

Bringing Thomas Jefferson's Libraries to Life

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At a dinner in 1962 honoring Noble Prize winners, President John F. Kennedy said it was “the most extraordinary collection of talent, of human knowledge, that has ever been gathered together at the White House, with the possible exception when Thomas Jefferson dined alone,” noting some of our Third president’s remarkable skills and achievements and great intellect.

Nowhere is that intellect better reflected than in Jefferson’s collections of books, a pursuit that dominated his adult life. The library Jefferson assembled at Monticello—and the classification system he devised for them based on Francis Bacon’s *The Advancement of Learning* grouping all human knowledge in the three faculties of: Memory, Reason and Imagination—reflected nothing less than “a blueprint of his mind,” in the words of historian Arthur E. Bestor.

More than just a means of locating individual books in his library, Jefferson’s classification system became a detailed guide showing where his books belonged, as he viewed them, within the whole expanse of human knowledge. His books were a working library. For Jefferson, books were valued for their utility in acquiring knowledge. He was not building a great collection as a hobby.

There were no subjects that lay outside Jefferson's collecting interests, from the law, representing his profession, history, both ancient and modern, foreign relations, politics and governance, to philosophy and religion, literature, including fiction, poetry, criticism and biography, art and architecture, exploration, native Americans and their languages, American flora and fauna, geography, geology, agriculture and plant propagation, gardening and landscaping, mathematics, medicine, astronomy and other sciences including chemistry, a subject not known to Bacon. His three most revered writers and thinkers were Bacon, John Locke and Isaac Newton.

Books in foreign languages comprised a considerable portion of the collection. Jefferson was fluent in French, Spanish and Italian, could read German and in later years most enjoyed reading about the Greeks and Romans in their own languages.

Jefferson's designs for Monticello and the University of Virginia, which he founded, were heavily influenced by classical architecture. He considered Greek and Roman design the best guide for all subsequent architecture and the Italian Andrea Palladio one of the best interpreters of antiquity. The Architecture section of his library catalogue listed 42 volumes including *The Architecture of Andrea Palladio* (1715) and such prosaic items as "Langley's Practical Geometry" and "The Builder's Dictionary."

We can also thank Jefferson for much of our knowledge of many native American tribes, early agricultural practices, the legal statutes and precedents of Virginia, and various aspects of life in Colonial America. If Jefferson had an overriding aim as a collector it was to acquire anything of merit relating to North

America and the United States. As president his knowledge of bibliography was essential in assisting Congress in building the first congressional library and later in drawing up a book list for the new University of Virginia library. He wrote a manual of parliamentary procedure, adopted by the U.S. Senate, based on his study of the English parliamentary system and practices gleaned from his extensive collection of political science and history, two of the largest subject areas in his library.

A large portion of his books were acquired in Europe. Jefferson purchased at least 2,000 volumes in 1784-89 alone while minister to France, almost doubling his collection by the time he returned home. Most of these were in French. Many others were purchased from booksellers in Britain. Jefferson identified his ownership of a book by writing a small "TJ" at the bottom of the title page.

For Bacon's three major categories of the mind Jefferson substituted History (Memory), Philosophy (Reason) and Fine Arts (Imagination). History was divided into Civil and Natural, each of which was further divided into categories under which Jefferson listed 15 subject areas that he called chapters. All the books in his library were recorded in 44 chapters.

Under History, for example, Chapter 4, Modern American, one would find books on early European settlements, virtually all of the original 13 colonies, military operations during the French and Indian and Revolutionary wars, George Washington's Journal, and biographies of many of the Founding Fathers. Some 79 titles were listed, many having multiple volumes. Chapter 15, Occupations of Man: Technical Arts, listed books on cooking, brewing, maple sugaring, printing,

weaving, watch-making, “Cavallo’s history of Aerostation”—flying, even an early book on steam generation.

Jefferson’s classification system today seems somewhat strange and idiosyncratic. Jefferson divided Philosophy into Moral and Mathematical. Moral was divided into Ethics and Jurisprudence. Religion is listed as a branch of Jurisprudence, reflecting his suspicion of organized religion. Instrumental in advocating separation of church and state, tolerance and non-interference in religious worship, Jefferson saw religion not primarily as theology, which is not listed in his chapters, but as institutional morality.

Jefferson observed that his classifications suited his particular interests and preferences, telling a friend in 1815 that a physician or religious person would have designated his sections and chapters differently. The late Jefferson scholar Dumas Malone called Jefferson the most meticulous and systematic of men.

No one in America had better resources at hand than Jefferson in writing a *Summary View of the Rights of British America* (1774), the *Declaration of Independence*, and *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1785); as secretary of state when he issued his précis on relations with France or, as president, in negotiating the Louisiana Purchase with Napoleon and in writing instructions for the Lewis and Clark Expedition. Jefferson’s reading, as opposed to experience, was the primary basis throughout his public life for his opinions, judgments and decisions.

Jefferson initially thought of giving his library to the University of Virginia. He subsequently considered giving the

U.S. Government “first refusal” upon his death. The War of 1812, however, informed this intention much sooner than he intended. Another factor in this decision was his growing indebtedness. Monticello was a massive drain on his finances. Indeed, his beloved estate was not completed in his lifetime.

On August 14, 1814, in retaliation for the U.S. occupation of York (now Toronto) during which American troops burned the Parliament building and its library, the British occupied Washington, D.C., and burned the Capitol including the 3,000 books in the congressional library consisting mainly of history, the law, parliamentary practices and related subjects. Jefferson saw this as an opportunity to realize his vision of using his collection as the embryo of a great library that would be the equal of any in Europe. He offered to sell his library of 6,500 volumes to Congress at whatever price legislators deemed fair. His only stipulation was that his collection be bought in its entirety and remain intact. In 1814 Jefferson had the largest private library in the country (only Harvard’s and possibly the College of William and Mary’s were larger).

Joseph Milligan, a local bookseller, appraised the collection at \$23,950. A protracted partisan debate ensued in which Jefferson’s enemies charged the former president with trying to foist his views and literary preferences on the United States. One vehement opponent, Rep. Cyrus King, Federalist of Mass., excoriated the “Jeffersonian, Madisonian philosophy,” the views of which were reflected in Jefferson’s “irreligious and immoral books, works of the French philosophers, who caused and influenced the volcano of the French Revolution.”

The timing of Jefferson's offer was not auspicious. The entire New England Federalist delegation opposed the purchase. The proposed sale was used by Federalists to vent their bitter opposition to "Mr. Madison's War." Jefferson's supporters countered that the government and the American people would be getting a national treasure. Jefferson somewhat optimistically ventured to say he knew of "no subject to which a member of Congress may not have occasion to refer." Eventually, less emotional arguments prevailed, and Congress narrowly approved the purchase in January 1815.

Jefferson used about two-thirds of the money he received to pay off some but not all of his debts.

The Librarian of Congress at the time, George Watterston, decided to modify Jefferson's classification system, much to Jefferson's displeasure. Though he kept the scheme modeled after Bacon's three categories of the mind, Watterston catalogued the books within Jefferson's 44 chapters in alphabetical order, whereas Jefferson had arranged them according to subject, content and importance as he valued them, which he explained was "sometimes analytical, sometimes chronological and sometimes a combination of both."

Jefferson's classification system, as modified by Watterston, was used by the Library of Congress until the early years of the 20th century, by which time it had become unwieldy. The library tried to convert to the Dewey decimal system, which proved unfeasible. Herbert Putnam, who became Librarian in 1899, devised the Library of Congress Classification Tables with almost 20,000 subdivisions that is in use today. Under Putnam the library "democratized" its collections through

interlibrary loans, and the sale and distribution of Library of Congress printed catalogue cards was initiated. The library's collections were opened to anyone for serious research, fulfilling Jefferson's dream for his books as the nucleus of a great national library accessible to all Americans.

Tragically, almost two-thirds of Jefferson's collection, including most of the books on literature, history and politics, were destroyed in a fire in 1851. The surviving 2,465 books are now on permanent display in the library's Rare Books and Special Collections Division. It was the second fire involving Jefferson's books. In 1770 a fire at Shadwell, Jefferson's birthplace, destroyed his library of 300-400 volumes including his law books.

Jefferson's 1814 manuscript catalogue of books with its unique classification system remained in Milligan's possession after his appraisal and has not survived. In 1942 the Library of Congress hired E. Millicent Sowerby, a British bibliographer, to prepare a new catalogue of Jefferson's books organized and listed as Jefferson had compiled them. She was handicapped in having available a catalogue of Jefferson's from 1783 listing perhaps half the volumes Jefferson had amassed by 1814. Sowerby was only partially successful in reclassifying his books. Nevertheless, she published between 1952 and 1959 a valuable five-volume annotated catalogue of the collection.

A previously unknown catalogue Jefferson had drawn up in 1823-24 to correct Watterston's modifications was discovered in 1917 and donated to the Library of Congress. Its significance was not immediately apparent and it lay uncatalogued on the shelves with the Jefferson collection. Initially it was thought to

be a catalogue of the University of Virginia's library. Finally in 1989 *Thomas Jefferson's Library - A Catalog with the Entries in His Own Order* was published based on the discovery. It restored the system Jefferson had perfected over many years.

Despite the loss of his great library, Jefferson never lacked for books. He wrote to John Adams soon after the sale of his collection saying, "I cannot live without books." He began a new collection, labeled by historians Jefferson's Retirement Library, which at the time of his death in 1826 numbered some 1,600 volumes.

In the 1950s the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation, supported by the University of Virginia, began to acquire duplicate copies of the books in Jefferson's Retirement Library. Using the extant catalogues Jefferson had compiled at various stages of his book collecting, auction catalogues (the collection was auctioned off after his death), the five-volume Sowerby catalogue, and other sources, books were obtained from bookstores and other sources in the United States and especially in Europe. The intent was to obtain books of the same size, published in the same year and by the same publisher and, where noted by Jefferson, the same edition and printing.

Bindings in Jefferson's day, before publishers' bindings started to become available in the 1830s and '40s, were typically of leather. Older books were sometimes bound in vellum. A buyer of a newly published book would pay separately to have the book bound from the printed sheets. Even a small library of two or three hundred books was an expensive enterprise. It was not possible to know in every case the design and type of the binding of Jefferson's books.

The plan was expanded over the course of the nearly 15-year project to include copies of books from the collection Jefferson sold in 1815 and also his collection, known as the petit format library, housed at Jefferson's estate at Poplar Forest near Lynchburg, VA. The latter collection of several hundred volumes also was auctioned off after Jefferson's death. Monticello now possesses copies of approximately 20-25 percent of the books in the Retirement and the 1815 collections and fewer from the Poplar Forest collection. The Library of Congress in recent years separately has acquired copies of approximately 96-98 percent of Jefferson's books destroyed in the 1851 fire.

In the last years of his life, with growing divisions in the country, Jefferson became preoccupied with issues of mutual toleration and national unity. More than ever he believed in the importance of books and in education as a moral responsibility of an enlightened citizenry in a representative democracy. In 1980 the ornate main building of the Library of Congress was named the Thomas Jefferson Building.

(Editor's note: the writer's father, an antiquarian book dealer specializing in early Americana, spent over a decade, along with his other book interests, on behalf of the Jefferson Memorial Foundation searching for and acquiring duplicate copies of the books in the various collections Jefferson amassed during his lifetime.)
