

# Th: Jefferson

# MONTICELLO

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## Find of a Lifetime

### DISCOVERY OF JEFFERSON'S BOOKS

#### Jefferson's Retirement Library

During the War of 1812 the British set fire to the Capitol building, destroying the 3,000-volume congressional library. In response to what he believed was a great national loss, Thomas Jefferson sold his Monticello library of more than 6,700 volumes to the Library of Congress.

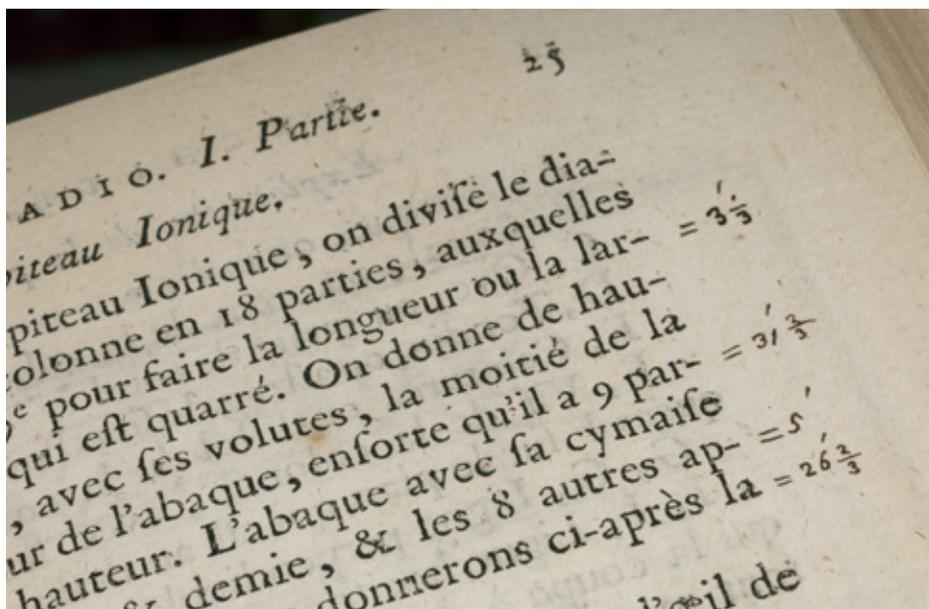
After the sale, Jefferson wrote to Samuel Harrison Smith, "an interesting treasure is added to ... [Washington, D.C.], now become the depository of unquestionably the choicest collection of books in the US, and I hope it will not be without some general effect on the literature of our country."

Shortly after parting with his library, Jefferson wrote to John Adams, "I cannot live without books." It wasn't long before Jefferson started to build his next and last collection—his Retirement Library at Monticello—which he collected over the last 11 years of his life.

After his death, Jefferson's library listed 931 titles, representing about 1,600 volumes. To settle Jefferson's enormous debt, his family was forced to sell the library at a public auction in Washington, D.C., in 1829.

#### October 2010 • Endrina Tay

Endrina Tay pored over documents



Jefferson's personal notes in the margin of his copy of Andrea Palladio's *Architecture de Palladio* (1764). Washington University Libraries Special Collections. Joe Angeles/WUSTL

and letters from Thomas Jefferson's family members at her desk in the Jefferson Library. She was searching for clues that would lead her to Jefferson's "missing" books.

As part of her work on the Thomas Jefferson's Libraries Project based at Monticello, Tay, associate foundation librarian for technical services, had been compiling a comprehensive list of Jefferson's surviving books sold during the 1829 auction.

"After the auction, the books were

scattered. The largest collections of Jefferson's books are at the Library of Congress and the University of Virginia, while smaller collections are in repositories around the country," said Tay.

But there was still a large collection of important and rare books from Jefferson's Retirement Library that was unaccounted for.

Tay's research led to Joseph Coolidge, husband of Jefferson's granddaughter Ellen Wayles

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Coolidge. A few weeks before the 1829 sale, Joseph Coolidge sent Nicholas P. Trist, who was married to another Jefferson granddaughter, a request to buy specific books. These were books Ellen knew well from her education under the tutelage of her mother, Martha Jefferson Randolph, and her grandfather, Thomas Jefferson, when she lived at Monticello from age 13 to 28.

In the February 11, 1829, letter, Coolidge wrote:

*"I beg you to interest yourself in my behalf in relation to the books; remember that his library will not be sold again, and that all the memorials of T. J. for myself and children, and friends, must be*

**"Books were at all times his chosen companions ...**

he derived more pleasure from his acquaintance with Greek and Latin than from any other resource of literature ..."

ELLEN WAYLES RANDOLPH COOLIDGE  
QUOTED BY HENRY S. RANDALL IN  
*THE LIFE OF THOMAS JEFFERSON* (1858)

*secured now!—this is the last chance!"*

Tay established which books Coolidge had purchased by comparing Coolidge's letter to two surviving copies of the 1829 auction catalogue annotated by Trist, along with a later Coolidge letter dated September 22, 1829, listing the books Trist had successfully acquired for Coolidge at the sale.

"We had a list of Jefferson books that we knew had gone to the Coolidges, but there was no sign of the books among living family members," said Tay.

The trail went cold.

### Ann Lucas-Birle

After ten years of research at the Jefferson Library, Ann Lucas-Birle was nearly done editing the travel diary of Jefferson's granddaughter, Ellen Wayles Coolidge. She was making final revisions to the introduction for the book, scheduled to come out in October 2011, when she found the missing link to Endrina Tay's research.

Lucas-Birle found an 1880 news report from the Harvard Register on Google Books that referenced the gift of Joseph Coolidge's library collection to Washington University in St. Louis.

"Right away I knew what this meant, and shared the article with Endrina," said Lucas-Birle.

She then went online to Washington University's library website and found several volumes that had belonged to Joseph Coolidge.

**Jefferson's personal markings helped verify his ownership of the books.**

Joe Angeles/WUSTL

"I took a deep breath and called Special Collections there to see if, by some chance, Joseph Coolidge's collection had remained intact after all these years. The staff person who answered my call said no, there was not still a Joseph Coolidge alcove, but that their curator of rare books may know the answers to my questions."

### November 2010

Armed with this new information, Tay and Lucas-Birle eagerly searched Washington University's online catalog for the collection. They hoped there would be dozens of books, but an initial search turned up only two titles that had an obvious Jefferson provenance.

"We weren't discouraged. The gift, made 130 years ago, made no reference to being once owned by Jefferson. We knew it was completely possible that no one from the library at the time of the gift knew the other books in the collection were Jefferson's," said Lucas-Birle.

Tay identified each of the titles in Washington University's online catalog, and came up with a detailed list of likely Jefferson books in the collection, organized by location.

"We contacted Rare Books Curator Erin Davis at Washington University with the list, hoping some, if not all, would contain Jefferson's distinctive ownership mark," said Tay.

### 2011

On January 25, Tay and Lucas-Birle received the news they were waiting for. Washington University librarians had pulled the books from the school's off-site storage facility, and confirmed the presence of Jefferson's ownership mark in 74 volumes, representing 28 titles.

The search was over, but the story had just begun.

Endrina Tay and Ann Lucas-Birle flew out to St. Louis to examine the

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books in person.

“It was the find of a lifetime,” said Tay.

Included in this discovery are Jefferson’s architecture books that he referred to in his designs for the University of Virginia, as well as Aristotle’s *Politica*, recorded by Nicholas P. Trist as one of the last

books Jefferson was reading or intending to read at the time of his death.

“We could hardly wait to see the books in person,” said Lucas-Birle.

Two of the architecture volumes, Freart de Chambray’s *Parallele de l’architecture antique avec la moderne* and Andrea Palladio’s *Architettura de Palladio contenant les cinq ordres d’architecture* contain notes and calculations made by Jefferson.

Washington University librarians found a tiny scrap of paper with Greek notes in Jefferson’s hand tucked in a volume of Plutarch’s *Lives*.

“This find confirms the veracity of my research. It’s gratifying and exciting to be able to trace in such detail the movement of books from origin to final resting place,” said Tay.

“Our discovery provides an amazing and

intimate look into Jefferson’s world. To find his handwritten notations is like peering over Jefferson’s shoulder to see his mind at work,” said Leslie Greene Bowman, president of the Thomas Jefferson Foundation. “To uncover such a significant collection of Thomas Jefferson’s personal books is a breakthrough for scholars and ongoing research on Jefferson’s life.”

Now historians, scholars and students will be able to access an enlarged collection of Jefferson’s Retirement Library books and perhaps learn a thing or two about the man who owned them.

The collection of Jefferson’s books is held within Washington University Libraries’ Special Collections, now the third largest repository of Jefferson books. Work is continuing, in concert with Washington University, to reassemble the 3,000-volume Joseph Coolidge library that was given by the Coolidge family to the university in 1880. Some of the books will be brought to Monticello this year for display in the “To Try All Things” exhibit in the Thomas Jefferson Foundation Visitor Center.



**Washington University Professor of History and Law David Konig, Endrina Tay, and Ann Lucas-Birle examine recently discovered Jefferson volumes at Washington University.**

Photo: Erin Davis, Washington University

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Read more about Ann & Endrina's discovery on their blog post. View more photos and learn more about the books at [www.monticello.org](http://www.monticello.org).

