

Thomas Jefferson

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Discovered: Jefferson's list of George Wythe's 'legacie'

ONE OF THE MORE significant of the many lists that Thomas Jefferson made during his life has been discovered and identified by a member of the Monticello staff.

The whereabouts, or even existence, of Jefferson's handwritten list of the books he inherited from his law teacher and mentor, George Wythe, was unknown until Endrina Tay, associate foundation librarian for technical services at Monticello's Jefferson Library, stumbled upon it while visiting the Massachusetts Historical Society.

On June 12, 1806, President Jefferson received sad news in Washington, D.C. A letter arrived from Richmond informing him that Wythe, his "faithful and beloved Mentor in youth, and ... most affectionate friend through life," had died four days earlier.

Wythe, a prominent jurist and a signer of the Declaration of Independence, had suffered an untimely death after being poisoned with arsenic by George Wythe Sweeney, his grandnephew. Sweeney had forged checks to pay gambling debts and then resorted to homicide in the hope of inheriting Wythe's estate.

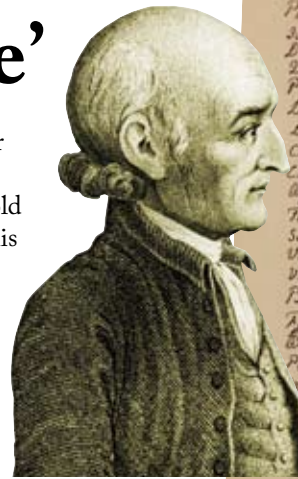
Jefferson had studied law under Wythe in Williamsburg during the 1760s. The two men respected and admired each other's accomplishments and

remained devoted friends over the decades.

In early 1806, the 79-year-old Wythe bequeathed Jefferson his library and some personal objects. In a codicil to his will, Wythe stipulated: "I give my books and small philosophical apparatus to Thomas Jefferson, president of the united states of America; a legacie considered abstractly perhaps not deserving a place in his musaeum, but, estimated by my good will to him, the most valuable to him of any thing which i have power to bestow."

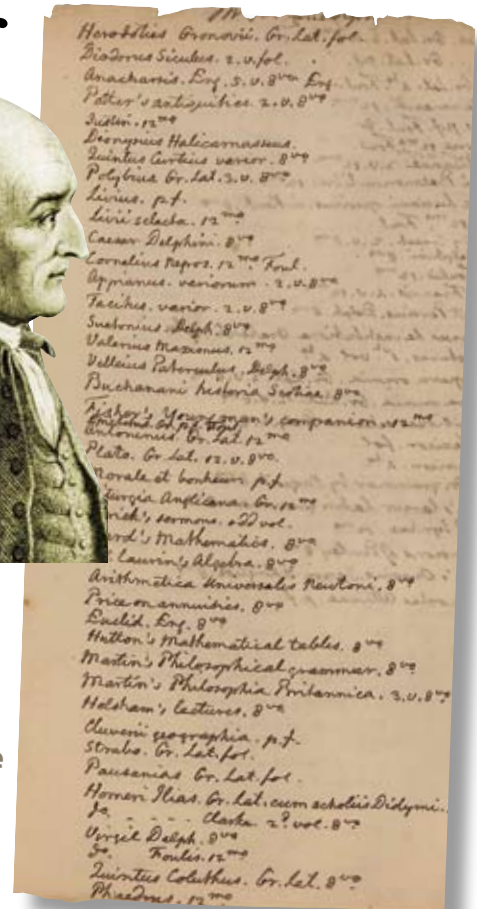
Following Wythe's burial, this bequest became the subject of several letters between Jefferson and William DuVal, the executor of Wythe's estate. In July 1806, DuVal delivered a catalog of Wythe's books to Jefferson's agent in Richmond, who then had the books packed up and transported. In late August, Wythe's library arrived by wagon at Monticello, together with the book catalog. This list has never been found, and documentation concerning the contents and full extent of Wythe's "legacie" to Jefferson had been unknown — until recently.

During a visit to the Massachusetts Historical Society in Boston late last year, Continued on next page.



George Wythe (1726-1806) was Jefferson's legal mentor and longtime friend.

Library of Congress



A portion of Jefferson's list of the books he received from Wythe.

Massachusetts Historical Society

Thomas Jefferson

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COMMENTS?
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Wythe 'legacie'

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Tay had the opportunity to examine a handwritten list of books from the society's collection of Jefferson's papers. The previous week, she had fielded a reference question concerning Wythe's books and learned that Jefferson gave to family members titles from Wythe's library that he already owned. As she turned the pages of this unfamiliar list in the MHS collection and noticed the law books and other titles listed under the names of Jefferson family members and other individuals, it dawned on her that the list could be Jefferson's inventory of the books he had inherited from Wythe.

To confirm her educated hunch, Tay worked with Jeremy Dibbell, assistant reference librarian at MHS. They were able to match extant Jefferson books that had a Wythe connection with titles found in the booklist. And by tracing Jefferson's correspondence during the period, they managed to reconstruct the events leading up to the arrival of the Wythe books at Monticello sometime between Aug. 17 and 30, 1806.

The research by Tay and Dibbell also determined that in September 1806, while home from Washington at Monticello, Jefferson took the time to inventory the Wythe library. A consummate list-maker and bibliophile,

he compared the books against his own library catalog and made a 12-page (eight written, four blank) list of 338 titles, representing some 649 volumes. Of these, he designated 183 titles to family members and other individuals and kept the remaining 155 for himself.

"This find not only expands our knowledge of Wythe's extensive library of legal, classical, and literary works, but provides us with a better appreciation of the care and attention Jefferson afforded to Wythe's bequest," Tay said. "Jeremy and I hope that this booklist will prove useful in future scholarship on Wythe, Jefferson, and other individuals named on it."

A transcription of Jefferson's Wythe library list is available online at <http://tjlibraries.monticello.org/transcripts/wythelibrary/1.html>. That Web page also has links to images of the original pages on the Massachusetts Historical Society's site and an annotated catalog of Wythe's library on LibraryThing.com.



The books bequeathed by Wythe were part of the second of the three libraries that Jefferson assembled in his lifetime. T.J.F.