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Diana Kohnke, Librarian, Sutro Library.
The Sutro Library

Now Open in a Sparkling New Location

By Gary F. Kurutz

On August 1, 2012, State Librarian of California Stacey Aldrich greeted and welcomed researchers to the opening of the Sutro Library, the San Francisco branch of the State Library, in its attractive and spacious new home in the heart of San Francisco State University. Located on the fifth and sixth floors of the renovated and expanded J. Paul Leonard Library, this opening marks the end of nearly a century of temporary facilities for this noteworthy public research library bequeathed to the State Library by the heirs of Adolph Sutro. This date also marks the happy conclusion of over a decade of planning and construction. Ms. Aldrich was accompanied by David Cismowski, Debbie Newton, Jarrid Keller, and Gerald Maginnity of the State Library’s executive committee along with a joyous Sutro Library staff led by Sutro Supervising Librarian Haleh Motiey. Diana Kohnke, the Sutro Library’s invaluable new reference librarian enthusiastically observed, “Across the board, researchers, new patrons and returning patrons have unanimously loved the new facilities.”

As researchers approach the J. Paul Leonard Library and look at its gleaming north façade and its inviting entranceway, they will see in large letters “J. Paul Leonard Library / Sutro Library.” The main floor of this twenty-first century university library certainly gives a welcoming feeling. In recognition of its comely design, the building’s architectural firm, HMC, won the 2012 Project of the Year Award by the Design-Build Institute of the Western Pacific Chapter. The space is filled with light and openness, and lounge chairs encourage study and quiet socialization. It is indeed an inspiring temple of learning. Off to one side is the hallmark of the modern academic library: a coffee service. In another direction, a large iconic letter “i” graces the wall, meaning this is the Information Center. Near the doorway, a sign with an enlargement of the Sutro bookplate leads the researcher to the elevators and the new Sutro facility. After a short trip to the fifth floor, the library patron enters an attractive entrance lobby. On one wall is a beautiful digitized portrait of Adolph Sutro, the amazing San Franciscan who created the nucleus of this great library. The reader will then be greeted by the friendly and helpful Sutro Library staff from behind a handsome and functional information and reference desk. The researcher is now poised to make use of one of the notable libraries of California.

On the north side of the fifth floor is a long bank of windows that overlooks the beautifully landscaped central “quad” of San Francisco State University. Open stacks filled with one of the nation’s largest genealogy and United States local history collections beckons the

EDITOR’S NOTE

Mr. Kurutz is the Foundation’s executive director. He wishes to express his gratitude to Supervising Librarian II Haleh Motiey, Librarian Diana Kohnke, and Special Assistant Lauranne Lee of the Sutro Library for their cheerful assistance with this issue of the Bulletin.
reader. Once library patrons check their belongings into nearby lockers, a series of handsome wooden tables and comfortable chairs on the north wall are available. In this age of laptops and tablets, all have ready access to power, and the facility is fully equipped for wireless connectivity. Behind the tables are stacks loaded with regional and county histories, directories, gazetteers, family histories, biographies, ship passenger lists, and periodicals.

The new facility provided the State Library’s Information Technology Bureau with an opportunity to introduce new technology and equipment into the reading room. Digital and analog resources live comfortably side-by-side. As Kohnke noted, “Although slightly trepidatious about the new technology to begin with, patrons, in the end, embraced and lauded the new book scanners and microfilm scanners. Members of the Daughters of the American Revolution (D.A.R.) were especially excited about the ability to use the microfilm scanners to obtain clearer and sharper images than before.”

To the immediate west of the reference desk is the glass enclosed rare materials reading room. Here scholars studying rare books, manuscripts, maps, and pictorial material are segregated. To protect these invaluable and irreplaceable collections against ever so clever thieves that prey on libraries, researchers are literally locked into the room. Easily viewable from the reference desk, they have to request permission to exit. But, what a treasure trove of incunabula, Hebrew scrolls, botanical drawings, English diurnals, and early nineteenth century Mexican imprints await their eager eyes!

Beyond the rare materials reading room are additional tables and stations for viewing the Sutro’s immense collection of microforms of U.S. local histories, city directories, cemetery records, U.S. census records, and film copies of Sutro Library special collections such as the Mexican pamphlet collection. To help researchers as they gaze into the screens of microform reading machines, the windows are blocked off. This side of the public area is also filled with open stacks containing more genealogical material and a sizeable collection of California history.

As a reminder of the library’s origins with Adolph Sutro, the walls that are not covered with bookshelves are embellished with framed reproductions of treasures the great man collected. The most imposing is the aforementioned full-length, seven-foot high digital portrait of Adolph Sutro in the entranceway. This is flanked by a full-color reproduction of Sutro’s own cigar box label “Flor de Adolph Sutro.” The chromolithograph for his Havana cigars features a profile of Sutro along with his Cliff House, gardens, and baths. On another wall is a beautiful full-size reproduction...
(79 x 82 inches) of a colored lithograph of the Sutro Baths; a photograph of Sutro’s elegant Cliff House; and the celebrated world map (78 x 50 inches) by Pieter van den Keere, c. 1610. The originals are now securely stored. Another framed picture is an enlargement of a striking photograph showing a very happy Sutro in his library at his home in Sutro Heights. Supplementing these are handsome wood and plexiglass exhibit cases designed to showcase library treasures. One of these, however, permanently protects a beautiful marble bust of Sutro. The sculpture at one time was actually on display at Sutro’s museum in his famous natatorium overlooking the Pacific Ocean.

Elevators take staff and visitors to the top floor of the building. The vast majority of the square footage on this level is devoted to a high security vault housing the Sutro’s remarkable rare book and manuscript collection. At last, the books and collections can, figuratively speaking, breathe. They are no longer crammed onto towering compact shelves or double and triple shelved. Furthermore, they will not have to move again. It is indeed an impressive sight to walk into this high security area and see stack after stack of vellum and leather-bound volumes covering scores of fascinating topics from ancient theological tomes to a first edition of Charles Darwin’s famous voyage on the H.M.S. Beagle. State of the art fire suppression, fire-rated doors, humidity and temperature control, and electronic security will safeguard these precious collections for generations to come.

In the middle of the north side of this floor is an attractive seminar room. Here staff will be able to give orientation sessions and workshops related to collection strengths and the fascinating history of Adolph Sutro and his library. It is also hoped that visiting scholars and other researchers will be able to share information about their own projects and how they are using the library’s collections and services. Of course the room is equipped with internet access and will be able to handle a variety of electronic media. With ever-changing technology, flexibility is the key.

The remainder of this lofty space is devoted to staff and volunteer offices and workrooms. Answering reference questions via email, packing materials for interlibrary loans, processing gifts to the collection, performing minor repairs on books, copying documents, and digitizing collections are just some of the multitude of functions conducted behind the scenes. Staff and volunteers, however, will be working in a cheerful space with new furniture and equipment. Moreover, offices have windows—a real bonus in any work situation. The north side windows overlook the green lawns, trees, and pathways that make up the central quad of the university. On those rare cloudless or fog-free days, the Pacific Ocean and hills of San Francisco offer a soothing vista. If one looks to the northeast, Mt. Sutro is in view. How appropriate!

Importantly, the Sutro Library’s staff will be able to work more directly with the university’s students and faculty. Already, staff has conducted several tours and met with the library faculty of the university’s Leonard Library, and the future promises a bright and productive relationship. The university’s provost of academic affairs toured the collections and expressed great delight in its size and richness. For decades, the Sutro Library has been known primarily for its incomparable genealogy and local history collections with busloads of family historians delving into its resources. Now with the Sutro located in the heart of the campus, it will open the rare book and other special collections to a new user group. One can only imagine the delight of an English major as he or she opens a First Folio Shakespeare from 1623 (the first collected works of the bard); the incredulous faces of geography majors as they study maps from the seventeenth century showing California as an island; or the gasps of delight as art history students turn the leaves of botanical books illustrated with hand-colored plates. It is anticipated that the various humanities and liberal arts departments of San Francisco State and other state universities will find a Golconda of original source material on the upper floors of this sparkling new facility.

It seems only appropriate to extend a sincere round of applause to present and past Sutro Library and California State Library staff who have had to move this great collection many times, discover and negotiate for new spaces, handle innumerable building emergencies, and fend off the budget cutters who would threaten this great library.
It is quite possible that in the annals of American book collecting and library history, there is no collector who has received less recognition—in relation to the value and importance of his library than the San Francisco entrepreneur Adolph Sutro. Sutro (1830-1898), an emigre to the United States from Prussia, began his collecting in a serious, systematic way in the early 1880s; within the span of ten years—driven by the ambition to create and endow a great public research library—he had assembled what apparently was the largest private library in America. At its peak, Sutro’s library contained perhaps 250,000 volumes and as many as 300,000 titles. It was unrivaled, however, not only for its size, but also for the strength and richness of many of its holdings. These comprised incunabula; a wealth of sixteenth-century books printed by all of the great European publishing houses; extensive runs of early scientific and technical treatises and periodicals; exhaustive collections of tracts, pamphlets, and periodicals documenting periods of English, Continental, and Mexican political, literary, and religious history; unique manuscript holdings pertaining to ancient Jewish history and to the history of eighteenth-century travel and discovery—the list runs on. In a word, Sutro had wanted to form a collection with sufficient range and depth across different branches of human knowledge and periods of history that it might serve as the basis for a leading public research library on the
Pacific Coast, and he was largely success-
ful in meeting this objective.

Given this success and the magnifi-
cence of his library, it would seem to be a
reasonable expectation to find Sutro listed
among the ranks of America’s eminent
book collectors. The reality, however, is
otherwise. At the height of his book buy-
ing ventures, when his library neared and
then exceeded the 100,000-volume mark,
Sutro did receive a measure of recogni-
tion, particularly in the local and regional
press. Yet in the main, the record is
strangely silent concerning Sutro and his
library. Few directories or collective biog-
raphies of notable collectors published in
this country mention Adolph Sutro, and
those that do generally limit their remarks
to a sentence or two. For example, Carl
Cannon’s survey, American Book Collectors
and Collecting from Colonial Times to the
Present, makes no mention of Sutro, nor
is he among the 359 “significant Ameri-
can book collectors,” included in Donald
Dickinson’s more recent Dictionary of
American Book Collectors. Typical of the
treatment that Sutro receives, when he is
mentioned, is that accorded him by Ruth
Shepard Granniss in the landmark 1939
survey, The Book in America ..., in which
Sutro and his library are together given a
total of three lines—this in a book whose
declared purpose was to correct the defi-
ciencies of previous studies and do justice
to the full range of book collecting in the
United States.

Thus the question inevitably arises,
why would a man who figured so promi-
nently in the history of book collecting in
the United States receive so little recogni-
tion? How could accounts such as Ruth
Granniss’, which sought to document
“the growth of libraries” and “the own-
ership of books by individuals,” in this
country either omit or at best make scant
reference to Adolph Sutro? The answer is
multi-faceted but has two broad sources:
first, the unfortunate fate which befell the
library after its owner’s death, consigning
it to neglect, disuse, and partial destruc-
tion; and second, the belief—given cre-
dence in anecdotal and popular accounts
but false to a great extent that Sutro was
not a collector or bookman in the more

“Flor de Adolph Sutro.” Adolph Sutro, when he first came to California in the Gold Rush, made a living selling tobacco in San Francisco. This beautiful cigar box
label for Cuban cigars was commissioned by the great collector. Flanking his portrait are views of Sutro Heights (left) and the Sutro Baths.
sophisticated sense of the term, but simply a parvenu and latecomer, who opened up his checkbook to buy vast quantities of books, operating without any underlying method or rationale. In the intertwined fate of Sutro’s library on the one hand, and the distorted image of him as a collector on the other, lies the explanation for his puzzling absence from the pages of American book collecting history.

SUTRO AS COLLECTOR: FACT AND FANCY

In January 1917, the Sutro Library was opened to the public as the San Francisco branch of the California State Library. By that time, Adolph Sutro had been dead for nearly two decades, and the Library had suffered greatly during the interval. Sutro had on many occasions publicly described his plans to donate his library to the city of San Francisco, after first constructing a building in which to house it and then providing an endowment for its growth and maintenance. He had devoted considerable time and energy to formulating these plans, but unfortunately—in one of the signal failures of his life—waited too long to implement them. When he died in 1898, the library was stored in two locations in downtown San Francisco. Approximately half was warehoused in a building on Battery Street, and the other half stored on shelves in a specially-renovated suite of offices that he rented in what was called the “Montgomery Block.” During the conflagration which swept over the city in the wake of the 1906 earthquake, all of the books in the Battery Street warehouse—some 100,000 volumes or more—were destroyed. The fireproofed Montgomery Block survived. In a further misfortune, Sutro—distracted during his final years by multiple business and political interests—had neglected to write a new will. The old will had been drawn up in 1882, on the eve of Sutro’s book-buying ventures, and thus made no stipulation about the disposition of the library. As a result, it was contested by Sutro’s heirs along with the rest of the estate. In 1913, after years of protracted litigation, Sutro’s children finally agreed to donate it to the California State Library. Even in its diminished state, the Sutro Library remained an exceptional collection with several areas of unduplicated strength. Although announcements about the opening of the Sutro Branch in 1917 fell, unsurprisingly, upon a largely disinterested public, they did stir the imagination and memories of some. One such individual was Edward F. O’Day, a columnist for a San Francisco weekly entitled Town Talk. Curious to know more about the library and its colorful founder, O’Day sought out the veteran San Francisco bookdealer and bibliophile Robert E. Cowan. As O’Day knew, Cowan was the perfect source. A man of wide erudition, Cowan had personally known Sutro, had inspected books housed in the Montgomery Block quarters several times, and had gotten second-hand descriptions of Sutro’s book-hunting exploits and methods of acquisition from two of the individuals with the greatest knowledge of Sutro’s library, George Moss and Frederic Beecher Perkins. In the interview with O’Day, Cowan drew upon his rich store of information to leave the reader with a series of sharp images of Sutro and several of the eccentric personalities around him—Moss; Perkins; Moss’s successor, Ella Weaver; Sutro’s daughter Emma, the executrix of his estate and the only one of his six children who shared, to a small degree, his bibliophilic interests; and W. R. H. Adamson, coexecutor of the estate and a close adviser to Sutro. Cowan, it is clear from his remarks, found much to admire in Sutro—his success as a pioneering California businessman, his knowledge of languages and refined European upbringing, his philanthropy and record of civic leadership—but he did harbor certain reservations about Sutro as a book collector, and more specifically, about Sutro’s methods of acquiring material. In what would later become an oft-quoted passage, Cowan offered the following observation:

He had a queer way of buying which was particularly successful in Italy. He’d go into a book shop and see ten or fifteen thousand volumes, mostly in pigskin or parchment. He’d ask how much was wanted per volume for the whole collection. Perhaps the dealer would say, “four lire.” He’d offer two lire, and get the whole stock. And usually it would be a bargain. Or
It is quite possible that in the annals of American book collecting and library history, there is no collector who has received less recognition—in relation to the value and importance of his library than the San Francisco entrepreneur Adolph Sutro.

Sutro Baths, c. 1896. Measuring a stupendous 79 x 82 inches, this full-color print is one of the most famous views of a San Francisco landmark. Built by Sutro, the baths opened on March 14, 1896, and ranked as the world’s largest indoor swimming facility. The baths burned down in 1966. The late Herb Caplan generously donated the original lithograph to the Sutro Library.
he’d go to the old monasteries and ask the monks to sell their old treasures. They’d refuse, whereupon he’d draw from his pockets handfuls of American gold, and the impoverished monks would yield. These methods of buying account for the enormous heterogeneous mass of books in the Sutro collection. He didn’t live long enough to round the collection out.7

These comments of Cowan’s require some analysis and qualification. First, they leave the impression that this approach was Sutro’s principal, if not exclusive, method of acquiring books. To so characterize him, however, would be unfair. Without question, Sutro engaged in such practice and (as described below) gladly seized opportunities to buy significant parts of libraries or even, in one instance, a dealer’s entire stock. But in this regard, Sutro was hardly unique; all of the great collectors of his day Henry Huntington, or Sutro’s San Francisco contemporary, Hubert Howe Bancroft, to cite two prominent examples—engaged in similar practices. That many, such as Huntington, may have done so in more genteel or discreet fashion is essentially beside the point. The differences are cosmetic; they, like Sutro, were on a mission and would let nothing stand in their way.

Cowan’s remarks also leave the impression that Sutro’s library had no particular shape or design, that he simply grabbed at books and collected without any coherent underlying strategy. This characterization is equally unfair. It is true that Sutro’s library extended into many areas and fields and had no single unifying theme, but the library’s heterogeneity was consistent with Adolph Sutro’s original plan for it.

Unlike many bookmen, such as Henry Clay Folger, Sutro was not out to collect exhaustively on a particular author and period, nor was he out to concentrate, like a Pierpont Morgan, on collecting rare and precious books, manuscripts, and objets d’art.8 Sutro’s purposes, as will be seen, were quite different, and both the structure and qualities of his library and the manner in which it was developed were fully consistent with them. Cowan’s remarks, however, tended to get repeated and the impression that they left, both of Sutro as an over-eager and undisciplined collector and of his library as something of a giant shapeless mass, became solidified in the minds of those concerned with such matters. Consider, for example, the opinion expressed by Milton J. Ferguson, who, as assistant librarian of the California State Library, wrote about Sutro: “If the collector had any early ideas about the scope of his library, he soon forgot them in the excitement of gathering his treasures.”9 Ferguson could not have been more wrong. Not only did Sutro have a clear sense, from the outset, of the kind of library he planned to assemble, but—as his correspondence with his own staff and with figures in the book trade make clear, he maintained this focus
until his collecting energies gave out. The one claim of Cowan’s that may be accepted at face value is that Sutro did not live long enough to round out his library.

Thus, if Cowan’s impressions are only partially true, and in some respects not true at all, how, exactly, did Adolph Sutro operate? What were his guideposts, methods, and motives? Although Sutro’s passion for books was long-standing, indeed dated back to his boyhood years in Aix-la-Chapelle, he was not in the position to undertake large-scale buying until the early 1880s. During the previous decade, however, Sutro had made a series of trips to London to raise capital for his project to construct a tunnel to drain the silver mines of the Comstock Lode near Virginia City, Nevada. He took advantage of these trips to visit bookshops and make minor purchases. Sutro’s struggle to get the tunnel project capitalized and completed was titanic, and it consumed his life for more than a decade. But in the end—working against powerful financial and mining interest he was successful. After the tunnel was completed in 1879, Sutro sold out his interest, and by the end of 1880, had realized a profit of more than $700,000. He then turned his attention to real estate, and within two years had significantly increased his fortune by purchasing valuable properties in downtown San Francisco as well as extensive tracts of land in outlying, undeveloped parts of the city. Now measuring his worth in the millions of dollars, Sutro set out in 1882 on a lengthy trip that took him to the Far East, South Asia, the Near East, and Europe.

Sutro spent almost two years in Europe, and his extended stay allowed him to lay the foundation for his library. The idea of the library, though, and of the purpose behind it had been taking shape in his mind for a number of years. Now it took solid form. “The wealth of man,” Sutro stated, “can be enjoyed only a short portion of the immeasurable span of time... and I resolved to devote some portion of this wealth for the benefit of the people among whom I have so long labored. I first resolved to collect a library, a library for reference, not a library of various book curiosities, but a library which shall compare with any in the world.” Thus, in the classic late-nineteenth century gospel of wealth tradition, Sutro decided to use part of his fortune to enhance the cultural good of his adopted city, and in characteristic fashion, he set his sights high, taking as models some of the great libraries of Europe, or of the eastern United States. While this goal may have been overly ambitious, California in the early 1880s still lacked a single library of high stature. Even at the time of Sutro’s death—some fifteen years in the future—the library of the Berkeley campus of the University of California numbered only 80,000 volumes. Sutro launched into the task of building a library with the same single-minded determination that he had previously brought to the tunnel project.

Sutro, a populist and staunch foe of the robber barons who controlled the California economy, won election as mayor of San Francisco in 1894. Unfortunately, his term as mayor distracted him from building a suitable home for his great library.
and by the time he was through, would spend nearly as many years assembling his library as he had in seeing the tunnel construction to completion. Initially, in late 1882–early 1883, Sutro did all of his own buying, either directly from dealers and through occasional bidding at auctions, or by using dealers as his agents and scouts. He visited bookshops constantly and corresponded with dealers in Scotland and Germany. Among the London booksellers he worked with were J. Britnell, Wildy & Sons, William Ridler, Maggs, J. Westnell, E. W. Stubbs, and Bernard Quaritch. Since he began with only the rudiments of a collection, Sutro’s orientation in building his library was extremely broad. In the beginning, there was little that he could not use, as long as it met the criteria—in his eyes—of having undisputed historical or literary worth and of documenting or reflecting the growth and development of European civilization from antiquity to modern times and the spread of that civilization in other lands. He did not restrict himself in terms of language, buying in French, German, Spanish, Italian, and Latin just as freely as in English, nor was he put off by the format of an item; his growing library soon included not only books but pamphlets, broadsides, prints, periodicals, and manuscripts.

Typical of Sutro’s acquisitions from these London dealers were a series of purchases he made in spring 1883 from Bernard Quaritch. In March 1883, Quaritch sold him a large group of English Civil War tracts and newspapers, which had come on the market during the sale of the Sunderland Library. In the same month, Quaritch sold him, for the sum of £5.10, a run (1688-1726) of the “Monthly Mercuries.” Then, a few weeks later, he bought from Quaritch a group of 1,005 parliamentary “occurrences,” corresponding to the year 1641. Thus we find Sutro buying printed material of every type, individual imprints as well as collections and sets, that would enable a man of education to read widely and deeply in the history of European law, politics, religion, and letters. So active was Sutro in this period that within a year he had acquired close to 35,000 volumes, and it was apparently during this first whirlwind of buying that he became known in London book circles as the “California Book Man.”

It was also in this period that Sutro began to realize that, to continue at the same pace and sustain his endeavor, he would need to hire an associate. First, he could not remain abroad indefinitely. His family required his attention, as did his San Francisco business interests. Second, he had come to know enough about book collecting and the formation of a preeminent research library to grasp that he could no longer operate entirely on his own. Rather, he would increasingly need the specialized knowledge and services of a professional bookman. The person Sutro found for this position was Carl Friedrich Mayer, one of the many booksellers with whom Sutro had dealings during his visits to Germany. Mayer was a Munich dealer, well versed in the antiquarian trade, with very good language abilities. Furthermore, he had compiled a catalogue of imprints in the Buxheim Library, out of which Sutro would acquire a great many of his incunabula and early sixteenth-century...
books. Mayer's circumstances coincided with Sutro's needs. He was also intrigued by Sutro's plans to establish a free public research library, and in late 1883, the two reached an agreement. Mayer would move to London, act as Sutro's agent in purchasing books, and oversee their subsequent storage, cataloging, packing, and shipping. Mayer began his work full-time as Sutro's "Librarian" in May 1884 and continued in this capacity (receiving a monthly salary of £20) through November 1886. He then spent a further six months—from December 1886 through May 1887—working part-time for Sutro, helping to wind down the London operation.19

With Mayer in place, Sutro felt free to finish his travels and to return to California, which he did later in 1884. Although separated by several thousand miles, the two kept in close contact via frequent correspondence. During his first months of employment, Mayer wrote to Sutro more than once a week, gradually tapering off to a letter every two weeks. His letters indicate that he not only kept Sutro fully up to date on his buying but also that he followed, with very little deviation, Sutro's instructions about what to emphasize in his purchases.

Since Sutro wished above all to create a "reference" library, by which he meant a library that would have practical value, he decided that its strongest segment should be science and technology. While not abandoning his earlier focus on political and cultural history, he gave Mayer to understand that he should concentrate on acquiring scientific and technical literature. Mayer took this instruction to heart, although initially he found it to be a challenge, for it went against his antiquarian instincts. For example, reporting on purchases that he made at a Puttick & Simpson auction of early June 1884 (only weeks after he began his London assignment), Mayer wrote, in his typically off-key English: "For one of them I cannot ask..."
your indemnity. This Dutch printing of 1489 completes a very gap in our collection, because we want a "Delft" printing.”20 He soon curbed these impulses, however, and fell into line with Sutro’s instructions, which Sutro continuously repeated were “to buy only useful books, no rarities.”21 Mayer set about in very methodical fashion to fulfill that dictate. Although he sometimes bought directly from bookshops and would also receive special offers, Mayer—as one experienced in the book trade—devoted most of his time to buying at auctions. His buying was principally done through three houses: Puttick & Simpson, H. H. Hodgson, and Sotheby. He would scrutinize their sale catalogs, inspect the lots in advance, and then execute his bids, always keeping a sharp eye out for works in the natural and physical sciences, as well as in medicine and engineering. In a sale at Hodgson’s in January 1885, for example, he reported to Sutro that he had acquired “about 200 engi-
neering books and papers or periodicals, among them very many privately printed reports on railways, water supplies (of various towns), harbours, sewage, etc. etc. I got about 620 volumes of them for one thousand and odd shillings. This is a very useful increase of the technical part of the library."22 Some months later, he wrote in a similar vein, informing Sutro that material purchased from the Osterley Park Sale had enabled "the completion of our collection of industrial arts."23 In July 1885, he reported that he had bought "some good sets of scientific periodicals, and a complete...copy of Journal and Proceedings of the Royal Geographical Society. London, altogether 76 vols."24

Thus observant of Sutro's instructions, Mayer labored on—month after month—to fill gaps in holdings already obtained and to acquire essential new titles. From San Francisco, Sutro remained actively involved, exhorting Mayer to forge ahead and often recommending specific books and periodicals that he wanted. In certain instances, the time between the issuance of a catalog and the auction was sufficient to allow Sutro to receive the catalog, mark the items he wanted, and get it back to Mayer before bids were due. Generally, however, Sutro had to rely on his agent to anticipate his wants, and that—after all—was why he hired him. Moreover, Mayer brought all of his technical acumen and understanding of the book trade to bear on his work. He was alert to bargains and highly conscious of market values. For example, a copy of the magnificently illustrated botanical work, Bateman’s Orchidaceae of Mexico, had sold in the Sunderland sale for £77. Mayer considered this overpriced, and later purchased a set at Puttick & Simpson’s for only £17.25 His ability to maneuver in this way and his grasp of the market was a sore point with certain bookdealers, who saw him and Sutro as interlopers. The competition with Quaritch was particularly intense and at times acrimonious. A telling illustration occurred in July 1885, when the two were bidding for a lengthy run of the London Gazette: "I went in having made up my mind to give up to 90. Quaritch was bidding against me very excited and going up to 125—. I could not get them. They were put down for Q. at 130—. Q. was very angry, but two days after he apologized solemnly in Sotheby’s, before the beginning of the sale."26 What Quaritch and other dealers resented was that Sutro, the “California Book Man,” was competing against them on their own terms. He was not a dealer himself, but by using Mayer as a full-time agent, he managed to buy at cut-rate prices. Mayer summed it up as follows:

Generally I must say he [Quaritch] is not very inclined to do business with you through me, looking at me as an intruder who takes the profit from the trade in an never heard of and in his eyes quite illegitimate way. The dealers know very well, that your
and my way to collect your library is saving money, which would be to be paid to them, in a way I sometimes already explained and representing at least one-third of the usual costs.  

While the dealers may have objected to Sutro’s tactics, there was little or nothing which they could do to block them. Like a businessman returning maximum profit on a minimum investment, Sutro pursued his strategy, with Mayer finding bargains everywhere. Not that Sutro’s investment was trivial (his basic monthly allocation for purchases was £300), but Mayer generally strove to make every dollar count. Furthermore, consistent with Sutro’s overall plan, Mayer spent his funds almost exclusively on bulk purchases. Occasionally, however, captivated by the prospect of some bibliographic gem, he would try to tempt Sutro to test the market and acquire it. In late 1884, for example, Mayer learned of the impending sale of a number of rare imprints, to include—as the pièce de résistance—a Mazarin Bible, “which will be sold...I fear not under £500.” Although Mayer’s estimate proved high, Sutro could have afforded this amount. Nevertheless, though he greatly admired the craft and beauty of early printed books, Sutro dismissed the idea out of hand, reminding Mayer that his principal interest lay in developing the technical and scientific side of his library. Acknowledging this fact, Mayer wrote back:

“But I understand quite well and agree thoroughly with you, that we can buy for this sum of about £3,500 very many books of a much greater importance in the chief line of your library....”

The policy that Sutro followed in this instance, and his refocusing attention to the core emphasis on scientific materials, guided his efforts throughout. He had conceived an overarching design and purpose for his library, and while its boundaries may have been rather loosely demarcated, they assumed more concrete form as time went on. Furthermore, Sutro never lost his focus or discipline. In his essay “Evolution of a Library,” Hubert Howe Bancroft provided a vivid image of the rabid, obsessive collector who must possess a particular object. Sutro was the antithesis of this type, once he had determined the direction...
of his library. He was rational, methodical, and farsighted, rarely driven in his pursuit of books by emotion or possessiveness.

Although Mayer spent the majority of his time scouting and buying books and periodicals, he had—as noted above—a number of other responsibilities. Sutro's London operation became a small-scale business in itself. It was headquartered at Brooks Wharf, on the Upper Thames, where Sutro rented office and warehouse space. When he was not busy at the auction houses, Mayer would spend time analyzing catalogs, cutting and pasting, in order to prepare himself for the next round of bids and purchases. Materials that he acquired were delivered to Brooks Wharf, where they were reconciled against the lists, catalogued, and later packed into crates (protected by oilcloth) for shipment to San Francisco. Materials in disrepair were sent off for patching and backing and—if Mayer judged it necessary—for rebinding. Substantial quantities of material received such treatment, as well as cleaning and fumigation. At the same time that Mayer settled into his London assignment, Sutro hired a London broker, Robert Warner, as his business agent. Warner rented him the Brooks Wharf offices and oversaw all of the financial transactions. He employed a clerk to check in the books purchased by Mayer. After verification by Mayer, Warner would approve invoices for payment. And like Mayer, he corresponded frequently with Sutro, sending him monthly statements of all expenditures and transactions. He took a very hands-on approach, and—whether in keeping with Sutro's instructions to him or simply out of his own high-minded sense of duty—kept a close eye on both Mayer and E. Hofstätder, another German bookseller who served as Mayer's assistant. As Warner put it, “I generally call in the office where your books are daily.”

Warner also authorized payment of their monthly salaries to Mayer and Hofstätder. Sutro thus incurred a series of regular business expenses, including office rental, labor, cartage, preservation and binding, packing case construction, warehousing, postage, insurance, and shipping. Indeed, the records show that for every dollar that he spent on books, Sutro spent an additional thirty-three cents in England on these ancillary expenses. Funds to meet all of these outlays were drawn by Warner on an account that Sutro established in London and replenished on a monthly basis. After several months of service to Sutro, Warner wrote that the operation was consuming so much of his time that he would henceforth need to charge a commission of 1% on all purchases made. Sutro does not appear to have raised any objections. Although the London operation appeared to function smoothly, Sutro evidently decided, near

The first leaf of Thomas Aquinas’s *Summa Theologiae* (1478) is adorned with a striking illuminated initial and border decorations. Sutro purchased this incunabula in 1883 as a duplicate from the Royal State Library in Munich.
the end of 1886, to wind it down. The letters from Mayer, so predictable until then, suddenly dried up, and while there is no indication that Sutro became disenchanted with his work, by late spring 1887, Mayer was off his payroll and presumably back in Munich. His association with Sutro had lasted nearly four years.

Sutro, however, was certainly not through with book buying; he had simply transferred his base to San Francisco and returned to being his own buyer. Furthermore, he continued (with one great exception) to acquire along the same broad lines, seeking out scientific and technical materials whenever possible, but also converting opportunities to enrich the historical and literary components of his library. An example of the latter is a collection that Sutro acquired in December 1887, belonging to a fellow San Franciscan, one Walter M. Leman. Leman was a retired actor who, during the course of a long career on the stage, had assembled an outstanding collection of early plays and dramatic works, as well as manuscripts and other publications bearing on the theme of the theatre. Sutro persuaded Leman, who had lost his sight and hence his ability to use the material, to sell him the collection, which contained some 600 titles. Sutro also continued to expand his holdings in European history and letters, acquiring from various dealers in England and Scotland long runs of eighteenth and nineteenth-century British newspapers and journals as well as key titles that he lacked in the field of travel and discovery. From an American dealer, Charles Soule, he acquired in 1889 a group of 700 “Commonwealth pamphlets,” which Soule had located during a buying trip to London. Sutro’s approach also remained consistent—buy in bulk to obtain the best unit cost, and swallow the inevitable duplicates. As Soule wrote: “I can get the whole lot at a price which will allow me to offer them at $210, or 30 cents for each pamphlet. I do not know that this is a very
exorbitant price, except that many in the lot might be duplicates of what you already have...”6 During the post-Mayer period, some of Sutro’s strongest acquisitions were in the natural and physical sciences. Preeminent among these was Sutro’s purchase, in 1893, of the Woodward Library. Formed by a creative San Francisco entrepreneur, Robert Blum Woodward, this library focused on the natural sciences—ornithology, botany, and zoology—with some minor holdings in geography and travel literature. Though not a large collection—it numbered only several hundred volumes—it was remarkable for the depth and quality of its holdings, many of which contained superb hand-tinted plates.37 Sutro’s acquisition of this library was followed some three years later by his purchase of the Wells Chemical Library. When the Wells Library, which had been developed by the secretary of the London Chemical Society, arrived in 1896 by ship from London and was transported to the Montgomery Block quarters, its books and other publications filled twelve cases.

None of these acquisitions, however, valuable as they were, could begin to match the collection of Mexicana that Sutro had bought during a trip that he made in 1889 to Mexico and Cuba. At a single stroke, Sutro succeeded in acquiring the most important and complete collection of nineteenth century Mexican political, religious and related imprints and ephemera to be found anywhere in the world. This collection, numbering in the tens of thousands, not only greatly increased the size of Sutro’s Library, but it also broadened its focus as well. Yet apart from this single, but spectacular branching out, Sutro adhered to the design that he first mapped out for his library many years before. The fidelity to its emphasis on science and technology was reiterated in the mid-1890s by George Moss, then Sutro’s principal librarian, in some notes that Moss compiled about the current state and future needs of the library. “It is intended by Mr. Sutro,” wrote Moss, “that the library shall be a free reference library, and that scientific and technical literature shall be made the most prominent department.”38 “Mr. Sutro,” he went on to say, “fully realizes that he has a great deal of purchasing to do to fill in gaps in nearly every department and hopes soon to be able to give the library his full attention and place it on an equal footing with any reference library in America.”39 This was an ambitious goal, but one that Sutro seemed well on his way to fulfilling. Unfortunately, however, his book collecting days were coming to an end. In the few years of life that remained to him, first political entanglements and then a failing mind would prevent Sutro from giving any further attention to the library.

**SPECIAL STRENGTHS OF THE SUTRO LIBRARY AND KEY SOURCES OF MATERIAL**

In 1883, before refining his thoughts on what his library should ultimately comprise, Sutro made a series of striking acquisitions which, collectively, not only doubled its size but placed it among the world’s foremost collections for certain genres and fields. He first struck at the his-
toric Sunderland Library sale, which took place in London in mid-1883. The Sunderland Library, formed originally in the 1690s and early 1700s by Charles Spencer, third Earl of Sunderland, was tremendously rich in material from the period of the English Civil Wars and also contained significant and unique political and social material from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Out of this library alone Sutro obtained some 30,000 imprints. In addition to buying these at auction, he may also have purchased a portion of them from Quaritch, since Quaritch had managed to monopolize two-thirds of the Sunderland sales. Out of other benchmark sales, such as the Hamilton and Crossley, and through purchases made later by himself and by Mayer, Sutro amplified and deepened his holdings on English social, political, and religious history, with the result that he grew to hold one the richest such collections to be found in any library.

After this fruitful round of buying in England, Sutro travelled to the continent in the summer of 1883. There soon followed a memorable series of acquisitions. The first came in September, when he bought a major part of the Buxheim Library. This library had originally belonged to the Carthusian Monastery in Buxheim, Bavaria, but after the secularization of the religious orders, had passed into the hands of a nobleman. It was now up for auction, and Sutro acquired significant portions of it—several thousand volumes—including manuscripts, incunabula, and a great many books from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries notable for their woodcut and other illustrations. A month later, Sutro was in Augsburg to bid at the auction of the library of the Duke of Dalberg. He again bought extensively, acquiring as many as 8,000 volumes. Sutro’s purchases from the Dalberg Library helped crystallize his emergent emphasis on scientific and technical literature, for many of the books he obtained were in the natural sciences and medicine, including the transactions and journals of a number of learned societies, and were rich in plates and illustrations. As remarkable as the Buxheim and Dalberg acquisitions were, they were nevertheless exceeded, in both quantity and quality, by Sutro’s third German book-buying success—his purchase of duplicate imprints from the Royal State Library in Munich. The Kingdom of Bavaria, to which this library then belonged, was in dire need of money, and Sutro had secured permission from a high-level government official to purchase such duplicates as he wanted. Moreover, his opportunity to do so coincided with his blossoming relationship with Charles Mayer. Anxious to continue his travels and reach the Near East, Sutro engaged Mayer to work through the duplicates. Mayer took to the task energetically, and when he had finished, had increased the size of Sutro’s library by some 13,000 volumes. When finally packed for shipment to San Francisco, it took 86 cases to hold all of the Munich State Library books acquired by Sutro. Still more impressive, however, was that 33 of these cases held incunabula. Thirty-three cases of “cradle books”! It is a staggering statistic. It is not clear precisely how many incunabula were once found in the Sutro Library, and the
The Sutro Library makes available a magnificent collection of color plate books. One of the outstanding examples is James Bateman’s *The Orchidaceae of Mexico and Guatemala* (1837–1843). Bibliographer Wilfrid Blunt called it “the largest, the heaviest, but also probably the finest orchid book ever issued.” Only 125 copies were printed. The line drawing on the top right satirizes the immense size of the elephant folio.
exact number is now of historical interest only. Sutro himself estimated that he owned over 4,000.44 There were certainly at least 3,000, or approximately one-seventh of all such books known to be in existence at the time. The range and excellence of the Sutro incunabula were attested to by a Cornell University scholar, Professor George Lincoln Burr, who spent several days inspecting them during a visit to San Francisco in 1892. After returning to Cornell, Burr wrote to Sutro: "It is, I think, beyond all comparison the best collection in America, both as to numbers and as to quality of the books of the 15th century; and I gravely doubt if it has any rival this side of the Atlantic for its literature of the 16th century."45 In addition to his purchases from these three major libraries, Sutro also acquired books of a similar nature, perhaps several thousand volumes in all, from dealers and bookshops in Munich, Heidelberg, Ellwangen, and other cities. His acquisitions in Germany thus consolidated the second pillar of his library—the incunabula and early printed books, focused in particular on the sixteenth-century struggles for religious and civil liberties in the German states, the study and development of cartography and the natural sciences, and European travel and discovery in the Age of Reconnaissance.

A third principal strength of the Sutro Library, as noted earlier, was its Mexican collection. Although Sutro made two book-buying trips to Mexico, it was the second of these, in 1889, that vaulted him onto the top rung of collectors of Mexicana. On that trip, he encountered for sale the entire stock of one of Mexico’s most distinguished bookshops, the Librería Abadiano, and living up to Robert Cowan’s image, he promptly bought all of it. The range of material that he acquired from the Abadiano was extraordinary. It included thousands of titles published in Mexico from the sixteenth to the mid-nineteenth century, among them exemplars of the earliest printing presses in America,
religious tracts and Church documents, colonial manuscripts, and early chronicles of the Spanish conquest and colonization. It also included rare and scarce periodicals and government publications, and—as its centerpiece—a collection of approximately 35,000 pamphlets, broadsides, and flyers produced during the first half of the nineteenth century, documenting the Mexican War of Independence and the country’s subsequent political travails. As a documentary and bibliographic source for nineteenth-century Mexican history, the material acquired by Sutro was unrivaled.46

What exactly motivated Sutro to buy up the Abadiano stock and thus branch out into the field of Mexicana is not clear. He may simply have yielded to the impulse to acquire the collection. On the other hand, the strengths of the collection in the history of mining and civil-ecclesiastical conflict—dominant themes in Mexican history from colonial times to the Porfiriato—were areas that Sutro had consistently emphasized. Mexico, furthermore, was obviously integral to collecting on early California and the Southwest, which Sutro briefly considered developing as a special focus.

Sutro’s library had many other areas of strength, almost all of which complemented the three major groupings described above. These included its Shakesperian materials;47 its great collections of English parliamentary papers and proceedings (which Lord Macaulay had reputedly used in writing his *History of England...*) and of codified English laws, (from the library of Lord Cairn); its collection of the papers and manuscripts of Sir Joseph Banks (1743–1820);48 and its collection of unique medieval Hebrew manuscripts.

Although forming one of the smaller segments within the Library, the Sutro’s Yemenite Hebrew manuscripts (which number some 167) are among its most rare and priceless holdings. Ranging from scrolls of extraordinary length (80 to 90 feet), to individual leaves, codices, and manuscript books, the collection focuses primarily on religious matters, providing commentaries on the Talmud, Torah, Mishnah, and other sacred and legal texts. It also includes a scroll of Jewish law dating from c. 1299, purportedly written by the scholar Maimonides. Sutro had acquired the material from the estate of the Jerusalem antiquities dealer Moses W. Shapira.49 From the moment of its arrival in San Francisco, Sutro’s Hebraica—perhaps because of its antiquity and its importance for Biblical studies and exegesis (and also, no doubt, because of an earlier forgery perpetrated by Shapira)—attracted widespread interest, on both sides of the Atlantic. “The Directors of the British Museum,” reported one article, “will send out men to overhaul these manuscripts and definitely ascertain their character and value.”50

While there is no record that this particular inspection actually took place, the manuscripts were nevertheless authenticated by various experts. In his reminiscences about Sutro and his Library, Robert Cowan drew special attention to the strengths of the Hebraica: “Dr. Roubin...had charge of the Hebrew books and manuscripts. The best thing he did was to discover the manuscript of Maimonides, presumed to be the only one in existence.”51

A curious footnote to these exceptional holdings in Sutro’s Library was its early Californiana. It held extremely little in this area. Sutro had contemplated building up this part of his library and, while in Spain in early 1884, had commissioned the copying of a number of documents bearing on sixteenth-century explorations of the California coast, found in the Archive of the Indies. His interest at this point was very keen and, to further the initiative, he enlisted the assistance of the chief of the United States legation in Madrid, John Foster. He then contracted with a Spanish scholar, Jose Gonzalez Verger, to research the documents in Seville and produce translations. After some months, however, he wrote to Gonzalez Verger, requesting that he discontinue the work. The latter tried to dissuade him, but to no avail. He was probably unaware that Sutro had been warned by another of his hired Spanish hands, Manuel Peralta, that the project was essentially a waste of time, because his fellow San Franciscans, H. H. Bancroft, had preceded him.52

**Japanese leaf painting. Sutro, like many patrons of the arts in the late nineteenth century, collected Orientalia. These delicate leaf paintings are superb examples of this exotic art form.**
Sutro Library is known in botanical circles for its sixteen-volume herbarium of Robert James, eighth Baron Petre. Lord Petre sponsored the plant collecting of Quaker John Bartram (1699–1777) of Philadelphia, the first American botanist. Self-taught, Bartram became North America’s foremost plant collector, sending seeds of trees and shrubs to the great estates in England. Thousands of pressed botanical specimens are carefully preserved in this remarkable collection dating from around 1740. Bartram is considered the “father of American botany.”

The Sutro rare book collection was stuffed into a variety of spaces in the basement of the San Francisco Public Library. The Sutro moved into this civic center location in August 1923.
EARLY CARE, APPRECIATION, AND USE OF SUTRO’S LIBRARY

As has been seen, by the time he returned to San Francisco in 1884, Sutro had amassed a collection well in excess of 100,000 volumes. As these arrived in the city, they were brought first to the warehouse on Battery Street and then—when this facility ran out of room—were taken to the Montgomery Block offices. The books of course had to be stored, but that was only the beginning. Sutro was actively pondering the question of where to site his library and was familiarizing himself, through specialized publications that Mayer procured, with the latest European theories and opinions about library design and organization. Meanwhile, he set up a full-scale administrative and technical operation based in the Montgomery Block offices. George Moss, a highly cultivated man with good organizational skills, was placed in charge and given the title of Librarian. He managed everything and soon became indispensable. Moss’s chief assistant was the temperamentally Frederic Perkins, who had recently been dismissed as head of the San Francisco Public Library. Perkins was the principal cataloger and also attended to a number of other duties. The library employed two other specialists, a bookbinder and a bookseller, as well as a number of clerks. The operation was not inexpensive, but saving money was the last thing on Sutro’s mind, since all of this activity was but the prelude to constructing his library and to endowing the city and its citizenry with a cultural and intellectual resource of permanent value. In addition to the rental of offices, there were expenses for building materials, such as furniture, shelving, and bookcases, and for preservation and office supplies. There were fees for janitorial services and a night watchman, and salaries for the professional staff. There were also special construction projects that added to the expenses. In 1887, for example, a special room was built for fumigating, and in 1892 Moss had a separate bindery room constructed. Sutro was often away, attending to other business, but Moss kept him fully informed of all activities within the library as well as any developments affecting it from without, such as inquiries from prospective users. Typical of such communication from Moss was a June 1893 letter to Sutro, concerning matters both internal and external:

Dear Sir: Col. Little handed me a copy of permit sent to Prof. Davidson. You will remember that you have Mr. Hopkins’ translation locked in your desk, so hope it won’t be asked for before your return. Costansos’ diary had better be bound and paged before going into other hands (I mean the translation). There will be less chance of loss & damage than in loose sheets. Mr. Perkins is cataloguing what we call the Reformation pamphlets, a great many do not contain Mr. Mayer’s slip, and many slips written by him are incorrect; as so very many of them are rare & valuable it is better to have a compact record of them and well marked. There are a few days work in the bindery...

As Moss’s letter implies, Sutro’s library was attracting a growing body of interest. Initially, it will be recalled, much of the interest was founded on curiosity, stimulated by newspaper articles which reported on Sutro’s library in much the same style as they would report on the discovery of a new comet or a heretofore unknown ancient city. That is, to the privileged few who had seen it, it was a wonder to behold. And indeed, an almost carnival-like atmosphere surrounded the unloading of the hundreds of cases of Sutro’s books onto the San Francisco wharves. As word passed that another shipment was in, crowds would gather to witness the spectacle.

As the novelty wore off, however, the interest that was displayed increasingly came from people who either wanted to know more about the library as a potential source for future research or from those who wanted to consult it out of immediate need. The latter were primarily students and faculty from the University of California at Berkeley and Stanford. The librarians at both institutions, J. C. Rowell and Edwin Woodruff, respectively, took an active interest in the Sutro Library and promoted its use. Word about the library gradually spread to a wider audience, primarily through the descriptions of it given by visiting scholars who were able to view and use it. Mention has already been made of the Cornell scholar, George Burr, who considered the Sutro to be the leading repository in the country for Renaissance and Reformation studies. Burr’s colleague and former Cornell University President Andrew Dickson White, provided perhaps the most glowing testimony, when he said about the library—following an 1892 visit: “With considerable acquaintance among the libraries of the United States, I should rank this one already among the first four in value, and it is rapidly increasing.”

Indeed, of all the library’s early scholarly visitors, none took a keener interest in it than White. What most impressed him about Sutro’s commitment was the promise that it held, and the vision that Sutro commanded, for enriching learning and research. “All to whom I have spoken,” he wrote to Sutro, “...joined me in my wonder at the foresight and depth of thought which has prompted you not to create [only] a public popular library, which any one can do, but one of the great libraries of the World for scholars....” Since White knew that Sutro was still attempting to build his library and to fill in gaps, he made a point of informing him about collections that were about to come on the market. In January 1893, for example, on the heels of a visit to Paris, he wrote to inform Sutro that the library of the just-deceased French historian Ernst Renan was soon to be up for sale. Then six months later came another letter from White, to let Sutro know of the impending sale of “a large library in Vienna....consisting of a ‘choice collection of Jewish printed books and manuscripts,’
belonging to the chief Rabbi of the city." Although Sutro displayed some interest in Renan’s Library, he did not make a serious attempt to buy it, nor did he pursue the Rabbi’s collection.

White was concerned that, even in California, Sutro’s library was still little known. Yet testimonies such as his, appearing in the national press, were slowly changing the situation. Between January 1886 and March 1892, the library received 705 visitors, including many from other regions of the United States. That the library was achieving some measure of recognition in these years is also evidenced in the many letters from librarians and curators, from both the United States and Europe, who wrote seeking employment in it, as well as in the continuing offers of material that Sutro regularly received.

Far from being mothballed, then, Sutro’s library in the decade 1885–1895 was under the control and supervision of two highly qualified librarians. Progress was slowly being made to arrange, catalog, and preserve its more than 200,000 volumes, and systematic efforts were also underway to expand its holdings in selected areas. In addition, word was gradually filtering out about the library and sporadic use was being made of it by local students and scholars. These activities, all knit together by Sutro’s larger aims for the library, augured well for the future, yet they were no more than a down payment. Until Sutro devised a concrete plan of action and provided the funding needed to implement it, the dream of the library would remain unfulfilled. Perhaps because Sutro had spoken for so long about his plans for the library, the lack of specific action created a growing sense of unease among some of its enthusiasts. As Mary Barnes, of Stanford’s Department of History and a frequent user of the library, expressed it in a letter that she wrote to Moss in September 1895: “I hope that we are about to see better days for the library, and that it will soon become as famous as it deserves to be.”

Unfortunately, however, the better days that Barnes, Andrew White, and many others envisioned for the Sutro Library were foiled by a series of events. Sutro had simply waited too long to address and resolve the various questions surrounding the disposition of the library: where to locate it, what exact relationship—legal and otherwise—should it have to the city, what would be the nature of its internal operations, and how to structure its governance and administration. Time ran out on Sutro. In 1894, he agreed to stand for election as mayor of San Francisco, persuaded to do so by a reformist group that opposed the power exerted over local business and civic affairs by the Southern Pacific Railway. Sutro was well-known and extremely popular, owing to his numerous philanthropic activities. He won the election by a clear majority. Yet he had none of the political skills needed to succeed in this position. His two years as mayor were a complete disaster, and when he left office in January 1897, Sutro’s health had been seriously undermined. Furthermore, his mind began to deteriorate rapidly. Within another year, in early 1898, his children intervened and sought the protection of the court. His eldest child, Emma Sutro Merritt, was appointed as guardian to oversee all of his business affairs, including the Library. In August 1898, Sutro died. Emma Merritt did her best to hold the library operation together, but events were conspiring against her. Sutro’s illness and withdrawal from any involvement in the library had necessarily brought significant new acquisitions to a halt. While efforts were still being made in early 1898 to maintain the inflow of numerous technical and scientific publications received gratis from government agencies and learned societies, offers of material made by dealers and private col-
lections were politely turned down. In addition to dealing with Sutro’s absence, the library suffered a second major blow when, after a lengthy illness, George Moss died in early 1898. Moss had been the heart of the operation. Moreover, Frederic Perkins had recently left the employ of the library to return to the East Coast. Thus, by the time of Sutro’s death, the library had lost its chief administrator and its main cataloger, the two individuals who formed the core of its professional staff. After Sutro’s death, work in the library largely ground to a halt. The executors of Sutro’s estate, Emma Merritt and W. R. H. Adamson, continued the policy of allowing inspection and use of the library by local and visiting scholars. Other activities, however, such as cataloging, cleaning, and binding, were suspended. Sutro had been involved in myriad business ventures, and until his finances were fully sorted out and his estate settled, library expenditures would need to be reduced considerably. When Emma Merritt warned her sister after Moss’ death, that “our finances have not permitted us to hire another librarian,” it was clear that Sutro’s plans were in jeopardy.

DEMISE OF THE LIBRARY: 1906 AND ITS AFTERMATH

In retrospect, of course, it is clear that Sutro’s failure to either initiate construction of the library or to leave explicit instructions concerning the matter in his will foretold a painful history to come. Yet while Sutro still had his health, the future was full of promise. His first choice of a site for the library was a large piece of property at the extreme western edge of the city. On this land, which came to be known as Sutro Heights, he had laid out several acres of beautifully landscaped gardens, accompanied by statuary, pathways, and ponds, and a palatial building in which to house and display his collection of art and artifacts. Sutro planned to construct the library on a protected point of this land, from which it would command an inspiring view of the Pacific Ocean. The library, in addition to housing his collection, would have “abundant room and conveniences for those who desire to pursue special studies and investigations.” He invited various dignitaries to visit the property and to examine the preliminary design for the library. A particularly keen supporter of the plan was President Holden of the University of California, who toured the property with a large contingent of faculty, assuring Sutro that “the closest relations with his library would be courted, for it would be of inestimable value in many departments of University effort.”

At this time, in the 1880s, Sutro Heights lay at some distance from the populated sections of San Francisco. Such isolation, Sutro initially thought, would work to the advantage of the library (“In ancient Greece, all places of learning and study were located far from the fret and worry of city life...”). Later, he may have begun to have some doubts on this score. What fundamentally caused Sutro, however, to change his mind about locating the library on Sutro Heights was the advice that various “experts” gave him, and which he unfortunately accepted as scientific, that the fog and sea air of the...
Heights would be damaging to his books. Persuaded of the veracity of this claim, Sutro began to look elsewhere in the city. Within several years, he had decided upon a new location, a twenty-six acre tract that he owned near the geographical center of San Francisco. This property, on gently rising land just south of Golden Gate Park and below what was then called Mount Parnassus (known today as Mt. Sutro), also afforded a striking view of the ocean, the headlands across the Golden Gate, and other scenic vistas. By the early 1890s, plans for the library had advanced considerably, with some of its actual design features made public:

It was to be of brick and stone and 100 feet by 200 feet in size. The building was to end in a semicircular bow to form reading and newspaper rooms. The middle of the building, to a width of 60 feet, was to be open from the ground to the glass roof which covered the structure. Seven stories of stack were designed to open upon this middle space. The ranges were to be 20 feet in length and 7 feet in height. ...it was designed to provide space for half a million volumes and was to cost $300,000.67

Sutro’s decision to locate the library on this parcel of land coincided with the efforts of the University of California to establish a new campus in San Francisco to house its schools of law, medicine, pharmacy, and dentistry (or what were then termed the “Affiliated Colleges”). Reasoning that both the professional schools and the library would benefit substantially from sitting next to each other and citing such examples as Harvard, Princeton, Yale, and the Universities of Oxford, Cambridge, Paris, and Berlin, Sutro offered to deed half of the acreage to the University of California. Berkeley’s administrators were by now quite familiar with the magnitude of Sutro’s Library, but to ensure that such understanding was shared by the Regents and members of the Affiliated College’s...
site selection committee, Sutro prepared a formal proposal summarizing the history and strengths of the library and including parts of the testimonies furnished by Burr and White. Although Sutro apparently encountered some opposition to his proposal, the Regents were delighted with it, and voted unanimously in October 1895 to accept the offer. In negotiating the conditions of the deed of gift, Sutro also restated his commitment to locate his library on the adjoining thirteen acres and to move toward its construction in the near future. According to one of his associates, W. C. Little, Sutro estimated that the building would be completed within five years.

Sutro had persuaded the Regents of the value that his library would hold for the university, and their acceptance of his offer was now bound up with his assurance that the library would either be built or, were he to die before this took place, that a trust would be set up to accomplish the same. In the discussion that occurred prior to the Regents’ vote, some concern was expressed about whether—in the event that Sutro should die first—heir to carry out his stated wishes, in the absence of legal language to this effect. The Regents, not wanting to “crowd” Sutro, apparently took it on good faith that Sutro would soon “have everything in shape,” so that his wishes regarding the library would be carried out to the letter. Their decision to omit this clause from the agreement was a fateful one, for in less than three years, Sutro was dead, having totally failed to get things “in shape” and leaving his heirs to entangle themselves in a web of litigation.

While he may have died without revising his 1882 will, there could be no doubt as to Sutro’s own intentions for the library. He had stated repeatedly that it should be opened and maintained for free use by scholars and the public and that its location should be within the city of San Francisco. He had finally narrowed its location to the site adjoining the land that he had donated to the University of California. He had researched its design and organization extensively, had described the endowment that would fund its continued operations, and had jotted notes about its administration and board of trustees. Yet, since none of the plan had been set down in a finished document, in the wake of his death doubts were immediately expressed about whether it would ever be executed. Even if Sutro’s heirs—his six children—had been united in wanting to honor their father’s wishes (virtually all of which were a matter of public record), the complicated finances of Sutro’s estate would have tied their hands initially. The heirs, however, were not united. On one side stood his daughter and eldest child, Emma Sutro Merritt, who believed firmly that the family ought to fulfill Sutro’s aims for the library. On the other stood a majority of her five siblings, who opposed doing so and wanted to sell the library. In his 1882 will, Sutro had bequeathed to his daughter Emma “all of my books, papers, scrapbooks, manuscripts, and pictures contained in my library.” It was on the basis of this clause in the will that Emma claimed that the library was hers. Her five siblings challenged this interpretation, arguing that when their father wrote this in 1882, he had a private library of no more than five to six thousand volumes and that common sense dictated that the great library which he subsequently developed could not reasonably be covered by it. In 1900, W. R. H. Adamson, executor of Sutro’s will, filed a petition to sell the library on behalf of the majority of the heirs. Emma S. Merritt filed a counter petition to block the sale and to obtain a ruling in favor of her interpretation.

The issue was bound up with litigation over other parts of Sutro’s estate and did not get settled for another thirteen years. The inability of Sutro’s children to resolve their dispute may have provided good copy for the newspapers, but it had tragic consequences for the library.

As noted above, an effort was made to provide some level of service in the library following Sutro’s death. But after a few years had passed, the library was essentially shut down. In place of a librarian, a “custodian,” Ella Weaver, was hired, to watch over the collection and perhaps perform some minimal listing, sorting, and arranging. As Robert Cowan put it, “Mrs. Weaver did nothing at the library except keep the doors closed.” While Sutro’s children contested ownership of the library, it remained in storage, locked up in the Battery Street warehouse and in the Montgomery Block offices. Had they managed to settle their dispute, the original library might still be intact. Fate, however, decreed otherwise.

The 1906 earthquake that struck San Francisco was followed by devastating fires that swept over major portions of the city. The Battery Street warehouse was consumed by flames. The fire destroyed approximately half of the Sutro Library, including more than ninety percent of the incunabula, thousands of bound volumes...
of manuscripts, and tens of thousands of other rare and unique imprints. It was an immense loss. The other half of the library, between 100,000 and 125,000 volumes housed in the Montgomery Block, was saved. The flames licked about the building but did not destroy it. The bitter irony is that Sutro had long been preoccupied with the threat of fire destroying his library. Indeed, in presenting his 1895 proposal to the Regents, he had described the protection that the land beneath Mt. Parnassus afforded against this possibility as one of its chief virtues. Others, too, had urged Sutro to take all precaution to protect the library against the threat of fire. Andrew White, for example, had been very explicit on the matter: “There is only one point,” he told Sutro, “on which I am nervous regarding it. I am more and more anxious to hear that you are making haste to get it into a fireproof building. It has become far too precious to be risked much longer.”

Although the obliteration of 100,000 volumes was a grievous loss to scholarship and a terrible reminder of the fragility of the library, it did not induce Sutro’s children to settle their differences. Both Emma Sutro Merritt and a majority of her siblings continued to defend their positions, the former determined to dispose of the library (or what now remained of it) in a manner consonant with her father’s wishes, the latter equally determined to sell it. “...unable,” as the San Francisco Call reported in July, 1909, “to harmonize their views,” the family and its lawyers were back in court. The litigation dragged on for several more years, but was finally settled in 1913. Whether the other Sutro children had a change of heart, or whether they had simply lost the case, it was their sister who prevailed. Once Emma Merritt’s position was vindicated, the question for the family became: to whom should the library be given? There were several possibilities. The University of California expressed interest in having the library, as did the State Library in Sacramento, and a group of Adolph Sutro’s friends revived his oft-expressed wishes that the library be presented to the city of San Francisco. The question was soon answered. In May 1913, it was announced that the heirs of the Sutro Estate had donated the collection to the California State Library. Very few conditions were attached to the gift. It was stipulated that the collection must be called the Sutro Library, that the books must bear the Sutro bookplate, that exceptionally rare volumes must not circulate outside the library, and—in keeping with its founder’s wishes—that the library must remain permanently in San Francisco. It was also provided that the books should be made available for public use not later than January 1, 1917.

It is not entirely clear why the family, and Emma Merritt in particular, for she played the key role, chose to donate the collection to the California State Library. The lobbying of the State Librarian, James Gillis, may well have been decisive. Like Sutro, Gillis believed in the free public library as an instrument of progress and enlightenment and as a great social leveler. In any event, the Board of Trustees of the State Library accepted the donation and the several conditions attached to it. Although the California Legislature did not validate the trustees’ action until 1915, when a bill was passed authorizing the Sutro Branch in San Francisco, all of the books and other materials stored in the Montgomery Block were moved in September 1913 to rented quarters in Stanford University’s Lane Medical Library, where the new branch...
would be temporarily located.

Thus ended fifteen years of uncertainty about the disposition of Adolph Sutro’s library, fifteen years of stubborn dispute punctuated by the calamitous disaster of 1906. While the library had finally found a home, it had not surmounted its difficulties. On the contrary, these were about to enter a new and in some respects more upsetting phase. In 1913, when the State Library trustees accepted the gift, the legislature also passed a bill appropriating monies to provide a building and operational funds for the Sutro Library. Obviously, the new branch library could not function properly without a budget. Governor Hiram Johnson, however, allowed the bill to die by pocket veto. Unforseen at the time, this defeat inaugurated a forty-six year chain of subsequent defeats, during which the Sutro Library was made to live a hand-to-mouth existence, deprived of resources and of legislative support, its great holdings cast into a cramped basement, neglected and forgotten by all but its most dedicated supporters.

A brief chronology will serve to illustrate this penultimate chapter in its history. As noted above, the Sutro Branch Library had rented space in San Francisco’s Lane Medical Library—part of Stanford University’s Medical School. Here it opened to the public in January 1917 fulfilling one of the conditions of the donation. These quarters, however, were meant to be temporary, and efforts continued on the part of some legislators to get funding for the Sutro Library. The need for funding was compounded by the crowded conditions facing the Lane Library. In 1923, a bill was introduced in the legislature calling for the state to appropriate monies to provide a building and operational funds for the Sutro Library. Obviously, the new branch library could not function properly without a budget. Governor Hiram Johnson, however, allowed the bill to die by pocket veto. Unforseen at the time, this defeat inaugurated a forty-six year chain of subsequent defeats, during which the Sutro Library was made to live a hand-to-mouth existence, deprived of resources and of legislative support, its great holdings cast into a cramped basement, neglected and forgotten by all but its most dedicated supporters.

As a branch of the State Library, the Sutro received a small appropriation annually from the legislature. The amount was negligible, some $4,000 to pay the salaries of two librarians. Yet a faction in the state senate begrudged even this sum of money and in 1933 proposed, as a cost-saving measure, to eliminate the Sutro Branch and return the library to the Sutro heirs. Their proposal was cast in the extreme and a group of prominent San Francisco citizens quickly mobilized against it. Included in this latter group was the noted printer John Henry Nash. In a piece that he wrote for the San Francisco News, Nash put his finger on the Sutro Library’s underlying problem—it had no building, no real infrastructure, and no recognition. In Nash’s words, “Instead of striving to save $4,000 a year, San Franciscans should be urging the erection of a suitable building to house the Sutro Library, where it might be used for research, or pleasure, by thousands who are still in ignorance of its existence. It has never been given the proper publicity.” Although the move to eliminate the Sutro Library went nowhere, the Sutro’s defenders could not turn the publicity that it generated to any good effect. The library continued to languish in the San Francisco Public Library, where, in the early 1940s, under increasingly crowded conditions, much of it had to be relegated to the basement. From time to time, voices were raised in protest against the orphaned state of the Sutro Library and the damaging physical conditions under which it was forced to exist. In 1940, for example, Paul Radin (who would soon head up a WPA project to inventory and compile a bibliography of the Sutro’s Mexican pamphlets) complained that “Time has sadly ravaged the Sutro collection. Dust...neglect, and the great catastrophe of 1906, have reduced it to a torso of what it once was.” Operating on a shoestring and largely hidden from public view, how could the Sutro Library hope to gain recognition and publicize its needs? In 1946, more than thirty years after the state accepted the donation of Adolph Sutro’s library, it was still being written (as it could perhaps still be written even today) that “not many Californians know that they...own a unique library—the Sutro Branch of the California State Library.”

The Sutro Library, however, could not stay in the basement forever. By the late 1950s, a series of solutions, some conservative, some radical, were being proposed to address its problems. The library had never enjoyed more than minimal support in the halls of state government, and some legislators again saw an opportunity to pare down the costs of the State Library by giving the Sutro away. The question resur-
faced of how to break the 1913 agreement with the Sutro heirs, so as to incorporate the library into the holdings of the University of California, or into the San Francisco Public Library, or to remove it to the state capital, Sacramento. Although several variants of these ideas were floated in 1957–59, and support for the U.C. Berkeley option initially extended into the governor’s office, more sensible thinking managed to prevail. Proposals were also made to move the Sutro Branch to other locations in San Francisco, such as the quarters of the University of California Extension Service, or back to the Lane Medical Library, since Stanford University was moving its medical school to the Palo Alto campus. None of these proposals, however, was practical or enjoyed more than limited support. Still another proposal, which very nearly came to pass, was not to give the Sutro Library to the San Francisco Public Library, but rather, to keep it there as the Sutro Branch in a larger, remodeled space. Funds for this purpose were appropriated in early 1958 by the Ways and Means Committee of the California State Assembly, raising hopes that a solution to the Sutro’s problems might be at hand. As an article in the San Francisco News put it: “The Sutro Library in San Francisco, probably the world’s most neglected collection of rare manuscripts and early books, got some hope for the future today.” 85 These hopes, however, were soon dashed, as the appropriation was quickly deleted by the Senate Finance Committee.

To the dismay and astonishment of many, the debate over what to do with the Sutro dragged on, the library falling victim to political posturing and infighting. In the 1959 legislative session, new proposals were made to close the doors of the Sutro, strike its funding from the state budget, and give it to the University of California.

Nevertheless, the wearying struggle over the library had brought renewed attention to it, and in the end, this attention saved it by solidifying its base of support and by demonstrating to a wider audience how exceptionally rich its holdings were. It was now documented, for example, that a significant portion of the Sutro’s enormous collection of British pamphlets from the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries were not to be found in either the Huntington or the William Andrew Clark Libraries. To those in search of such fugitive material, a visit to the Sutro Library was unavoidable. 86 A coalition of interests—San Francisco legislators and other elected officials, the California library community, newspaper editors and columnists, and citizens at large—began to campaign for the library and to protest vigorously against its history of neglect by the state. The distress that was felt over the irresponsible mistreatment of a major cultural asset was summed up in these words from an editorial in the San Francisco News: “The state has made shameful use of this treasure house of knowledge.” 87 The gathering criticism and concern eventually reverberated in the national press, thus expanding the focus of attention. 88 A final source of support for the embattled library against efforts to dismantle it or to move it out of San Francisco came from within the Sutro itself. Beginning in the mid-1950s, its staff began to publicize the library to a much wider audience by organizing traveling exhibitions to sites in Northern California and by writing articles about its holdings for publication in national journals. 89

The heightened desire to rescue the Sutro Library, improve its conditions, and place it in adequate quarters culminated in an offer made in late 1958 by the University of San Francisco to house the Sutro on the ground floor of its new Gleeson Library. Under the terms of a twenty-year lease, the Gleeson Library would make 14,000 square feet of space available to the Sutro—far more than the amount of a renovated area offered by the San Francisco Public Library—for the nominal fee of $1.00 per year. In all other respects, the Sutro Library would stay unchanged, continuing to function as a branch of the California State Library, observant of all of the conditions of the 1913 agreement. This option was clearly superior to any other that the Sutro had before it. Short of having its own building (which would not occur until 1983), the Sutro Library could not realistically hope for a more generous offer. Yet, generous as it may have been, the offer was not without its critics. Opposition to the prospective move came from two quarters: first, from an assemblage of civic leaders, elected officials, and members of boards and commissions, and second, from among members of the Sutro family.

When the proposal to transfer the Sutro to the Gleeson Library was first announced, it was perceived by some to violate the principle of church-state separation. The University of San Francisco was a Jesuit institution, and to these critics, the placement of a public library in a private religious institution—whatever the guarantees of free, public access—was fundamentally wrong. The issue stirred considerable controversy, and a significant
protest against the transfer was expressed on these grounds. Furthermore, a portion of the community, led by the San Francisco Public Library Commission, opposed the move on more general grounds as well, asserting that given the history and purposes of the Sutro Library, it was more appropriate that it remain in a public location. In light of the sharp divisions over the issue, California Governor Edmund G. Brown appointed a committee to analyze the University of San Francisco’s offer. After conducting a brief study, the committee unanimously recommended that the offer be accepted. Governor Brown agreed with the recommendation, and the announcement was soon made (in May 1959) that the state would lease space in the Gleeson Library for the Sutro Branch. Although opposition continued to be expressed, it gradually died down, and in early January 1960, the San Francisco Public Library Commission withdrew its objection and agreed to the transfer. At this juncture, an opéra bouffe aspect was injected into the affair when two of Adolf Sutro’s granddaughters, Alberta Morbio Pruett and Marguerite Morbio de Mailly, sought a legal injunction to block the move, alleging that the original donors expected the Sutro Library to be housed in a nonsectarian environment, and further threatening that, if the library move to the University of San Francisco went through, they would sue to repossess the library in its entirety. The granddaughters’ case did not materialize. In early 1960, the Sutro Library was transferred to new quarters in the Gleeson Library. At long last, it could move forward.

FINAL THOUGHTS
Having considered the history of the Sutro Library from its beginnings down to 1960, one returns to the original question—how is it that the man who conceived and assembled a library of such remarkable proportions has earned so little recognition for his efforts as a collector? The answer is tied

(Above) The new rare book vault on the sixth floor has finally given Adolph Sutro’s magnificent collection proper shelving. The vault is equipped with humidity and temperature control and stout security.

(Below) A high-tech reference desk on the fifth floor welcomes Sutro patrons. Shown behind the desk is the high security rare materials reading room.
to a number of factors. Certainly, the fire that in 1906 reduced half of Sutro’s library to ashes played a role. Gone in a few cruel hours were the books and manuscripts that had placed it at the pinnacle of collections in this country, of both incunabula and sixteenth-century European imprints. Yet this loss, colossal as it was, hardly accounts for Adolf Sutro’s lack of recognition. First, it happened after he had assembled the library and thus could not negate his collecting achievements. Second, even after the fire, the Sutro remained—both in size and quality—one of the finest private libraries in the country, containing areas of strength, such as its Mexicana and its pamphlets relating to the political, economic, and religious history of Great Britain, that set it apart from other collections. Ultimately, the major explanation for Sutro’s obscurity as a book collector lay in his own indecisiveness and lack of action. What separated Adolf Sutro from Huntington, Morgan, Newberry, and others, was his failure to either carry through with his plans to construct a building for his library and leave an endowment for its future operations, or to provide the means and instructions by which to accomplish these purposes after his death. That failure led directly to the sad train of events that subsequently befell the library. To take such action was imperative for Sutro, because unlike a number of other collectors, he could not count on his children (other than his eldest daughter) to remain faithful to his vision. The tragedy is that Sutro had been motivated by high ideals and a deep sense of civic purpose. For him, libraries were a sublime creation, touchstones of progress and of cultural and intellectual enlightenment. The donation of the Sutro Library in 1913 to the California State Library was made out of respect for Sutro’s wishes and to fulfill his earlier vision for the library. For nearly half a century, the state’s failure to support the Sutro Library subverted this intention. What is more, the disuse and neglect into which the library fell left its mark on Adolf Sutro’s reputation as a book collector. Largely lost in the wreckage of the post-1913 years were the record and the memory of the library that he had planned and assembled. Equally lost (to the extent that it had ever existed) was the recognition of Sutro’s importance within the ranks of American book collectors and of his stature, in Richard Dillon’s phrase, as “San Francisco’s pioneer booksman.”

ENDNOTES

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1 On the question of the size of Sutro’s library, see Richard H. Dillon, “The Sutro Library,” News Notes of California Libraries, 51, No. 2 (April 1956): 338-352. While there is no full-scale history of the Sutro Library (which has functioned since 1917 as a branch of the California State Library), the story of its formation and subsequent travails has been recounted in various articles and pamphlets. In addition to the aforementioned piece by Dillon (who served as Sutro Librarian from 1953 until 1980), see his booklet, The Anatomy of a Library [San Francisco: Sutro Library, 1957], and Peter Thomas Conmy, “The Sutro Library: Origin, Nature and Status,” California Librarian 20, No. 2 (April 1959): 91-95 & 129.

2 See, for example, “Notes on the Sutro Library,” Overland Monthly (June 1885), n.p.; “Rare Old Works; An Appreciative Sketch of the Sutro Library,” San Francisco Daily Report (Dec. 31, 1886), n.p.; and The Colleges and the Big Library, San Francisco Chronicle (September 15, 1895). For testimonies appearing outside of San Francisco, see “A Real Benefactor,” The Augusta Chronicle (September 16, 1885), and “San Francisco...Adolph Sutro’s Great Library—Its Riches and His Methods,” The Daily Tribune [Salt Lake City] (November 29, 1885).


5 Granniss wrote and compiled Part III, entitled “American Book Collecting and the Growth of Libraries.” Although, as mentioned above, the book was designed to fill out the historical record, it actually had less to say about Sutro and his library than did a 1915 study by George Watson Cole, Book-Collectors as Benefactors of Public Libraries. [reprinted for private distribution from papers of the Bibliographical Society of America, Volume IX, Nos 3–4] (Chicago: [University of Chicago Press], 1915).

6 Both Moss and Perkins were exceptionally capable. Moss, who served as Sutro’s chief librarian for some ten years, was an English bookbinder, reputedly trained by Francis Bedford, as well as a scholar with a broad knowledge of languages. Perkins, a former head librarian of the San Francisco Free Public Library, worked for Sutro (under the supervision of Moss) for several years in the early 1890s, catalog-


8 Even if he had been so motivated, Sutro would have found it difficult, if not impossible, to compete with Folger, Morgan, Huntington, et al., because his personal wealth was much less than theirs.

9 M. J. Ferguson, *The Sutro Branch of the California State Library*. [Sacramento: California State Library (?), n.d.] This slim pamphlet by Ferguson carries no publication date, but was probably written around 1920.

10 For these and related details about Sutro’s life and travels in the 1870s–1880s, see Robert E. Stewart, Jr. and Mary Frances Stewart, *Adolph Sutro: A Biography.* (Berkeley: Howell-North, 1962): pp. 41–79. This is the only full-length biography of Sutro.

11 As quoted in Conmy, pp. 93–94.

12 This figure is given by Dillon in “The Sutro Library,” p. 338.

13 Among the materials in the Sutro Branch Library are receipts and correspondence pertaining to Adolph Sutro’s book purchases during this and later periods. For records documenting his 1883 London purchases, see Sutro Papers, Sutro Branch Library, Drawers 5 (Folder 2), 6 (Folder 1), 7 (Folders 1 & 2), and 9 (Folder 1). For simplicity’s sake, the Sutro Branch Library will be cited as “SBL.”

14 Sutro Papers, SBL, Drawer 5, Folder 2. For more on the Sunderland sale, see p. 12.


16 The price for this batch was £3.1 0. *Ibid.*

17 Stewart, *Adolph Sutro*, p. 178

18 Other German booksellers from whom he bought included Ludwig Rosenthal, Carl Forster, J. Hess, and E. Hofstätter. Although Sutro travelled in 1883 (and after) to various European book centers—Basel, Antwerp, Paris, Madrid—Germany, after London, was his second major theatre of operations. Correspondence and receipts pertaining to Sutro’s purchases from German booksellers (including Mayer) is contained in the Sutro Papers, SBL, Drawer 5, Folders 2, 3, and 4; Drawer 6, Folder 1; and Drawer 9, Folder 1.

19 A complete tabulation of Mayer’s purchases, his month-by-month expenditures for books between May 1884 and October 1886, is found in the Sutro Library. See “Journal, Library, A. Sutro,” Sutro Papers, SBL, Drawer 32, Folder 1. (This is the account book for the London operation and includes all of its outlays.) Whether still in London or back in Munich, Mayer apparently did a limited amount of work during the winding-down period, since his salary for the entire six months was only £90.

20 Carl F. Mayer to Adolf Sutro, June 9, 1884. Sutro Papers, SBL, Drawer 5, Folder 5.


28 See the account book cited in note 20 above. Each monthly entry records this sum as the allotment for books. Although the figure of $2,000 has often been cited, this seems incorrect, since at this time a pound sterling was equal to $5.00.

29 As it happened, bulk purchases were unavoidable, as very few books were sold individually. Such treatment was given only to books of exceptional value or interest. Instead, almost all of the books disposed of at auctions were sold by lot, tied in bundles of 25 each, without separate bibliographic description. These were the conditions that Mayer (or any purchaser or agent) faced. To circumvent the problem of buying what he did not want, Mayer made every effort to inspect lots in advance. For a description of the sale-by-lot system, see Henry R. Wagner, *Sixty Years of Book Collecting*. Los Angeles, The Zamorano Club, 1952.


35 For these and other details about the collection, see “Leman’s Old Plays . . . ,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, December 29, 1887.

36 Charles C. Soule to Adolf Sutro, July 11, 1889. Sutro Papers, SBL, Drawer 5, Folder 1.


38 These notes by Moss are unsigned, but are clearly written in his hand. They are also undated, but because of details that they contain regarding Sutro’s choice of a site for his library, must have been composed around the mid-1890s. Further evidence for this date is found in the fact that Moss gives the number of volumes in the library as 200,000, a figure which likely could not have been reached before this time.
Sutro Papers, SBL, Drawer 22, Folder 1.

39 Ibid.


43 This number is included in an undated tabulation (probably done by Robert Warner), found among Mayer’s letters to Sutro. See Sutro Papers, SBL, Drawer 9, Folder 1.


45 Ibid.


47 The four folios and the Halliwell-Phillips Collection of Shakespeare Stratford documents.

48 Banks was president of the Royal Society and had sailed with Captain Cook. The 100,000 pages of material (chiefly manuscripts) in his collection document and mirror the scientific spirit and achievements of his time.

49 An invoice in the Sutro Library indicates that he paid £200 for them. Sutro Papers, SBL, Drawer 8, Folder I. Shapiro had taken his own life in March 1884, following the revelation that he had tried to sell a forged “manuscript of Deuteronomy” to the British Museum. This was not the first fraudulent sale for which Shapiro had been the agent. For a brief note on his role in these affairs, see “Shapira Fragments,” in the Encyclopedia Judaica, Ed. Cecil Roth & Geoffrey Wigoder, Vol. 14: 1301-1302.

50 “The Sutro Library,” in the Pacific Churchman, April 1, 1885, from the Sutro papers, SBL, Drawer 32, Folder 2.

51 O’Day, Town Talk, p. 5.

52 It is sometimes thought that Sutro’s Spanish “agents” led him to believe that they were uncovering heretofore unknown documents relating to the early Spanish colonization and evangelization of present-day California. On this point, see, e.g., Donald C. Cutter’s preface to his reedition of George B. Griffin’s 1891 compilation, Documents from the Sutro Collection. Donald C. Cutter, The California Coast: A Bilingual Edition of Documents from the Sutro Collection...[Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1969]: vii-xix. Peralta, however, was very direct with Sutro, informing him: “Only I must tell candidly, I believe that you came too late to find anything new. In Mexico as well as in San Francisco no document has been spared examination, copy and even printing. The infatigable Hubert Howe Bancroft has left you and everybody else quite behind in Californian documents and historical knowledge. He has copies of all documents of interest in the very Archives of the Missions on California, New Mexico, Arizona, Oregon, etc. etc.” Manuel Peralta to Adolf Sutro, March 2, 1884, Sutro Papers, SBL, Drawer 5, Folder 5.

53 Moss’ monthly salary was $125 and Perkins’ $100. The principal bookbinder, Henry Marsden, was paid $18 per week; the book-sewers earned less, around $1.45 per day. See “Sutro Library Receipts,” Sutro Papers, SBL, Drawer 22, Folder 3.

54 George Moss to Adolph Sutro, June 20, 1893. Bancroft Library, Sutro, A.H.J., Papers & Correspondence, Box 8, George Moss Folder.

55 White wrote a quite complete description of the library to the editor of the Christian Advocate, J. M. Buckley, who printed it in the paper in 1892. Sutro included parts of White’s account in a pamphlet that he published in 1895, when he proposed a site for the library to the Regents of the University of California. See Adolph Sutro’s Letter to the Regents of the University of California and to the Committee of Affiliated Colleges on the Selection of a Site for the Affiliated Colleges. (San Francisco: 1895): pp. 4–5.

56 Andrew White to Adolph Sutro, June 21, 1892. Bancroft Library, Sutro, A.H.J., Papers & Correspondence, Box 19, Andrew D. White Folder.

57 Andrew D. White to Adolph Sutro, July 29, 1893. Ibid.

58 See “Visitor’s Register: Sutro Library 1886–1994,” Sutro Papers, SBL, Drawer 35. Moreover, according to Perkins, a number of these visitors had specialized knowledge of libraries and were thus able to appreciate the remarkable strengths of the Sutro. “This library, imperfect as it is, has excited the astonishment of every book expert who has examined it.” See Bancroft Library, Sutro, A.H.J., Papers & Correspondence, Box 9: Perkins, Frederic Beecher Folder.

59 Mary S. Barnes to George Moss, Sept. 10, 1895. Sutro Papers, SBL, Drawer 10, Folder 7.

60 See, e.g., letter from P. W. Treat (private secretary to Sutro) to George Warner, a Minneapolis collector, in which Treat wrote: “Replying to yours of 6th we are not purchasing anything for the Sutro Library at present, but in the near future we would be pleased to hear from you again.” P. W. Treat to Warner, January 10, 1898. Sutro Papers, SBL, Drawer 33, Folder 2.

61 To scholars later researching this period in the library’s history, Moss’ fate was apparently something of a mystery. (See Richard Dillon, “Adolph Sutro Finds a Librarian,” The Journal of Library History, Vol. 2 [1967]: 225-234.) Yet it is clear from a letter that Emma Merritt wrote to her sister Katie that Moss had indeed passed away: “In regard to the library there is no complete catalog. Poor Mr. Moss...who was for so many years the Librarian, died on the 25th of March, after a lingering illness of nearly two years. Practically, there has been nobody in the library for about ten months....” Emma Merritt to Mrs.
Moritz Nussbaum, n.d. [but probably written in early April 1898]. Bancroft Library, Sutro, A.H.J. Papers & Correspondence, Box 41: Sutro Estate; Correspondence, Legal Documents, 1898–1915.

62 Ibid.

63 Among Sutro’s artifacts were Egyptian mummies and a great many stuffed animals and birds.

64 See “At Sutro Heights,” Pacific Rural Press (San Francisco), May 8, 1886.

65 Ibid.

66 Sutro went on to say, “...and here, among these groves and gardens, by the side of the great Pacific, I shall place my books.” From remarks he addressed to a group of editorial writers in 1885, as quoted in “A Real Benefactor,” The Augusta Chronicle, September 16, 1885, p. 8.

67 From an article on the proposed library published in the San Francisco Call on June 15, 1893, as paraphrased in Ferguson, Sutro Branch, p. 3.

68 See note 66 above.

69 W. C. Little quoting Adolf Sutro, as reported in “The Colleges and the Big Library,” San Francisco Chronicle, September 15, 1895.

70 Mention of such a trust and of Sutro’s assurances to the Regents was reported in “Sutro’s College Site is Settled. Approval of the Deed of Gift,...,” San Francisco Chronicle, February 2, 1923.

71 Ibid.

72 There is also some indication that Sutro may actually have decided to deed the library itself to the University. See Stewart & Stewart, Adolf Sutro, 207–208.

73 As evidence that Sutro was serious about leaving an endowment for the library, Moss cites Sutro’s success in getting an amendment passed to the state constitution that exempted public libraries from taxation. According to Moss, Sutro had feared that the endowment might otherwise be eaten up in taxes. Mention of this initiative of Sutro’s is made in the surviving fragments of a biographical sketch about him, which, while lacking a specific date and author, was apparently written by Moss, as it bears notes and corrections in his handwriting. See Sutro Papers, SBL, Drawer 31, Folder 2. Furthermore, Sutro expected that the endowment, “to be used in the maintenance of the library and for the acquisition of additional books,” would yield a minimum income of $2,000 per month. See Dillon, “The Sutro Library,” p. 340.

74 The question was posed, for example, in an article published in the San Francisco Chronicle just a day after Sutro’s death, as quoted in Conny, “The Sutro Library,” p. 92.

75 See “Heirs Seek to Sell the Sutro Library,” The San Francisco Call, August 23, 1900, p. 11.

76 Ibid.

77 O’Day, Town Talk, p. 5.

78 Andrew White to Adolf Sutro, June 21, 1892. Bancroft Library, Sutro, A.H.J. Papers & Correspondence, Box 19: Andrew D. White Folder.

79 See “Sutro’s Heirs Are in Dispute over Library,” The San Francisco Call, July 29, 1909, p. 5.


81 The bill was introduced by Assemblyman Albert Rosenshine. See San Francisco Chronicle, February 2, 1923.


86 This and other unique strengths of the Sutro Library were publicized in a report (the so-called “Henderson Report”) issued in 1957 by a special state committee formed to evaluate the Sutro Library and its needs.


89 The principal person driving this publicity campaign was Richard Dillon, who had become the Head of the Sutro Branch in 1953.


91 “San Francisco: Literary Orphan,” San Francisco Chronicle [This World section], January 24, 1960.

When Curator of Special Collections Emeritus Gary Kurutz told me recently that moving the Sutro Library to its new location on the San Francisco State campus was about to happen, I began to reflect on my experience with this wonderful library and its holdings. Shortly after arriving in 1980 to take the post of state librarian of California, I learned that the good fathers at the University of San Francisco (USF) were evicting the Sutro. The library had been in the basement of the Gleeson Library at a dollar a year for some time.

Gary, Chief of State Library Services Sheila Thornton, and I made our way to USF on several occasions to discuss the
possible extension of their good graces until we could find a suitable home, realizing that we had to remain in the City and County of San Francisco. On one of those first trips, we were exposed to hepatitis and all had to get shots as a result. I was actually in Wisconsin at a meeting of state librarians where they chased me down, and colleagues there got me to a clinic for the inoculation. Another time, I would stay on for other meetings and was mugged outside of my hotel. But that is another story all together.

These negotiations were to continue until we had agreement for the library to remain in place, but at a much higher rent, until such time we could find a suitable location. Gary and I set about looking at a variety of options, including the Masonic Temple on Van Ness Street, which would have been great. But, alas, it was way out of our reach to renovate let alone purchase. Remember Proposition 13 was newly passed.

One day at lunch, I overheard the gathering at the table next to me speculating on the options for the temporary buildings behind the State Capitol, which had been temporary housing for the legislature during the renovation of that historic building. It took me no time at all to begin making calls on return from lunch. To make the story much shorter, an agreement was struck with the legislative leadership to acquire the buildings for the Sutro Library. So I began to try to find a place to put them. San Francisco State University President Paul Romberg, came to the rescue, and together we pushed a proposal through the California State University Board of Trustees and settled on an agreement that would allow the temporary buildings to move to the north part of the San Francisco State University campus for one dollar a year. We were in business.

It only took thirty-six truckloads to finish the job, and the buildings were reconstructed with the need to only buy a new front entrance and a couple of toilet fixtures. Principal Librarian Cy Silver from the library consulting staff oversaw the construction with folks from General Services. Sheila, Gary and their crew planned the move which went smoothly. Some new treasures were uncovered and logged. And we were ready to open for business with compact shelving for the bulk of the original Sutro collections and open shelving and user space for the high use collections of local history and genealogy—even a rare book room.

The dedication was a stellar event. Var- tan Gregorian, then president of the New York Public Library and formerly at San Francisco State was keynote speaker, former State Librarian of California Ethel Crockett, and a host of legislative members and staff were on hand to celebrate the opening. During the private brunch at the Cliff House, I recall looking out the window toward the site of the Sutro Baths wondering what Adolph himself would have thought.

We would draw from the Sutro collections many times over for exhibitions and content for the Bulletin, always with Gary Kurutz’s fine writing. Bringing the treasures of the Sutro Library to the attention of the public and those of the California State Library has always been one of my personal pleasures. Californians can be very proud of the fact that these two collections today compose a tremendous resource for public scholars and historians. During the remainder of my time as state librarian, I would yearly invest in building the extensive collection of local history and genealogy, making this a Mecca for local historians and those interested in their family roots.

It is such a pleasure to see the Sutro Library ready to take on new clothes and continue to welcome Californians to sample its riches.

Shortly after arriving in 1980 to take the post of state librarian of California, I learned that the good fathers at the University of San Francisco (USF) were evicting the Sutro.
The Sutro Library’s Long Journey Is Over

By Gary F. Kurutz

In 1984, I gave a talk to the Zamorano Club in Los Angeles detailing the many moves and homes of the Sutro Library over the twentieth century. The title of my talk was “From Pillar to Post: The Peregrinations of the Sutro Library, 1913–1983.” Much of the same information concerning the different locations is contained in Russ Davidson’s and Gary E. Strong’s fine articles. It seemed appropriate, however, to describe the last and what we hope is the final journey of the Sutro Library.

Overlooking beautiful Lake Merced and the Pacific Ocean on 480 Winston Drive in southwest San Francisco, the Sutro Library from 1982 to July 2012 was located in a 20,000 square-foot modular building originally designed to house the Legislative Chambers during the restoration of the State Capitol Building. From the beginning, State Library administrative staff knew that it was not a perfect solution but it did provide a home in a state-owned building on state-owned real estate. No longer did the Sutro depend on the decision making of a landlord. However, the state architects who reconfigured the structure to meet the Sutro’s needs warned that the building’s air-conditioning system and roof would eventually need to be replaced. Miraculously, it survived the October 17, 1989, Loma Prieta Earthquake beautifully. When the earth shook at 5:04 in the late afternoon, a few ceiling tiles fell down, a small number of books from some of the top shelves hit the floor, and drawers of microfilm cabinets opened. Staff remaining in the building just after it closed, of course, rightly quailed in fear and crouched under tables. The seismic event devastated the neighboring J. Paul Leonard Library of San Francisco State University twisting metal stacks and hurling tens of thousands of books to the floor.

As the years passed, it also became clear that the Sutro Library would have to expand its facility to accommodate collection growth in addition to replacing its heating and air-conditioning system, installing a new roof, and handling routine repairs. When Adolph Sutro contemplated building a library on his property overlooking the Pacific Ocean, experts warned him that the humid ocean air would harm his collection. Ironically, the Winston Drive facility overlooked the ocean, and fog and drizzle frequently engulfed the area. The HVAC system strained and groaned and could not keep up. Early on, a mold outbreak attacked the collection, and staff scrambled to rectify the problem and deal with several volumes that required eradication of the dreaded fungi. In response, contractors installed portable dehumidifiers and fans that battled twenty-four hours a day to keep the air dry. Despite these problems, vigilant staff cheerfully monitored conditions and kept Sutro’s legacy mold and pest free. Later a new roof was added and the building restuccoed to further protect the collections. Workers also installed screens and other devices to shield the library against rodents and other critters that lurked about in the Stonestown neighborhood.

There remained one other unsatisfactory element: the lack of proper storage for the majority of the rare books. The former Senate Chambers were not large enough to house the non-circulating collection.
on conventional metal library shelves. When the moving company delivered the books to the new location, tens of thousands of volumes remained packed away in cartons. Funding in post Proposition-13 days remained tight, but the State Library secured an appropriation to install compact shelving units in what came to be called the “back stacks.” Huge concrete piers were poured, tracks for the shelving bases installed, and eleven-foot high rolling shelving units installed. Compact shelving has the advantage of eliminating the need for aisles and thus saving much space. The perimeter walls of the back stacks supported oversize shelves. Finally, the books, which included hundreds of folio and elephant folio-sized volumes were carefully put in place. The weight supported by the units was tremendous. It was an awesome sight for visitors to be shown the back stacks. Despite the size of the room and its rows of leviathan stacks, this proved to be a less than satisfactory solution. Why? It was still not large enough to adequately shelve all the books. Many of the fragile volumes had to be double and even triple-shelved. Scaling a ladder to try and find a small octavo-sized volume squeezed behind two-rows of books proved to be dangerous not only for the books but also for the librarians.

When historian and librarian Dr. Kevin Starr of San Francisco became the State Librarian of California in 1993, he naturally visited the State Library’s San Francisco branch. Immediately, Dr. Starr expressed dissatisfaction with the Winston Drive facility. This reconfigured modular building, he believed, was not suitable for the world-famous rare book and manuscript collection of Adolph Sutro. Something had to be done. On June 28, 1995, he wrote: “Adolph Sutro’s vision of a proper home for the Sutro Library has for nearly a century been a goal of his heirs and every State Librarian.” Library consultant Cy Silver was commissioned to develop a general building program addressing the Sutro’s need for adequate storage, shelving, and public programs. Clearly the Winston Drive facility needed to be expanded or a new site developed.

Timing is always crucial. The Sutro’s Library’s property owner, San Francisco State University, needed to seismically secure its J. Paul Leonard Library following the 1989 earthquake. Furthermore, the university library was in desperate need of expansion room not only for bound volumes but also to accommodate new media and computer stations. Plus, its student body was growing. Working with Deputy State Librarian Cameron Robertson, General Counsel Paul Smith, and Cy Silver, Dr. Starr approached San Francisco State University and met with University President Dr. Robert Corrigan. Starr and Corrigan agreed to join forces in seeking state funding for a joint-use facility. A deal was struck, and in 2002 a lease revenue bond approved by the governor and state legislature funded the renovation and expansion of the Leonard Library.

Given the Sutro Library’s history of having to move every twenty or so years, the State Library, with the blessings of the California State Department of Finance, required a permanent solution. To enter into a landlord-lessee relationship with the university was unacceptable. The Sutro Library Branch would, therefore, become a part owner of the building. The State of California allocated a percentage of the funding for the renovation and expansion of the facility to include 30,000 square feet for the Sutro Library operation. It would be a permanent allocation of space. By so doing, the university could not, in say twenty-five years, terminate the agreement. The Department of Finance has been steadfast in assuring the State Library that this represented a permanent home for this once wandering library. Moreover, without the inclusion of the Sutro Library, the university would not have received the funding for the project.

Beginning in the new millennium, State Library staff met with library staff from the university led by University Librarian Debbie Masters and members of the university’s Capitol Planning Department. It represented an exciting time to plan a joint-use facility and to interact with university librarians. Earlier, San Jose State University and the San Jose Public Library had entered into a joint-use agreement, and since 2003 that relationship has been a success. Bringing the remarkable Sutro collection into the center of campus represented a happy prospect. Originally, the plan called for the Sutro Library to be located on the first floor and then the fourth floor of the new facility. The latter option would have placed it on the same floor as the university’s own special collections, the Frank V. de Bellis Rare Book Collection, and also the San Francisco Labor Archives and Research center. The plan provided space for an exhibit gallery where both the university and Sutro could create displays.

However, as has been the history of the Sutro Library, nothing is simple. As time lapsed in the planning phase, costs escalated exceeding the State’s allocation. The demand for concrete and steel in China, India, and elsewhere impacted the budget. The State augmented funding but not enough to cover everything that both staffs wanted. Consequently, such standard appointments as finished ceilings had to be scaled back and the project architect terminated. A new firm HMC Architects was brought in to undertake what in the building trade is known as a “design build facility.” In this process, the same firm handles the design and construction.

Planning meeting after planning meeting was held, and staff of both institutions poured over floor plans, furniture and equipment configurations, and stack layouts. Sutro Library staff diligently measured the collections inch by inch and microfilm cabinets drawer by drawer. Part of the facility called for the addition on the west side of the Leonard Library of a new
structure to house an automated library retrieval system (LRS). Several university libraries have used this futuristic system to densely store non-rare materials into bins. Each volume would be bar-coded, and a robot-like device would then glide down tracks from the command post and retrieve the correct bin. The bin would then return to the command post, and a technician would open the bin and retrieve the requested volume. As a part owner of the facility, the Sutro has received several of these bins, which will be used to store bound newspapers and microforms made obsolete by online information services.

Engineers reviewed the load-bearing capacity of the Leonard Library and surprisingly determined that the section of the fourth floor set aside for the Sutro would not work. The plan called for its heavy book stacks to be placed over the roof of the old facility. Simply put, loaded book stacks would be too heavy, and a new location in the renovated facility had to be found. Darlene Tong, Head of Information, Research and Instructional Services of the University Library, suggested that the Sutro move into the fifth and sixth floors on the north side of the building. These floors had previously housed the university library’s special collections and administrative offices. With that timely and brilliant suggestion, the engineers determined that its load-bearing walls and floors could handle the weight of the Sutro’s collections. At last, a permanent home had been found.

This new location, while not on the same floor as the university’s special collections, does offer several advantages. The fifth and sixth floors are not shared with the university. Thus, the Sutro Library physically maintains its independence as the San Francisco branch of the State Library. The sixth floor, in particular, represents an ideal secure space to house the rare book and manuscript collections. All the materials are now shelved on conventional shelves on standard library stacks in a high-security vault room. The vault did not require compact shelving units and the volumes do not have to be double or triple shelved. To protect the collections against the heavy coastal humidity, the vault has state-of-the-art environmental controls. And, the building is well engineered to withstand the next earthquake. In addition to all these positive features, there is one other bonus. The two floors overlook the beautiful central campus quad with its attractive landscaping, groves of tall trees, and striking student union building.

As described in the previous Bulletin (#103, p. 31), Library staff both at the Sutro led by Supervising Librarian II Haleh Motiey and in Sacramento led by Debbie Newton, head of the Administrative Services Bureau, and David Cismowski, chief of the State Library Services Bureau, worked tirelessly to prepare for the move. This included all aspects from planning the stacks and furniture layouts to disposal of obsolete furniture and equipment. San Francisco State University staff helped enormously in making this a relatively smooth transition. No library move is problem free. Along the way, State Librarian Stacey Aldrich, General Counsel Paul Smith, and Library administrative staff reviewed the master service agreement with the university detailing the practical workings of the Sutro in the Leonard Library. Beginning in the spring of 2012, two moving companies working with an excited staff began packing books and installing shelves in the new location. On July 5, State Library Services Bureau Chief David Cismowski turned over to the university the keys to 480 Winston Drive. A building that housed hundreds of thousands of precious books and manuscripts for nearly three decades stood empty. On August 1, 2012, the Sutro Library reopened its doors to the beautiful new facility amid the broad smiles of researchers and staff alike.

The State of California received the Sutro Library in 1913. Now, ninety-nine years later, it has finally found a suitable permanent home. Its peregrinations are over.

“Adolph Sutro’s vision of a proper home for the Sutro Library has for nearly a century been a goal of his heirs and every State Librarian.”

– Dr. Kevin Starr
On the morning of August 13, 2012, in Lubbock, Texas, the Sutro Library’s honorary curator of Mexicana, Dr. W. Michael Mathes passed away after a valiant fight against cancer. For decades, Dr. Mathes has been a generous supporter of the Sutro Library and a close personal friend. He will be greatly missed especially as the Sutro Library enters a new era in its new facility.

I first met Mike while serving as library director of the California Historical Society in 1975. We instantly hit it off with a mutual love for books, bibliography, and the history of our Golden State. At the time, Mike was a professor of history at the University of San Francisco. Earlier, he had worked for the Society assisting

EDITOR’S NOTE
Dr. W. Michael Mathes was Honorary Curator of Mexicana at the Sutro Library, Professor of History at the University of San Francisco, and Member of the Orden Mexicana del Águila Azteca, Academia Mexicana de la Historia, and Doctor Honoris Causa in the Autonomous University of Baja California. The author of dozens of books and articles on Mexican, California, and Pacific Ocean history, Dr. Mathes has received such recognition as the Henry R. Wagner Award, California Historical Society; Sir Thomas More Medal for Book Collecting, Gleeson Library Associates, University of San Francisco; Hubert Howe Bancroft Award, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley; and the Oscar Lewis Award, Book Club of California. Dr. Mathes was a generous donor to the Sutro Library, California History Section of the State Library, and the Foundation.
As we got to know each other, Mike invited me up to his gorgeous home in the hills above Sonoma. I thought I was entering a Spanish hacienda seeing the tiled roof, enclosed courtyard, and cactus garden. Friendly German shorthair pointers greeted me. Not surprisingly, he loved all things Mexican and served cerveza, chili peppers, tortillas, and steak, all seasoned with liberal doses of Tabasco sauce. After a

Beautifully designed and published by the Book Club of California, Mexico on Stone, was a path breaking study of book illustration in Mexico. Many of the illustrations for this large format fine press book came from the Sutro Library.
quick tour of his casa, he took me into his library. My eyes must have seemed as large as doorknobs as the room had book stacks, and the shelves were filled with thousands of volumes, ninety percent of which were in Spanish. There was also a shelf full of his publications. In an era before computers, he had placed on a stout table an electric typewriter and microfilm reader. I had never seen a microfilm reader in a private home. When I asked him about the reader, Mike told me how he had instituted several projects to microfilm historic documents from Mexican and Spanish libraries and archives pertaining to California and Baja California in support of his research and for placement in California institutions. This was impressive indeed. During this and subsequent visits, Mike would sometimes reveal his disappointment with the lack of understanding about our state’s Hispanic heritage and how few historians bothered to investigate primary source documents found in places like the Archivo General de Indias in Sevilla and the Archivo General de la Nación, México City. Few, however, had his command of the archaic Spanish written by the explorers and missionaries.

Mike had made countless trips to Baja California. As a youth he enjoyed camping in the rugged wilderness of our southern neighbor. There he enhanced his knowledge of Spanish and soaked in the local culture and history. Because of his expertise, he often led camping tours to this Mexican border state for American tourists. The Spanish explorers and missionaries who opened up the region particularly attracted his interest. Furthermore, he told me the Mexican government had just finished a trans-peninsular highway. Knowing this, I asked him if he would lead a California Historical Society bus tour of Baja California and he readily agreed. I could not resist signing up, and a busload of Society members traveled down Highway One of Baja California all the way to Cabo San Lucas. Through much of the trip Mike stood in front of the bus regaling travelers with the peninsula’s little-known history and lore. The tour included a New Year’s Eve celebration at La Paz on the Sea of Cortes and Mike left us to join friends he knew in La Paz. He later told me how he and his amigos fired guns into the air to celebrate. I should mention here that Mike did a great deal to develop and enhance the Archivo Histórico Pablo L. Martínez in La Paz, Baja California Sur. Our tour naturally took us to this wonderful research center.

When I accepted a position with the State Library as Sutro librarian in 1979, I immediately contacted Mike. At the time, the Sutro Library was located on the lower floor of the University of San Francisco’s Gleeson Library. Since Mike was a professor there, it made perfect sense to involve him with the Sutro. Mike had told me of its fabulous collection of Mexicana. Seeing
One of the great treasures purchased by Sutro in Mexico City in 1889 was Antonio de Mendoza’s *Ordenanzas y Copilacion de Leyes*. It is the first legal code and sixteenth book printed in the Americas. Juan Pablos, the printer, established the first printing press in the Western Hemisphere in the City of Mexico in 1539. (Opposite page) The title page bears the coat of arms of Emperor Charles V. Sutro commissioned a special binding for this early imprint.

an opportunity, I asked if he would help develop the collection, and he enthusiastically agreed. Giving him access to the closed stacks, he dove in finding one treasure after another. Again, his command of Spanish and Mexican bibliography proved worth its weight in gold. Because of his invaluable work, I asked then State Librarian Ethel Crockett to designate Mike as the honorary curator of Mexicana at the Sutro Library. She agreed and Mike graciously accepted this honor at a special ceremony and continued in this capacity until his death. The two of us had spent many a happy hour in the Sutro stacks studying its wondrous volumes.

As a scholar and collector, Mike was naturally curious how Adolph Sutro acquired his great and formidable collection of Mexican history. Seemingly, Sutro devoted most of his attention to European history and the sciences. However, Sutro knew a bargain when he saw one. As Mike discovered, Sutro just happened to be in Mexico City in 1889 at the time of the death of Francisco Abadiano, the proprietor of that ancient city’s longest established bookstore and publishing concern. Sutro purchased the entire stock of Librería Abadiano that included thousands of individual titles published from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century plus a mass of manuscripts, pamphlets, periodicals, and ephemera. It was a treasure trove. In addition, the San Francisco bookman had acquired the business records of the Abadiano family whose business history stretched back to 1753. This exciting analysis by Mike served as the subject for his illuminating article, “A Bibliophile’s Dream: Adolph Sutro in Mexico,” published in the *Quarterly News-Letter of the Book Club of California* (Summer 1980). He observed, “Sutro probably instructed his agents to buy everything, and they interpreted this to mean the contents of the desk and wastepaper baskets; he thus unknowingly obtained an excellent collection of documents pertaining to the history of printing and book selling in Mexico.”

While working in the Sutro and going through the Abadiano purchase, Mike started pulling together dozens of vellum and leather-bound volumes with a distinctive fire-mark or brand on the head of the text block. It was a Spanish custom to brand books with the owner’s mark rather than using an easily removed bookplate. These brands or fire-marks all had the insignia of the convent library of
Santa Cruz de Tlatelolco from Mexico City. Archbishop Juan de Zumárraga, the first Catholic archbishop in the Western Hemisphere, had founded a library in 1535 to serve the clerics and missionaries in the newly conquered land. Mike had located inventories of the collection, and through a careful analysis, concluded that the Sutro Library possessed a sizeable portion of the Colegio de Santa Cruz de Tlatelolco library. In addition, he found that three of the volumes actually belonged to the archbishop.

Excited by this discovery, Mike thought an account of this early New World library a subject worthy of publication. State Librarian Gary E. Strong worked with Mike in bringing this bibliographic narrative into book form. It was published in 1985 by the Foundation as America’s First Academic Library: Santa Cruz De Tlatelolco, 1535–1600. Mike’s last sentence of his narrative summarized the importance of his discovery: “Thanks to [Adolph] Sutro’s mass purchase and the distinctive brands on the books, this first academic library in the America’s remains substantially intact.” In addition, Mike frequently contributed articles to the Bulletin including “Early Books from Mexican Monastic Libraries in the Sutro Library” and “The European Book in Sixteenth Century Colonial Mexico.”

Realizing the tremendous importance of the Mexican collection, Mike made a point of promoting the Sutro Library during his many visits to Mexico and academic institutions throughout the United States. A renowned lecturer, he participated in many conferences in Latin America. In addition, he knew antiquarian booksellers in Mexico and Spain and worked with them in adding to the collection. Through the efforts of dealer and library supporter Howard Karno, the Sutro acquired the original publisher’s proof sheets of Lord Kingsborough’s Antiquities of Mexico (1831–1848). A stupendous large folio nine-volume work, the Antiquities reproduced ancient Aztec codices found in European libraries. The proof sheets consisted of the artist’s instructions for hand coloring each plate. It represented a remarkable find. A few years later, Mike made possible the acquisition of a folio volume of original drawings and manuscript text from the Antiquities dated 1830. More than likely, Lord Kingsborough himself used this volume to help promote subscriptions to his grand and costly publication project. He wrote up the story of this remarkable publication venture for the Bulletin as “Edward King, Lord Kingsborough: The State Library’s Unique Collection of His Works Documenting Ancient Mexican Civilizations.”

Another spin-off of Mike’s contacts in the Hispanic world was attracting a donor
from Mexico to pay a then handsome sum of $50,000 to have the Mexican pamphlet collection microfilmed. According to Mike, this pamphlet collection was one of the largest in the world documenting Mexico’s struggle for independence in the 1820s. This project helped preserve the collection and make the pamphlets accessible for research to anyone via purchase or interlibrary loan.

One major event, however, interrupted our scholar’s work on the Mexican collection. The University of San Francisco had notified State Librarian Crockett that it was terminating its lease with the state of California and that the Sutro Library would have to move. This forthcoming event, while not pleasant as all moves are traumas for book collections, gave Mike the opportunity to further organize material. The new location on Winston Drive in southwest San Francisco included a rare materials reading room. I had asked Mike to select the best part of the Mexican collection to go into the room as a means of promoting this scholarly resource. Visitors to the new facility could see shelf after shelf of vellum-bound volumes documenting the history and literature of Mexico. Images of Mexico decorated the walls and end panels of the stacks. Mike also generously volunteered to write a bilingual brochure describing the collection. As part of his duties as honorary curator, he happily answered queries about Mexicana not only for in person visitors but also for those

A recent addition to the Sutro Library is this folio volume designed to promote Lord Kingsborough’s stupendous *Antiquities of Mexico* (1831–1848). Bound in pigskin, the sumptuous work contains sixty striking full-page watercolor reproductions of Aztec manuscripts found in European libraries. The Sutro Library also possesses the artist’s proof sheets and a completed set of the most lavish work on Mexican antiquities.
who wrote or emailed the Sutro Library. Mike was such an asset with his ability to respond to complex questions of Mexican history and bibliography.

Working with such a collection gave this phenomenal historian an opportunity to expand his own horizons. The Sutro Library possesses an uncommonly fine collection of illustrated books printed and published in Mexico. Mike had always felt that Mexico’s printing and publishing history was not fully appreciated especially in this country. He would frequently point out that printing and library formation came long before any such developments in the Thirteen Colonies. Hearing this, I suggested that he write a book on Mexican lithography and he tackled the subject with alacrity. In 1984, the Book Club of California published his *Mexico on Stone: Lithography in Mexico, 1826–1900*. It received much acclaim and was illustrated with many examples from the Sutro collection.

Mike’s investigation of the Mexican collection library continues to live on as demonstrated by the following moving words from Lindsay Sidders, a doctoral candidate in history at the University of Toronto: “I am saddened to hear of Dr. Mathes’ passing; his work on Tlatelolco has been (and continues to be) instrumental in my work. Without his extensive study it would have been nearly impossible for me to organize a research trip to the Sutro. The collection on Tlatelolco is so rich and extensive and he put so much effort and time into understanding and cataloging its various pieces and history—I am so grateful. Hopefully I can build on his important contributions.”

Much to our regret, Mike had decided to move back to north Texas after spending most of his life in California. He had purchased a ranch in Plainview and set up his library in the new location. I quickly learned from Mike that Plainview was the home of the Mathes family, and he wanted to return to his roots. However, via email and telephone we kept in close touch. Moreover, Mike made many return trips to California to attend book fairs and give talks and he always made a point of spending several days at the Sutro Library. He happily continued answering reference questions about the Mexican collection and often sent boxes of gift books to us.

Mike rarely if ever said “no.” The noted antiquarian bookseller and auctioneer Dorothy Sloan had contacted me in the summer of 2002 about writing entries for a forthcoming auction of the Daniel G. Volkman, Jr. collection of the *Zamorano 80*. The *Zamorano 80* is a legendary list of the most important books on California history up to 1930. Only one institution has all eighty in first edition, and Volkman was only the third private collector to form a complete collection. It would be one of the most noteworthy auctions of Californiana in years. Sloan wanted to produce a monumental catalog that would not be a rehash of previous descriptions of *Zamorano 80* titles. I agreed to do the job despite being given a challenging deadline of early fall and I also realized that I would not be able to handle the early Spanish language material at least in a way that would not be a repeat of Henry R. Wagner’s *Bibliography of the Spanish Southwest 1542–1794: An Annotated Bibliography* or the bibliography entitled *The Hill Collection of Pacific Voyages*. So, I suggested that she engage our mutual friend W. Michael Mathes to write the entries for not only the Spanish language materials but also the early pre-American period of voyages. Fortunately, Mike agreed, and the two of us bolstered by Dorothy’s encouragement and inspiration, helped produce a memorable and successful three-hundred-page auction catalog at warp speed. The memorable auction was held at the Society of California Pioneers Building in San Francisco in February 2003.

The subject of the Mexican War intrigued both of us. Mike had found in the collection a number of broadsides printed in Mexico denouncing the perfidious invader (the United States) as well as newspapers.
books, pamphlets, and prints documenting the Mexican viewpoint. In Sacramento, the State Library had built a substantial collection of U.S. government documents and published eyewitness accounts, newspapers, prints, and sheet music. We both agreed this warranted a publication, and through the generosity of the Foundation, we published The Forgotten War: The Conflict between Mexico and the United States, 1846–1849: A Bibliography of the Holdings of the California State Library. Mike composed a very useful annotated bibliography of Spanish language material while this writer handled American publications. Related to this, I had found in the State Library’s collection an outstanding reminiscent account of the war by an American officer John Corey Henshaw. Mike urged me to edit the manuscript for publication, and I sent him many drafts. His knowledge of Mexican geography and military history was invaluable. Bolstered by his encouragement through dozens of emails, the University of Missouri Press published the Henshaw recollection in 2008.

My final personal story about Mike well illustrates his friendship and commitment to scholarship. He visited me in Sacramento, and while having lunch, I told him I had wanted to write a descriptive bibliography of the Klondike Gold Rush similar in format to my California Gold Rush bibliography. Mike immediately reminded me of his trips to Alaska and the Yukon and enthusiastically suggested that the two of us go on an Alaskan road trip visiting historically important places related to the last great American gold rush. I was incredulous and said, “How about if we fly to Alaska and rent a car?” Mike replied, “No, no—you have to see the terrain firsthand to gain a true understanding of its history.” How right he was. In late August 2010, he drove from his home in north Texas and met me in Sacramento in his brand new Chevy pickup truck. Together we drove 9,000 total miles hitting places like Carcross, Tok, Watson Lake, Whitehorse, Five Finger Rapids, Dawson City, Anchorage, Skagway, and Juneau. The scenery was breathtaking and the vastness of the region overwhelming. We made a pilgrimage to Bonanza Creek, a tributary of the Klondike River, where Californian George W. Carmack and his Native American friends first discovered gold in August 1896. This discovery started the great stampede north. During this month-long trip, Mike generously drove me to places like the Yukon Archives in Whitehorse, the Anchorage Public Library, and the Alaska State Library. Bookstores and museums with their bookstores along the way had their own magnetism, and we did our best to support the local economy. At night, we exchanged bibliographic tales and planned the next day’s adventure. We now both felt like real sourdoughs. On the return, we spent time at the University of Washington’s special collections department. Zooming down Interstate 5, Mike dropped me off in Sacramento, and headed to San Diego and thence across the border to give a presentation.

Following that lecture, Mike then hopped on a plane from San Diego back to Sacramento to give a talk at the Library. The year 2010 was the sesquicentennial anniversary of Mexico’s fight for independence. A local bookseller notified us that he had run across an unusual collection of Mexican manuscripts. I immediately contacted Mike, and he went through the documents. Found in this mass of material was an incredible manuscript, the testimony and recollection of Melchor Guasp, the jailer of the initiator of Mexican independence, Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla. With his usual promptness, Mike translated the four-page manuscript. Based on his recommendation, we purchased it for the Sutro Library. The story did not end there. This was too good to pass up, and Mike produced a wonderful and moving introduction to Guasp’s amazing account of the final days of Hidalgo. This resulted in a beautifully designed Foundation publication and a public program at the State Library in September 2010. The Mexican Consul to Sacramento attended the event, and Mike gave an engaging account of the discovery of the manuscript and its contents.

That was the last time I saw Mike. We had exchanged many emails and telephone calls concerning various historical projects and we both talked about making a return trip to Alaska and Yukon Territory. In one of his emails, he revealed that he was fighting cancer but remained determined to beat the dreaded disease. Despite that, Mike had planned to drive from his ranch in Texas first to San Marino, California, and then to San Francisco to receive the Oscar Lewis Award from the Book Club of California in February 2012. He also included in his itinerary a visit to the State Library. I, along with others, had suggested his name as a worthy recipient of this prestigious award. Shortly before the ceremony, I received an email from his nephew Stephen Brandt in San Marino that Mike was very ill and could not make the trip to San Francisco. Entering the Huntington Hospital in Pasadena, the doctors discovered that the cancer had spread. Stephen took excellent care of him making sure he received the best possible care. Ever determined, Mike recovered sufficiently to give a well-received paper to the California Mission Studies Association in Santa Barbara. He returned home to Texas, but the cancer had returned and Mike entered a hospital once again. Following several weeks of treatment, he entered a hospice for his final days. One of the great scholars and bookmen in California and Pacific Coast history had died. His scholarship will live on through his many books and articles as will his many contributions to building libraries and archives. I will be forever grateful for his long friendship and big-hearted encouragement and I so wanted to give him a big abrazo. On August 16, Mike’s nephew arranged for his burial at the Mathes Family Plot in Plainview, Texas. W. Michael Mathes now rests in Clio’s realm.

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