

Discovering Charles Othniel Marsh, Yale's First Professor of Paleontology



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This semester, the Sterling Memorial Library Exhibits Corridor highlights the diverse research of four Yale students. David McCullough, an American studies major at Davenport College, is displaying excerpts from his research on paleontologist Othniel Charles Marsh, a notable figure in Yale's history.

McCullough began his research while enrolled in John Gaddis's course "The Art of Biography." Not surprisingly, the course required McCullough to compose a biography as a final project. He had heard of an Indiana Jones-esque professor who had taught at Yale during the late 19th century, and McCullough believed this character could inspire a compelling biography. This professor turned out to be Othniel Charles Marsh, the first professor of paleontology in the United States and eventual founder of the Peabody Museum of Natural History. During the early 1870s, Marsh led four expeditions to the uncharted American West and brought back many of the fossils now displayed at the Peabody Museum. Throughout his research, McCullough became very familiar with the Othniel Charles Marsh Papers, a collection of writings and materials held in the library's Manuscripts and Archives department. Most significantly, the Papers document Marsh's treacherous 1870s expeditions with his students, and these records became a core element of McCullough's research.

McCullough also found considerable personal support within the Yale Library. George Miles, the curator of Western Americana at the Beinecke Library, and Bill Landis, the Head of Public Services in Manuscripts and Archives, were particularly helpful and provided McCullough with indispensable advice. "Their counsel and friendship means the world," says McCullough. You can see McCullough's display in the Sterling Memorial Library Exhibition Corridor, on view through April 30.

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