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Jefferson: Librarian-in-Chief

Few public figure's lives are so entwined with "library" as is Thomas Jefferson's, but his library story stands in shadow amidst so many other well-known and almost mythical accomplishments, driven by this sentiment:

"It can never be too often repeated, that the time for fixing every essential right on a legal basis is while our rulers are honest, and ourselves united."

It is, however, fair to say that the sentiment and the many better known accomplishments were informed and shaped by the Jefferson library story itself. Dumas Malone, Thomas Jefferson Foundation Professor of History at the University of Virginia at retirement in 1962, wrote about all of this in his six-volume, Pulitzer Prize-winning *Jefferson and His Time*. The book set is available in the WLN collection if you want a thoroughly wonderful read. The volumes are the story of America itself at its founding, of its aspirations even only partially fulfilled today, and in threat. I draw from Malone.

Malone said that Jefferson and his colleagues "thought more about the future, and they knew more of the past." They and Jefferson were avid readers. As Peter Jefferson's legatee, Thomas inherited his father's books, of which forty are known. It was a small nucleus of a collection and included almost every planter's bible and prayer book, "books useful to a magistrate," volumes on history, and books about astronomy and geology.

"He always loved to study, for by this means he expanded the horizons of his mind and gained the power of knowledge, which was the only power he really craved." He began to buy books as a law student at the College of William and Mary, often the classics then, and then lost much of this early collection, housed at his 1743 Shadwell birthplace, in a fire that consumed Shadwell in 1770.

"Within three years, he had more volumes than he had lost." By 1773, he had 1256 volumes, according to his own records.

In 1783, foretelling the modern practice of libraries everywhere, Jefferson catalogued his precious library of books, which catalogue became celebrated. That spring, he counted 2640 volumes in his collection, classified in a scheme that outlived him at the Library of Congress for two generations. He arranged his books by subject matter and subdivision, eschewing the practice of the time of arranging by size, or even alphabetically. "...for Jefferson kept the house of his mind in order."

To put the size of Jefferson's collection of that time in perspective, Murrysville Community Library today has about 60,000 items, including print books and electronically-based materials. Jefferson's collection was only about 4% of that, but still amazingly large for one individual in that time, or any time.

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His ever growing collection was to become the founding collection of the Library of Congress in Washington, now an unimaginably huge and comprehensive repository and resource for all that there is to know. That's a story of its own, so more about that next time.

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