

Rare Collections Library Pennsylvania's Treasures

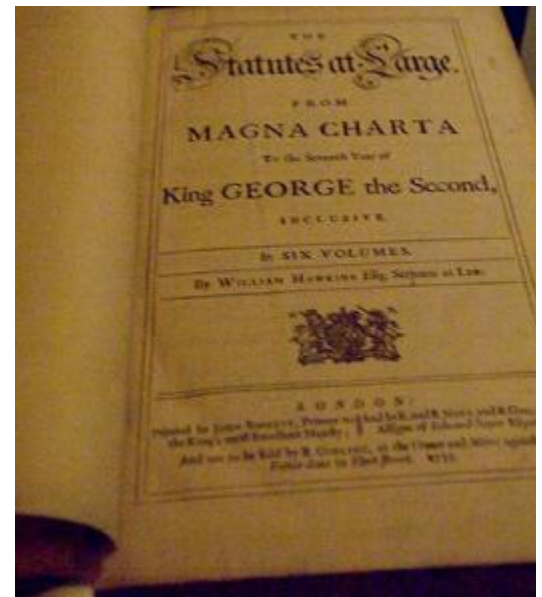
by Ted W. Hanson

It began with an inauspicious entry dated December 5, 1745 in the Journal of the Provincial Assembly: "*Ordered, That the Clerk send to England for the best edition of the Statutes at Large, for the use of the House . . .*" It was not entirely surprising the Provincial Assembly felt the need for English law books. Members suspected the proprietors were seeking to set aside William Penn's charter and their liberty was at stake. Access to a library of English law would provide ammunition for the coming struggle.

The Clerk of the House - one Benjamin Franklin - dutifully purchased the requested books and the volumes he selected formed the foundation of what is now the Pennsylvania State Library. Significantly, and against all odds, only two volumes are missing from the original General Assembly collection.

In the centuries before Amazon.com, books were rare, expensive and purchasing them from overseas was not a simple matter. First, the order would be made in duplicate or triplicate. Two or three ships sailing for England be given a copy of the order insuring that if one vessel sank or was seized by an enemy the others would reach their destination. The bookseller would in turn locate a ship sailing for the colonies on which to send the books. In all, a lengthy process. It was more than 18 months later before Assembly records indicate Franklin was reimbursed for the volumes.

The Assembly's collection was soon supplemented with tomes of statutes from neighboring colonies, additional English law books and other volumes deemed "suitable and necessary" for the use of the Assembly. The additional books included philosophy, history, natural sciences, literature and poetry. From the very inception, the Pennsylvania State Library has been more than collection of law books. By 1753, the collection had expanded to the point that the library was assigned its own room in the State House, By the end of the following year Charles Norris (brother of Speaker Issac Norris) had been appointed "Keeper of the Assembly Library."



One of the original books of English law purchased by Benjamin Franklin for the use of the Provincial Assembly.



A 1774 account describes the Library in what we now know as Independence Hall: "*From (the Assembly) room you go through a back door into the Assembly's Library which is a very elegant apartment. It is ornamented with a stucco ceiling and chimney pieces. Round the room are glass cases in which the books are deposited. These books consist of all the laws of England made in these later years and beside these history and poetry. The Assembly only have recourse to this library . . .*"

The Assembly Library, regarded as the finest held by any provincial government, was available to the First Continental Congress meeting in Philadelphia as relations between England and her colonies deteriorated. During the Second Continental Congress, as John Adams noted in his diary entry for June 15, 1775, George Washington retired to the Committee and Library Room while his fellow delegates discussed appointing him to lead an army of rebellion against the King. Washington was seated among the volumes when the delegates unanimously elected him Commander in Chief.



The following year when Thomas Jefferson was crafting the Declaration of Independence, the Assembly Library was at hand. Among the works were writings by English philosopher John Locke whose influence pervades the Declaration of Independence and inspired the phrase, "Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

In the fall of 1777 the British army's proximity to Philadelphia forced both the Continental Congress and Pennsylvania's government to flee, avoiding certain imprisonment and possible execution. As the enemy approached the city on September 17, 1777 the Supreme Executive Council "Ordered, That the books in the library belonging to the State be sent immediately to Easton, in Northampton County and committed to the care of Robert Levers, Esq. of the said county."

The Library eventually was moved to Lancaster where the Pennsylvania Assembly had convened and by 1778 with Philadelphia out of British hands, the tomes were returned to the State House. An inventory revealed the many volumes were missing. The Supreme Executive Council wanted the books back and directed "public notice be given to all persons having books belonging to the State to return the same to the Secretary without delay; otherwise the Council will be induced to think they are detained from improper motives, and to take further measures for their recovery." Over the course of the following year, missing volumes found their way back to the Library.



A farmer's diary

In the Rare Collections Library is a small diary kept by George Ross, a Lancaster County farmer.

Ross, the son of a signer of the Declaration of Independence, recorded daily life on his farm interspersed with other, sometimes political, observations. In an entry dated January 12, 1815, Ross had trenchant remarks about James Madison and [Governor Simon Snyder](#) who in 1812 advanced the proposal to move the seat of state government to Harrisburg from Lancaster. Respecting the office, but not the person who holds the office is nothing new in American politics.



"No work, it being recommended by the Presdt. as a day of humiliation & prayer. I caus'd my People to abstain from menial services - Not out of Respect for Madison for whom I feel the most contemptible opinion; but as in the case of Snyder who is equally contemptible, I revere the sacred offices, which these miscreants now fill, & hope when they are chang'd we will cheerfully obey their successors."



In 1812 the Library was moved again, this time to the new state Capital in Harrisburg. Lacking a building, the books found a home on the second floor of the Dauphin County Courthouse (on the site of Whitaker Center) where they remained until the Capitol was completed in 1822 and the Library was situated on the second floor.

The Library was regarded as vital to the business of the Legislature and in 1854 a law was enacted requiring the Library to be open weekdays from 9 AM - 2 PM for the use of "members of the Legislature, visitors, citizens and strangers . . ." with extended hours into the evening on session days. Thus the Library became accessible to ordinary citizens, but the general public could not borrow books. Even governmental officials were severely restricted in the number and length of time books could be borrowed. Atlases, maps, charts, dictionaries, encyclopedias and newspaper files were among the items that were forbidden to be removed from the State House "on any terms whatsoever."

However, on the night of June 26, 1863 that provision was set aside. General Robert E. Lee was approaching Harrisburg and the Library once again took flight from the dangers of war. Some 23,000 volumes were loaded loosely into a freight car and sent, ironically, to Philadelphia where they were stored in a fireproof building.

Within a few weeks, the books returned to Harrisburg and were restored to their proper places on the seriously overcrowded shelves. The following year the Legislature appropriated funds to construct an addition to the Capitol with space dedicated for the Library. Finally, on July 3, 1867 the new space was dedicated.

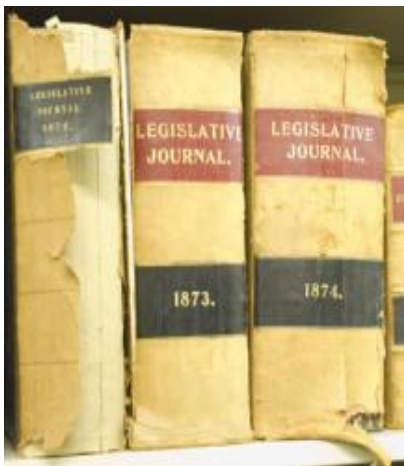
However, the new Library which was "confidently expected (to provide) the most commodious Library accommodations in the County" fell far short of expectations. The lighting, heating and ventilation were bad and the shelves inadequate to hold the existing collection, much less new accessions. Not only was the Library growing, so was state government and by 1893 the Legislature approved construction of a new building to relieve overcrowding in the Capitol and house the Library.

In December 1894, the new building (now known as the Ryan Building) was ready for the library and the books were moved another time. No one realized it then, but that move saved them from certain destruction. Three years later, Harrisburg's first Capitol was destroyed by fire, but the priceless collection housed next door was spared the flames.

The Library remained in the Ryan Building until 1931 when it moved into new quarters in the State Education Building (now the Forum Building). State-of-the-art when it was built 77 years ago, the Forum Building lacks modern heating, ventilating and air conditioning systems, not to mention humidity and air purification controls critical for the long-term preservation of historic paper-based collections. Moreover, aging mechanical systems amount to virtual time bombs. An undetected leak could destroy irreplaceable items.



In the 1950's and 1960's leadership at both Independence National Historic Park and the State Library realized the historic importance of the collection. Many of the volumes had been scattered among historic sites and the State Library's general collection. As late as the 1970's it was possible to check out some of the original volumes. Officials began the task of locating the volumes and reestablishing the collection as an intact colonial library.



Legislative journals from the 1870's await conservation.

In 1998, the Governor's Council on Library Development noted the Forum Building's substandard environmental conditions were placing the Commonwealth's most valuable and historic documents at risk. Books that had been thumbed by the framers of the nation's charter documents were in grave peril. Not from war and fire as in the past, but from mold and antiquated plumbing.

The Rare Collections Library is unique in that it contains the majority of books, publications and newspapers that influenced the Founding Fathers. The U.S. Department of Interior has recognized the importance of the Library and declared it a National Treasure. Other holdings include The Nuremberg Chronicle dating to 1493, Franklin's publications including *Poor Richard's Almanac* and a remarkable collection of early Pennsylvania newspapers.

Preserving the collection while making it accessible to the public presented a unique challenge. The new \$7.2 million facility for housing the Rare Collections has attracted international attention for its innovative approach in creating an environment conducive to the preservation of the fragile collection.



Carved from existing space in the Forum Building, no detail of the facility has escaped the attention of the project architect Cornelius (Neal) Rusnov. From the reading room paneled in Pennsylvania black cherry (which according to Rusnov was Franklin's favorite wood), to the color corrected LED lighting fixtures custom



designed to illuminate the vaults, Rusnov's careful hand is evident throughout the facility.

The reading room where members of the general public may view holdings from the collection is a fitting setting for the Library's crown jewels and Rusnov lavished attention on it, personally selecting the trees that yielded the paneling. Highly sensitive to the building's history, Rusnov echoed motifs found elsewhere in the Forum Building. Several years ago, plaster models for the building's bas-relief sculptures were discovered stored in the attic. Rusnov had the models conserved and incorporated them into the design. A plaster model of the Three Fates occupies a prominent place in the reading room.

Four stained glass windows, commissioned for the room, illustrate aspects of Franklin's life: printer, inventor, scientist and statesman.

The most valuable components of the rare collection have been moved into the vault where they are no longer subjected to variations in temperature and humidity. But for every item stored safely there are hundreds of other pieces of history awaiting conservation. Pennsylvania's vast Civil War collection of newspapers is particularly at risk.

There is a sizable collection of "transitionally rare" items in the State Library's holdings. These 90,000+ volumes do not yet meet the "rare book" criteria or are second and third editions. Nevertheless, these books are valuable to our history but are currently housed in a basement area of the Forum Building with inadequate climate controls. Eventually the space they are in will be properly conditioned allowing for their long-term storage.



In many cases, the only known copy of a document is in our collection. If the action is not taken soon, Pennsylvania will lose important parts of our state and national heritage.

Thousands of newspapers spanning four centuries are housed in the Forum Building basements in conditions hastening their deterioration.