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Letter to the Editor

John H. Hickcox's Confession: An Addendum

In 2004, we wrote an article for the *Journal of Government Information* reporting the arrest of John Howard Hickcox, creator of *United States Government Publications: A Monthly Catalogue* (also called *Hickcox's Monthly Catalogue*) and Assistant Librarian at the Library of Congress, for stealing letters and money sent to the Librarian of Congress, Ainsworth R. Spofford. Since the charges against Hickcox were later dropped, and Spofford, his employer, was quoted in a newspaper account as saying that he believed that Hickcox was innocent, we speculated that he was not guilty (Stimson & Nobunaga, 2004). However, the recent discovery of a letter written in 1882, just over a month after Hickcox's arrest, has led us to believe otherwise (Bramhall, 1882).

Hickcox was probably better known as a prominent numismatist than he was as a government publications specialist. Hickcox was made an honorary member of the American Numismatic and Archaeological Society (ANAS) in 1859 (Hickcox, 1859). When Hickcox was arrested on January 19, 1882, it was front page news in newspapers across the United States. It appears that the ANAS learned of the arrest and asked their Corresponding Member in Washington, William L. Bramhall, to investigate and report back to the society. Bramhall's letter to William Poillon, Secretary of the ANAS, dated February 24, 1882, (with the notation "JR [sic] Hickcox's scrape" later written on the outside), says:

“Your previous letter came duly to hand since when I have almost daily been trying to find time or opportunity to visit the Congressional Library and interview Mr. Spofford relative to the subject matter of your communication, to which my attention had not been previously called, until yesterday when I saw Mr. Spofford the Librarian, who informed me that Mr. John R. [sic] Hickcox had been dismissed on the ‘charge of opening mail letters and pocketing the money,’ which charge he admitted to be true. Mr. Spofford stated that he exceedingly regretted the committal of the offence, as Mr. Hickcox had served for a number of years faithfully and acceptably.” (Bramhall, 1882)

A “scrape,” indeed. Although this letter reported Hickcox’s confession third-hand, the other facts of the case seem to corroborate it. Following his arrest, Hickcox left his position at the Library of Congress, and his membership in the ANAS was revoked (Proceedings, 1882).

The path that led to this discovery began in the numismatic realm. A Google alert in late 2005 revealed a listing of numismatic books for sale, including a book authored by Hickcox, *A History of the Bills of Credit or Paper Money Issued by New York, from 1709 to 1789* (Hickcox, 1866). The annotation for that book mentioned Hickcox’s confession, information which was quoted as coming from Q. David Bowers’ book, *American Numismatics Before the Civil War 1760-1860* (Bowers, 1998). A footnote in Bowers’ book, in turn, led to his source, Howard L. Adelson’s *The American Numismatic Society 1858-1958* (Adelson, 1958). The Adelson work mentioned the specifics about the letter from Bramhall to Poillon. Next we contacted the current American Numismatic Society (ANS) archivist, Joseph Ciccone, and asked if the society

archives contained that letter. Ciccone sent us a copy of the letter and told us that if we had not provided the names of the correspondents and the date he would have been unable to locate the letter by subject alone. We did contact the ANS library prior to publishing our 2004 paper but they did not have any information regarding Hickcox's arrest. We learned that if an organization has both a library and an archives department, the information contained within the two entities may be completely separate. This pursuit also confirmed that full-text information contained within books is extremely hard to uncover, although Google Books and similar projects are increasing the findability of some book information. It was only through serendipity and perseverance that we were able to locate this new finding.

We report this discovery to complete our research on John H. Hickcox, a key contributor to the organization of nineteenth century government information as well as the field of numismatics. Although, with the continued digitization of older materials bringing new facts to light, can one ever say that historical research is really completed?

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