

Scholars Mourn and Fight A Landmark Library's Closing: Scholars Mourn ...

By WILLIAM H. HONAN

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"I feel like I'm watching the Titanic go down," said Margot Gayle, an author who has spent much of the last three years gathering material for a biography of James Bogardus, a 19th-century architect and engineer, at the library of the New-York Historical Society. "The closing of the library throws a great cloud over my finishing this book," she added.

Like many other researchers, not to mention the general public, Ms. Gayle said she was shocked and dismayed last week when she learned that the cash-starved historical society would close its library on Feb. 19 in a last-ditch effort to avoid bankruptcy. It is also canceling all but one of its public programs and dismissing 41 employees. The four floors of art galleries in its landmark building on Central Park West at 77th Street were shut down last month, although

conservators will continue to work on the collection.

The library, which contains three million books, manuscripts and maps, and the art galleries and warehouses, which hold 1.6 million objects of fine and decorative art, make the society one of the nation's premiere cultural resources.

Ms. Gayle said that the society's various collections were integral and that the whole would be greatly diminished if broken up, a possibility the trustees have openly discussed. "The prints and photographs illustrate the collection and give it its splendid uniqueness," she said.

Scholars' Petition

Some scholars are trying to generate political pressure to rescue the society. Mike Wallace, a professor of history at John Jay College, said he had helped to organize a Committee of Concerned Scholars and gathered more than 500 signatures at 40 cam-

pusés throughout the country on a petition urging state and city officials "to fashion a solution that will keep the collections intact and available to all New Yorkers."

Signers include Paul Byard, the president of the Architectural League of New York; Robert A. Caro, the biographer; Howard Dodson, chief of the New York Public Library's Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture; Eric Foner, the president-elect of the Organization of American Historians; Brendan Gill, the New Yorker critic and author; Alice Stone Ichman, the president of Sarah Lawrence College; Warren F. Ichman, the president of Pratt Institute; Jay Kaplan, the executive director of the New York Council for the Humanities; Lawrence Levine, the president of the Organization of American Historians; Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., the historian, and

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Bruce Stave, the director of the Urban History Association.

Others, however, are simply wringing their hands in despair. Deborah Gardner, a scholar who has been working at the library for four years on a biography of the architect Isaac Newton Phelps Stokes, said she felt "devastated" because the library contains the bulk of the Stokes papers.

Stanley N. Katz, the president of the American Council of Learned Societies, researched two books on colonial New York there. "It's the institution of continuity in the city," he said. "This could never happen in the South or in a city like Chicago because of the civic pride there."

Bits and Pieces of the Past

Curators, librarians and visiting scholars last week pointed out that the true value of the society's immense holdings is not so much the familiar highlights — George Washington's coach, early drafts of the United States Constitution, Tiffany

lamps and Audubon watercolors — but the vast quantity of ephemera that reveal ordinary life in the early years of the nation and New York City.

"The beauty and importance of our collections," said Jean Ashton, the society's librarian, "was very well expressed in 1805 by the founders of the society, who stated: 'Without the aid of original records and authentic documents, history will be nothing more than a well-combined series of ingenious conjectures and amusing fables.'"

A random survey of the collections turned up these items:

¶A letter dated April 25, 1865, from a young woman named Clara Harris to a friend. "My whole clothing, as I sat in the box was saturated literally with blood, & my hands & face — you may imagine what a scene," she wrote, describing a recent ordeal. Miss Harris had shared the Presidential box at Ford's Theater with Abraham Lincoln when John Wilkes Booth took the fate of the nation into his hands.

¶Two pocket-size diaries kept by Civil War soldiers, one from Georgia

A rich collection of ephemera that reveal history.

and the other from New York City, both of whom who died at what became known as Burnside's Bridge at Antietam on Sept. 17, 1862. William Rothert, the Union soldier, illustrated his diary with drawings of sailing ships and the cocky soldiers of his regiment who wore Algerian-style tasseled turbans. A. B. Ross, the Confederate soldier who might conceivably have killed Rothert, or have been killed by him, wrote tersely as the fighting intensified. ("Calhoun wounded at spring through both arms. Bob missing since Sunday night last. . . .) The starkly blank pages in both diaries after Sept. 17 speak as eloquently as those crammed with jottings.

¶The first menu for Delmonico's, New York's most fashionable restau-

rant throughout much of the 19th century. Printed in 1837, the 11-page menu lists 46 veal dishes, from calf's head fricasseed to mock-turtle veal.

¶A 10-foot-tall carved and painted wooden sculpture of a fire chief holding a megaphone and pointing the way to a fire. The model stood for many years outside Fireman's Hall on Mercer Street in Manhattan until removed in 1851.

¶A large oil portrait of Edward Hyde (1661-1723), a British colonial governor of New York and New Jersey, dressed as a woman. Scholars have confirmed that Hyde was a transvestite, but some suspect this portrait may have been commissioned by his enemies.

¶An album of artwork by students at the African Free School in Manhattan, consisting of fine pencil drawings, musical notations and watercolors.

¶A decorative collection of 1920's-vintage admission cards for speak-easies, including the Mona Lisa, at 36 West 56th Street; the Son of the Sheik, at 77 Washington Street, and the New Ball and Chain, at 56 East 52d St.

A Declaration in Danger

On Friday, administrators of the society released a list of 178 objects they had put up last month as collateral for a \$1.5 million loan from Sotheby's, the auction house. The most sensitive of the items is probably a copy of the Declaration of Independence from the 1776 John Dunlap printing.

Juliana Sciolla, the society's operating officer, said there are 24 extant copies of the Dunlap printing, including two at the New York Public Library and one at the Pierpont Morgan Library, and that the society was keeping a better, one-of-a-kind printing by another New York printer, also made in 1776.

"Furthermore," Ms. Sciolla said, "if worse came to worst and the collateral were about to be sold, we have the right to substitute items."

Patricia U. Bonomi, a New York University professor who specializes in early New York history, said that if the Dunlap printing were sold, "the possibility of comparing the two printings would be lost."

"The breakup of collections like this is something that historians have to deplore," she said.

Mr. Katz of the American Council of Learned Societies put it even more strongly. "If we can't keep all this in New York," he said, "the city will be committing cultural suicide."