"BOOKS ARE THE BEST OF THINGS, WELL USED": THE VALUE OF LANCASTER'S RARE BOOK COLLECTION

Thayer Memorial Library, January 15, 2012

It's a pleasure and an honor to be part of the revival of the exhibition "A General Diffusion of Knowledge." This 1985 display is now making a comeback in honor of the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the Thayer Memorial Library through the collaborative efforts of a number of people devoted to this institution and its history.

I clearly remember the bright winter day in 1985 when the Constance V. R. Dexter Rare Book Room was dedicated and the display first opened. The program featured representatives of library administration and town government. The audience included descendants of early donors to the library and local residents curious about the treasures of this place. The keynote speaker was Eleanor Louise Nicholes, former Special Collections Librarian at Wellesley College, my first boss, and the personal mentor who introduced me to the world of rare books and manuscripts.

I see from a copy of the invitation to the 1985 event that the title of Miss Nicholes's talk was "Why Rare Books in Lancaster?" I confess that I don't recall much of its substance, but I do remember that it held the audience.

When I was asked this fall to come up with a topic for my lecture today, it occurred to me that the question "Why rare books in Lancaster?" is one that should be revisited every twenty-five years or so. Good stewardship of local heritage requires awareness of the answers to it.

The passage of a quarter century has refined my perspective on what makes Lancaster's small but rich Rare Book Collection important. Since 1996, I've been fortunate to serve as Curator at the Concord Free Public Library, which has rich and wide-ranging special collections. Because Concord's Revolutionary and literary past are part of our nation's history, these collections also form part of our collective national heritage. Attending to Concord's collections and to the needs of

the many people who use them has significantly expanded my appreciation of the value of such materials, and also my awareness of their vulnerability.

So . . . why rare books in Lancaster? I'll begin by ruling out some easy responses to the question.

Let's quickly eliminate the concept of book collecting as a form of investment. In these economic times, when not even real estate is dependable, it's safe to say that book collecting is not the best way to protect assets. A book's monetary value represents only what someone is willing to pay for it, and that value—like so many other things—changes over time. Moreover, looking at books and manuscripts through this lens is inappropriate for libraries. Investment in a book translates into cash in hand only when that book is sold. But library special collections like Lancaster's rare book collection often consist largely or entirely of gifts made by donors who love their books and offer them in the expectation that they will remain permanently on the shelves. Repositories generate bad feeling and bad publicity when they start to sell off valuable books presented through donor generosity. Although dealers and auctioneers are in the business of moving inventory, libraries are not. They keep material for present and future readers.

Nevertheless, visitors often ask me in my role as curator in Concord how much a particular book or manuscript is worth. I approach the question as a teachable moment and encourage the inquirer to look hard at his or her assumptions. *Is* the worth of a book monetary, or is it something else? I believe that monetary value is largely irrelevant, except in terms of collection management (preservation, security, insurance, and other related considerations).

Side-by-side with and related to preoccupation with monetary value, fascination with iconic high-spot books—incunabula from the earliest period of printing, for example, or lavishly crafted modern fine press books—inspires in some book collectors and aficionados a sense of pride in personal knowledge, taste, and judgment. While it's certainly true that the books that occupy special collections the world over are culturally significant and often aesthetically beautiful, however, high-spot collecting says more about the collector than about what's collected. By and large, it does not tend toward the gathering of a coherent, meaningful

collection—either personal *or* institutional—and certainly not toward the creation of a unique collection. There are plenty of generic university, college, and private rare book collections that specialize in high spots. But in my experience truly distinctive collections are deliberately crafted wholes that reflect knowledge and perseverance. They are built on the strength of some kind of internal thematic connection, not on iconic status alone any more than on monetary value.

The whole of a collection is, in fact, more valuable than any one of its individual parts. The relationship between items—not all of which need be rare—is more significant than the value of any of them individually. Good collections make a kind of sense that has to do with the way their component parts dovetail with one another. So while it's impressive that the Thayer Memorial Library has copies of the Nuremberg Chronicle of 1493 and of Gardner's *Photographic Sketch Book of the War* (both of which you'll see upstairs), despite their intrinsic historical significance, the simple presence of great books does not, in and of itself, make a great collection. The cachet of collectible books does not answer the question, "Why rare books in Lancaster?." The Nuremberg Chronicle in the Thayer Memorial Library still requires some explanation.

If you spend any time at all looking at the display upstairs, you'll understand that Lancaster's rare books are not limited only to high points. You'll find the Nuremberg Chronicle, but you'll also find the sensational *United States Criminal Calendar* (published in 1832). Complete with engravings of murder in progress, this book can hardly be counted among the beacons of civilization. The collection boasts a seventeenth-century edition of Sir Walter Raleigh's *History of the World*, but it also features the sweet, simple, locally produced *A Geography of Worcester County; for Young Children*, which likewise does not qualify as one of the hundred greatest books of all times.

Concern for the preservation of endangered materials is also sometimes altruistically offered as a reason to maintain rare book collections. The word "rare" is synonymous with scarce. Many books that form part of rare book collections are indeed scarce, and sometimes—because of their age, condition, and history—at risk. You won't find copies of the Bible printed in 1772 by John Baskerville in every library in this country, nor of the 1755 Boston printing by

Daniel and Zechariah Fowle of Ellis Huske's *The Present State of North-America*. But other libraries besides the Thayer Memorial Library archive these books. The mere fact that they are rare does not impose a particular collecting responsibility on any individual library. Why not centralize all such materials at the Library of Congress or—as was once suggested in regard to Lancaster's collection—the American Antiquarian Society, or on Google Books? Or do they have some meaning that's lost when they're removed from the context in which they were brought together?

In connection with this point, let me also add that not all of Lancaster's Rare Book Collection *is* actually rare in the strict sense of the term—scarcity per se has not been a consistent collecting criterion in its evolution. Certainly there are rare—even unique—printed items in this building—the Nuremberg Chronicle, for example. But even the Chronicle in its Latin and German printings is represented in multiple American as well as European repositories. There are more surviving copies of it than many people realize. In fact, most volumes in Lancaster's Rare Book Collection are not as rare as the Chronicle, and some are not rare at all. You'll find numerous copies of the 1866-1868 edition of Benson Lossing's *Pictorial History of the Civil War*, for example, in libraries across the United States.

Ideally, the fact that a book is not technically rare should have little to do with its importance to an institution. It's appropriate for book dealers to be preoccupied with scarcity and likewise with high-profile status and monetary value, but attention to those characteristics doesn't insure the development of interesting and useful library collections. In order to make sense, the rare book collection of a small public library like Lancaster's must be relevant to the place that supports it. It should focus on items that reflect town history directly, on subject areas that were or are at some point of vital interest to town residents, or on the associations of particular books with local interests and individuals. In light of the profile I'm suggesting, I prefer the term "special collections" to "rare books" for a collection like the one here.

Now that we've put to rest what Lancaster's Rare Book Collection is *not*, let's look at what it *is*. At this point I want to look back to the founding of this library in

1862—during the Civil War— and to the construction of its building and the early growth of its collection.

Lancaster can't claim to be among the first Massachusetts towns to establish a public library after the 1851 passage of state legislation authorizing towns to raise tax funds for the support of public libraries. The Lancaster Social Library—a private, proprietary entity that had supplied the town's reading needs since 1790—was dissolved in 1850. The separation that same year of Clinton from the original mother town Lancaster raised the question of how to divide the collection for members subsequently living in two towns. The collection of the defunct library was sold at auction, much of it to former Social Library members. The Library Club of Lancaster—another proprietary association—was formed in 1851, effectively putting off the establishment of a public library until a later time.

In 1861, members of the Library Club of Lancaster rejected the idea of giving their collection to the town for addition to a public library. The "distracted condition of the public" on the verge of civil war and the likelihood that a tax increase would be required to support a public library were offered as reasons. But not long after, in 1862, the people of the town made the commitment to establish and maintain a free public library. Prompted by the proposal of the Agricultural Library Association that both the Library Club and Agricultural Library collections be given to the town to form the nucleus of a public library, the proprietors of the Library Club voted in the affirmative. In so doing, they set a pattern that has since operated to the benefit of this library and particularly of its rare book collection: private donation for public benefit.

The books given to the Lancaster Town Library by the Library Club of Lancaster and the Agricultural Library Association were not originally acquired because they were rare or precious. They formed part of reading and working collections which only over time have become valuable from a historical viewpoint. When first added to the Lancaster Town Library, they circulated. They thus demonstrate what I meant when I cautioned against holding up "rarity" as a reason to collect. Engagement with content resulted in the initial acquisition and ultimate preservation of these books. The current rarity of any of them is incidental. If you do an Internet search, you'll find that nineteenth-century printings of books by Jane

Loudon, for example, sell for hefty prices these days. But when the 1857 American edition of her *Gardening for Ladies* came into the Lancaster Town Library from the Agricultural Library collection, I suspect it was valued as a useful work by a popular and more or less contemporary author.

I'd like to read you the statement issued by the proprietors of the Library Club of Lancaster when they determined in 1862 that it was time to turn their collection over to the town: "The proprietors of the Lancaster Library believing that a public library in the town, to which all can have access, would greatly aid the cause of education and good morals, by affording to the young, innocent and profitable reading, and to all the means of knowledge and mental improvement, desire to aid in the establishment of such an institution." The polite nineteenth-century language in which the statement is couched makes it sound deceptively bland, but it was, in fact, progressive, and reflective of an emphasis on self-education that permeated American culture at the time. And that progressive aim was itself an extension of the focus on a "general diffusion of knowledge" that had informed the establishment in 1790 of the Lancaster Social Library.

Nowadays we flatter ourselves with the thought that the democratization of knowledge is an Internet phenomenon. It is, in fact, an impulse that has played out over centuries and been expressed in multiple interconnected ways.

It was apparent in the organized transmission of texts by manuscript copyists in medieval times and the Renaissance; in the introduction of printing from movable type in Europe in the fifteenth century and its subsequent spread; in the idealistic concern during the Enlightenment with the dissemination of knowledge as a means of promoting the social as well as the intellectual good; in the technological advances that made print culture affordable and accessible to middle-class readers in the nineteenth century; and in the public library movement, too. Today, the impulse is expressed not only in the digital resources available in libraries everywhere, but also locally in Lancaster's very public maintenance of the unique cultural heritage documented in its Lancaster Collection and Rare Book Collection. These rich public resources are within reach of *everyone* with an interest in the town, resident and non-resident, generalist and scholar.

Let's get back to Lancaster in 1862. If the public was preoccupied in 1861, when the proprietors of the Library Club of Lancaster decided against donating their collection to the town, it had to be even more so on April 2, 1862, when a committee appointed at the annual Town Meeting in March recommended the establishment of a public library. In the interim, the Southern states had seceded and the Confederacy had been formed; Lincoln had been inaugurated; Fort Sumter had been attacked; the South was blockaded; and battles had been fought—the First Battle of Bull Run and the Battle of the *Monitor* and *Merrimac*. It was a divisive time, a time of struggle and loss for North and South alike, which was likely a contributing factor in the decision to establish a public library. Libraries support community in difficult times.

Lancaster's new library was on some level an attempt to look optimistically beyond the reality of a hard present into a better future for the town. With the dedication in 1868 of a new library building and Civil War memorial combined—largely through the generosity of capitalist, railroad promoter, and financier Nathaniel Thayer—the Lancaster Town Library conspicuously reminded the town of its past even as it helped local citizens move into the future. In its first decades, by melding earlier local collections with new acquisitions (including valuable gifts that later became part of the Rare Book Collection), the library continued to provide stability and community memory while adapting to growth and change. One of the major values of the Rare Book Collection specifically, then, has been and remains its role in affirming community life, past, present, and future.

As I've hinted already, the Rare Book Collection as developed over time is internally coherent. It's composed of patterns and themes. There's nothing random about it. The exhibition upstairs was designed to highlight the collection's six existing strengths and to explore they ways in which they reflect and feed into the exploration of local history. What, specifically, are the diverse threads that make up this collection as a whole?

(A) One important category of books consists of volumes illustrating the history of libraries and of book collecting in Lancaster. The remnants of earlier libraries include volumes from the Lancaster Social Library collection; the Library of the Lancaster Sabbath School Association; the school district libraries; and the

Lancaster Agricultural Library. The many individual collectors who donated books from their personal collections in the early history of the Town Library include Nathaniel Thayer, Alexander C. Washburn, George M. Bartol, Sally Flagg, Henry Stedman Nourse, and John Leland Sherman Thompson, all of whom are represented in "A General Diffusion of Knowledge."

If you want to know more about specific predecessor libraries and donors, you'll find a good deal of information in the exhibition catalog. I'd simply like to make a few general points about what these books tell us. In a sense, they represent (to borrow a phrase from Nathaniel Hawthorne) "twice-told tales." First of all, they say something about intellectual history and about the history of the book in the periods during which they were produced. But from a local perspective it's more significant that the provenance—the history of ownership—of these books speaks to the learning, taste, and sophistication of the people who lived and worked in this community, who held town offices, ran local businesses, attended worship services, enjoyed social events, and looked out for their families and neighbors. We know for sure that the information in these books was accessible to the people who lived in this place specifically. Therefore, a rare book collection like Lancaster's feeds into the current trend toward microhistory.

Those of you who are interested in social history will likely be aware of the fact that the nineteenth century was, as I've mentioned, a time when self-culture was pursued with a passion. But how much more immediate and relevant that generality becomes when we learn that our predecessors here had access to the specific—and rather esoteric—information contained in a title that came into the Town Library from the collection of School District No. 5? I'm referring to *The Winter Evening Book*, published in Boston in 1842. Because this volume remains in the library today, we know first-hand that people who lived here a century and a half ago could read for themselves about ancient British costume, the use of cross-country skis by Laplanders, and the Liverpool and Manchester Railroad. Similarly, it says a lot about lasting local respect for the values of the early Republic that Joel Barlow's *Vision of Columbus* —formerly a part of the Lancaster Social Library collection —came into the Town Library early as a gift and was kept on the shelves well after its currency had lapsed. The decision to keep resources like these suggests that nineteenth-century Lancaster was not an isolated

or inward-looking place, small and agricultural though it may have been. Print culture provided instruction and amusement here, but—perhaps more importantly—it also afforded a sense of broader identity and an understanding of the world—both civilized and natural—beyond the town.

Likewise, it speaks volumes (no pun intended) about local culture that private collectors held the early Town Library in sufficiently high regard to donate books about which they cared. Nathaniel Thayer acknowledged the founding purposes of the library by purchasing Gardner's *Photographic Sketch Book of the War* specifically for it, but he also paid a compliment to the knowledge, taste, and sense of humor of Lancaster residents by giving from his personal collection the satirical Doctor Syntax volumes written by William Combe and illustrated by Thomas Rowlandson. Alexander C. Washburn gave the library volumes produced by cutting-edge European printers and publishers of the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries (including his copy of the Nuremberg Chronicle, the library's only incunabulum—that is, book printed in the fifteenth century, the "cradle of printing" period). Local historian Henry Stedman Nourse not only compiled and donated rich collections of very local material (forming the nucleus of what is now the Lancaster Collection), but also presented other historically significant American books from his working collection, among them an 1807 Boston edition of Noah Webster's *The American Spelling Book*.

Such donations reflect the intellectual lives of members of this community. For a while "You are what you eat" was a popular aphorism, but "You are what you read" is, in my opinion, just as true. Books from personal libraries reveal information about their owners. If annotated, they may reflect the influence of particular texts on particular readers in very specific ways.

(B) New England imprints up to the mid-nineteenth century, and particularly Massachusetts imprints, form a second category of books in Lancaster's Rare Book Collection. Specimens of New England printing in the collection reflect an embrace both regional and local, representing New England printers and titles from three centuries and including products of small-town as well as urban places. The collection features books printed in Leominster and Lancaster as well as Boston, Worcester, and Springfield.

This particular subject strength, of course, is a by-product of location. Naturally, regional and local printers and publishers supplied the predecessors of and donors to Lancaster's library with books, and some of these came into the library. There was no initial plan to establish this as a subject strength, and no real need to do so comprehensively, since several larger institutions—notably the American Antiquarian Society in nearby Worcester —were in the mid-nineteenth century already building collections supporting research in the history of the book in American culture. Nevertheless, Lancaster's collection as it has evolved over time complements American printing collections elsewhere.

Since the bibliographer's job requires examination of as many copies as possible of a single printed item, researchers who consult the AAS copies of Isaiah Thomas's 1795 first Worcester edition of Charlotte Turner Smith's *Elegiac Sonnets*, for example, may well also want to see Lancaster's copy for comparative purposes in identifying variants. Moreover, researchers exploring the work of Carter and Andrews of Lancaster really must come to this library, regardless of how many other libraries hold work by that firm, because other resources here—materials in the Lancaster Collection—enrich understanding of the story of local printing, publishing, and print culture. New England imprints in Lancaster's Rare Book Collection in turn provide context for understanding the story of local printing and publishing and enhance our appreciation of one important aspect of local manufacture and culture.

(C) A third strength of the Rare Book Collection consists of volumes produced by European printers and publishers of note in the history of the book. This small but impressive group of books is, like the gathering of Massachusetts imprints in the collection, incidental. It was created by the individual interests of early donors rather than by deliberate institutional policy. As with American imprints in the collection, books from the presses of Aldus Manutius, Henri Estienne, John Baskerville, Christopher Plantin, the Elzeviers, Thomas Bensley, and others do not physically form a distinct cluster on the shelves, but are scattered on the basis of subject classification. Because a number of libraries around the world actively collect books like this, this area of Lancaster's collection is best approached—as I suggested earlier—for what it tells us about the broad cultural awareness of earlier

Lancaster residents and philanthropists, and the message they conveyed in entrusting historical landmarks of the European book trades to the new Town Library.

(D) Another category of books that relates directly to the history of the formation of the Lancaster Town Library in 1862 encompasses books in botany, horticulture, gardening, and natural history.

During the Victorian period, natural history and botany in particular inspired huge enthusiasm among the middle classes on both sides of the Atlantic. Amateur naturalists proliferated, collected specimens, and compiled herbaria. Clubs, agricultural libraries, botanical gardens, and museums were formed, and related publications abounded. People ventured into the woods to locate and identify species in the wild and also cultivated personal gardens. In nearby Concord, naturalist and author Henry David Thoreau devoted his life to observing nature in his home town and to describing it in his journal.

Nathaniel Thayer of Lancaster gave money for the construction of a herbarium at Harvard and funded the 1865 expedition to Brazil of Swiss-born scientific naturalist Louis Agassiz, who taught at Harvard. Prior to the establishment of a public library here, Lancaster residents had access to the Lancaster Agricultural Library, which included volumes on agriculture, botany, gardening, landscaping, rural architecture, animal husbandry, and fishing. As I've mentioned, in 1862 the Agricultural Library was folded into the collection of the new Town Library, so these books became available to readers on a public basis. (Interestingly, only a handful of books from the Agricultural Library collection survived circulation to become part of the Rare Book Collection in the twentieth century.) As the library grew, trustees with a special interest in natural history made sure that titles in this subject area were purchased for the general collection, and some of these later made their way into the Rare Book Collection. Additionally, a Natural History Museum was kept with the library's book collections from 1862 well into the twentieth century.

Clearly, the development of botany, horticulture, gardening, and natural history as collection strengths in this library was an expression of a broad phenomenon that

had trickled down to the local level and took on a life of its own here. When you look at the 1800 fourth edition of Thomas Bewick's *A General History of Quadrupeds* upstairs in the display or at the eight-volume 1839 edition of Audubon's *Birds of America* (both purchases for the library), you're seeing items that were added to the library because there was an eager local public for them. Such books in turn further shaped local understanding of the natural world. They consequently reflect Lancaster's specific social history as well as the general culture in which they were produced.

(E) Religion and theology constitute a fifth subject strength of Lancaster's Rare Book Collection. The regional and local importance of religion is a bigger subject than I can broach today in anything but the most superficial way. Suffice it to say that religion was a major force in all aspects of New England life, in Lancaster as elsewhere. It would be unusual if the Lancaster Library's early holdings did not include a strong representation of religious books, at least of the Puritan and Congregational variety.

It's interesting that during the 1880s, the Library Committee took pains to acknowledge in its annual reports that religion could be a contentious subject and to emphasize that town money would not be spent on controversial books in the area, although gifts were welcome, especially insofar as they promoted the fair representation of various denominations.

In the end, although the Trustees chose not to disturb the even tenor of community life and declined to represent religious dispute through purchase, the Town Library collection (and later the Rare Book Collection) did, in fact, accommodate a number of controversial religious and theological works acquired through gift. While wary of public engagement in the religious quarrels of their own time, the Trustees at the same time maintained historical perspective—the long view—in documenting the debates and tensions of other eras. The result in the Rare Book Collection is a deep vein of books documenting religious unorthodoxy and dissension over time.

When you go up into the museum, you'll find a copy of the Geneva Bible given by John Eliot Thayer, named for the fact that it was produced in Geneva, where English Protestant exiles fleeing persecution during the reign of Queen Mary had

settled. It eventually became the home Bible of the English people, the preferred Bible of the Puritans, and an influence on this side of the Atlantic when the Puritans migrated to the New World in search of religious freedom. But it was first published as a by-product of a hostile religious climate.

You'll also see *History of Redemption* by Jonathan Edwards, the controversial American evangelical minister and theologian who fueled the First Great Awakening in the eighteenth century, and a Worcester edition of Thomas Paine's *The Age of Reason*, in which the author presented arguments against established Christianity and the Bible and which many at the time of its publication considered profane.

The presence of these books in Lancaster's Rare Book Collection highlights the survival of a respect for the "general diffusion of knowledge" that motivated the establishment of the Lancaster Social Library in 1790. Promoting a well-grounded historical understanding of religion arguably advances the dissemination of information for personal enrichment *and* community well-being that formed the stated ideal of the founders of the Lancaster Social Library.

(F) Finally, we come to volumes in history—the sixth and final major category of books that compose the Rare Book Collection. This subject area includes titles geared toward specialists and general readers both; books in European and American history (with a particularly strong representation of the latter, as you might expect); volumes covering history from ancient to contemporary times; and primary texts as well as secondary.

I've already referred to some of the historical volumes in the exhibition: the Nuremberg Chronicle; Gardner's *Photographic Sketch Book of the War*; Sir Walter Raleigh's *History of the World*; Benson Lossing's *Pictorial History of the Civil War*. Other titles on display upstairs include: Samuel Griswold Goodrich's *Peter Parley's Common School History*; Constantin-François Volney's *New Researches on Ancient History*; and a 1760 edition of William Douglass's *A Summary, Historical and Political, of the First Planting, Progressive Improvements, and Present State of the British Settlements in North-America*. Such works are

complemented by the strong showing of local history available in the Lancaster Collection.

The active development of history in Lancaster's public library collection in the mid- to late nineteenth century was an extension of an earlier practice in proprietary libraries of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Unlike frivolous fiction, history was a serious and improving subject that descendants of New England Puritans could read without guilt. It was heavily represented in social library collections in general—in Concord's, for example, as well as Lancaster's—and later migrated into public libraries from such collections. Public libraries in communities with a particular pride in and respect for history—Lancaster and Concord among them—maintained and over time steadily built upon their early social library holdings in history. I'm told that history and biography remain strengths of the Thayer Memorial Library today, in the circulating collection as well as the Rare Book and Lancaster Collections. Obviously, the community as a whole still values history—global and national as well as local—and appreciates links across geographical and political boundaries and between past and present.

That's Lancaster's Rare Book Collection in a nutshell.

To underscore my major point today: Yes, Lancaster's Rare Book Collection covers wide-ranging subjects and reflects the history and the world view and political and social events of multiple and far-flung times and places. But cumulatively, it's all about Lancaster. It presents a unique profile of community interests and mindset. It is, therefore, an important part of local heritage to be treasured and preserved and enjoyed and used in various ways by residents of the town and also by researchers from beyond Lancaster.

This last point—the one about use—is worth considering. I firmly believe that the best way to protect special collections materials is by making them accessible and visible and by encouraging people to understand what their potential uses are. I think that we only really value things for which we can identify some use, even if that use is simply to satisfy the aesthetic sensibilities or to provide amusement.

Since the 1960s, when the Rare Book Collection was formally established, the administration, staff, consultants, and volunteers of the Thayer Memorial Library have done much to preserve it and to make it accessible. The opening of the original Rare Book Room in 1971 and the fitting out of new facilities in the 1990s were important. The 1985 exhibition "A General Diffusion of Knowledge" helped raise awareness of what the collection holds. Reinforcing that awareness is the aim of all of us who have been involved in the exhibit's reappearance. The online cataloging of the collection in the 1980s and 1990s was a major step in the direction of access and use. I think it's appropriate on this one hundred and fiftieth library anniversary to ask how best to promote the collection in the future.

In this digital age, the plan of action for publicizing Lancaster's Rare Book Collection must, of course, include online exhibitions and other Web offerings. I think it's truly wonderful that an online version of "A General Diffusion of Knowledge" is under consideration.

But I also believe that promoting Lancaster's Rare Book Collection as a hands-on research resource is key to maintaining its vitality and ensuring good stewardship in the long run. When a local "commodity" is valued by outsiders—when the wider world sees it as useful in some way and actively seeks it out—local appreciation for it as an asset is also enhanced.

In the eyes of institutional administrators and funding agencies, demonstrable demand is a compelling justification for the expense associated with collection maintenance and management, and it therefore favors the active protection of resources. Books are only as valuable as they are valued, and demand is the expression of value. In his Phi Beta Kappa Address (also known as "The American Scholar"), Ralph Waldo Emerson declared "Books are the best of things, well used." Use is the key concept here. Preservation under climate-controlled security doesn't mean much if the material preserved is of no use to anyone.

Going forward, it will be the challenge of the library administration and staff to publicize the collection, to apply available resources to making potential users realize the ways in which it meshes with their interests and concerns, and to maintain an atmosphere that encourages and supports research.

Finally, continued growth will also be important to keeping Lancaster's Rare Book Collection relevant and vital in a changing world. Those connected with this place will want to look through library holdings periodically to see if there is some unweeded area of the collection that looks ripe to become documentary evidence of Lancaster's social history and life of the mind even as they unfold.

Before I hold my peace, I'd like to thank the Library Trustees and Director Joe Mulé for the opportunity to collaborate with them and with exhibit preparator Frank Graham and a corps of dedicated volunteers in recreating "A General Diffusion of Knowledge." Allow me to speak for us all in wishing the Thayer Memorial Library and everyone associated with it a joyous one hundred and fiftieth anniversary, and many happy returns.