



Written by [Joe Wolverton, II, J.D.](#) on April 29, 2015

215th Anniversary of the Library of Congress: Books the Founders Read

This month marks the 215th anniversary of the establishment of the Library of Congress.

As they did at so many critical moments in the history of our Republic, the dynamic duo of James Madison and Thomas Jefferson played major roles in the creation and continuation of the country's unofficial national library.

Madison, known to history as the Father of the Constitution, is more deserving of the moniker Father of the Library of Congress, as it was his proposal that Congress create such a resource.



Although Madison's suggestion went unheeded when it was made in 1783, on April 24, 1800 President John Adams signed legislation permitting the transfer of the nation's capital from Philadelphia to the new federal city. One provision of that bill authorized the expenditure of \$5,000 "for the purchase of such books as may be necessary for the use of Congress ..., and for fitting up a suitable apartment for containing them."

An order was sent to London for the new collection, which amounted in that year to 740 books and three atlases.

Jefferson, himself no slouch when it came to the love of books and learning, appointed the first overseer of the Library of Congress. A law signed in 1802 extended book borrowing permission to the president and the vice-president.

About this point in the story, most Americans believe that the library and its contents were destroyed in a fire when the British sacked Washington, D.C. during the War of 1812. According to an official Library of Congress blog post, however, there might be more to the story. Here's an excerpt from that article questioning the incineration of the first library's 3,000 or so volumes:

In the immediate aftermath of the fire, there were conflicting reports about the extent of the damage that was inflicted on the original collection. Writing in 1905, Library of Congress historian William Dawson Johnston cited documents preserved in the Annals of Congress that indicate that much of the first library had in fact been preserved.

The Annals of Congress for September 22, 1814, for example, contains a letter written by the staff members of the Library who were assigned the task of removing the collection to safety in the days before the invasion of Washington:

S. Burch (who was furloughed from his post in the militia on August 22 — two days before the fire — so that he might resume his duties at the Library) and the Under-Librarian of Congress, J.T. Frost (who was too old for militia duty). These were the only staff members involved in the



evacuation of the Library. The letter was their report to the Librarian of Congress, Patrick Magruder, about the events at the Library leading up to the fire. They wrote:

“[On Monday, August 22] We immediately went to packing up, and Mr. Burch went out in search of wagons or other carriages, for the transportation of the books and papers; every wagon, and almost every cart, belonging to the city, had been previously impressed into the service of the United States, for the transportation of the baggage of the army; the few he was able to find were loaded with the private effects of individuals, who were moving without the city; those he attempted to hire, but not succeeding, he claimed a right to impress them; but, having no legal authority, or military force to aid him, he, of course, did not succeed. He sent off three messengers into the country, one of whom obtained from Mr. John Wilson, whose residence is six miles from the city, the use of a cart and four oxen; it did not arrive at the office, until after dark on Monday night, when it was immediately laden with the most valuable records and papers, which were taken, on the same night, nine miles, to a safe and secret place in the country. We continued to remove as many of the most valuable books and papers, having removed the manuscript records, as we were able to do with our one cart, until the morning of the day of the battle of Bladensburg, after which we were unable to take away anything further.”

Thus far: two oxcarts were taken away to safety — one full of records and papers, and another containing books and papers. The records and papers appear (in another passage) to have been destroyed in a later fire, one that took place in the safe house; but as for the printed books, Burch and Frost state later in the letter, “a number of the printed books were consumed [in the Capitol fire], but they were all duplicates of those which have been preserved.” In other words, the better part of the Library had been removed to safety before the fire, including the most valuable books. Frost mentions the successful rescue of the print book collection again in another letter on December 17, 1814, which he wrote in response to public statements made by the Joint Committee on the Library of Congress. The Committee had claimed that the collection was completely destroyed because no preparatory measures had been taken to expedite its removal. Frost writes, “The several loads [of books] that were saved, were taken from the shelves on which they were placed and deposited in the carts by which they were taken away; they have suffered no injury....”

An official statement issued on December 12, 1814 by the committee on the Library insisted, however, that the library was “destroyed by the enemy on the 24th of August last [1814].”

If any of the books and papers were saved, as Messrs. Burch and Frost claimed, the whereabouts of those invaluable volumes are unknown to this day.

While that little mystery lingers, what is known is that less than a month after the British burned much of the new capital city, Thomas Jefferson offered to sell his personal library — some 6,487 volumes — to the government as a replacement for the destroyed collection. The curious story of that transaction is reported by the Library of Congress:

Thomas Jefferson wrote to his friend, newspaper publisher, Samuel H. Smith (1772-1845) asking him to offer Congress his personal library of between “9 and 10,000 volumes” as a replacement. Jefferson promised to accept any price set by Congress, commenting that “I do not know that it contains any branch of science which Congress would wish to exclude from this collection ... there is in fact no subject to which a member of Congress may not have occasion to refer.” Records indicate the total of volumes received by the Library of Congress was 6,487. This more than doubled the holdings that were lost in the fire of 1814.



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This must have been quite a sacrifice for Jefferson, who famously declared, “I cannot live without books.”

Don’t worry about him, though; he immediately began replenishing the shelves of his library and he amassed a second collection of several thousand books, the entirety of which was sold at auction in 1829 to pay off Jefferson’s debt to his many creditors.

Perhaps most interesting to modern admirers of the Founders is the list of books housed in the 1812 Library of Congress. This catalogue contains several volumes of “sacred history,” including the Holy Bible; numerous writings of the ancient Greeks and Romans so familiar and influential to the Founders (including Cicero, Tacitus, Herodotus, Thucydides, Appian, Demosthenes, Cato, Xenophon, etc.); and most of the works penned by their British and continental influences, as well: Algernon Sidney, Blackstone, Emerich de Vattel, Samuel Pufendorf, and Jean-Jacques Burlamaqui.

The complete catalogue can be [found here](#).

Perhaps a fitting way to celebrate the anniversary of the founding of the Library of Congress is to take a few hours to read a few selections from the books our Founders read (all of which are available free on the Internet), drinking from the deep and refreshing wells of knowledge that nourished them.



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