

Inception of the Special Collections

Thomas Jefferson reserved the principal room of the most splendid building of his academical village, the Rotunda, for the library. And upon the completion of the Rotunda in 1826, the 8,000 volumes it contained ranked the University's library near the top among American institutions of higher learning. For his own library and for the University, Jefferson sought books of the highest quality with the best texts and emphasized the collection of original manuscripts. "The letters of a person," he wrote, "form the only full and genuine journal of his life."

The letter in which he made this statement, the lists of books he selected, and many of the books themselves are in the University Library today together with his architectural drawings, the minutes that he kept for the Board of Visitors, and thousands of other letters and documents about the creation of the University. From these auspicious beginnings the Special Collections Department grew.

From the 19th-century foundation

James Madison, the University's second Rector, established the first endowment fund for the purchase of materials for the library through a bequest in his will in 1836. Ever since, alumni and friends of the University have designated gifts for the purchase of rare books and manuscripts. The Alfred Henry Byrd, Elizabeth Cocke Coles, and John H. Cocke endowed funds, each used for the purchase of books and manuscripts relating to Virginia, and the unrestricted Douglas Hamilton Gordon and Bennett Wood Green funds, are the oldest of these.

The renowned Lee Family of Virginia placed its papers, rich sources of colonial and revolutionary history, in the library sometime before 1832. Over the next 160 years, many other families followed suit, including the Randolphs, Berkeleys, Cockes, Cabells, Carrs, Bryans, Tuckers, and Harrisons. Today, the papers of Virginia families are the cornerstone of the department's manuscript collections and are rich sources for a great variety of historical and other studies. Notable political collections include the papers of U.S. congressmen and cabinet officers, such as senators Carter Glass and Harry F. Byrd, Sr. and Jr., and Secretary of State Edward Stettinius. Other manuscript holdings are domestic, economic, literary, religious, agricultural, and educational in nature, and include a variety of formats ranging from manuscripts and typescripts of letters, diaries, account books, and memoranda to computer files and printouts.