FAU makes Colonial American collection more accessible, honors donor

The Pennsylvania Evening Post from July 8, 1776 was the first newspaper to publish the Declaration of Independence and is among the more than 11,000 books, pamphlets and documents that make up the Marvin & Sybil Weiner Spirit of America Collection at Florida Atlantic University. (March Randell, Sun Sentinel April 29, 2012)

By Scott Travis, Sun Sentinel
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Morton Weiner loved reading about American history and always dreamed of replicating the vast library of another history and literary buff, Thomas Jefferson.

Weiner, a Philadelphia businessman who retired to Boca Raton, far exceeded his goal. For more than 60 years, he saved his lunch money to buy 13,000 books and other materials, twice as many as the Library of Congress acquired from Jefferson’s Monticello library.

Weiner’s collection includes the original Articles of Confederation drafted in 1777 and the first printing of the Declaration of Independence in the Philadelphia Evening Post.

He died in 2010, but his vast library lives on at Florida Atlantic University. In 2006, Weiner and his late wife, Sybil, donated the estimated $3.8 million collection to the Boca Raton campus. FAU will pay tribute to him with a posthumous honorary doctorate of humane letters at a graduation ceremony Friday.

“This formal recognition of his life-long passion for books and scholarship, especially as they related to the concept of freedom and democracy in America, would have made him very proud and grateful,” said his son, Heidi Weiner of Cape May, N.J.

The Marvin and Sybil Weiner Spirit of America collection is also becoming more accessible to the public. While you have to make an appointment to view most items, reproductions of the more popular items will be permanently displayed on large-scale posters on the first floor of the library’s west wing, starting this week.

The library also plans to make digital versions of many of the collections, so researchers and history buffs from around the world can access the rare works.

Weiner spent 65 years combing through bookstores, estate sales and catalogs to add to his holdings. The gift established FAU as the major research center in the Southeast United States for study of the American Colonial period, university officials said.

“Usually, whenever you want to see historical items of this nature you have to go to Philadelphia, Chicago or somewhere else in the Northeast,” Weiner said in 2006 when he donated the collection. “There’s nothing south of the Mason-Dixon line...it can now be appreciated by those in the southeast part of the U.S.”

The materials cover a wide range of topics, including law, philosophy and literature from the 18th to 19th centuries. There are first-edition works by such greats as John Milton, Montesquieu and Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

“It’s a scholar’s dream,” said Victoria Thur, special collections librarian. “It’s the foundations of modern western thought.”

The collection also includes numerous historical pamphlets, including an original copy of Thomas Paine’s “Common Sense.”

“I like to think of a pamphlet as the Twitter of its day,” Thur said. “If you wanted to get information out quickly, you did it through pamphlets.”

FAU also opened a study hall in the same room as the Weiner collection, giving students a chance to view certain items through a glass case. These include several volumes of the Federalist, portions of the Notes from the Continental Congress and the shorter King William and Queen Mary grants to the province of Massachusetts Bay in 1700.

Some of the books even came with newspaper clippings attached and many had handwritten notes from Weiner or previous owners.

“He actually read a lot of the books,” Thur said. “He made sure he bought whole books. He wouldn’t buy a book that was cut apart. Whatever you see is what he put in his hands. It’s amazing. Every time I come in here, I’m blown away.”

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