

# 1

## Origins of MEDLINE and Why It Works the Way It Does

**F**IRST, consider how MEDLINE came to be created, and how it evolved. This will give you the basis for understanding how it works.

### Origins

In 1864, toward the end of the Civil War, John Shaw Billings, a 27-year-old military surgeon, was transferred from field duty to the Surgeon General's Office in Washington. His new assignment included, among other things, care of the modest collection of books and journals that was the Surgeon General's Library. During the years that followed, Billings aggressively expanded the collection, building it into the country's largest medical library. In 1876, he told the Surgeon General that it "may now be properly called the National Medical Library" (Garrison 1915)—a name that, by the middle of the twentieth century, would become the "National Library of Medicine."

Billings then developed an elaborate system for cataloguing everything within the Library. At the time, most libraries did not attempt to catalogue their books by subject, though the practice was beginning to be introduced. Users were accustomed to locating books by author and then searching the indexes of individual books to find information about a particular topic. In one of his first bold innovations, Billings designed a cataloguing system that included both subjects and author names in his *Index Catalogue of the Library*