

J. R. Alexander and the Trade in Papyri in the Late 19th Century

J. R. Alexander was not a papyrologist, nor is his name widely known among papyrologists today, yet he is a figure whose efforts transformed the discipline—albeit quietly. Alexander was a Christian missionary based in Asyut, Egypt, where he served as director of the American Mission Training College. He also maintained close ties to the scholarly community, hosting many traveling archaeologists and Egyptologists as they passed through the area, as well as keeping a close eye on the local trade in antiquities. It is due in large part to Alexander that there came to light two of the most important lots of papyri ever to emerge from Egypt. The first of these lots was British Library Papyri 130-137 (acquired in 1889-1890) through which much lost literature was recovered: the *Athenian Constitution* attributed to Aristotle, the *Mimes* of Herodas, and the medical text known as the *Anonymus Londinensis*. Second was a group of papyri acquired in 1897 by Edgar J. Goodspeed, now held in Special Collections at the University of Chicago. Though less celebrated than the British Library papyri, and mostly documentary in character, the Goodspeed papyri occupy a singular position in the history of the discipline chiefly for their role in the formation of an eminent scholar. Goodspeed is widely recognized as the first American papyrologist, due in large part to his work publishing pieces from his private collection. As this was a time when collections of Greek papyri were all but unheard of in the United States, Goodspeed's choice to assemble his own collection was essential to this process.

Until now, Alexander's story has never been told in any detail. Drawing from unpublished material at the University of Chicago and Westminster College (New Wilmington, PA), I will discuss Alexander's life, work, and involvement in the antiquities trade, considering

along the way ethical questions raised by his career in Egypt. It is my hope that this paper will restore to scholarly attention a long-forgotten figure with an outsized influence on the discipline of papyrology.