Revolutionary ‘bloggers’

FAU’s exhibition of pamphlets shows historic debates in Colonial America

BY JAMES D. DAVIS
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They didn’t have The Huffington Post or Politico three centuries ago, but opinions still spread fast through pamphlets. Many writers ranted about the British monarchy in the years before the American Revolution. Others fired back at their “disloyal” opponents. And their words still echo in exhibitions like “Pamphleteer in America.”

On display at the Wimberly Library of Florida Atlantic University, Boca Raton, the exhibition has the work of several “stars” of the revolution: Thomas Paine, John Adams and John Hancock. The 35 pamphlets, newspapers and other items offer a peek at the heated debate in the years before war broke out.

“There were passionate opinions on both sides,” says William Miller, dean of university libraries at FAU. “Some people resented having to put taxes to England for anything. Others said they’d rather do that than have crazy people overthrow the monarchy and take over the government.”

“Because nobody knew what the government would be.”

The papers, five to 30 pages long, were the colonial version of blogs. Written between 1764 and 1789, they were widely published and read aloud in taverns, churches and town meetings — the 18th century version of social networks.

Among the items are early editions of Paine’s “Common Sense,” considered to be the sharpest collection of arguments for independence from England; the Pennsylvania Chronicle and Universal Advertiser, a mid-18th century newspaper; and the “Federalist Papers,” a collection of 85 articles by John Jay, James Madison and Alexander Hamilton, setting out concepts of government that still influence the nation.

The materials have lasted so long because they’re actually made of old rags, not the acidified pulp used today. Old clothing was pulped, liquefied and run over a wire mesh frame to dry into sheets.

“That was a bone of contention, too — the British even taxed paper,” Miller says.

The exhibition, through Sept. 28, represents only a fraction of a gift in 2006 from the estate of the late Marvin Weiner, who had homes in Boca Raton and the Philadelphia area. Weiner was a businessman with a passion for the Revolutionary Wars and the 19th century European Enlightenment.

If you go
What: “Pamphleteer in America,” a collection of pamphlets, newspapers and other documents from 18th century Colonial America
When: Noon-midnight Sundays, 8 a.m.-midnight Mondays-Thursdays, 8 a.m.-6 p.m. Fridays and noon-6 p.m. Saturdays, through Sept. 28
Where: Wimberly Library at Florida Atlantic University, 777 Glades Road, Boca Raton
Cost: Free
Information: 561-297-2693

“He wanted [the collection] to be seen and used by the public,” Miller says. “He knew that if he’d given it to a major research library, it would just sit on a shelf. We give lectures about the materials, and we have groups visit to look at them. That’s the way he would have wanted it.”

Weiner left FAU about 1,000 books and perhaps 2,000 pamphlets. They make up one of the largest collections of Revolutionary-era materials, Miller says.

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