

Libraries' Surprising Special Collections

Tucked away in libraries across the country are unexpected archives and world-class treasures

- By Kristin Ohlson
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I walk through an arched marble doorway and into one of the loveliest rooms I've seen anywhere. Designed to look like a Renaissance Library, the John Griswold White Reading Room offers sweeping views of Lake Erie and downtown Cleveland, as well as a dazzling abundance of venerable books and objects. A lawyer and scholar who died in 1928, White was one of the library's greatest benefactors and his prodigious collections fill this room.

White was a progressive thinker who insisted that these collections be available to the public. I've come to look at his chess collection—donated upon his death and still growing through his endowment. It's possibly the world's largest collection—tied only with the Hague—with well over 30,000 books about chess and checkers, newspaper columns, letters from chess masters, treatises on the game—including twelfth-century Arabic manuscripts and more than 50 Indian treatises—tournament records, handbooks, a wide range of literary works that have substantial mention of chess, thousands of chess pieces, and more. Much more, including the death mask of American chess queen Gisela Khan Gresser and a grumpy, hand-scrawled note from American-born Bobby Fischer, the 11th World Chess Champion.

Researchers from around the world use these materials to document and analyze the history of the game, but I—a Clevelander for more than 30 years—have never visited this room until now. I've since discovered that many other libraries around the country hold odd and unique collections, of which patrons wandering the circulating stacks are largely unaware.

Here are seven more surprising collections, lurking in public or university libraries around the country.

- Among its many collections, the [Boston Public Library](#) has what it believes is the largest collection of fore-edge painted books in any public library. These books feature a painting along the fore-edge (opposite the spine) of the book that can only be seen when the pages are subtly fanned—when the book is closed, gold leaf on the outside edge of the pages hides the image. The technique originated with Samuel Mearne, royal bookbinder to Charles II from 1660-1683, and the artists usually embellished already printed books of literature with scenes that corresponded to the content. The Boston collection includes books from the late 1700's to the mid-1800s. They were donated in 1941 by banker Albert Wiggins.
- The [University of Utah's J. Willard Marriott Library in Salt Lake City](#) has America's largest collection of Arabic papyrus, parchment and paper documents, with 770 on papyrus and more than 1,300 on paper. A large part of the collection—acquired and then donated by Professor Asiz

Suriyal Atiya, founder of the school's Middle East Library and Middle East Center—dates from the pre-Ottoman period and offers an unparalleled look at the cultural, political, literary and religious life of the Arab world during the first few centuries of Islam. Especially interesting: a rare example of early Islamic legal work, giving scholars a glimpse of the academic culture in which the first Muslim jurists worked, and tax receipts from Islamic Egypt in the 11th and 12th centuries that offer insight into the relatively favorable legal status of women at that time.

- At the [University of Delaware in Newark](#), a special space is allotted to the villains of print: forgers, hoaxers and other literary frauds. Donor Frank W. Tober bequeathed a vast collection of books, manuscripts and other materials to the library, which received them in 1995; however, the heart of his personal library was his collection on literary forgery. It includes material regarding nearly every major forgery from antiquity to such recent cases as Clifford Irving, who tried to scam the literary world with a faux autobiography of Howard Hughes in 1972. The Tober Collection has extensive materials on famous forgers such as Thomas Chatterton, an 18th century teenager who wrote poems that he claimed were lost works of a 15th century monk, AND 19th-century forgers Thomas J. Wise and H. Buxton Forman, who used their knowledge of the printing process to forge and offer for sale 50 pieces of British poetry and literature. THERE ARE ALSO secondary historical, critical, and reference material on forgery from all periods, as well as material on imaginary voyages, counterfeiting, forensics, and the technology of forgery detection.

- The [University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee](#) has the nation's largest collection of [nurse romance novels](#), more than 400 volumes in which nurses are the central character. The collection was donated in 2005 by artist, photographer, and former UWM art professor Leslie Bellavance, who started collecting them as part of her own research on popular-culture presentations of nurses. The novels were written for both young and adult readers from the 1950s to the 1970s, often reflecting stereotypes about nurses and women in general. The Nurse Romance collection augments the library's American Nursing History Collection.

- The [New York Public Library](#) maintains the world's largest collection of tobacciana, materials related in some way to tobacco's history, use, and mystique. Donor George Arents came from a Virginia family that was one of the founders of the American Tobacco Company, and he himself patented and manufactured cigarette- and cigar-rolling machines. Presented to the library in 1944, the Arents Collection now includes 12,000 books; sheet music, drawings and prints with a tobacco theme; posters, labels and stickers; letters from such luminaries as George Washington and Thomas Jefferson; a wooden cigar-store Indian, and an early cigarette vending machine. The books range from literary works like Thomas Nash's *Pierce Penilesss* (1592) to early medical books advocating tobacco as a cure for various diseases and ailments. Among the collection's 125,000 cigarette cards is the 1910 Honus Wagner card, which was distributed with Sweet Caporal cigarettes until Wagner pulled it from circulation because he didn't want children to buy tobacco to get his cards.

- The [Saint Paul Public Library](#) holds the nation's largest World War I print aviation collection, donated by Korean War Army Air Corp bombsight and autopilot mechanic Don Severson, now a retired physician. Severson has donated nearly 500 volumes, including one signed by Eddie Rickenbacker, the top-scoring American ace of the first World War; signed copies of early

aviation biographies; and rare publications from the US and abroad on early aviation and wartime. Most material of this nature is not available outside of private and military libraries.

- Finally, Florida Atlantic University has a collection you can listen to: the [Judaica Sound Archive](#) was launched in 2002 by library volunteer Nathan Tinanoff, who feared the library's small sample of recordings might be dispersed and lost. Since he founded and became director of the archive, the collection has burgeoned to 60,000 recordings from the early 20th century to the present, thanks to the donations of individuals and organizations around the world. The archive includes all types of Judaic music—Sephardic, Yiddish, liturgical theater and more—and music by Jewish performers, composers and conductors, as well as a strong collection of cantorial music. 7,000 songs are accessible through the archive's website, including 153 cantorial albums.

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