

# THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

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**Figure 1.** The Main Reading Room of the Library of Congress, accompanied by a Lenovo ThinkPad.

## 1 Introduction & Background

Founded in the year 1800, the *Library of Congress* in Washington D.C. is the first of few federal culture institutions in the United States.<sup>1</sup> As a research library, it aims to provide and maintain a source of knowledge for Congress and the American people in the pursuit of informing the public.<sup>[1]</sup> The library maintains three buildings on Capitol Hill, connected by a network of underground tunnels, along with an audiovisual conservation center in Culpeper, Virginia; the library boasts a collection of 173 million items and more than 3,000 employees.<sup>[2]</sup> The importance of the library has increased along with the age of the United States — demonstrating the importance of historical documents, providing evidence of activities and telling stories throughout the history of humanity.

### 1.1 History

James Madison originally proposed the idea of creating a congressional library in 1783, though initially being rejected. The years after the Revolutionary War sought a need for a library, and so when Congress moved to Washington D.C., President John Adams signed an act of Congress, in which, part of the legislation appropriated funds “for the purchase of such books as may be necessary for the use of Congress ... and for fitting up a suitable apartment for containing them.” (i.e., the Library of Congress).<sup>[3]</sup> Initially, books were ordered from London and

the newly founded *Library of Congress* consisted of 740 books and three maps, which were housed in the Capitol. Later, in 1802, then President Thomas Jefferson signed a bill to appoint the Librarian of Congress and established a Joint Committee on the library to regulate and oversee the *Library of Congress*.<sup>[4]</sup> This moment is generally regarded as the birth as an *institution* for the Library of Congress.

#### 1.1.1 Fire!

In 1814, amidst the War of 1812, Washington D.C. was seized by British forces. As an act of revenge for the destruction caused by American troops in Canada, the British commander instructed his men to set ablaze government buildings across the city. The *Library of Congress* was among the structures devastated by the fire. In the aftermath, Jefferson proposed to sell his library as a replacement. Congress agreed to his proposal in early 1815, acquiring 6,487 books, twice the size of the original library.<sup>[5]</sup> However, in an unfortunate turn of events, on Christmas Eve of 1851, a fire broke out in the library due to a defective chimney flue, resulting in the loss of two-thirds of Jefferson’s collection.<sup>[6]</sup> The *Library of Congress* significantly replenished its collection following a fire at the Smithsonian Castle in 1865. During this period, it was planned to relocate the library to the proposed Thomas Jefferson Building, designed to be fire-resistant. In 1866, through an act of Congress, with the help of Secretary Joseph Henry, the Smithsonian Institute transferred 40,000 non-scientific volumes from the Smithsonian Institute to the *Library of Congress*.<sup>[7]</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*generalis*; federal cultural institutions are created due in part of the pseudo-cultural policy of the United States — the United States does not currently have a comprehensive federal cultural policy as most cultural policies are enacted on the local or state level. However, the Constitution mentions the protection of arts, and as a result, federal cultural institutions are created whenever needed.

### 1.1.2 Reorganization

Armed with the notion of forming a *true* national library, director librarian Ainsworth Spofford expanded collections to include *Americana* and *American Literature* and led the construction of the Jefferson Building of the Library of Congress.<sup>[8]</sup> Spofford placed all copyright registration and deposit activities under the library's control and restored international book exchanges with Europe and Canada. The Joint Library Committee held hearings to assess the condition and plan for the library's future growth. With Spofford's aggressive expansionist policies, he and six other experts sent by the *American Library Association* testified that the library should continue its expansion to become a true national library. As a result, Congress allocated funds to more than double its staff from 42 to 108 people and gained administrative structure for categorical sections (i.e., having separate divisions for manuscripts, periodicals, and historical information).<sup>[5]</sup>

In 1897, the Jefferson Building was completed. Spofford, wanting to provide easy access to the books to the congressmen, delegated the task of building a tunnel from the Capitol to the library to the Army Corps of Engineers, nestled with a comfortable \$900,000 budget. The engineers created a tunnel equipped with conveyor belts capable of moving books at approximately 600 feet per minute. They came with telephone wires to "allow for the rapid transmission" of messages between the book requestor in the Capitol and the librarian tasked with fetching the book in the library. At this point in time, the *Library of Congress* had obtained a collection of over 840,000 books.<sup>[9]</sup>

### 1.1.3 Acquisitions

From 1897 to 1987, the library employed an aggressive and liberal acquisition policy, broadening the diversity of its collections. Foreign acquisitions saw a notable increase; collections of Hebraica, Chinese, and Japanese works were purchased in 1904 — the first Eastern purchase in the library's history.<sup>[5]</sup> In 1929, Congressman Ross Collins gained approval for the library to purchase Otto Vollbehr's collection of incunabula for 1.5 million dollars.<sup>2</sup>, which included one of three remaining perfect vellum copies of the Gutenberg Bible. <sup>[10]</sup> This aggressive purchasing policy filled the main library, which forced Congress to purchase land to build the John Adams Building in 1930.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt politicized the Library of Congress by appointing poet Archibald MacLeish as the Librarian of Congress. Occupying the post of librarian from 1939 to 1944 during WWII, MacLeish encouraged librarians to oppose totalitarianism on behalf of democracy, pushing patriotic activities by establishing a "democracy alcove" in the Main Reading Room for significant documents like the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and The Federalist Papers.

<sup>2</sup>Interestingly, Vollbehr used his fortune obtained from this purchase to perpetuate anti-Jewish rhetoric in the United States. Around this time in the 1930s, he became part of a committee that worked for the Nazi Propaganda Ministry, disseminating pro-Nazi material in various publications and newspapers. One of his works, *Is Pacifism Possible*, caught the eyes of the federal government, causing his activity to be investigated by Congress in 1934 in the House Committee of Un-American Activities.<sup>[10]</sup>

The library also assisted in the war effort by researching historical weather patterns on the Himalayas for Air Force pilots.<sup>[11]</sup>

Automation was introduced in the library's cataloging procedures after the war, contributing to the unprecedented growth rate between 1954 and 1975. During this time, Lawrence Mumford presided as the Librarian of Congress, holding an extreme acquisition policy; the library's collection increased from 10 to 17 million books, the staff from 1,600 to 4,500, and the annual budget from \$9.5 million to \$116 million. As a result, the library initiated planning for a third building on Capitol Hill, now known as the Madison Building.<sup>[12]</sup> Mumford's policies would eventually help grow the library's collection to over 80 million by the 1980s.

### 1.1.4 Contemporary Activities and Philanthropy

President Ronald Reagan nominated historian James Billington as the 13th librarian of Congress in 1987. Under Billington's leadership, the library doubled its collection from 85 million items in 1987 to more than 160 million in 2014.<sup>[13]</sup> The modern *Library of Congress* has an imminent presence in the humanities; the library now has a focus on providing cultural experiences to the American population, establishing programs. These included: *American Memory*, created in the 1990s to provide online access to digitized American history along with primary sources; the *National Book Festival*, founded in 2001 to recognize and support achievements in improving literacy in the United States; the *National Audiovisual Conservation Center*, opened in 2007 as an audiovisual archive for the library — serving as the first primarily digital archive for the *Library of Congress*.

When Billington announced his retirement in 2015, commentator George Weigel described the *Library of Congress* as "one of the last refuges in Washington of serious bipartisanship and calm, considered conservation" and "one of the world's greatest cultural centers".<sup>[14]</sup>

## 2 Reflection

### 2.1.1 What you saw — describe the exhibit.

We visited the *Jefferson Building* and the *Madison Building*, entering the Hispanic, Main, Newspaper & Current Periodical, Performing Arts, Prints & Photographs and Rare Book & Special Collection Reading Rooms. The Jefferson Building had noticeably older architecture, mimicking a *Beaux Arts* style while the newer Madison Building felt more like an office building. The Main Reading Room, located in the Jefferson Building, is a circular dome accompanied by two floors of books, available to the public (depicted in *Figure 1*). The books contained in the Main Reading Room consists of reference books in history, philosophy and fine arts. The Hispanic and Rare Reading Rooms, two rooms located on the second floor in the Jefferson Building, exhibited similar architecture — the walls were draped with lavish velvet curtains, hanging roughly thirty feet from the ceiling.

The Madison building was made primarily for additional space, and as a result, the six-story building placed little regard to interior architecture. We observe this in the Manuscripts Division, where Congress sought to move tens of millions of doc-

uments from the Adams and Jefferson building — the interior is extremely bland, but hidden behind the drywall barrier are thousands of shelves, all holding manuscripts from the South Sea Company to pictures taken by Great Depression photographers. Similarly, the Periodical, Prints, and Performing Arts reading rooms shared the bland interiors.

### 2.1.2 Describe how what you saw reinforces a theme in United States history.

The formation of the United States is different than any other country due to the nature of *how* the country was formed. Intellectual thinkers from various backgrounds came together to establish a nation based on the principles of freedom, equality, and justice. These thinkers, thinkers like Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, and James Madison, brought a range of perspectives and ideas to the table. We assert these men as intellectuals as they debated and discussed these ideas, shaping them into the principles of freedom, equality, and justice that the nation was founded upon — and we know that they weren't all for show: Jefferson's [book] collection was particularly unique at the time in that it was the working collection of a scholar, not a gentleman's collection for display.

The *Library of Congress*, with its extensive collection of resources, serves as a testament to this intellectual diversity. It houses works from a multitude of authors, thinkers, and creators, each contributing their unique perspective to the collective knowledge of the nation. This vast array of information represents the ongoing intellectual dialogue that has been central to the development of the United States. In essence, the *Library of Congress* is more than just a repository of books and materials. It is a symbol of the intellectual diversity and democratic ideals that have shaped the United States, reinforcing the intellectual origins in the nation's history.

### 2.1.3 What surprised you about what you saw?

People usually say the 'humanities is dead', however everything we saw at the *Library of Congress* directly contradicts this notion. The vast collection of books, manuscripts, photographs, recordings, and maps is a testament to the enduring relevance of the humanities. The library's commitment to preserving and promoting culture, history, and knowledge speaks volumes about the vitality of the humanities. From the breathtaking architecture to the insightful exhibitions, every corner of the library breathes life into the humanities, proving that they are not only alive but also evolving and thriving. So, while some may argue that the humanities are dead, our experience at the *Library of Congress* clearly demonstrates that they are very much alive and continue to enrich our understanding of the human experience.

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