unquestionably the choicest collection of books in the US”¹

The 1815 Sale of Thomas Jefferson’s Library to the Nation

Summary Timeline

August 24, 1814 – British destroy the United States Capitol and congressional library
August 28, 1814 – Thomas Jefferson receives news of the destruction
September 21, 1814 – Jefferson writes to Samuel Harrison Smith to offer to sell his library to Congress
February 3, 1815 – Jefferson receives official notice of the approval of the sale
March 18 to April 18, 1815 – Jefferson reviews and organizes library
May 2 to 8, 1815 – Ten wagonloads of books leave Monticello for Washington, D.C.
May 8-14, 1815 – Books arrive in Washington, D.C. and are placed on the third floor of Blodget’s Hotel which served as the temporary Capitol for Congress
July 3 – 24, 1815 – Joseph Milligan unpacks book boxes and sets them up in the order stipulated by Jefferson in his manuscript catalogue
End January 1816 – Jefferson receives the print catalogue of the library from Librarian of Congress, George Watterston

To Learn More


Exhibition Credits
Curated by: Endrina Tay, Associate Foundation Librarian for Technical Services, Jefferson Library
Designed by: Connie Schnitger, Jefferson Library volunteer
Book boxes constructed by: Larry McMahan, Jefferson Library volunteer
Special thanks to Jack Robertson, Foundation Librarian, Jefferson Library, for his support.

Commemorative Exhibition
Celebrating the Bicentennial of the 1815 Sale of Jefferson’s Library to Congress
Jefferson Library, Thomas Jefferson’s Monticello
May 1 – October 31, 2015
EXHIBIT CASE 1
"my greatest of all amusements, reading"

EXHIBIT CASE 2
"I shall not retain a single one"
4.  Enlarged Facsimile of Selected Manuscript Pages from Jefferson’s 1783 Catalog at the Massachusetts Historical Society (Actual Size, 4\(\frac{1}{2}\) inches by 7\(\frac{3}{4}\) inches)
p. 50, p. 135 (on American History and Politics) p. 74 & 75 (on Technical Arts) p. 176 & 177 (on Architecture) p. 198 & 199 (on Epic Poetry)

EXHIBIT CASE 3
"I cannot live without books"
5. Enlarged Facsimile of Selected Manuscript Pages from Jefferson’s 1783 Catalog at the Massachusetts Historical Society (Actual Size, 4\(\frac{1}{2}\) inches by 7\(\frac{3}{4}\) inches)
p. 50, p. 135 (on American History and Politics) p. 74 & 75 (on Technical Arts) p. 176 & 177 (on Architecture) p. 198 & 199 (on Epic Poetry)
7. Facsimile of U. S. Capitol After Burning by British by George Mungen, 1814. Source: Library of Congress Prints & Photographs Division

EXHIBIT CASE 4
"you will receive my library arranged very perfectly in the order observed in the catalogue"
11. Enlarged Facsimile of Notes on Thomas Jefferson’s Library at the Time of Sale from the Library of Congress (Actual Size, 9\(\frac{1}{4}\) inches by 7\(\frac{1}{2}\) inches)