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Accounting History exhibits; Harry C. Bentley Collection at the Boston Public Library, May 15 through June 15, 1992

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In honor of the 75th Anniversary of Bentley College, an exhibit of 40 books from The Harry C. Bentley Collection at the Boston Public Library (BPL) was held from May 15-June 15. The exhibit was coordinated by John Cathcart, archivist at Bentley College and Richard Vangermeersch, professor of accounting at the University of Rhode Island. They were joined by the coauthor of Harry C. Bentley’s two volume bibliography, Miss Ruth S. Leonard for a reception at the BPL on May 29. This exhibit was the first one from the Harry C. Bentley Collection housed at the library.

John Cathcart and Richard Vangermeersch are very much interested in the improvement of exhibits of accounting history. John has presented many small exhibits at Bentley College and developed the use of a "foam-board" material which allows display of more than just a page or two of each book. Richard has participated in the exhibit at Columbia for the AICPA Centennial. Both are interested in finding new ways to provide the same excitement of a study of the books by the viewers as achieved by the exhibitors.

Something different is being planned for an exhibit of books at the Northeast American Accounting Association meeting in Providence in April, 1993. They plan to display 20 books from the Bentley Archives and several other books from Richard's personal library. A "photo package" from each of the 20 books of the Bentley Archives and a brief commentary on each book will be provided. As the exhibit is discussed, viewers will be urged to examine the books. This procedure is expected to make the viewers more active participants in the process.

John Cathcart
Richard Vangermeersch
The books exhibited are presented here for your interest and knowledge in the order used in the exhibit brochure. It begins with William Mitchell's 1796 book which Bentley and Leonard believed to be the first American book on accounting.


Winchester, George W. (1808?-?). Journal to Winchester's New Method of Teaching Bookkeeping by Double Entry . . ., Hartford. Hawley, 1848. 48pp.


Meservey, Atwood Bond (1831-1901). Meservey's Bookkeeping Without a Master,
influence of the Greeks, also had an extensive system of controls designed to prevent the misappropriation of public funds. Expenditures were supposed to be made only on proper authorization of a magistrate, and supported by documentation establishing the legitimacy of the disbursement. Those having custody of funds were not allowed to authorize disbursements. In spite of these controls, and severe penalties for the theft of public funds, corruption was always a problem. This was especially true in the later days of the Roman Empire when separation of custody of the treasury and the right to order disbursements disappeared [Brown 1968].

In addition to the controls described above, the Roman government had financial officers called quaestors who managed the treasury and supervised the recording of transactions by the scribes. Quaestors also audited the accounts of provincial governors. On leaving office, the quaestors, in turn, had to have their accounts examined or heard by both their successors and the Roman Senate. It is from this practice that we get the word, "audit," which is derived from the Latin, "audire," meaning to hear [Stone, April 1969].

Inadequate reporting was sometimes a problem, as indicated in a speech given by the orator, Cicero, in the first century B.C. In his prosecution of Gaius Verres for corruption, Cicero commented on the deficiencies of a report rendered by Verres when he was a quaestor to Gnaeus Carbo [Greenwood 1978, 159-161].

Let us see how he presented his accounts: he will prove to us himself why he ran away from Carbo; he will give evidence against himself. Note first their conciseness:

Received 2,235,417 sesterces

Expended: soldiers' pay, corn, adjutants, deputy-quaestor, commander's private staff 1,635,417 sesterces

Balance left at Ariminum 600,000 sesterces

Is that the way to present accounts? Have you or I, Hortensius, has anyone in the world, ever presented them like that? Confound the man's unscrupulos impudence! What does this mean? Among all the thousands of accounts that have been presented, is there any parallel for this style of thing?

Auditing in the Bible

There are several direct and indirect references to auditing in the Bible. It should be noted these references occur in stories or parables and are not historical in nature.