

# David Gordon Lyon

Harvard professor David Gordon Lyon (1852–1935) was an Assyriologist—a scholar of the history and language of Mesopotamia (ancient Iraq). He worked tirelessly to promote the study of the ancient cultures that once flourished in today's Middle East.

Lyon assembled a rich collection of antiquities from what we now call the Middle East, including the Holy Land. (The term “Semitic” refers to the related languages and cultures of the region.)

In 1889, Lyon established the Semitic Museum's first galleries; the present building was completed in 1903. A charismatic and tireless teacher, curator, and fundraiser, he traveled the world, developing a wide circle of colleagues and supporters to help him carry out his plans. To Lyon, this museum was not merely a building to display artifacts, but rather a busy institution devoted to teaching, research, and publication of ancient Near Eastern history, languages, and cultures.



## The Nile to the Euphrates

The ancient Near East, today called the Middle East, stretches from the Nile River in Egypt to the Euphrates River in Syria and Iraq. Cultural contributions can be attributed to Israelites, Phoenicians, Egyptians, Arameans, Babylonians, Arabs, and many others.

The region developed the world's first writing system, invented the wheel, created the first centralized governments, law codes and empires. Astronomy, mathematics, music, and medicine began here.



Harvard  
Semitic Museum

6 Divinity Ave, Cambridge, MA 02138

### HOURS

Monday–Friday 10:00 am–4:00 pm  
Sunday 1:00–4:00 pm  
Closed Saturday and on Harvard University holidays

### ADMISSION: FREE

For information on educational tours, group reservations, events, and rentals, email: [hsmreserve@hmsc.harvard.edu](mailto:hsmreserve@hmsc.harvard.edu)

### PARKING AND DIRECTIONS

Visit the website for details on parking options

[semiticmuseum.fas.harvard.edu](http://semiticmuseum.fas.harvard.edu) | 617-495-4631

**HMSC** HARVARD MUSEUMS OF SCIENCE & CULTURE



## From the Nile to the Euphrates

*Creating the Harvard Semitic Museum*



FLOOR

2

Harvard  
Semitic Museum

Lyon courted donors to help assemble an antiquities collection and erect a building. The institute Lyon envisioned would highlight the tremendous cultural contributions of the Semitic peoples of the Ancient Near East. He found the perfect partner in Jacob Schiff, a New York financier and philanthropist.



Lyon and his student George Reisner were the driving force in the Harvard University–Boston Museum of Fine Arts Expedition to Egypt and Sudan. Thousands of objects from the expedition went to the Museum of Fine Arts and the Peabody Museum at Harvard, but the Harvard Semitic Museum’s Egyptian collection was primarily assembled through purchases and gifts.



Artifacts as discovered at Giza

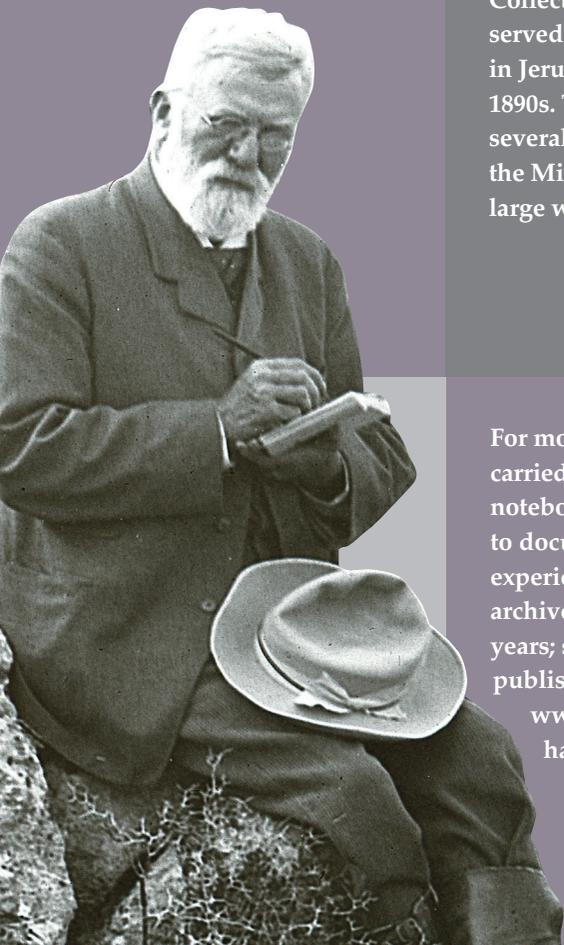


A large portion of the Museum’s original exhibits was selected from the diverse Merrill Collection. Selah Merrill served as American consul in Jerusalem in the 1880s and 1890s. The collection contained several hundred artifacts from the Middle East, including the large water jug above.



Early exhibits at the Semitic Museum included mannequins in native dress purchased by Lyon during his travels.

Specimens of natural history from the Middle East were also part of Lyon’s collection. The Museum still has numerous species of wood and geological samples.



For most of his life, Lyon carried a small pocket notebook, which he used to document his daily experiences. His personal archive spans sixty-five years; some of it is now published online at: [www.tinyurl.com/harvardsemitic](http://www.tinyurl.com/harvardsemitic)

Lyon at Samieh



Lyon (center) at Samaria

The creation of the Museum was intensely personal for Lyon. He even added items to the collection such as his own small bag of pebbles gathered at the Sea of Galilee. After his retirement from his director’s role in 1899, he continued to serve as Honorary Curator until 1932.

