

Pennsylvania Libraries: *Research & Practice*

Interview

In the PaLRaP Spotlight: Patrick Spero

*Librarian and Director, American Philosophical
Society (APS) Library, Philadelphia, PA*



Interview by Stephanie Campbell

Stephanie Campbell is a Collection Development Project Librarian at Brodart, stephanie.campbell@brodart.com

Tell us a little about yourself, specifically, your career trajectory and what led you to special librarianship?

No career is a linear path, and I certainly could not have predicted that I would be Librarian of the [American Philosophical Society](http://amphilsoc.org) (amphilsoc.org) when I entered graduate school in 2002. I pursued my Ph.D. with the hope that I would become a professor, but, as my career developed and I learned more about my own interests and skillset, I found that I gravitated toward jobs that revolved around historical collections.

My journey to the field of libraries began while pursuing my Ph.D. in early American history at the University of Pennsylvania, I had become involved in a number of public history initiatives, which opened my eyes to a career in

libraries and archives. I realized that some of the most exciting things were happening in these places. Technology was changing libraries and creating new outreach opportunities.

When the opportunity to work at the David Library of the American Revolution (Washington Crossing, PA) came about, I seized it. At the David, I worked to acquire new materials, improve access, and develop programming. After that experience, I continued to pursue opportunities that involved working with libraries. From 2009-2011, I spent two years as a postdoctoral fellow at the APS Library writing a guide to its early American collections. Then, after joining the faculty at Williams College (Williamstown, MA), I served on the faculty committees of both the Chapin Rare Book Library and College library.

While I enjoyed my time as a professor, I realized that the dream job I had envisioned in 2002 wasn't the same one I had in 2015. The opportunity to return to the APS as Librarian seemed a perfect marriage of all my interests. I could develop collections, use new technology to broaden access to materials, and increase the amount of programming the institution conducted.

The American Philosophical Society, deemed the oldest learned society in the United States, includes both a museum and a library. Founded by Benjamin Franklin in 1743, its mission is to promote useful knowledge through research, fellowships, and public outreach. Tell us more about the APS Library's services.

The APS Library's services are built upon the strengths of its collections – Early American History, Ethnography and Linguistics, and the History of Science. We strive to both steward these materials and provide access to them. The library's curators and conservators work to build upon our collection's strengths with new acquisitions and preservation of what we have, while our cataloguers and manuscript processors work to make those collections accessible to researchers. We then make these collections more accessible through: our Center for Digital Scholarship, which is constantly building our digital library; the Center for Native American and Indigenous Research (CNAIR), which promotes innovative use of the collections that benefit indigenous communities and academic scholarship; and through Scholarly Programming, which supports the research of long- and short-term fellows and holds bi-annual conferences.

Give us an example of how CNAIR benefited an indigenous community.

CNAIR has worked with the language revitalization program of the Tunica-Biloxi Tribe of Louisiana to provide them with high quality digital scans of a large body of notebooks made in the 1930s with the last fluent speaker of the Tunica language. Community members who are experts in the language and culture have been utilizing these manuscripts to further strengthen the tribe's initiatives to build a new generation of speakers. These community experts have also helped archivists at CNAIR to describe just what these materials are more accurately and meaningfully. They've also corrected and expanded information about a few dozen Tunica photographs that are here, such as identifying the people in the photos, and explaining to us the context of these materials both historically and in the present-day community. We're then able to convey this more accurate and detailed information to researchers using the library's collections, which helps them to understand Tunica history and culture more fully.

The library's collections include the papers of Benjamin Franklin, the Journals of Lewis and Clark, and first editions of books such as Sir Isaac Newton's *Principia* and Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species*. How do you acquire new collections?

[The APS Library](http://amphilsoc.org/library) (amphilsoc.org/library) acquires new collections through both purchase and donation. Our curators regularly monitor auctions for items that will strengthen our collections. They also maintain relationships with current scholars who may decide that the APS is the best place to make their research accessible.

Who are your primary users?

The Library is open to all researchers who demonstrate a need to use its resources. This means that the primary users are researchers working a specific topic, but through CNAIR we also increasingly serve indigenous communities throughout North America who are able to make use of our collections through the power of digitization.

Among the many exciting projects at the Library are those done collaboratively between our Digital Humanities Fellows and staff at our Center for Digital Scholarship. The Library accepts two fellows each year to come to the APS for one month to research and develop a digital project. One ongoing project of note is the Women in Science Project that is being developed in collaboration with 2018-2019 Digital Humanities Fellow, Dr. Serenity Sutherland. This project developed a prototype for visualizing correspondence networks of women scientists in the late 19th and early-to-mid 20th centuries. By working collaboratively with Dr. Sutherland, the project also reveals connections between women scientists represented in collections at the APS and those whose records are held at other institutions.

Can you provide a few general statistics to illustrate your usage?

In 2018, 433 individual researchers visited the Library to conduct research in its collections. The library also supported the work of 37 fellows across ten different types of fellowships. Moreover, since the founding of CNAIR in 2014, the library has worked directly with more than 60 indigenous communities and nations throughout North America.

What are the challenges of running a special library – balancing preservation, digitization, scholarly research support, public education/outreach.

The main challenge of running a special collections library is that we'd like to make our collections as widely accessible as possible while also protecting them. This can mean limiting the display or handling of some items that may need conservation work, or setting priorities for digitization that, by definition, mean we make some parts of the collection more widely available than others.

The library hosts conferences, workshops, lunchtime talks, and other events throughout the year for neighboring institutions, Friends of the APS, fellows, and staff. Can you name a recent program that was particularly well attended?

One of the library's short-term research fellows gave a Brown Bag Lunch talk earlier this winter on research she did at the APS on scientific and political debates over money – both paper and coin – in the mid-19th century.

Describe a day-in-the-life at the APS Library.

A day in the life at the APS definitely changes depending on one's role. Archivists are on the front line of our collections, processing our materials to make them available to researchers. Conservators, too, are constantly working directly with items by preserving them or preparing them for exhibition. Our curators are monitoring auctions, corresponding with potential donors, researching the collection, or working on projects to make parts of it more available. Reference librarians are fielding questions from all over the world. It's really a vibrant work environment.

Can you tell us why you do what you do?

For me, special collections libraries are among the most inspiring and dynamic places. I like to say that we are the laboratories for the humanities. Every day, there are researchers, staff members, or students using our collections and making new discoveries. Their work creates new knowledge that illuminates our past and helps us understand our present.