

Pennsylvania Libraries: *Research & Practice*

Interview

In the PaLRaP Spotlight: Michael Lear

Rare Collections Librarian

State Library of Pennsylvania, Harrisburg, PA



Interview by Stephanie Campbell

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

I have been interested in history since grade school when I taught myself the list of U.S. presidents and memorized all the state capitals. We visited many historic sites on family vacations. When I attended college, I planned for a museum career as a curator, collections manager, or living history interpreter. I earned my first master's degree in history and museum studies but did not think about libraries or archives as keepers of historic materials until I saw a job posting many years later for a library archives and special collections assistant. This is how I entered the field more than twenty years ago.

The State Library of Pennsylvania consists of two bureaus: The Bureau of the State Library and Bureau of Library Development. Public libraries across the state are familiar with the latter because of its statewide leadership roles surrounding literacy, professional development, and state aid. The Bureau of the State Library's basic mission is to "preserve the stories of Pennsylvania and provide assistance to state government."¹ Areas of specialization include government documents, genealogy, law, public administration, economics, political science, statistics, education, public services, and local, state, North American, and United States history.² Tell us about the rare collections.

The State Library of Pennsylvania traces its origins back to 1745 when Benjamin Franklin, clerk of the Assembly, was authorized to purchase a set of books containing English laws and some large maps. For many years, the primary focus of the State Library was to serve as a resource for the legislature. In 1816, the legislature formally created the State Library as we know it today. The mission gradually expanded to serve the legislature, other state agencies, and eventually the public. Today, the State Library serves as a major public and research library, as well as a government library which collects state documents.

Various books have been acquired over several years through gift or purchase and are rare and valuable - our Rare Collections Library unit was created in 1965 to better preserve these items. We have more than 400 surviving volumes from the 18th century Assembly Collection identifiable by gold-stamped ownership marks authorized in 1767, as well as a large collection of works printed in Pennsylvania, Pennsylvania newspapers that include Franklin's *Pennsylvania Gazette*, and many specimens of rare books in various disciplines and time periods, our oldest item dating from the 1490s.

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed operations and usage. Perhaps you can describe a day-in-the-life of the Rare Book Library when in-person operations were in effect and also how you've been doing business since.

As a mostly published collection, many of the State Library's materials are available elsewhere - this includes a growing collection of digitized items that are available online via websites such as Google Books, the Internet Archive, and Hathi Trust Digital Library.

Law and genealogy research have remained popular topics among our patrons before and throughout the pandemic due to our large and more unique collections in these areas. Newspapers on microfilm, many not available elsewhere, were also widely used before the pandemic.

Before the pandemic disrupted daily on-site work, the State Library had been relocated to other areas of the Capitol complex due to renovations to the historic Forum building. My work area was located in one building, the library's point of service located in another building, and our rare materials located in a third building. Significant planning was necessary to make trips to retrieve requested materials for in-person use, scanning for remote users, and for working with the physical collection. In the area of rare books, most of our research questions received before the pandemic could be answered remotely since they involved questions of provenance, unique characteristics of our copy, or the need for an image of a page or two.

In this regard, our work has not changed, since we have been able to access the collection when needed, even remotely. Library staff have a strong service ethic and we have found ways to safely meet the needs of many patrons despite barriers created by the pandemic.

While most Rare Collection research needs have been met remotely during the pandemic, I do hope to encourage in-person use of collections in the future to students and schools to support teaching and learning about primary sources and the history of printing and literacy. I do not think this hands-on experience is easy to duplicate remotely.

Finally, can you tell us why you do what you do?

I find it very gratifying and rewarding to take part in preserving our material culture and assisting patrons with their research needs. I like the challenge of seeking out an answer to a question, solving problems, learning new things about printing and publishing history, and teaching learners about historical primary sources.

Notes

¹ <https://www.statelibrary.pa.gov/StateAgencies/StateServices/Pages/default.aspx>

² <https://www.statelibrary.pa.gov/GeneralPublic/Collections/More-About-the-Collections/Pages/default.aspx>