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Library of Congress

The Library of Congress on Capitol Hill is the largest library in the world. It houses more than 170 million items, of which in excess of 39 million are catalogued books and other print materials. It is the main research arm of the U.S. Congress and is home to the U.S. Copyright Office. It occupies three buildings, including the Thomas Jefferson Building since 1897.

It was born of the sale to the U.S. Congress by Thomas Jefferson of his private collection of about 6500 books, after extensive negotiations in 1814-15. Jefferson did not bargain hard on price, leaving the value to Congress and estimators. In a vote that could have presaged petty party line machinations of today, approval of purchase as a whole in the House of Representatives was granted by a relatively tight 81-71 margin. Jefferson wanted the collection kept whole. Even with this obvious good to the country and society, passage of the acquisition came hard.

The need for a congressional special library was clear. A predecessor library started in 1800 made that need evident; it had been populated with the aid of Jefferson's recommended acquisitions, but was destroyed by British invaders in 1814. This collection consisted of perhaps 3000 volumes.

Jefferson's selling price was \$23,950, a very much needed sum to Jefferson at the time. He was, after all, less good at keeping his own balance sheet in the black than he was at building a personal library collection and cataloguing it in an orderly way. The selling price included his own catalogue system for the books.

The books were transported by ten horse-drawn wagons to Washington from Monticello. They were transported in their own bookcases, transformed into shipping containers for the purpose of a ride over very rough 19th-century roads. Quite a feat, but successfully accomplished. The books survived that without circumstance, but the collection sadly was, after his death in 1826, decimated by fire in 1851.

For all that, the collection "survives" to this day as the Library of Congress. And Jefferson, that great man, that imperfect man, enigma to slavery, could not stand living without his books. He immediately started another library. "I cannot live without books," wrote Jefferson to John Adams about a month after the tenth and last wagonload from his library set out for Washington." Over the next ten years he built back up to about 1000 volumes, these reflecting the needs and entertainments of the man in his retired years as "The Sage of Monticello." That is the title of the sixth book in Dumas Malone's important six-volume set, from which I have borrowed liberally.

This one of many legacies, The Library of Congress, is his monument to public libraries, but it is not one of the three accomplishments that he chose to be inscribed on his headstone. They are: (1) author of the Declaration of Independence; (2) author of the statute of Virginia for religious freedom; and (3) father of the University of Virginia.

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However, he could have been none of those without his also being the founder of the Library of Congress, without his also being the avid reader and collector that he was. It is the underlying legacy, and we all need to know it better.

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