

# Chess Libraries in America

## A SKETCH OF THEIR FORMATION AND PROVENANCE

BY ALBRECHT BUSCHKE

*The E. B. Cook collection of books and other paraphernalia pertaining to the game and history of chess was presented to the Princeton University Library in 1915, as a bequest of its former owner, Mr. Eugene Beauharnais Cook (1813-1915), a member of the class of 1850. A complete list of the books in this collection was published in Princeton University Classed List (1920), Vol. 6, pp. 3585-3608. Dr. Buschke, internationally celebrated authority on and collector of chess books, is the first to have made an extended study of the hundreds of letters in the Cook correspondence preserved during nearly a half-century of vigorous activity in the chess world. From these letters and from his own wide familiarity with other similar correspondences, Dr. Buschke takes us behind the American chess scene during its most flourishing period.*

CHESS collections have a comparatively long tradition in this country, especially if one considers the fact that the American chess literature began nearly two hundred years ago. In Europe, where chess has been played perhaps since the seventh century, where references to the game may be found in mediaeval romances, and where book collecting has been a favorite hobby since the invention of printing, the gathering of chess collections cannot be traced very much earlier than 1830. In America, chess collections of considerable size existed by 1840. In D. W. Fiske's *Book of the First American Chess Congress*, 1859, there are records of six or seven collections comparable to the most important European chess collections. And among these is listed the collection of Eugene B. Cook of Hoboken, New Jersey. Curiously enough, Fiske did not mention his own collection which had been described in 1857 as a library "which in point of numbers and value is only excelled by one other in the country." The "one other" was that of Professor George Allen in Philadelphia.

It is rather astonishing to find Mr. Cook's name in such distinguished company only nine years after his graduation from Princeton. Were it not for his already widely established reputation as one of the foremost American composers of chess problems, one would hardly see any justification for listing him among collectors at that time. As late as 1877 Cook wrote modestly to John G. White of Cleveland, "My little collection should hardly be mentioned with yours and Gilberg's. My list would show but a few over three hundred titles. I began collecting a long time ago but until recently my Chess Library has not grown much."

John G. White, Mr. Cook's correspondent in Cleveland, must have been collecting for some years to have established his celebrated collection, but I have been able to find no records which reveal when or from whom Mr. White gathered his collection. After 1876, however, this particular book collecting game came into prominence in America. And the dominant figures in the field were White of Cleveland, Cook of Hoboken, and Charles A. Gilberg of Brooklyn. This triumvirate became staunch friends who cooperated to share their knowledge and discoveries. Each made excellent use of opportunities afforded by the dispersal of several European chess collections during the 1870s and 1880s; but there is little doubt that Gilberg's collection, as well as Cook's, never would have reached any important size had not John G. White helped them very graciously and generously. Certainly without his friendly cooperation the Gilberg collection would not have been preserved entire.

In the letter files of the Cook collection we find many passages which reveal White's generosity. On New Year's Day, 1880, Gilberg wrote to Cook, "I received, last evening, from our Cleveland friend a box containing some old chess books, which he desires *us* to appropriate as 'a Christmas donation' to our respective libraries. If you can conveniently come over to Brooklyn on Friday or Saturday eve of this week, we can then proceed to divide the spoils." Thereafter, for the next eleven years, White's Christmas "bales" arrived either at the home of Cook or of Gilberg and were gratefully divided.

The direction of each collector was quite distinct. From the beginning, Cook had been interested in a special kind of chess literature: that relating to chess problems. In this special field he won a lasting reputation, and contributed widely to the publication of original chess literature in America. In fact, as early as 1868 he published with Gilberg and W. A. Henry, *American Chess Nuts*, a collector's item highly prized today. It is, therefore, important to learn his own ideas concerning a chess library. We are fortunate enough to have his utterances on the subject in letters written to John G. White. One of the earliest, written in February 1877, contains this specific reference: "I am endeavoring to get my library of books relating to chess problems as nearly complete as possible. If there was only sufficient interest in the matter, I should try to write something to illustrate problems chronologically." Regardless of the demand, Cook began to assemble his notes for a study of this subject and continued this aspect of his hobby for more than twenty years. During the extended search for sources which would be of value to him in his projected survey of the historical sequence of chess problems, his collection became particularly rich in rare chess works which he could afford to buy, copied extracts of old chess manuscripts, and even single periodical articles relating to the subject. The correspondence between White and Cook shows how many suggestions the more wealthy collector in Cleveland received from the more scholarly Princetonian who was fifteen years the senior of White. I think it will not injure White's fame if I state here that a great deal of what he knew of American chess history and of early American chess literature (as well as of mediaeval chess manuscripts) he owed to his extensive correspondence with Cook during a period of 43 years.

After Cook's death in 1915, his biographer, Dr. H. Keidanz, intended to fulfill the wish of his master. But although he collected material beyond that which Cook had already gathered, and although he was assisted by Mr. White, he could not finish the work and left it for the next generation of chess scholars. In 1927, however, he did publish the record of Cook's life and achievements in chess in a fine book entitled, *The Chess Compositions of E. B. Cook of Hoboken*. Curiously, however, a few copies of this book are extant with a separate title page obviously designed to serve as a second part, or appendix to the work. This separate title page reads, "Historical Sequence of Chess Problems, By E. B. Cook, Revised and Enlarged by John G. White and Dr. H. Keidanz." On the back of this leaf was the page number 360 together with a list of abbreviations to be used in the checklist of books on chess problems. The existence of this leaf and the very detailed list of abbreviations are proof that Dr. Keidanz had planned to complete the work.

Furthermore there have appeared in various booksellers' catalogues typewritten checklists of books on chess problems in the library of John G. White. The greater part of Dr. Keidanz's own checklist, written on hundreds of small slips of paper, three inches square, are still preserved today in my own collection.

Although neither Cook nor White published anything which recorded, during their lives, their deep researches into the bibliography of chess, we are fortunate to have a part of White's investigations (and thus, indirectly, much of Cook's researches) which were incorporated in J. H. R. Murray's standard work, *A History of Chess*, published in 1913. The four elephant folios containing the White-Murray correspondence over a period of about thirteen years are now preserved in the Cleveland Public Library.

This brings us back again to the eventual disposition of the most famous American collections of chess books. The fate of D. W. Fiske's first chess collection remains a mystery. Von der Lasa mentioned in 1864 that Fiske, after using his books amply, had "given them away". That Fiske made a second chess collection, now in Iceland and not in Cornell University as wrongly stated in Keidanz's work, we know from letters in the Cook collection at Princeton.

Professor George Allen's collection was more completely described than any other American collection – in a catalogue prepared in 1878 by Allen's executors, shortly after his death. For more than five years the executors failed to find a purchaser. E. B. Cook, who was very active in raising the necessary \$2,500 for the purchase of the collection, played a prominent part in persuading the Library Company of Philadelphia to acquire the library. In the *Library Bulletin* for July 1884, appeared the following note:

"The chess collection of the late Professor George Allen has recently been purchased from his heirs by the Library Company. It comprises nearly nine hundred titles, besides two hundred and fifty autograph letters and fifty photographs and engravings of chess celebrities. The library is in excellent condition, and many of the books are fine examples of bookbinding."

The collection may be found today at the Ridgway Branch of the Library Company of Philadelphia.

When Charles A. Gilberg died in 1898 his famous library was held by his estate and eventually was sold for \$1,100 to a New York dealer. This sale took place in 1925. About five years later it came into the possession of Mr. Silas W. Howland of New York, and Howland's enlarged collection was subsequently presented to the Harvard College Library.

The John G. White Chess and Checkers Collection, the largest of its kind in the world, is now preserved together with the voluminous White correspondence, in the Cleveland Public Library in Cleveland, Ohio.

Finally, it seems fitting to mention the cornerstone of the Cook collection – or of any chess collection: Lucena's "Treatise on the Game of Chess," which constitutes the second part of *Repeticion de Amores E Arte de Axedrez*, published in Salamanca, Spain, about 1496. When Mr. Cook acquired this book at the peak of his collecting career in 1902 he was the first of his friendly competitors in America to make such an important addition. The significance of the book is easily understood, for it is the earliest specific treatise on chess to have been printed. To be sure, other claims have been made for this position of honor. In 1796 a Spanish bibliographer, Francisco Mendez, described an earlier printed treatise by Vincent, but no copy of this work has turned up. Other chess incunabula such as the *Guldin Spil* published at Augsburg in 1472 and the different Cessolis editions, including the rare Caxtons of 1474 and about 1483 are not comparable to Lucena's treatise explaining the rules of the game, for these other works are chiefly concerned with moralizations which use the chess pieces merely as symbols for their counterparts in human life.

Although the Lucena treatise is not an extremely rare book, complete copies are uncommon. At present there are at least seventeen known copies of Lucena's work and nine of these copies are owned by libraries or collectors in the Americas. Of those in the United States, copies in the collections of Cook (Princeton), White (Cleveland) and Howland (Harvard) contain only the second (chess) section. Copies which contain the first part, the *Repeticion de Amores* (which has nothing to do with the game of chess) and also the second and larger part, the *Arte de Axedrez*, are found in the John Pierpont Morgan Library, the Henry E. Huntington Library, and in the possession of Dr. A. S. W. Rosenbach. Nevertheless, none of these is a perfect copy.

The Lucena treatise is the only fifteenth century book in the Cook collection. But the importance of this collection (which is surpassed in rare books not only by the White library in Cleveland but also by the Howland library at Harvard) rests upon the voluminous letters received by Cook from his correspondents, the ephemeral pamphlets relating to the history of American chess clubs, and particularly the publications relating to chess activities in New Jersey. This wealth of material waits to be exploited by someone who may write the history of chess in America after 1859. In this American material, the Cook collection surpasses that of any other collection.

(From *The Princeton University Library Chronicle* Vol. II, Number 4, June 1941, pp. 147-152.)