

AAG Newsletter

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The Library of Congress: Geography's Treasury

It's been 25 years since the AAG held its annual meeting in Washington, DC, so scholars and researchers from around the world will have a lot to do this Spring when it comes to catching up on the extraordinary cultural and geographic research institutions in this famously archival city. What better place to start than the Geography and Map division of the Library of Congress?

Several major events at the AAG's annual meeting will help geographers experience and better understand the Library of Congress (LoC), with a special focus on the treasures and scholarly resources of its Geography and Map Division. But as it is the largest library in the world and



Library of Congress Reading Room.

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holds extensive historical and current book and periodical collections on every imaginable geographical topic, a brief history of the collection might both whet your appetite and prepare you for the sheer volume of its holdings.

The Library of Congress

Briefly, the Library of Congress was established by an act of Congress in 1800 upon the transfer of the capital from Philadelphia to Washington. The legislation initially envisioned a reference library for Congress only, containing "such books as may be necessary for the use of Congress - and for putting up a suitable apartment for containing them therein..."

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Douglas Richardson, Publisher
and Managing Editor

Jim Ketchum, Editor

AAG Voice 202-234-1450

AAG Fax 202-234-2744

newsletter@aag.org

www.aag.org

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The original library was housed in the Capitol itself until August 1814, when our colleagues from Britain visited and set fire to the Capitol Building, burning and pillaging the fledgling library in its cozy apartment, together with its comfortable leather chairs and globes, and its modest but hopeful collection of books and maps.* Fortunately, however, Americans are not ones to let minor slights fester, and within one month retired President Thomas Jefferson offered his entire personal library as a replacement. Jefferson had spent 50 years accumulating books, "putting by everything which related to America, and indeed whatever was rare and valuable in every science" and his library was considered one of the finest in the country. The ecumenical nature of his collection, reflecting a voracious curiosity on all subjects, fundamentally altered the philosophy and rationale behind the collecting policies of the LoC, which then saw its mission as a repository for open scholarship on every conceivable intellectual pursuit.

In 1897, the Library of Congress moved to the ornate, Italian Renaissance Jefferson Building, which is today one of three Library of Congress buildings clustered near the US Capitol. The central Reading Room of the Jefferson Building is one of the most beautiful odes to the love of knowledge in Washington. It is simply not to be missed.

The Library's collection of more than 130 million items includes more than 29 million cataloged books and other print materials in 460 languages; more than 58 million manuscripts; the largest rare book collection in North America; and the world's largest collection of films and sound recordings.

The Geography and Map Division

But of course of most importance is its unparalleled collection of maps and related cartographic and geographic reference materials. The Library's original "Hall of Maps and Charts" has now become the Geography and Map Division, occupying an area of

90,000 square feet in the Library's James Madison Memorial Building. Annual additions to the Geography and Map Division's collections average 60,000-80,000 maps and 2,000 atlases. The many rare and valuable maps and atlases in the collection include the recently acquired 1507 Waldseemuller map,

original prints chronicling of Napoleon's adventures in Egypt, and the 1482 printed edition of Claudius Ptolemy's *Geography*. The Geography and Map Division holds, preserves, and makes available to the public the largest and most comprehensive collection of maps and atlases in the world.



Richardson

AAG and Library of Congress

To help guide you through this magnificent collection, John Hebert, Director of the Library of Congress Geography and Map Division, will deliver a special plenary presentation at the AAG Annual Meeting on the Library of Congress' geographic collections, its dynamic plans for the future, and how geographers can access the Library for research and pleasure. Dr. Hebert's plenary talk is hosted by the Washington Map Society and will be held at 8:00pm on April 15, 2010, at the AAG meeting headquarters hotel, the Marriott Wardman Park.

Dr. Hebert has also been working collaboratively with the AAG on a plan to archive, digitize, and jointly distribute the AAG *Geographers on Film Collection*, created largely by Wes and Nancy Dow, at the Library of Congress. An update on this joint initiative also will be provided at the AAG Annual Meeting.

An AAG Field Trip to two special Library of Congress Open House events exclusively for AAG annual meeting attendees will also take place on Saturday, April 17, from 9:00am to 12:00pm. Both the Geography and Map Division and the Prints and Photographs Division of the Library of Congress will welcome AAG attendees and these events are open to anyone (including spouses) with an AAG conference badge. *There is no charge to attend these special Library of Congress Open House*

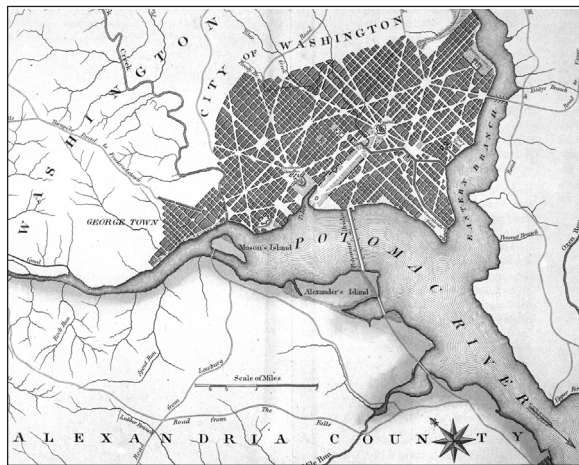
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events, but transportation from the conference hotels to the Library of Congress is not provided. Both Open Houses are in the Library's James Madison Memorial Building, which is easily accessible from the AAG conference hotels via Metro (subway) to the Capitol South station on Capitol Hill.

During the Open House, the graceful and pleasant Geography and Map Reading Room (room LM B-02) will host a unique display of both modern and historic maps, atlases, globes, and terrain models, dating from the 14th century to 2010. In addition to the display, the Geography and Map Division will offer "behind the scenes" guided tours of the Library's rich cartographic collections.

The Prints and Photographs Reading Room (room LM-337) Open House will highlight research opportunities in its holdings and suggest ways to explore its collection both online and on site.

Organizers of these Open House events are Ed Redmond of the Geography and Map Division, Library of Congress, and Barbara



The Library of Congress contains thousands of unique historical maps such as this one of Washington D.C., drawn by Robert King and published in 1818.

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Orbach Natanson, of the Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress.

Geography Reference and Online Services

The Geography and Map Division also employs very helpful reference librarians who will respond to requests "that cannot be answered by a library in the inquirer's locality."

While this is a great service, they are quick to note that they cannot undertake extensive research projects or assist students in preparing bibliographies, term papers, or other academic assignments (sorry, geography students).

As might be expected, numerous digital map and other geographic resources also are increasingly available online from the Library of Congress for researchers and the public. A good place to start is www.loc.gov/topics/maps.php. But the AAG's Annual Meeting offers geographers a unique opportunity to experience the dazzling array of cartographic wonders at the Library of Congress first hand. See you there. ■

Doug Richardson
drichardson@aag.org

**Sources: Facts, figures, and quotes, including the phrase "burning and pillaging" are from the LoC website. In fairness to the British, one theory put forth by historians to account for their book-burning rampage in 1814 notes the common mis-impression of the era by many British tourists that America was a soccer playing country, and therefore when viewed in proper cultural and historical context, such behaviour might well be excused. Aside from the above, however, other statements in this column are pure conjecture.*