

page.⁶ Riddled with what E. Millicent Sowerby describes as “erasures and semi-erasures,” the 1783 catalog was a working document that functioned as the primary reference tool and inventory of Jefferson’s library at least until 1812, when Jefferson made a fair copy of the catalog that would eventually accompany his books to Congress in 1815.⁷

Jefferson intended to have the **1812 catalog** printed for reasons of both personal convenience and future preservation. Writing to Thomas Cooper on July 10, 1812, Jefferson refers to the fair copy: “I am making a fair copy of the Catalogue of my library, which I mean to have printed merely for the use of the library.”⁸ Jefferson’s portrayal of the 1812 catalog as “useful” may reflect his need for an easier-to-navigate alternative to the 1783 catalog, which by 1812 was a confusing and palimpsestic document that listed books he no longer owned and omitted books he had since acquired. Jefferson’s desire to print the 1812 catalog—a remediation that would have enabled him to distribute copies to interested readers—also reveals his interest in the library’s posthumous existence and utility; at last, the collection that the 1812 catalog would describe was nearing a long-elusive stasis. Tacit in Jefferson’s letter to Cooper is the fact that he had begun to view his collection of books as a coherent and relatively fixed whole, ready to enter the permanent record.

By the time Jefferson began work on the 1812 catalog, he had already envisioned an institutional future for his library. In a letter to Cooper, dated January 16, 1814, Jefferson writes: “I have long had under contemplation, & been collecting materials for the plan of an university in Virginia.” Jefferson adds that this university (not yet *the* University of Virginia, but only *an* university in Virginia) might acquire his library “on their own terms,” thus securing a collection of “about 7. or 8 thousand volumes” and “the best ... of it’s [sic] size probably in America.”⁹ Jefferson’s letter expresses a typical immodesty about his books, but it also indicates that he had come to anticipate the dispersal of his library—an act that would require a legible and comprehensive inventory of its contents. However, war intervened, and the destruction of Washington in 1814 by British troops precipitated the library’s sale to Congress in 1815.

In addition to the presumably improved functionality it offered, the 1812 fair copy introduced a new organizational schema, superseding an earlier version that organized the 1783 catalog. In retirement, Jefferson continued to refine and modify the order of his shelves and the headings under which he classed his

6. “1783 Catalog of Books,” accessed April 7, 2021. See also Sowerby, “Sources and Reference Books,” 215.

7. Sowerby, “Sources and Reference Books,” 215.

8. “Thomas Jefferson to Thomas Cooper, 10 July 1812,” *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/03-05-02-0179>.

9. “Thomas Jefferson to Thomas Cooper, 16 January 1814,” *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/03-07-02-0071>. Tay cites an earlier letter sent to Littleton Tazewell, indicating that Jefferson had begun envisioning a library for a planned university in Virginia at least as early as 1805. Tay, “Forming the Body of a Library,” 209, n. 14. See also “From Thomas Jefferson to Littleton W. Tazewell, 5 January 1805,” *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/99-01-02-0958>. [This is an *Early Access* document from *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*. It is not an authoritative final version.]