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A Look at Our Rare Book Room

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A Look at Our Rare Book Room

Paul Hellyer, Reference Librarian

If you're a student at the William & Mary Law School, you've probably walked by our library's Rare Book Room too many times to count. Ever wondered what's in there? If so, read on.

You might think this is where we keep our rare books, but that's actually incorrect, for the most part. The Rare Book Room is intended for display, not storage, and the dozen or so books you see there are only a small, rotating selection from our rare book collection. We have several hundred rare books, nearly all of which are kept in a climate-controlled, secure room. Exposure to light gradually damages our rare books, so it's better for them to spend most of their time in the dark.



Also, our Rare Book Room is not just about books. One of our most treasured items in this room is an original portrait of John Marshall, who studied law at William & Mary in 1780 and became one of the most influential Chief Justices of the United States. Painted by John Wesley Jarvis (1780-1840), this portrait dates from around 1825, when Marshall was in his 70s. It was one of six nearly identical portraits Marshall commissioned as gifts for his sons; the version we have is believed to be the original painting, from which the rest were copied.

Five other portraits line the north side of the rare book room. Starting on the left-hand side, we have a 20th-century portrait of George Wythe, who was the first law professor at William & Mary—and the first law professor in the country. Next are three 19th-century portraits of the Randolph family, a prominent Virginia family with ties to William & Mary. Edmund Randolph, whose portrait is next to George Wythe's, studied at William & Mary in the 1770s and went on to become the first U.S. Attorney General. On the right-hand side, we have a 20th-century portrait of William H. Cabell, who was the first person to obtain a bachelor's degree in law at William & Mary and who became governor of Virginia and a justice on the Virginia Supreme Court.

Perhaps the most visible item on display—and certainly the most curious—is the law school's mace, which is a brass replica of a 17th-century mace used in the British House of Commons. It was presented to the Commonwealth of Virginia on the 750th anniversary of Magna Carta in 1965, and was displayed at Jamestown Festival Park before being transferred to the law school in the 1970s. It is now carried each year in the law school's graduation ceremony by the president of the Student Bar Association. Although the mace itself is not a part of the law school's early history, we use it today as a symbol of our ties to English law and William & Mary's colonial heritage.

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