

Recording Assignments and Related Documents in the Copyright Office Began on July 25, 1870

Copyright Lore

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Recording assignments and related documents in the Copyright Office began on July 25, 1870. At that time, all documents submitted for recordation were copied by hand into handsome leather-bound ledgers and were personally signed by Librarian of Congress Ainsworth Rand Spofford. Spofford, who was largely responsible for the centralization of copyright functions in the Library of Congress in 1870, also served as de facto Register of Copyrights until the position of Register was established by an Act of Congress on Feb. 19, 1897.



PHOTOS BY CHARLES GIBBONS

The first ledger, Volume 1, consists of 601 handwritten pages, and covers a period of nearly 3 years. The first recorded document pertains to the transfer by John B. Sheldon “of one-half interest in the maps and charts or pictures of the discovery of the North Pole and the Polar Gulf.” By the time the third general revision of the U.S. copyright law went into effect on July 1, 1909, only 40 handwritten volumes had been completed, an average of about one per year.

On Nov. 22, 1922, the Office discontinued the practice of handwriting the documents and began to type them with a special typewriting machine. Volume 150 is the last to be typewritten. In spring 1927, the procedure for recording documents was changed once again when the process of preparing photostatic copies was inaugurated. This procedure was in effect until Aug. 3, 1953, when, beginning with Volume 891, the Copyright Office began to microfilm documents submitted for recordation. Starting on April 4, 1997, with Volume 3,400, documents have been recorded in the Office’s imaging system and may be searched in LM-459.

The Documents Recordation Section is currently recording documents in Volume 3,507. ©