

THE STORIED HISTORY OF **VASSAR'S THOMPSON MEMORIAL LIBRARY**

by Sheila Wagner

From its inception in 1865, the library at Vassar has been an open shelf library. They encourage the students to make use of all the stacks, not just the ones pertaining to their particular courses of study. Matthew Vassar, founder of the college in 1861, made clear that the funds be invested especially in “the replenishing and enlarging of the library.” When he died in 1868, he dedicated a portion of an annual \$50,000 to continue that cause.



Photo by Tamar M. Thibodeau/Vassar College

When the library first opened, it was located on the third floor of Main Building. At that time the size of the room was only thirty by thirty-five feet in area and contained about 2,400 volumes. Some of the annual contribution was used in 1872 for relocating the library to an adjoining room, but that room was soon declared too small also. The next move was to the fourth floor of Main Building, which was a much better fit for the rapidly growing collection of volumes.

Rapid Growth

By 1891, the volumes in the library had grown to nearly 20,000 with a growing student body as well. Frederick Ferris Thompson, a philanthropist and trustee of the college, was well-known to the student body and given the nickname "Uncle Fred." The largest of several gifts that Thompson bestowed to the college went toward the building of a three-story annex extending from the front of Main, which was complete in 1893.

After many thousands of books were added to this library more quickly than anticipated, it became apparent that a new library was needed in a building of its own. The donor for this new building was Mrs.

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Mary Clark Thompson, an alumna of Vassar and the widow of Frederick Thompson who had died in 1899. The library was dedicated in his honor and named Frederick Ferris Thompson Memorial Library. The groundbreaking for this building was in the spring of 1903 and dedicated on June 12, 1905.

The architects Frances R. Allen and Charles Collens envisioned the building as three wings built around a central tower. The Perpendicular Gothic style included elaborate carvings on both the interior and exterior walls. One of the most admired elements of this structure is the stained-glass Cornaro window situated in the central room of the west wing. This window depicts the bestowal of the first doctorate ever to be received by a woman, Elena Lucretia Cornaro Piscopia, at the University of Padua in 1678. This window has inspired and will continue to inspire many generations of Vassar students.

Major Renovation

Less than ten years after the completion of this beautiful structure, the acquisition of books had grown the collection to 81,000.

One of the most admired elements of this structure is the stained-glass Cornaro window situated in the central room of the west wing. This window depicts the bestowal of the first doctorate ever to be received by a woman, Elena Lucretia Cornaro Piscopia, at the University of Padua in 1678.

Mary Clark Thompson again donated the money for an expansion which included two L-shaped wings on the north and south sides of the library. These additions were designed by the same architects and completed by 1918, maintaining the Perpendicular Gothic style of the original building.

There have been other additions leading up to the 21st century including the addition of Van Ingen Library, in honor of the first art professor at Vassar. The next major renovation was achieved by filling in the two interior courts formed by the 1918 wings, transforming

it into stack areas for books and also adding new stairs and elevator, as well as the Special Collections seminar room. The Martha Rivers and E. Bronson Ingram Library has high-tech information resources, study spaces, reserve and periodicals rooms, and a home for the Vassar College Archives and Special Collections.

Modern Day Observations

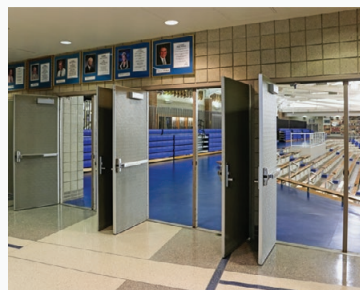
Andrew Ashton, Director of the Libraries at Vassar, stated that the Cornaro window in many ways is the heart of the campus. He shared that

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since Vassar was founded as a women's college with a mission to provide a rigorous, world class education, the story of Lady Cornaro holds a very special meaning. He continued, "Countless students have told me that the minute they walked into the library they knew they were coming to Vassar."

Ashton explained that Thompson Memorial library has over 1,000,000 volumes in print as well as hundreds of thousands of online resources, digital collections, and multimedia resources. The Archives and Special Collections also has special focuses on Hudson Valley book arts. "Additionally, the Vassar College Libraries includes the Dickinson Music Library and Van Ingen Art Library," he said.

Tracy Sutherland, Head of User Services for the Libraries, said that the architecture of the original buildings of both the Music and Main Libraries is spectacular. She adds that the Cornaro window is a "jaw dropping aspect" of the main library. She also mentioned that the elaborate Regina music box located in the reading room in the music library is of special interest.

Sutherland stated that she was overjoyed about acquiring the first edition of a book titled *Various Poems, Religious and Moral* by Phillis Wheatley. She

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continued, "It is a true treasure of a first publication by an African American woman." There are other rare book holdings with important titles related to the culture of African Americans from the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries.

Maggie Chen '20 is a student worker in the library, majoring in studio art works in the preservation department of Technical Services. She is an enthusiastic representative of Vassar libraries and stated, "I come here to relax and the people who work with me are very nice. I think it's a great place that helps me unwind."

Sutherland concluded, "It was clear to me early on that this library was really special to the community. The students respect it and I'm very thankful too... as my brother says, to 'work in a castle.'"



ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Sheila Wagner has spent the last several years working as a professional editor and recently became the staff writer for *Private University Products and News*. Wagner can be reached at sheila@pupnmag.com.

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