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Historic Mount Vernon Returns Copy of Rare Book Borrowed by George Washington in 1789 to The New York Society Library

New York, NY – A small missing piece of American history came home on May 19 after 221 years: a copy of a book borrowed by the first President of the United States was returned to the library from which he borrowed it in New York City.

In October 1789, The New York Society Library, New York City's oldest library, shared a building with the federal government in Federal Hall, at Wall and Broad Streets in lower Manhattan. The Library's collection was used by Members of Congress, the Cabinet and the President himself. According to the Library's meticulous borrowing records or what is called a "charging ledger," President Washington took out *The Law of Nations* by Emer de Vattel on October 5, 1789. The book was not returned, nor any overdue book fine paid. Earlier this year the New York Society Library completed restoration of its 1789-1792 charging ledger, which will be available to the public in a digital version on its website in the fall of 2010. The ledger features the borrowing history of Washington, John Adams, John Jay, Aaron Burr, Alexander Hamilton, George Clinton, James Duane, and over 450 other New Yorkers. The Library also conducted an inventory of books mentioned in the ledger and confirmed that the book checked out by President Washington was still missing.

Although this was a well-kept secret at the Library for years, it became public recently in an article in *The New York Daily News*. A few days after learning of the situation, staff at Washington's home in Virginia, Mount Vernon, offered to replace Vattel's Law of Nations with another copy of the same edition. To observe this auspicious occasion, the Library hosted a ceremony on May 19 at 11 a.m. at which Mount Vernon's President, James C. Rees, and Librarian, Joan Stahl, presented the errant volume to Charles G. Berry, Chairman of the Library's Board of Trustees and Mark Bartlett, Head Librarian. The event took place in the Members' Room at the building the Library has occupied since 1937, 53 East 79th Street.

Mount Vernon's kind gesture shows their appreciation for maintaining a library's collection for posterity. They are in the process of establishing a library of their own: as the nation's first and only center for amassing and disseminating knowledge about Washington, the Fred W. Smith National Library for the Study of George Washington will safeguard Washington's books and manuscripts, serve as a scholarly retreat, create educational outreach programs on Washington, and provide seminars and training programs with a special focus on Washington's leadership. Construction of the 45,000 square foot facility is expected to begin in early 2011, with a completion date in 2012.

The Donald W. Reynolds Foundation has pledged \$38 million to Mount Vernon for the creation of this library. As the longtime chairman of the Donald W. Reynolds Foundation, Fred W. Smith has championed a number of projects related to George Washington. The Foundation's gift is the largest in the history of Mount Vernon, which ranks as the oldest and most visited national preservation project in America.

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About The New York Society Library

Founded in 1754, the New York Society Library is the city's oldest cultural institution and one of fewer than 20 membership libraries in the country. In the eighteenth century, an organization labeled "Society" indicated that it was open to everyone throughout society. Today, we are open to all for reading, reference, and many events, with circulation and other services by subscription. The Library is a 501(c)(3) not-for-profit corporation supported by membership fees, charitable contributions and income from its endowment (built largely from bequests). Extensive information on the Library and its history can be found on www.nysoclib.org.

About George Washington's Mount Vernon Estate & Gardens

Since 1860, over 80 million visitors have made George Washington's Mount Vernon Estate & Gardens the most popular historic home in America. Through thought-provoking tours, entertaining events, and stimulating educational programs on the Estate and in classrooms across the nation, Mount Vernon strives to preserve George Washington's place in history as "First in War, First in Peace, and First in the Hearts of His Countrymen." The estate is located 16 miles from the nation's capital. It is owned and operated by the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association, America's oldest national preservation organization, founded in 1853. Admission fees, restaurant and retail proceeds, and private donations support the operation and restoration of Mount Vernon. For more information visit MountVernon.org.

About the Donald W. Reynolds Foundation

The Donald W. Reynolds Foundation is a national philanthropic organization founded in 1954 by the late media entrepreneur for whom it is named. Reynolds was the founder and principal owner of the Donrey Media Group. When he died in 1993, the company included over 70 businesses, the majority of which were in the communications/media field. Headquartered in Las Vegas, the Reynolds Foundation is one of the largest private foundations in the United States. For more information, please visit online at www.dwreynolds.org.



The New York Society Library: A Very Brief Introduction

Founded in 1754, the New York Society Library is the city's oldest cultural institution and one of fewer than twenty membership libraries in the country. In the eighteenth century, an organization labeled "Society" referred to a group of founders and members with similar interests, not to social position. Today, we are open to all for reading, reference, and many events, with circulation and other services by subscription.

Our general collection of approximately 300,000 volumes has particular strengths in biography, literature, and New York City history and culture—the product of our members' tastes over the last quarter-millennium. Although it is primarily a library for the general reader, it has considerable potential for research, including several named special collections of rare books. We also offer an active Children's Library, a wide range of print and electronic reference sources, and a variety of special events, discussion groups, and workshops for adults and children. The Library annually presents the New York City Book Awards to the best new books about New York City.

Our beautiful landmarked building, dating from 1917, includes handsome and comfortable reading rooms, spaces for study and writing, and ten stacks of books open to members. It also features the Assunta, Ignazio, Ada and Romano Peluso Exhibition Gallery, offering rotating exhibitions of rare books, antiquarian documents, and book-related art

The Library is a not-for-profit tax-exempt 501(c)(3) corporation supported primarily by membership fees, tax-deductible contributions from individuals and foundations, bequests, and income from its endowment.

Extensive information on the Library and its history can be found on our website, www.nysoclib.org.



The New York Society Library: The Historic First Charging Ledger

The first ledger is the record of the Library's circulation activity from 1789 to 1792, while the Library was in Federal Hall at Nassau and Wall Streets. We had over 450 subscribers at that time. The first ledger includes the borrowing records of John Jay, Aaron Burr, George Washington, DeWitt Clinton, James Roosevelt, Nicholas Fish, Alexander Hamilton, George Clinton, James Duane, Robert R. Livingston, Gouverneur Morris, Reverend William Linn and many other New Yorkers. The ledger contains over 350 pages of circulation activity. It is perhaps the most important historic item in the Library's archives.

Examining the ledger, we learn that Burr was a voracious reader, making his way through Gibbon, Swift, and Voltaire; and that Clinton was a serious reader, with not one novel on his list of Hobbes, Buffon, Tasso, Herodotus, and Polybius. About John Jay, William J. Dean remarked in his "Book Selections of the Founding Fathers" (*New York Law Journal*, February 8, 2007), "Chief Justice Jay must have had his own collection of law books, for few of the books borrowed by him from the New York Society Library are law-related. What stands out when examining the Library's charging ledger is both the breadth of his interests and his wide reading in literature, history, travel and science."

Thanks in part to the generous support of an anonymous donor and trustee emeritus Christopher Gray, the Library was able to contract with the Northeast Document Conservation Center to conserve and digitize the ledger from 2007 to 2009. The two volumes of the ledger are securely stored in the rare books collection and are brought out for special occasions.

The ledger's digital version is currently being incorporated into a website, which will be announced and made available to Library members, scholars and the public free of charge in the fall of 2010. The website will add profiles of notable members listed in the ledger, including biographies, birth and death dates, and portraits when available. Most important is the transcription of the titles borrowed by each member and, when possible, comparison with the Library's holdings of these items in the rare book collection. The Library is very excited to open the borrowing records of so many significant figures for the use of historians and students of history.

In addition to the first ledger, the Library's archives has more than seventy ledgers from the 19th and 20th centuries, possibly one of the most complete set of book circulation ledgers in the country. These ledgers are also of great interest and value to scholars. They show, for example, the books on whaling that Herman Melville took out (and didn't return for two years while he was writing *Moby Dick*). More broadly, they provide unique insights into the reading tastes of our early nation and many of its distinguished writers, who were among our members.

GEORGE WASHINGTON'S LIBRARY BOOKS

During the Revolution, the New York Society Library's books were looted by British soldiers occupying Manhattan; some were torn up to make wadding for rifles and others were sold for rum. After the war, a few books that had been stored at St. Paul's Chapel in lower Manhattan were recovered, and in 1784 others were found through advertisement.

In 1789, the Library reopened in its old quarters in the old City Hall. In 1789 and 1790, when New York was the nation's capital and Congress occupied the building -- then renamed Federal Hall - it served as the first Library of Congress; it was used by George Washington and John Jay.

On October 5, 1789, GW borrowed two titles from the Library, a subscription library. As far as current staff there can determine, George Washington borrowed:

1.) Emer de Vattel's *The law of nations, or, Principles of the laws of nature, applied to the conduct and affairs of nations and sovereigns*. We were also able to determine that our edition was translated from the French into English, quarto-sized, and printed between 1758 and 1789. Based on that information, we believe we had either the first English edition (London : Printed for J. Coote, 1759) or its reissue under a new title page (London : printed for J. Newbery, J. Richardson, S. Crowder, T. Caslon, T. Longman, [and 4 others in London], 1760).

2.) *The Parliamentary register : or, history of the proceedings and debates of the House of Commons [House of Lords]*; containing an account of the most interesting speeches and motions, accurate copies of the most remarkable letters and papers of the most material evidence, petitions, etc., laid before and offered to the House during the first [-sixth] session of the fourteenth Parliament of Great Britain.

London : Printed for J. Almon, 1775 [-1780?] [17]

v. ; 22 cm (8vo)

Why was George Washington interested in these two books?

In many ways, the period when Washington “checked out” the two books from the library was a rather slow period for the government overall. Congress had recessed on September 29, 1789, and would not meet again until the first Monday in January, 1790. Washington himself would be leaving New York in order to make a tour of New England on October 15, 1789. It appears to me that Washington might have been interested in the two books, because of background or insights they might give to the diplomatic problems faced by the new American government.

According to Douglas Southall Freeman, political appointments “became the most pressing as well as the most vexatious task Washington faced during the last days of the [Congressional] session and for some weeks after adjournment,” although he had determined the major appointments by the time of the adjournment on September 29th. This is easily seen in Washington’s diary for these days, when he is sending out commissions for “Judiciary Judges, Marshalls and Attorneys” [October 1st & 2nd]; and “Judges of the Supreme and District Courts; & to the Marshalls and Attorneys” [October 5th]. During this period, he also signed “Letters of Instruction to the Governor of the Western Territory,” concerning such matters as the possible need to call up the militia against the Indians [October 6th]; and met with the Supreme Court’s Chief Justice, John Jay, and Secretary of the Treasury, Alexander Hamilton, about diplomatic affairs concerning trade with Britain [October 7th]. Mr. Jay had been Secretary of Foreign Affairs under the Articles of Confederation government and would remain in charge of the State Department until the arrival of Washington’s new Secretary of State, Thomas Jefferson, on March 21, 1790.

This is Freeman’s take on the diplomatic situation: “...Another diplomatic question of more immediate bearing concerned the relations of Britain and the United States. Congress had shown a disposition to levy discriminating duties on British imports because no commercial treaty between the two countries existed. The future of America’s important trade with the West Indies was in doubt; slaves carried away by the British had never been restored or paid for; the western posts had not been evacuated;

Americans had resented the failure of Britain to send a Minister to the United States, though their country had been represented by John Adams for more than three years at the Court of St. James's. Before these bad conditions drifted to worse, Washington thought it desirable to sound out the London government and to ascertain whether relations could not be improved and a commercial treaty negotiated without discrimination, reprisal or trade war. John Jay and Alexander Hamilton were called separately into conference on this, with the result that Washington took the advice of the Secretary of the Treasury and decided to ask Gouverneur Morris, who was then in England, to ascertain the views of the ministry, to the end that "harmony and mutual satisfaction between the two countries" might be achieved."

Washington noted in his diary on October 14th that "Having resolved to write to Mr. Gouv. Morris, to request, as a private Agent that he wd. sound the intention of the British ministry with respect to their fulfilment of the Treaty [ending the American Revolution] and dispositions towards a Commercial Treaty with us the letters were prepared and lodged in the hands of Mr. Jay to forward." Those letters to Morris, dated October 13, 1789, can be found in *The Papers of George Washington, Presidential Series, Volume 4*, pp. 176-183.

Sources:

Freeman, Douglas Southall. *George Washington: A Biography, Volume 6: Patriot and President*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1954. pp. 232, 233, 238-239, 240.

Washington, George. *The Diaries of George Washington, Volume 5*. Edited by Donald Jackson and Dorothy Twohig. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1979. pp. 448-460."