



WISCONSIN STATE LAW LIBRARY

120 MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. BLVD.

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CELEBRATING 175
YEARS OF SERVICE

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Oldest Library in Wisconsin Celebrates 175 Years of Service

MADISON, Wis. - April 20 marks the 175th “birthday” of the Wisconsin State Law Library, the oldest library in the state. To honor the occasion, the staff is hosting a party in the library’s Reading Room on Wednesday, April 20, 2:00-3:00 p.m. Birthday cake will be served, and Chief Justice Shirley Abrahamson will read a proclamation by Governor Scott Walker recognizing the library’s 175 years of continuous service. “We are very proud and excited to celebrate this special milestone,” said Jane Colwin, State Law Librarian.

In addition to throwing a party, library staff and volunteers have been busily researching their old library catalogs, reading articles about the library’s history written by former staff, poring over newspaper clippings at the Wisconsin Legislative Reference Bureau and sifting through materials in the Wisconsin Historical Society archives in order to compile a more complete history of the library.

On April 20, 1836 then President Andrew Jackson signed an Act of Congress creating the Territory of Wisconsin, which included all of present day Wisconsin, Iowa, Minnesota and parts of North and South Dakota. The final provision in the act appropriated funds for the purchase of law books to support the new territorial government, and so the Wisconsin State Library, as it was first called, was established.

The initial collection consisted of congressional documents and debates and “books of a miscellaneous nature” acquired in Washington and Philadelphia. Its first home was a rented room in Burlington, Iowa. After its first legislative session in Belmont, Wisconsin, the territorial government moved to Burlington to await construction of a capitol building in the newly platted “Town of Madison,” the site they chose for the permanent capital. The library moved into the new building at Madison in 1841 and resided there - and in each subsequent capitol building - until 1999, when it once again operated out of temporary quarters during the construction of its current home in the Risser Justice Center, completed in 2002. More historical highlights are in the interactive timeline the staff has developed on the library’s 175th anniversary web page.

Their research has also brought the staff closer to identifying books in the collection that were probably among the first ones acquired back in 1836. “We haven’t been able to locate a list of the books purchased with the \$5,000 appropriated by the U.S. Congress as part of the organic act establishing the Territory of Wisconsin,” explained Colwin. “But we do have a catalog dated December 1840, and research by one of our volunteers has indicated that most of the books in that catalog were very likely part of the original collection.” After some research of her own in the library’s rare book room, Colwin agrees. “I found books on this list with ‘Wisconsin Library’ stamped on the leather bindings and hand-written accession numbers on the inside flyleaves.”

Today the Wisconsin State Law Library contains approximately 135,000 volumes and is located in the Risser Justice Center, 120 Martin Luther King, Jr. Blvd in downtown Madison. The collection includes Wisconsin and federal statutes, regulations and court opinions, laws of other states, practice guides, legal treatises and journals aimed at the practicing attorney, and public computers with databases providing access to both current and historical legal research materials. The library’s web site <http://wilawlibrary.gov> links visitors to free sources of Wisconsin and federal law, as well as information from legal and government information web sites that library staff has reviewed and categorized into over 400 different topics. The staff answers reference questions (but does not give legal advice), fills requests for copies of library materials, selects, orders and processes library materials, maintains the library’s web site, and develops, teaches and presents a wide variety of legal research classes and programs for judges, attorneys, librarians, and the public. The State Law Library also manages the legal resource centers located in the Milwaukee and Dane County courthouses.

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