

10-1976

Frank Patten and the Rosenberg Library

Mel Jordan

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarworks.sfasu.edu/ethj>



Part of the [United States History Commons](#)

Tell us how this article helped you.

Recommended Citation

Jordan, Mel (1976) "Frank Patten and the Rosenberg Library," *East Texas Historical Journal*: Vol. 14: Iss. 2, Article 6.

Available at: <http://scholarworks.sfasu.edu/ethj/vol14/iss2/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by SFA ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in East Texas Historical Journal by an authorized administrator of SFA ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact cdsscholarworks@sfasu.edu.

FRANK PATTEN AND THE ROSENBERG LIBRARY

by Mel Jordan

The history of the Rosenberg Library of Galveston, and of its fortunes while under the direction of Frank Patten, began with the efforts of a philanthropist to make cultural resources available to the general public through a private bequest. Frank C. Patten, who was responsible for the Library's initial development, and for collecting and making available the treasures of information concerning Texas history, typifies the dedication and resourcefulness of those librarians who built the collections of the early twentieth century. Had Galveston continued to be a leading seaport and commercial center, and had Patten received the financial support for which he asked, the Rosenberg Library might have retained its position as one of the outstanding libraries of the South. In its present state it holds rich resources for the study of the early economic, political, and social life of Galveston and Texas because of the determination of Frank Patten to gather and preserve the original documents pertaining to these subjects.

The first public library in Texas had its beginning September 13, 1870, when the Galveston Chamber of Commerce, "adopted a resolution creating a Library Department whose object should be to establish and foster a Mercantile Library,"¹ and on January 20, 1871, the Galveston Mercantile Library, with a reading room, was first opened to the public.²

Henry Rosenberg, an immigrant to Galveston, found work as a salesboy in 1843, and in the years that followed became as wealthy merchant and banker. He died on May 12, 1893 and in the twenty-first section of his will he bequeathed the "rest and residue" of his estate to his executors *in trust* to be invested for a period of two years following his death. At the end of the two year period they were directed to "organize and endow a free public library for the use of the people of Galveston, together with free lectures upon practical, literary and scientific subjects, and such other incidents to a great public library as may be most conducive to the improvement, instruction and elevation of the citizens of Galveston"³ The articles of incorporation were signed on July 5, 1900, and a charter was granted to the Rosenberg Library Association by the State of Texas on July 10, 1900.⁴ The corner stone for the library building was laid in October, 1902, inscribed with the final sentence in Henry Rosenberg's will: "I desire to express in a practical form any affection for the city of my adoption and for the people among whom I lived for so many years, trusting that it will aid their intellectual and moral development, and be a source of pleasure and profit to them and their children and their children's children through many generations."⁵

In 1901 Major A. J. Walker, the Executor of the Rosenberg Estate, transferred to the Board of Directors of the Rosenberg Library the residue of the estate, valued at \$620,529.69. In that same year the design for a building was accepted, and the contract for construction was awarded to Harry Devlin on March 21, 1902.⁷ Patten, the newly appointed Librarian, arrived in Galveston July 24, 1903 to take charge of the preliminary work necessary to the opening of the library, and on the evening of June 22, 1904, the birthday of the founder, he

was in charge of the dedication ceremonies that were held in the lecture hall of the newly completed building. On that day the Library had been open to public inspection, and on the following day its services were first offered to the public.⁸

Frank Chauncy Patten, 1855-1934, was born in Rochester, New York and at the age of four traveled to Wisconsin with his parents who were in search of a religious utopia. He grew up on the American frontier, working as a farm boy and carpenter, and at the age of nineteen, a few years after the Civil War, started teaching school. Combining college studies with school teaching and working in the Ripon College Library, Patten did not leave Wisconsin until he was thirty-one years old. Finding that he had a preference for library work, he went to New York City to attend the first class for the professional training of librarians which was offered at Columbia College.⁹

Patten's first job of importance came when he accepted the position of Librarian of the Helena, Montana Public Library in 1892. Under his leadership the Library received increased financial support which he used to triple the size of the collection and expand the quarters for the library. The library staff consisted of Patten and seven assistants, one of whom was Mary C. Gardner, who was to work with him again in Galveston, became the Acting Librarian at Helena when Patten left in July, 1899, to study at Harvard.¹⁰

The quality of his former schooling made it difficult for him to gain admission, but Patten was admitted to Harvard College as a special student on April 20, 1899 and stayed on through the 1900-01 school year. He was forty-four years old when he entered Harvard, and thus at the age of forty-six, finished his formal education.¹¹

With professional training plus twenty years of experience, including a brief time as Assistant Librarian of the Lenox Library in New York City, Patten received his most important appointment when he became Librarian of the newly endowed Rosenberg Library in Galveston, Texas. He was selected for the position in 1903, when there were few public libraries in Texas, and stayed until his death thirty-one years later, more than half the years spent in his chosen career.¹²

When Patten arrived the building was still under construction, and he spent the first year getting ready for the opening — busying himself with the selection of personnel, furniture and books. It was an attractive building in the style of late Italian Renaissance architecture, and at that time a show-place in Galveston. Of a total of \$548,000 that had gone to the endowment of libraries in the State of Texas up to that time, Rosenberg Library had received \$500,000.¹³ Phineas L. Windsor, then Librarian of The University of Texas, said, "the Rosenberg Library endowment is so large as to warrant the confident expectation that it will become a leader among libraries of the Southwest."¹⁴

Patten went about putting these considerable assets to use. He brought in Mary Gardner, who had replaced him at the Helena Public Library, to be his Assistant. Miss Gardner was great deal like Patten in temperament and they worked well together. Miss Gardner's most important duties were selecting the books to be bought, training personnel, and preparing material for publication in the *Bulletin of the Rosenberg Library*, referred to as a "model" by Julia Ideson who was then Librarian of the Houston Public Library.

Within a few years the Galveston Public Library was absorbed by The Rosenberg Library, and a branch library was built for blacks, the first in the United States. Public lectures were begun, and in 1910, publication of the *Bulletin of the Rosenberg Library* was started.¹⁵

On January 11, 1905, the Negro branch of the Rosenberg Library, "the first branch library for colored people to be established anywhere in the country,"¹⁶ was opened for use. An agreement had been reached between the governing body of the Rosenberg Library and the authorities of the Galveston public schools to build an addition to Central High School (the Negro high school in Galveston) to serve as the branch library.

Several years later, when Patten was editing a book that was to be a memorial to Mr. Rosenberg, he felt the need to explain why it was necessary to establish a separate library for blacks:

conditions in Galveston required that the use of library privileges by the colored citizens would be separate and distinct from their use by the white people, this being the same kind of separation of races that is observed in the public schools everywhere in the South. It was by means of a branch library that the Rosenberg Library Board of Directors attempted to meet the problem of the proper way to furnish library facilities to the colored . . . The plan has proved a decided success with us. Since our branch was established several other branch libraries for colored people have been established in other cities in the South.¹⁷

Mr. John R. Gibson, the school Principal, was appointed to supervise the Negro branch, and the Library opened with about 1,100 volumes and twenty-one current periodicals. By the end of 1916, the branch had 2,800 volumes and a registration of 1,288. It was kept open about six hours a day. In 1918 Miss Lillian Davis became the Assistant Librarian of the branch and was given full responsibility for its operation in 1928.¹⁸

Public lectures were begun at the Rosenberg Library in March 1906, with Jenkins Lloyd Jones of the University Extension Division of The University of Chicago who gave a series of lectures on Victor Hugo, Ibsen, Tolstoi and Sidney Lanier. The same year Patten addressed the Texas Library Association meeting at Waco where he stated: "the public library is the natural center in the town for those intellectual activities that make for scholarship, culture, progress, better information and the general public good. And it is very proper that educational lectures should be encouraged and supported under library auspices as much as possible . . ." ¹⁹ The lectures proved to be popular, and the reading lists printed with the announcement of each lecture were meant to promote "reading with a purpose." In keeping with his belief that the primary role of a public library was educational, Patten said, "It is very desirable that the Rosenberg Library free lectures be interesting and pleasing, but it is even more desirable that they should be significant and instructive — food for the intellectual life."²⁰

Both Patten and Miss Gardner stressed the need for work of high quality from their assistants. They were very frugal, managing the Library within the limits of the income from the endowment fund. The books for the Library were selected with great care, and special privileges for the patrons were rarely granted. Each volume was examined by the "apprentices" when it was returned to the Library, and if it was damaged the borrower was fined.²¹

As he had in Helena, Patten gathered a large collection of pamphlets as a part of the reference collection. When members of the staff attended a cultural event of any kind in Galveston they were asked to bring back three copies of the program for the Library, and by the end of 1914 30,000 pamphlets had been gathered. In Patten's opinion, this pamphlet material was of unusual value, "especially that in social and political science. Some of the most useful and authoritative matter on new subjects appears first in pamphlet form."²²

As early as May, 1912, Patten had written that "the collection and preservation of local printed matter, — newspapers, magazines, maps, plans, photographs, programs, posters, advertising matter of all kinds, city directories, etc., and of local manuscripts, old diaries and the like, is an important function of a public library, especially when that library is housed securely in a fire-proof building. Such material, being 'original sources,' is of great value to the historian."²³

A 1918 publication of the Library, *Henry Rosenberg, 1824-1893*, states:

the library has gathered and is carefully preserving a very valuable and already quite extensive local collection of Galveston historical material, consisting of books, pamphlets (such as reports, year books, programs, and other printed matter of churches, schools, societies, lodges, clubs, corporations, and other organizations), newspapers, magazines, leaflets, prints (such as theatre and concert programs, circulars, announcements, handbills, placards, posters, etc.), maps, blueprints, manuscripts, engravings, photographs, pictures, relics, and other historical material. This interesting and valuable Galveston historical collection has resulted almost wholly from donations by Galveston friends, and every year it grows by further donations, all of which are appreciated by the library management.²⁴

And in early 1919, Patten was able to write: "our Galveston historical collection, after fifteen years growth, has become quite important historically. It consists of books, pamphlets, maps, charts, photographs, pictures, portraits, and historical relics relating to the city of Galveston."²⁵

A year later he said he hoped that the Texas Historical Society of Galveston which had had its start in 1871 could be revived because "A local historical society could do much to gather and preserve the original material of Galveston history."²⁶ The Society had been active for a number of years, but it had become less so, and care of the manuscripts and letters had been placed in the custody of E. G. Littlejohn. During the Galveston storm of 1900 many of the papers were badly damaged. After the Rosenberg Library was opened, what remained of the papers were stored there until 1921 when "Mr. Littlejohn called a meeting of the surviving members of the organization and at his request the Library was made custodian, with the express direction that none should ever be removed from the library building."²⁷ The collection of the Society consisted of about 200 books, 800 pamphlets, and 1,000 manuscripts.

Together with these papers of the Texas Historical Society of Galveston, Patten had gathered, by the first half of the 1920s, a collection that contained letters in Spanish written before the Texas Revolution, printed orders and decrees in Spanish, the correspondence of James Morgan who was reputed to have had the largest private library in the State, the papers of Peter Wagner Grayson, the papers of Henry M. and Charles T. Truehart (which included a copy of the diary of James Lawrence Truehart, a member of the Mier Expedition), and the Samuel May Williams papers relating to the social, economic and political life of Texas from 1819 to 1858.²⁸

Samuel May Williams, one of the founders and promoters of Galveston, had been the secretary and land office manager of Austin's Colony, and in 1922 Mrs. Mary Williams League, his daughter, and Thomas Jefferson League, his grandson, gave to the Rosenberg Library a leather trunk filled with his papers. Dr. Eugene C. Barker, former Chairman of the History Department at The University of Texas, used these papers when he wrote his biography of Stephen

F. Austin.²⁹

John Miller Winterbotham, a Galveston lawyer and businessman, and a member of the Board of Directors of the Library, put together an exhibit of the historical material held by the Library in 1923. The two outstanding collections of the exhibit were the James Morgan papers and the Samuel M. Williams papers.³⁰ By such exhibits as this others became aware of the collections concerning Galveston and Texas History, and as early as 1924, in the *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* it was said that "the historical collections of the Rosenberg Library are a veritable treasure, undoubtedly the most important in the State except those at Austin Even now no serious study of the commercial history of the State could be attempted without the use of these materials."³¹

At the end of 1926 the Library had more than 7,000 local history manuscripts, and had organized special collections of Galveston and Texas history. The Library received from the estate of Dr. Joseph O. Dyer a collection of specially valuable material that included a number of papers of David G. Burnet, the first President of the Republic of Texas. The Dyer collection also included an original three-page letter in the handwriting of Jean Lafitte, dated July 7, 1819, which in Patten's opinion was one of the most interesting items in the collection.³² Patten urged others to lend or donate their collections to the Library. Pointing out that Galveston had an interesting history, he wrote that

because Galveston was for more than half a century the center of Texas activities and culture, and the residence of many of the leading families of Texas, there are here stored in attics and odd places, in homes and offices, many striking and invaluable records of these vigorous and sterling people. Let the letters, diaries, books of account and other manuscripts, the books, maps, all kinds of prints, photographs, pictures, paintings, historical relics — all of them — come to the Rosenberg Library to be recorded and put in proper condition and so preserved for the future historian.³³

It was Patten's hope that a museum could be established and managed by the Library to better handle the historical material that had been gathered.

Patten expressed his interest in history not only through his work in collecting historical material for the Library, but also through his membership in historical associations. The national organizations in which he held memberships were the American Historical Association, the Mississippi Valley Historical Association, and the Sons of the American Revolution. For memberships in state organizations Patten chose those of two adjoining states, the Louisiana Historical Society and the Historical Society of New Mexico, and belonged to the Texas State Historical Association and the Texas Folklore Society. On a local level he was a member of the Texas Historical Society of Galveston.

In 1915, Patten had suffered what he described as a "serious" illness. That same year the first ocean-going vessel traveled up the Houston ship channel to dock at Houston, by-passing the wharves of the "merchant princes" of Galveston Island. The inflation following World War I drastically reduced the value of the dollar, and Rosenberg Library found itself in financial trouble from which it did not recover in Patten's lifetime.³⁴

In 1927 Patten made an appeal to the public for donations to the endowment fund, but none were forthcoming. In 1929 he appealed for financial support from taxes. Resigning himself to the Library's financial difficulties, he said "so it has

come to pass that it is not possible for the library to keep up its growth and its service to the public in accordance with the desires and expectations of our citizens and in accordance with the increasing opportunities to make the library more useful to the people of Galveston.³⁵

September 1, 1932 marked the fiftieth anniversary of Patten's work in libraries. He was to survive that anniversary by less than two years. Frank Patten died the night of January 6, 1934 in St. Mary's Infirmary in Galveston. Funeral services were conducted at Trinity Episcopal Church on the afternoon of January 8, 1934. Masonic services were then held at the Scottish Rite Cathedral, and the body was sent to San Antonio that evening for cremation. The Library remained closed all that day.³⁶

Patten remained a bachelor throughout his life. In his will he bequeathed \$1,000 to Mary Gardner, his long-time Assistant, and the rest of his estate, which was valued at \$12,000 to the Rosenberg Library.³⁷

Arthur R. Curry, Patten's immediate successor at Rosenberg, disclosed in his first annual report that Patten had secretly given a total of \$38,000 of his own money over the years to augment the salaries of four of the assistants in the library.³⁸

NOTES

¹Texas Library Association, *Handbook of Texas Libraries Number Four*, Published in Observance of the Texas Library Association, *Handbook of Texas Libraries Number Four*, Published in Observance of the Texas Centennial, 1836-1936 (Houston, 1935), 142.

²[Rosenberg Library, Galveston] *Henry Rosenberg, 1824-1893* (Galveston, 1918). 202.

³Henry Rosenberg, "Last Will and Testament." [2-3](Eugene C. Barker Texas History Center, The University of Texas).

⁴[Rosenberg Library, Galveston] *Henry Rosenberg, 187-88*.

⁵Betty Wales, "'Through Many Generations'; Rosenberg Library's First 50 Years," *Texas Library Journal*, XXX (December, 1954), 202.

⁶ [Rosenberg Library, Galveston] *Henry Rosenberg, 187-88*.

⁷S. C. Griffin, *History of Galveston, Texas* (Galveston, 1931), 115.

⁸[Rosenberg Library, Galveston] *Henry Rosenberg, 187-88*.

⁹*This is the more consistent spelling of his name; at times it was spelled Frank Chauncey Patten, and in Columbia College it was recorded as Francis Chauncey Patten (Columbia University, School of Library Economy of Columbia College, 1887-1889: Documents for a History [Columbia University, 1937]), 192; Letter from Mrs. Margaret C. MacNab, Assistant County Historian, County of Monroe, Rochester, New York, March 29, 1966; Clara Endicott Sears. Days of Delusion: a Strange Bit of History (Boston, 1924), 188-89; Letter from Eleanor D. Towle, Secretary to the Dean, The Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, Harvard University, December 21, 1965; Emory A. Bailey (ed.), Who's Who in Texas: a Biographical Directory, Being a History of Texas as Illustrated in the Lives of the Builders and Defenders of the State, and of the Men and Women Who are Doing the Work and Molding the Thought of the Present Time (Dallas, 1931), 46; C. C. Williamson and Alice L. Jewett, Who's Who in Library Service (New York, 1933), 331. "Rosenberg Library," Handbook of Texas Libraries, No. 2 (Houston, 1908), 18-22.*

¹⁰Josephine M. Haley, Librarian, Helena Public Library, "History of the Helena Public Library of Helena, Montana," (Helena, 1928), (Typewritten); *The Library Journal*, XXVIII (March, 1902), 161.

¹¹Letter from Eleanor D. Towle.

¹²Bailey, 46.

¹³Benjamin Wyche, "Free Public Libraries in Texas, Ten Years Growth, 1899-1909," *Texas Libraries*, I (November, 1909), 6-7.

¹⁴P. L. Windsor, "The Library Situation in Texas," *Bulletin of the American Library Association*, I (May, 1907), 77-8.

¹⁵February 26, 1872, "An Act to authorize incorporated cities to establish and manage free libraries" was approved by the State Legislature, and an ordinance adopted by the City of Galveston November 18, 1874, provided for the appropriation of 3,000 dollars annually to maintain the Galveston Free Library, formerly known as the Galveston Mercantile Library. H. P. N. Gammel, *The Laws of Texas, 1822-1897*, VI (Austin, 1898), 1060. The ordinance was repealed on April 7, 1878, and support of the Library by the City was discontinued until August 7, 1879, when it was again opened, this time in the City Hall with the City Clerk serving as custodian. In April, 1881, the City Council consented to entrust an organization of young men of the City known as the Galveston Lyceum with control of the Library's books, but under the supervision of the Library Committee of the City Council. On January 12, 1905, the Galveston City Commission voted to offer the

books in the Galveston Public Library to the Rosenberg Library and to discontinue the City's library after February 28, 1905. The offer was accepted by the Board of Directors of the Rosenberg Library and the moving of the books completed on February 15. *Ibid.*, III, 15; Texas Library Association. *Handbook of Texas Libraries Number Four*, 142; [Rosenberg Library, Galveston], 198.

¹⁶Texas Library Association, *Handbook of Texas Libraries Number Four*, 48.

¹⁷[Rosenberg Library, Galveston] *Henry Rosenberg*, 197.

¹⁸Glynnell Shakelford Barnes, "A History of Public Library Service to Negroes in Galveston, Texas 1904-1955" (unpublished M.S.L.S. thesis, Atlanta University, 1957), 23-24; [Rosenberg Library, Galveston] *Henry Rosenberg*, 197; Personal interview with Mrs. Nellie Bennett at Galveston, Texas, December 20, 1965.

¹⁹Frank C. Patten, "The Library and the Lecture," *Public Libraries*, XI (November, 1906), 489-92.

²⁰Frank C. Patten, "Librarian's Report for the Year Ending 31 December 1913," *Bulletin of the Rosenberg Library*, I (March, 1914), 339-40.

²¹Apprentices were accepted by Rosenberg Library, and this was the major means of supplying the needed personnel. The apprentices, who were required to have a high school education, worked the first three months without pay. Miss Gardner was in charge of their training, and tried to impress upon them the seriousness of making errors. Mary C. Gardner, "The Training of Library Apprentices," *Texas Libraries*, II (January, 1917), 63-68.

²²Frank C. Patten, "Librarian's Report for the Year Ending 31 December 1914," *Bulletin of the Rosenberg Library*, II (March, 1915), 10.

²³"Local Historical Material," *ibid.*, I (May, 1912), 194.

²⁴[Rosenberg Library, Galveston] *Henry Rosenberg*, 210-11.

²⁵Frank C. Patten, "Librarian's Report for the Year Ending December, 1918," *Bulletin of the Rosenberg Library*, II (March, 1919), 352.

²⁶Frank C. Patten, "Librarian's Report for the Year Ending 31 December 1919," *ibid.*, III (March, 1920), 19-21.

²⁷J. M. Winterbotham, "News and Comments," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, X (December, 1923), 340-44.

²⁸*Ibid.*

²⁹Ruth G. Nichols, "Samuel May Williams," *The Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, LVI (October, 1952), [189]-210.

³⁰"Notes and Fragments," *ibid.*, XXVII (July, 1923-April, 1924), 168-69.

³¹*Ibid.*

³²*The Galveston Daily News*, January 30, 1927, 13; A notable compilation was made in 1933 when the Library issued a typewritten "List of Manuscripts in the Rosenberg Library, 1655-1933," compiled by Ruth E. Madden. The list was a "Gift of the Rosenberg Library through Miss Amelia Williams." The publication consisted of both a primary list of original material, as defined by historians, and a secondary list of historical writings. Rosenberg Library, Galveston, "List of Manuscripts in the Rosenberg Library, 1655-1933" (Galveston, 1933) (Typewritten).

³³*The Galveston Daily News*, January 30, 1927, 13.

³⁴Letter from Frank C. Patten to J. F. Marron, September 6, 1916 (Texas Library Association Archives).

³⁵*The Galveston Daily News*, January 27, 1929, 7.

³⁶*Ibid.*, September 2, 1932, 1.

³⁷*The Galveston Tribune*, February 17, 1934, 8.

³⁸*Dallas Journal*, February 11, 1935, 9.