



a treasure trove of
AMERICAN HISTORY

by Margaret Clevenger

The sheer number of volumes is impressive. With more than twenty thousand books and pamphlets, another fifteen thousand photographs, and one thousand other items including maps, the A.S. Williams Americana Collection is a treasure trove of American history from the late 1600s until 2009.

Stephen M. Rowe's book *From A Love of History*, published in 2013 by The University of Alabama Press, captures the essence of the collection with hundreds of photographs of items and brief histories of each. The book, at 169 pages including the index, is a visual treat and an absorbing visit across centuries of American culture.

Rowe is the long time curator of the collection which was housed at the Eufaula Athenaeum until 2010, when the collection was acquired by The University of Alabama. He has known Steve Williams, an executive with Protective Life Insurance Company in Birmingham, for decades. Rowe is in the antiquarian book business and Williams has been a client and friend since 1985.

"Steve is a native of

Eufaula and he wanted to move his collection from his house in Birmingham down here," Rowe said. "That was the driving force of him buying this building in 2000. I guess it took about two years to get it like he wanted and to start moving the collection. We had professional movers, but Steve and I packed and unpacked the collection."

During the course of setting up the books and photographs in the Athenaeum, Williams asked Rowe, who was living in Raleigh, North Carolina, to move to Eufaula and oversee the newly opened historian's dream. With a degree in history from North Carolina State University and experience in archival materials and private manuscripts, Rowe had the background for the job, but was not sure he wanted to move. He agreed to stay for a year, but still remains

there today.

"Packing and unpacking was fairly simple because of the way Steve had his books organized," Rowe said. The Athenaeum is about 6,500 square feet and the two men placed the books in sections. "We had the presidential collection and it was in the front room and was basically chronological by president. The civil war books were in one section, southern fiction in another, and biographies in one section by subject, regardless of author. We never had a card catalog or an online catalog of our books. If I wanted to check if we had a particular book, I could just walk over to the shelf. We had good control over this, and we didn't keep regular hours like a library, so the need for pulling individual titles was not a day-to-day thing."



From left, Stephen M. Rowe and Steve Williams at the Eufaula Athenaeum

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-Dr. Louis Pitschmann

According to Rowe, The University of Alabama acquired approximately 95% of the Williams Americana Collection in 2010, and moved it to the Amelia Gayle Gorgas Library on UA’s Tuscaloosa campus.

Dr. Louis Pitschmann, Dean of Libraries at UA, facilitated the acquisition. “The Williams Collection builds on existing strengths and brings our special collections, particularly those pertaining to the South and the history of photography, to a new level of excellence and national prominence,” he said.

During the process of the University acquiring the collection, Rowe said he and Dr. Pitschmann were talking one afternoon when the dean asked if he would be interested in writing a book about the collection. “I told him I would,” Rowe said.

Pitschmann offers a simple explanation of why a book on the subject is needed. “Collections of this magnitude and exceptional nature require a detailed guide to reveal their treasures.”

“I worked on the book, ran this place (the Athenaeum), and ran my book business,” Rowe said.

“It was around the clock. I started writing the book on January 2, 2013, and stayed at the computer through March. In fact, I bought the computer to do the book. Everything else I had composed on a regular old Brother typewriter.”

Rowe was the ghost writer for the book *Battle Maps of the Civil War*. A native of Richmond, Virginia, he is now working on a book about the Battle of Seven Pines, Virginia. Rowe said he is also composing that one on his computer.

In the foreword to *From A Love of History*, Wayne Flint, noted historian and Professor Emeritus at

Auburn University, wrote “I have long been fascinated by the intellectual history of book collecting and book collectors. I was fascinated by the eclecticism of the A.S. Williams Collection. This book will take its place with the others I love, telling the story of a journey of discovery and describing what was found.”

In preparation for writing the book, Rowe chose items from the Americana Collection and spent a week in Tuscaloosa pulling photographs, books, and artifacts to be photographed. “Robin McDonald did 550 photographs for the book,” he said.

From A Love of History is divided into ten chapters ranging from presidents and founding fathers to manuscripts and special archives. Two of the longest chapters are on the Civil War and Southern fiction.

In the chapter on the Civil War is a photograph of President Lincoln, standing a head taller than the soldiers around him, on the battlefield at Antietam. The photo was taken in October, 1862.

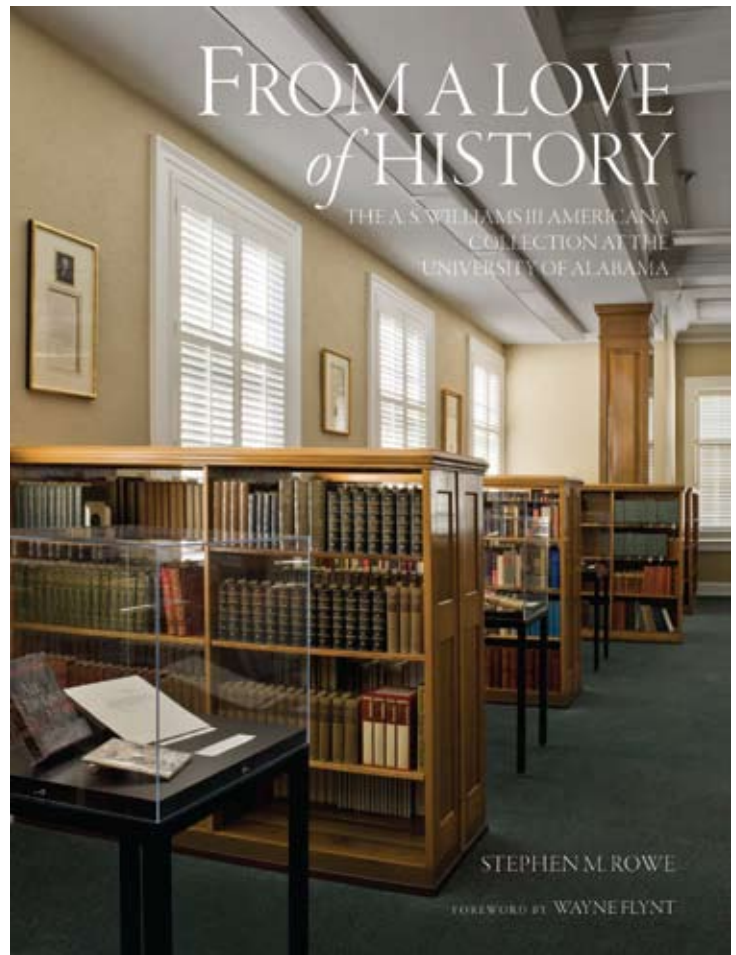
In chapter five titled “People and Places: Prints, Postcards, and Related Graphics,” readers will find a fine and rare example of a messotint engraving of General George Washington. The piece was published in 1871 by Valentine Green and was based on a painting by John Trumbull, who was called “the painter of the Revolution.”

Covered in the fiction section are first editions of many iconic Southern tales including the first British edition of *To Kill a Mockingbird* and the first edition of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. One of the photographs included in this section is of a grinning seven-month-old Truman Capote, his famous face captured and easily recognizable even at such a young age.

In the final chapter of the book, the pages of the 1863 register from the Battle House in Mobile reveal the signatures of well-known men and women who were guests at the famous hotel. Confederate generals Joseph E. Johnston and John C. Breckinridge stayed at the hotel. So did Captain A.H. Keller, the father of Helen Keller. Confederate spy Belle Boyd slept here as did Horace Hunley, the inventor of the first submarine to sink an enemy ship.

Mary Bess Paluzzi, Associate Dean for Special Collections at the University Libraries, is in charge of the Williams Collection. “We are to the point now

The cover of the new publication (top right) and the facade of the Athenaeum, located in Eufaula, Alabama (bottom right)





President Lincoln on the battlefield at Antietam, October, 1862

of doing the original cataloguing for the unique items,” Paluzzi said. Included in those items are 450 Confederate imprints.

“A Confederate imprint is a publication printed in the Confederate states between April, 1861 and April, 1865,” Paluzzi said. “They are a very collectible item, especially those that were printed toward the end of the war because paper was so scarce and there were so few commercial printers under Confederate control.”

Right now mostly UA students are using the collection, but researchers from off campus can call to check for availability of items and to make an appointment. Paluzzi said the manuscript collection is a wealth of untapped historical documentation.

The collection is housed in one of the original reading rooms on the third floor of the Gorgas Library. “It has an open fireplace and it looks out into the tree canopy,” Paluzzi said. “It’s beautiful.”

The title of Rowe’s book came from an interview he did with Williams for an article that appeared in *Alabama Heritage*. “I asked him what got him started in all this,” Rowe said. “And he told me that it was a love of history. It seemed like a logical title.”

With such a large number of books removed from the Eufaula Athenaeum, one might think the building now sits empty, but that is not the case. “We kept all the Eufaula and Barbour County-related material,” Rowe said. “We also kept a significant core collection

of books relating to the American Revolution, founding fathers, and the early presidents, which we are rebuilding. The front room is now looking like it did in 2009.” ■

Margaret Clevenger’s work has appeared in many newspapers and magazines including Alabama Heritage, Mississippi Magazine, Pennsylvania Magazine, and Southern Lady. She has a story, “Whistling Past the Graveyard” in the anthology Tuscaloosa Tales: Stories of Tuscaloosa and its People. She is a regular contributor to Jubilation.