

Born in 1815, **William Darlington** spent most of his life pursuing his own avid curiosity about the world. He collected maps of emerging territories; letters written by the nation's first president, George Washington; rare religious manuscripts; and more. Today, much of his personal library is part of the University Library System's Special Collections department, where surprises abound.

Written by
Ervin Dyer

Photography
courtesy of
the University
Library System's
Department of
Special Collections.

In the summer of 1886, the elderly attorney, leaning on his walking stick, entered into the sunny, oblong room, the brightest space in his manse in the woods. He turned to gaze out the three large bay windows. Looking south, through the veranda doors, he saw the lilies of the valley running free in the fields, the rolling Allegheny River and, in the distance, the green knolls of what is now Highland Park.

But, in this library, his attention soon shifted to the forest of more than 14,000 books, magazines, manuscripts, and maps that filled the walls at Guyasuta, his breezy estate named for a Seneca leader and scout to George Washington. Here, the genial lawyer indulged his vast curiosity about botany, geography, politics, natural science, religion, democracy, and—of course—history.

For William Darlington, history was magic, an immersion into a wondrous search of the human soul. This magic produced his passion for books that documented the opening up of the great Western frontier. He wrote and published on the native American Indians, gathering stories on their rituals, histories of wars, and captives, often using the language of the “red race” to describe their world. What he amassed on the early stories of the unfolding of a growing nation are unparalleled: His collection contains bound volumes of his own notes and research on such topics as the Ohio Company, an English land speculation company; Forts Pitt, Duquesne, Shippen, and Kittanning; the Allegheny River; and the city of Pittsburgh.

He collected as if consumed by a fever. He gathered some of George Washington's personal papers. It wasn't enough. He harvested letters penned by political, military, and literary figures such as Colonel Henry Bouquet, General Cornwallis, Alexander Hamilton, Andrew Jackson, Daniel Webster, and Hugh Henry Brackenridge, the founder of the University of Pittsburgh.



Above: William Darlington, c. 1886. Right: A hand-colored lithograph of Jack-O-Pa, a Chippewa chief, is from the *History of the Indian Tribes of North America*, dated between 1837 and 1844.

Something



Special



Top: Pitt's Special Collections contains many of the personal records of Mary Roberts Rinehart, a Pittsburgh native and noted mystery writer.

Center: The inaugural program of the first performance at Pittsburgh's Stanley Theater, now the Benedum Center for Performing Arts.



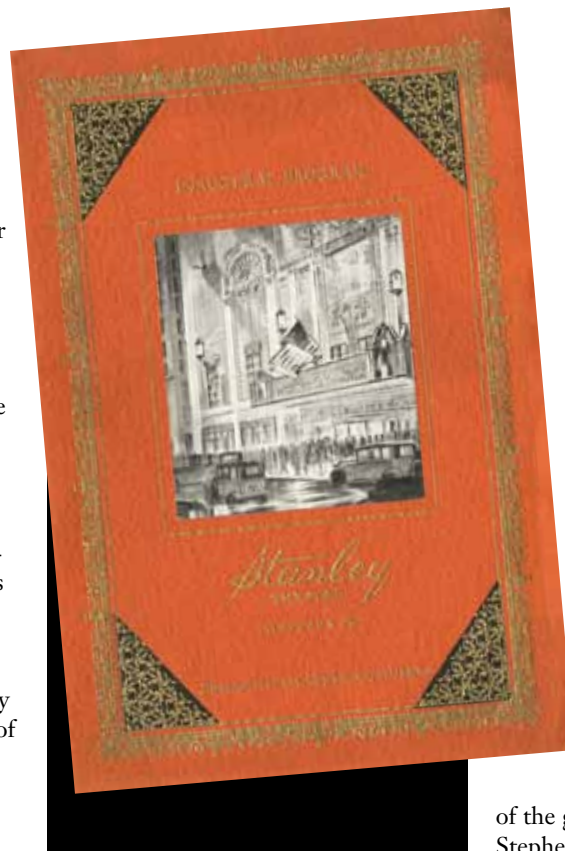
Top: An illustration of the wood-engraving of the King of Hearts in Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* from a limited Sesquicentennial Edition. The original work was first published in 1865.

Right: An example from a collection of vintage photos showing the devastation of London after bombings by Hitler's air force during WWII.

His passion spilled over to include poetry, literature, and English, Spanish, and Irish ballads. He owned a Geneva Bible, a sacred text a half-century older than the St. James Bible. William Shakespeare, John Milton and John Donne all read the Geneva Bible, and it was one of the Bibles that crossed the water with the Pilgrims. Also in the collection: A number of travel books more than 200 years old detailing voyages from the North Cape to the polar seas.

Today, this rare trove of material—The Darlington Memorial Library Collection—belongs to the University of Pittsburgh, where it is a crown jewel in the library system's Special Collections Department.

Like many of its counterparts across the nation, Special Collections is a repository for rare books, age-old manuscripts, and one-of-a-kind materials that are bequeathed to, gifted to, or purchased for the University of Pittsburgh. Together, the collections—which are kept in several locations within the library system—are a treasure of more than 52,000 physical volumes, 560 linear feet of manuscripts and archives, 13,000 photographs, 500,000 theater programs, and various slides, microfilms, posters, recordings, ephemera, and memorabilia documenting both personal zeal and public life.



Although the collections are kept at various storage and preservation sites, the Special Collections Room, located on the third floor of the Hillman Library, offers a quiet visitors' hub with a genteel, built-in hush. A soothing amber glow welcomes bibliophiles, scholars, and the plain-ol' curious. Because of their rare and unique nature, these collections are noncirculating and, traditionally, must be visited for access. Now, though, many of the collections are being digitized, offering open access to their mysteries via the Internet. The Darlington Collection, for instance, can be visited at <http://darlington.library.pitt.edu>.

One of the oldest items in the Pitt collection is a leaf from the letters of St. Jerome that dates to 1466, so preservation is often the first rule of business. When possible, some materials are conserved, rebound, or boxed, then kept in the Special Collections room, protected against the devils of dust, humidity, and harmful light. All of the care adds a white-glove tenor to this place, a sense of the sacred in the safeguarding of fragile items. There is warmth here, too. It is stoked by the attentive staff of librarians, historians, and preservationists, who agree this space is a not a museum but rather a living, welcoming "open house."

"We want the public here," says Jeanann Croft Haas, head of Special Collections and Preservation, as she snaps on

a protective glove before showing a visitor Darlington's fragile collection of letters from George Washington. "We want classes to come. We want students to use our stations. We work with professors who can build lectures around what we have here. This is a teaching collection."

Of course it is, and the lessons that can flow from here are endless. The mass of materials on hand meanders through the worlds of music, art, and drama: The Fidelis Zitterbart Collection, given to the University in 1960, contains nearly 1,500 manuscript compositions from a man who was a contemporary

of the great American music maestro Stephen Foster. The atrocity of war is evident in 143 photographic images from the Associated Press and the Graphic Photo Union showing the devastation of London during WWII bombings by Hitler's air force. An endowment supports the Ford E. and Harriet R. Curtis Theatre Collection. This collection has more than 500,000 theater programs, including a facsimile of the Ford's Theatre playbill from the night of President Lincoln's assassination, dozens of histories and items from Pittsburgh's local theaters, and reels of Fred Kelly (A&S '28), the son of East Liberty and older brother of Gene Kelly (A&S '33), acting in a few University productions. Of note, too, are the Archives of Scientific Philosophy. This storehouse of books and lecture notes includes the scholarly papers of influential philosophers like Hans Reichenbach and Rudolf Carnap, including correspondence they shared with other modern thinkers instrumental in advancing quantum mechanics; space, time and relativity theory; and theories in the logic of math.

Other charms shine all around these collections, neatly tucked away and precisely catalogued among the temperature-controlled stacks: Poetry and pamphlets on Cooperative movements, rare editions of texts by iconic authors, Brazilian literature and the biography and personal papers of Pittsburgh native daughter and noted mystery writer Mary

One of the oldest items in the Pitt collection is a leaf from the letters of St. Jerome that dates to 1466, so preservation is often the first rule of business. When possible, some materials are conserved, rebound, or boxed, then kept in the Special Collections room, protected against the devils of dust, humidity, and harmful light.

Roberts Rinehart. First editions of noted Spanish author Ramon Gomez de la Serna and a schoolbook collection with texts as old as the Spanish Conquest.

But, perhaps, nothing shines brighter than that rarest of gems in the Darlington collection. It's the John James Audubon 19th-century masterwork, *The Birds of America*, another copy of which recently sold at a Sotheby's auction for \$10 million. Audubon was a dashing self-taught naturalist who dreamed of cataloguing and painting all the birds of North America. He was born in Haiti and spent time as a young man in the woods of Pennsylvania, near Valley Forge. He called the place paradise. The hunting and fishing there fueled his frenzy for the creation of *The Birds of America*, which became one of the largest—and rarest—books in the world, a work that rivals the importance of the Gutenberg Bible.

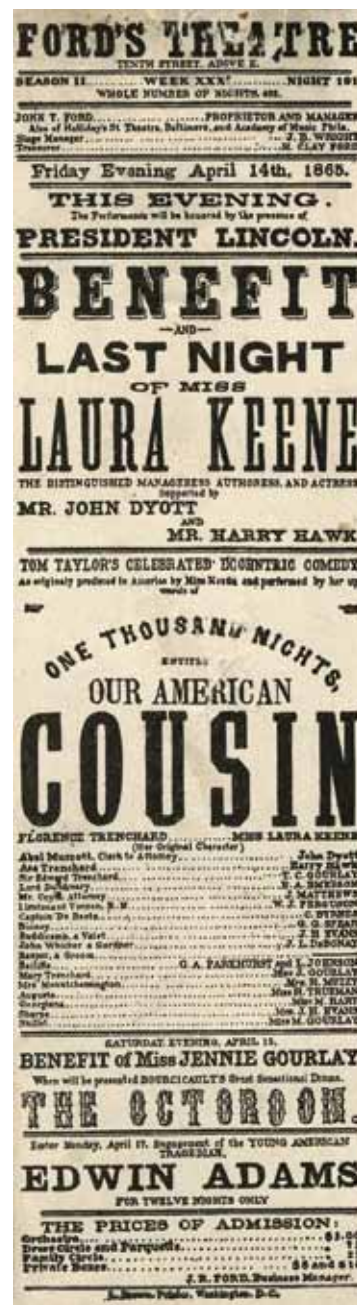
William Darlington, too, had his own frenzy with botany. And when the serious lawyer with the dark arch of eyebrows paid \$400 for the four oversized, bound volumes in 1852, he must have been astounded. The authentic details in the meticulous portraits of passenger pigeons (drawn in Pittsburgh), wild turkeys, purple finches, and 432 other birds make them flutter with life, as if the birds are ready to fly off the page. The book is both an awesome display of scientific accuracy and art. The birds are painted life size, depicted in the midst of their natural, often predatory behaviors. It's possible to count the hairs on the necks of the wild turkeys and see the dimples in the plumage of the purple finch. Every day, multiple times a day, someone comes into the library to access the Audubon collection. The Audubon book has also been digitized, is accessible online, and is one of the most heavily used digital collections in the University Library System, says Croft Haas.

Darlington's Audubon book and, indeed, his entire library from Guyasuta came to Pitt's Special Collections the same way many other items do: They were a gift. Darlington's daughters, Mary O'Hara Darlington and Edith Darlington Ammon, gave the University all 14,000



volumes of their father's collection, beginning with an initial gift in 1918 and a second in 1925. The daughters, connected to two of the oldest families in Pittsburgh, were part of the fabric of history in early Western Pennsylvania and perhaps understood better than anyone the value of preserving their family's collections. Their mother was Mary Carson O'Hara Darlington, herself the granddaughter of James O'Hara, an Army general who established trade with Native Americans and became one of Pittsburgh's first industrialists with a glassmaking business. O'Hara Township is named after him.

The daughters also gave a \$1 million endowment to maintain their father's collection, which was originally located in The Darlington Memorial Library, a cozy Victorian-era space once situated on the sixth floor of the Cathedral of Learning. Visitors walked through a wrought-iron gate, into a red-carpeted grand room, where arched doorways opened into smaller alcoves stuffed with books. Beginning roughly two decades



Far left: Newspaper broadsides were an extensive part of Darlington's library, including this article, which details the 1799 funeral procession for U.S. President George Washington.

Left: A facsimile of the Ford's Theatre program from the night that President Lincoln was assassinated.

Below: This geisha was chosen by local judges in Japan as a "Tokyo Beauty." The hand-painted photograph, from a set of vintage Japanese texts, is 100 years old.



ago, aspects of the collection moved into the University's Special Collections department, where it now exists as a prized acquisition.

Nearly two centuries after Darlington's birth, his collection lives on, reflecting a rich, varied portrait of a 19th-century gentleman and his insatiable curiosity about life—the private and the public, the past and the present, offering a glimpse into the fledgling nation when it was an expanding New Frontier.



Examples from the library's rare collection of John Audubon prints, one of only five complete sets of *The Birds of America in the United States*. From left: Pink Flamingo, American White Pelican, Fish Crow, and Snowy Owl.

Darlington, born in 1815, was descended from a Cheshire, England, family who first came to Chester, Pa., in 1711. At the time of Darlington's birth, James Madison was president, and Pittsburgh was on the rise from its beginnings as a village of 400 homes, when

hogs and dogs roamed past crookedly built structures, and drays filled the dirt streets. In Darlington's early years, about 5,000 people lived in the river town, a smoky triangle already dusted with soot from the glass, leather, and copper industries being fueled by coal.

Darlington's father was a carpenter who

expanded his trade into ownership of a hardware store. He and his wife nurtured their son's curiosity, and the young Darlington grew increasingly interested in planting and pioneer life, particularly in the ways of Western Pennsylvania, the gateway to the West.

Education was key to his advancement. According to one legend, in 1833, he walked from Pittsburgh through the oak and walnut trees and into the great beyond in Washington County to attend Jefferson Academy, a preparatory school linked to Jefferson College, a precursor to today's Washington and Jefferson College. There, annual tuition and expenses cost about \$25, and he studied Latin and Greek and took classes in oratory and arithmetic. He later apprenticed with a local attorney, earning his law credentials in 1837. In time, he became a trustee of the University of Pittsburgh, when it

Every day, multiple times a day, someone comes into the library to access the Audubon collection, which has also been digitized, is accessible online, and is one of the most heavily used digital collections in the University Library System.


was known as the Western University of Pennsylvania.

When possible, Darlington and his wife, Mary, a published author who read five languages, traveled to New York City to greet shipments that bore the latest installments of a novel by Dickens or Thackeray. For the rest of his life, he often talked of books, photography, or the news of the day.

Darlington died in 1889 at the age of 74. He was at Guyasuta, surrounded by family and his beloved books. The carpenter's son had traveled the world, argued before the U.S. Supreme Court, and amassed more than 14,000 books, the equivalent of a book acquired every

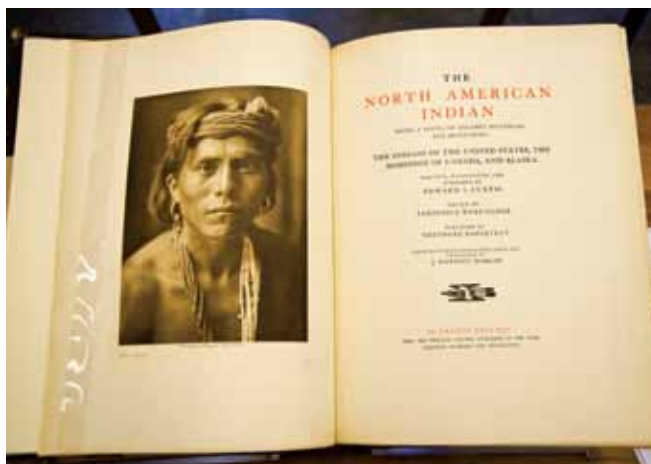
other day over the course of his remarkable life. He adored books so much that he kept careful documentation of his purchases, pressing scores of receipts into his ledgers and keeping the minutiae of his correspondence with booksellers and noted book collectors. His most valuable volumes he kept upstairs, in a hallway near his bedroom. But downstairs in his library, his thicket of journals, periodicals, and historical materials made the collection, amassed over his lifetime, one of the largest west of the Allegheny Mountains.

Today in the 21st century, even the distant past can be present with the flip of a page or the click of a mouse thanks

to the foresight of collectors and benefactors like the Darlington family. That is, perhaps, the true value of all Special Collections—rare access to the breathing, thumping, daily rhythms of past lives caught in the currents of history. 



The original desk of William Darlington remains in the Cathedral of Learning, where the lawyer's collection was once housed.



One of a series of texts on *The North American Indian*, published by Edward S. Curtis between 1907-1930. The set contains a forward by former U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt.