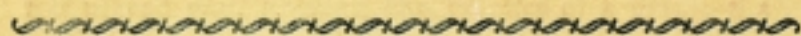


THE NATION'S  
CARETAKER



**M**ARK DIMUNATION '74  
*cares for some of America's most  
precious documents as chief of the Rare Book and  
Special Collections Division at the United States  
Library of Congress. The national archive of more  
than 800,000 items is vast, ranging from a pristine  
copy of the Gutenberg Bible to the things found  
in Abraham Lincoln's pockets on the day he died.*



BY DAVID HAWLEY

*Photographs by Jay L. Glendenin, Polarix Images*





MARK DIMUNATION '74 WITH THE  
LESSING J. ROSENWALD COLLECTION,  
ONE OF THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS'  
PREMIER COLLECTIONS.



**I**N 1815, WHEN THOMAS JEFFERSON OFFERED to sell his personal library to Congress to replace a much smaller collection that had been burned by the British during the War of 1812, there were those who didn't think much of the proposal.

Jefferson's library of 6,487 volumes was the largest private collection in North America at that time. Yet it seemed too eclectic to its critics, who also noted that many of the books were printed in foreign languages. Not surprisingly, Jefferson thought his library was entirely appropriate for a new, enlightened nation and its leaders. There is, he declared in a letter to a friend, "no subject to which a member of Congress may not have occasion to refer."

Last January, those words resonated for Mark Dimunation, chief of the Library of Congress' Rare Book and Special Collections Division, when he was asked to loan Jefferson's 1764 copy of the Quran to Minnesota Representative Keith Ellison for his ceremonial swearing-in as the first Muslim member of Congress.

Carefully placing the two leather-bound volumes in a special container, Dimunation left the Library of Congress complex — commonly called the LOC — and took a short walk through underground tunnels to the nation's Capitol. There, he stood on the sidelines for the brief, unofficial event where new members traditionally pose for photographs with family and friends. The actual swearing-in had taken place earlier that day in the House chambers.

"The event was particularly apt," Dimunation recalls. "One of Jefferson's books, which had restored the nation's library, was being taken back to perpetuate another institution that Jefferson built — a democratic structure: the Congress."

The moment carried additional meanings. For one, Dimunation was reared in the Twin Cities suburb of St. Anthony, which is part of the Fifth Congressional District that Ellison, a Democrat, now represents. But more significantly, what took place that January day involved what Dimunation believes is one of his sacred duties: to make the nation's most precious documents available for use by the American people.

### *Falling into a career*

**D**IMUNATION BELIEVES HIS SENSE OF RESPONSIBILITY and service has some roots in his experiences at St. Olaf during the turbulent early 1970s, a time when political demonstrations were erupting on college campuses nationwide. He recalls joining a group of students who invaded and occupied the college's administration building. The peaceful confrontation ended following a dialogue with St. Olaf's long-serving and highly respected president, the late Sidney A. Rand. It was, says Dimunation, a typical St. Olaf kind of "community meeting."

"Before we left the building, we cleaned up," he says with a laugh. "To me, that defines the St. Olaf experience. We had our demonstration, made our point and reached a consensus. Then we tidied things up in the president's office and left it as we found it."

When Dimunation, a history major, graduated from St. Olaf in 1974, few friends or faculty thought that the tall young man with "wild hair" who reveled in theater and music would become a librarian. On the other hand, they fully expected him to do the unexpected.

"He was a gregarious, outgoing and a seize-the-moment kind of guy," recalls Patrick Quade '65, professor emeritus of theater who later became director of International and Off-Campus Studies.

"Mark was one of those students you remember for a variety of reasons," Quade says. "He was so excited in all the things he was involved with — theater, study abroad, playing in the St. Olaf Band, and what he was learning through the coursework he had developed in the Paracollege. He just embraced the possibilities of all those areas, learning what was going to be best for him and for his potential as a human being. That sounds grandiose, but for him, it was true."



**DIMUNATION HOLDS THOMAS JEFFERSON'S 1764 COPY OF THE QURAN, WHICH WAS USED IN THE SWEARING-IN CEREMONY OF MINNESOTA REPRESENTATIVE KEITH ELLISON.**





**DIMUNATION DISPLAYS A RARE BLOCK BOOK, PRINTED ENTIRELY FROM WOODCUTS. THIS EXAMPLE, DATED 1470, ILLUSTRATES THE APOCALYPSE OF ST. JOHN, A POPULAR MEDIEVAL STORY CULLED FROM THE BIBLICAL BOOK OF REVELATIONS.**

In retrospect, Dimunation's experiences at St. Olaf provided perfect preparation for a career that he acquired almost by accident. He chose St. Olaf, he says, because its Paracollege allowed students to design their own course of study in collaboration with a faculty adviser.

a doctorate in history. After completing his courses he decided to take a job in the Bancroft Library, the primary special collections library at Berkeley, where he could earn money while working on his academic research projects. Instead, he was named assistant head of acquisitions, responsible for collecting and preserving rare books. He soon discovered a passion — and a career.

Dimunation went on to Stanford University where he served as the curator of rare books in the history department. He was there when the 1989 earthquake struck, destroying the library building but miraculously sparing everyone from injuries. "For the next two years, I spent my time administering the library from a plywood box," Dimunation says.

In 1991, Dimunation headed east to take a position at Cornell University as curator of rare books and associate director for collections. He stayed at Cornell, also teaching in the English

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*"It's an extraordinary privilege to have access to these materials. It's quite a sandbox to play in."* - MARK DIMUNATION '74

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A sort of "college within the college," the Paracollege (which was discontinued in the late 1990s) "worked very well for certain students, and Mark was one of them," says Professor Emeritus of History Erling Jorstad '52. "He was a serious, open-minded young man who took his studies seriously. He wanted to get the best education he could."

Dimunation credits Jorstad with teaching him the value of social history and analysis. Other inspirations included the late Miles "Mity" Johnson, conductor of the St. Olaf Band. Dimunation, a clarinetist, remembers band practices as "half music and half life philosophy, with everyone bonding together in a significant artistic experience built around community. It had a profound effect on me."

Overseas studies took him to Oxford — "a city that wears its history on its sleeve" — and Dimunation also remembers being present when the Howard V. and Edna H. Hong Kierkegaard Library was being constructed.

"I was fascinated with the process of reconstructing a library. Oddly enough, the first thing I did at the Library of Congress was to reconstruct the Thomas Jefferson collection," Dimunation says. "But fundamentally, the Paracollege and St. Olaf taught me the ability to think critically and to write analytically and to avoid being bound by a single discipline. It also created a sense of a community of scholars. Those are all aspects of a curatorial viewpoint."

After graduating from St. Olaf in 1974, Dimunation went to the University of California–Berkeley with the intention of getting

Department, until 1998, when he heard about an opening at the Library of Congress. It was "a prominent position with a tough pool" of candidates, he says, conceding that he was a bit overwhelmed when he was hired. Nearly a decade later, he continues to be awed by the scale of the Library of Congress. "It's the world's largest library, with more than 150 million pieces, and also the nation's oldest extant cultural institution," Dimunation says.

### *Universal knowledge*

**T**HE RARE BOOK AND SPECIAL COLLECTIONS DIVISION headed by Dimunation is housed in one of the Library of Congress' three buildings. It includes nearly 800,000 items of astonishing diversity. Here can be found documents dating from the age of papyrus and one of only three existing perfect vellum copies of the Gutenberg Bible.

The division's more than 100 separate collections also feature broadsides (30,000 of them, including copies of the Declaration of Independence), pamphlets, theater playbills, prints, posters, photographs, medieval and Renaissance manuscripts and numerous other artifacts.

Visitors often are fascinated by seemingly everyday things, such as the items President Abraham Lincoln had in his pockets on the night he was assassinated: two pairs of spectacles and a lens polisher, a pocketknife, a watch fob, a linen handkerchief, a brown leather wallet containing a \$5 Confederate note and nine

[CONTINUED ON PAGE 49]



newspaper clippings, including several favorable to the president and his policies.

Dimunation's own academic specialty — 18th and 19th century English and American printing — also is represented in such treasures as the Lessing J. Rosenwald Collection of illustrated books that spans six centuries. "From Albrecht Dürer to William Blake to Picasso, it's all here," Dimunation says.

"It's an extraordinary privilege to have access to these materials," he says. "Often the collections are of monumental books or associated with grand figures in history. But many others tell stories of ordinary individuals and give us an understanding of what it was like, for instance, to live in the 16th century or to arrive in this country at a certain time. It's quite a sandbox to play in."

When he speaks of the heart and soul of the division he oversees, Dimunation returns to Thomas Jefferson. In 1815, after a partisan and heated debate, Congress agreed to purchase Jefferson's private library for \$23,950. The price was based largely on the size of the books rather than their content — in essence, knowledge purchased by the pound.

"Congress got a bargain," Dimunation says. "Jefferson collected like a good enlightenment scholar should, in all fields."

In 1851, however, flames again threatened the congressional collection when a fire that had started in a chimney on Christmas Eve destroyed the early library and about 4,000 of Jefferson's books. The current Jefferson Library, which houses Dimunation's division, was considered fireproof when it was built in 1897. Today, the Library of Congress is a complex of three buildings, named for the second through fourth presidents: Adams, Jefferson and Madison.

When he arrived in Washington in 1998, Dimunation's first task was to reconstruct the original Jefferson collection by finding matching editions for all the books destroyed in the 1851 fire. That effort continues today.

"For about half of the missing books we located matching copies elsewhere in the Library of Congress," Dimunation explains. "Others were obtained on the open market. Right now, we lack 300 volumes. It gets more difficult as the list goes down and the missing pieces become arcane, rarer and, in some cases, obscure."

An exhibition of Jefferson's original library is currently in development, designed to display the books in a circular ring of stacks, the way Jefferson envisioned it. The exhibit is expected to showcase the

## THE WORLD'S LARGEST LIBRARY

The Library of Congress is the nation's oldest federal cultural institution and serves as the research arm of Congress. It is also the largest library in the world, with more than 130 million items on approximately 530 miles of bookshelves. The library contains more than 29 million books and other printed materials,



2.7 million recordings, 12 million photographs, 4.8 million maps and 58 million manuscripts. Its collections include:

**Personal Libraries:** Woodrow Wilson, Theodore Roosevelt, Susan B. Anthony, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Frederic W. Goudy and Harry Houdini, among others.

**Author Collections:** Walt Whitman, Henry James, Sigmund Freud, Rudyard Kipling, Benjamin Franklin and Hans Christian Andersen.

**Subjects:** Such things as magic, gastronomy, cryptography, radical literature, printmaking, the French Revolution and the discoveries of Sir Francis Drake.



Learn more about the Library of Congress at [loc.gov](http://loc.gov).

uniqueness of Jefferson's organizational plan. Unlike most libraries of his day, which arranged collections alphabetically, Jefferson preferred to arrange his according to subject, though the topics were in an Enlightenment hierarchy, with such subjects as "Memory," "Reason" and "Imagination" to denote history, philosophy and art. As a practical matter, however, the books on Jefferson's shelves were placed according to size.

According to Dimunation, Congress debated the purchase of the library on a number of issues, including pertinence to the business of government and relevance given that many of the books were in foreign languages. The Quran used by Minnesota Representative Ellison during his ceremonial event had been translated into English. The 1764 volume was published in England, a later printing of a translation originally published in 1734.

"It was the first English translation from the Arabic," says Dimunation, noting that its title was the anglicized "Koran."

"We think Jefferson purchased it in 1765 in Williamsburg," Dimunation says. "It was at a time when Jefferson was studying law at William and Mary, and it likely was acquired because the Quran is referred to in 18th-century law books as an example of Arabic law. It survived the fire, so it's his actual copy."

Books in Dimunation's area rarely leave the library. Jefferson's Quran used for the congressional ceremony last January was well chaperoned and out of Dimunation's hands for only a few min-

utes. But anyone is entitled to examine most of the materials available in the Library of Congress' Rare Book and Special Collections Reading Room — provided they are willing to follow procedures. And, of course, you can't take anything out without committing a felony.

"Anyone 18 or older can get a reader card," Dimunation says. "We are a public library. We have thousands of people coming in on a daily basis for a wide variety of purposes, including research or attending exhibitions."

His job is the calling of every library curator. "Regardless of where you're working, the primary role of a curator is to provide, develop, promote and interpret the collections that are under your custody," Dimunation says. "Perhaps we have an enhanced sense of stewardship [at the Library of Congress] because the collections are so awe inspiring. But it remains a responsibility to keep them safe and secure on one hand and to make them readily available to the people of the United States."

His work at the Library of Congress is enhanced by the city itself. "I've not lost the awe of being in Washington," he says. "Every day I drive past the Washington Monument and the Capitol on the way to work. There are moments I have to remind myself that I'm actually working. It's a wonderful job, and I'm very lucky to have it." 🐾

**DAVID HAWLEY** is a Twin Cities-based freelance writer.