Libraries' Surprising Special Collections

I walk through an arched marble doorway and into one of the loveliest rooms I've seen anywhere. Designed to look like a Renaissance Library, the John Griswold White Reading Room sweeps views of Lake Erie and downtown Cleveland, as well as a dazzling abundance of venerable books and objects. A lawyer and scholar who died in 1928, White was one of the library's greatest benefactors and his prodigious collections fill this room.

White was a progressive thinker who insisted that these collections be available to the public. I've come to look at his chess collection—donated upon his death and still growing through his endowment. It's possibly the world's largest collection—tied only with the Hague—with over 30,000 books about chess and checkers, newspapers columns, letters from chess masters, treatises on the game—including eighteenth-century Arabic manuscripts and more than 50 Indian treatises—tournaments records, handbooks, a wide range of literary works that have substantial mention of chess, thousands of chess pieces, and more. Much more, including the death mask of American chess queen Gisela Khan Gresser and a grumpy, hand-scrubbed note from American-born Bobby Fischer, the 11th World Chess Champion.

Researchers from around the world use these materials to document and analyze the history of the game, but I—a Cleveland for more than 30 years—have never visited this room until now. I've since discovered that many other libraries around the country hold odd and unique collections, which patrons wandering the circulating stacks are largely unaware.

Here are seven more surprising collections, lurking in public or university libraries around the country.

• Among its many collections, the Boston Public Library has what it believes is the largest collection of fore-edge painted books in any public library. These books feature a painting along the fore-edge (opposite the spine) of the book that can only be seen when the pages are subtly fanned—when the book is closed, gold leaf on the outside edge of the pages hides the image. The technique originated with Samuel Meares, royal bookbinder to Charles II from 1660-1683, and the artists usually embellished already printed books of literature with scenes that corresponded to the content. The Boston collection includes books from the late 1700s to the mid-1800s. They were donated in 1941 by banker Albert Wiggins.

• The University of Utah's J. Willard Marriott Library in Salt Lake City has a collection of 65,000 pages of Arabic papyri, papyri written in medieval and modern period, world legal and religious manuscripts, that are considered to be major treasures in world's libraries.

• Finally, Florida Atlantic University has a collection you can listen to: the Judaica Sound Archive was launched in 2002 by library volunteer Nathan Tinanoff, who feared the library's small sample of Jewish music would be dispersed and lost. Since he founded and became director of the archive, the recordings might be dispersed and lost. Since he founded and became director of the archive, the recordings might be dispersed and lost. Since he founded and became director of the archive, the recordings might be dispersed and lost. Since he founded and became director of the archive, the recordings might be dispersed and lost. Since he founded and became director of the archive, the recordings might be dispersed and lost. Since he founded and became director of the archive, the recordings might be dispersed and lost. Since he founded and became director of the archive, the recordings might be dispersed and lost.