THE SHERBORN LIBRARY READER
by Elizabeth Johnston, Library Director

The Sherborn Library has launched an e-book on its website, nicely juxtaposed with the news of our recent unveiling of the gift of a magnificent mahogany book cabinet to house a collection of 200 year-old books. To add to the irony, the e-book we scanned to the web was scribed in 1830.

An e-book proper is a small, paperback-sized PC that the industry refers to as the Palm Platform into which readers may download encrypted text, i.e., copyrighted reading material, from an e-book publisher for a fee. The Sherborn Library's e-book is the full text of a publication that may be read on the Internet from your home PC.

The book the Library chose to publish as an e-book is The History of Sherburne by William Biglow, printed in 1830. Library Trustee Edward Perry volunteered his time, computer equipment, and technical skills to the project, which can be viewed on the Library's website at http://people.ne.mediaone.net/sherbornlibrary, by following the links to the bibliography of local history and genealogy and clicking on the title's blue hypertext. Also, the e-book is accessible from Ed's Sherborn Community Web Page at http://members.aol.com/sherbornma, by following the links to the Library page.

Biglow's History of Sherburne is the earliest published Town history. Ed summarizes the content: "its descriptions of people, places, and events remind us of the sturdy fortitude, patriotism, and depth of religious feeling which motivated those who established the foundation of today's Sherborn. A study of this text gives meaning to the old names associated with the streets, geographical features and institutions which we pass by in our daily lives but barely reflect upon, and an appreciation for the heritage bestowed upon us as a result of the dedication and labor of these early pioneers."

Ed pioneered the e-book scanning. At a Trustees' meeting in late 1999, I displayed the gift of the restored original edition and a facsimile copy given to the Library by Mr. and Mrs. Robert Fuller in honor of the Town's 325th anniversary. The preservation and restoration work of this valuable resource included the deacidification of each page to alleviate deterioration, mending with Japanese paper, handmade paper covers, and a protective phase box. The facsimile copy is a workhorse for daily handling and Ed was delighted to find that its font and print scanned beautifully.

Will e-books take off? Last year the publishing industry reached a minor landmark when an e-book, Angels of Russia by Patricia le Roy was nominated for the Booker Prize, a major literary award. And no wonder, since e-books are touted as "smarter" than ordinary hardcovers and paperbacks. In my view, e-book readers have to be pretty smart, too, in order to figure out how to turn the e-pages. But many e-books feature built-in dictionaries that provide the definition of all the big words you don't know. That makes the e-book smarter than most of us.

Resistance to e-books comes from many readers who are not convinced that there was

anything wrong with old-fashioned books, and I do mean old-fashioned, as many e-publishers have tried to attract readers by putting a leather cover-like flap over the Palm computer. The e-book might very well cut down on paper consumption and save trees, but animal rights activists will be up in arms about these leatherbound Palms. To add insult to injury, an e-book publishing maven was recently quoted in Newsweek boasting "within five years we'll have front-surface technology that doesn't require you to read behind glass." So much for the well-read bespectacled or bifocaled!

The popular downside response to e-books is "you can't curl up in bed with one." Nevertheless, e-books are friendly. You can loan e-books to friends via email or infra red beam, with the publishers' copyright intact because the original customer will not be able to view the book while your friend has access to it, just like books made out of paper, and other things you loan to friends that they never return.

Despite my skeptical tone, I am a proponent of e-books. Libraries are being revolutionized by the widespread digitization of printed matter. Our book and media collections are greatly augmented by the ability to download your requested resource in the e-text of printed or graphic material on a suitable device. Fifty years ago we were trying to accomplish the same for you when we filled out the carbon form requesting a library-to-library loan, or twenty years ago when we plugged computers into neighboring libraries' collections. The template for electronic collections is already in place: librarians have cut the die for it.

The library institution's democratic responsibility for providing access to information is governed by the cooperation of library professionals and a strong intra-institutional lending agreement, because no library can own, or disseminate, all of the resources that comprise the human record. The "virtual library," or the "library-without-walls", is a great idea whose time has come to rescue librarians from the cross-fire of electronic, voice, and in-person information requests. Locally, we can handle the run on our few copies of a bestseller because many of you are willing to be placed on a waiting list.

Public libraries adhere to a first-come-first-serve policy, although participating institutions which are interlibrary lenders may place restrictions giving local requests priority for high-demand items. Occasionally readers' obsession with a certain author's books turns to paranoia and we are accused of giving the best-seller to someone we like better. Libraries could spare readers this tendency if, for every paper text there was a corresponding e-text. You would experience no delay or waiting list for the information you want. And we all know that to have to wait or to be delayed is anathema to the productivity of humankind living in Massachusetts.

What about rare stuff such as Biglow's History of Sherburne that Ed digitized? The lack of availability makes it, and other scarce and thinly scattered sources, prime candidates for the scanner. The e-book extends copy availability and meets the demand for information and reading material. Someday the e-book will quietly replace your TV and you won't be able to tell the difference.

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