

2015

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By David F. Morrill

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Recreating the personal library of eighteenth-century statesman, lawyer, and jurist George Wythe--the Law School's, and the nation's, first law professor--is not an easy task. According to Linda Tesar, Head of Technical Services and Special Collections in the Wolf Law Library, Wythe left no personal papers or documents recording his book collection.

"To recreate it, researchers have combed through his correspondence, they've looked at the law notes of his students, and they even looked at his case reports," Tesar said. "He cited *everything* in his case reports."

Tesar and colleague Stephen Blaiklock were on hand Friday, Nov. 13, to share the Law School's findings with alumni and staff, and to help dedicate the Law School's newest centerpiece--the George Wythe Room.

"It's wonderful for us today to remember George Wythe and his importance to our nation, to our state, and also to this law school as our first law teacher," said Davison M. Douglas, Dean and Arthur B. Hanson Professor of Law, who hosted the event. "We have assembled a tremendous resource, reflecting a man of broad interest, including the law, political theory, and literature."

Jim Heller, Director of the Wolf Law Library, said the Wythe Room grew out of a similar project replicating Thomas Jefferson's books.

"We decided to collect books that Wythe had in his personal libraries in Williamsburg and Richmond," Heller said. "These were the books that he used to teach, mentor, and lend to the likes of Jefferson, John Marshall, and Henry Clay, and many other famous and important people."

Charged with directing the project, Linda Tesar said that building the collection was "something like a treasure hunt," involving a number of experts and resources.



“It’s much like sniffing out clues and solving crimes,” Tesar said. “We examine evidence, we evaluate the veracity of witnesses, and we rely upon primary documents.”

The collection represents about three-fifths of Wythe’s entire library. Subjects include history, geography, mathematics, science, English literature, Greek and Latin classics, and, of course, law.

“We have Homer, Shakespeare, and Don Quixote; we have Blackstone, Coke, and St. George Tucker,” Tesar said. “We have books ranging from as large as 18 inches tall to as small as three inches tall, and from 260 to 460 years old.”

Guests were given tours of the room, which not only contains original tomes behind special ultraviolet glass, but also paintings of Wythe, Jefferson, and Marshall. The room also includes a touch screen that contains digital information about the collection, including the Law School’s celebrated Wythepedia (http://lawlibrary.wm.edu/wythepedia/index.php/Main_Page).

“With passion, common sense, a lot of research, and some money, we have created a magnificent collection and built a room that honors our first law professor,” Jim Heller said.

About William & Mary Law School

Thomas Jefferson founded William & Mary Law School in 1779 to train leaders for the new nation. Now in its third century, America's oldest law school continues its historic mission of educating citizen lawyers who are prepared both to lead and to serve.