

History Up Close



TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY

By **LYDIA HILL**

Within the walls of Texas A&M University's Cushing Memorial Library and Archives, history awaits. The earliest known Aggie ring in existence from 1889 gives a glimpse of university days gone by. A 4,000-year-old clay cuneiform tablet tells of a long-ago sheep-hide transaction. A mysterious, bloody inscription from a previous owner lurks in a 1533 occult book. A collection of Texas cookbooks shares recipes from before the days of standardized measurements. Early Latin American books contain student-drawn doodles of

flowers and birds in the margins. And the scent of Native American campfires still wafts from the pages of a 1685 Bible written in the Wampanoag language.

These are only a fraction of the treasures Cushing holds. As the university's official archive and special collections for 23 years, the library compiles and preserves books and other rare items. In this role, it serves as a gateway to history, transporting visitors to the times and places contained within the pages of its collections.

PRESERVING THE PAST

Cushing was built in 1930 as the university's first stand-alone library. In the late '90s, it underwent renovations to become the new home of the university's special collections unit. The building houses more than 260,000 volumes, from Shakespeare's second folio to modern-day comic books, says Beth Kilmarx, Cushing director and associate dean of special collections. The library organizes these items into collections, including rare books, gender and ethnic studies, and Texas and the Borderlands. Cushing also has one of the nation's largest science fiction and fantasy research collections, Kilmarx says, and is the official



COURTESY OF CUSHING MEMORIAL LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES

CUSHING MEMORIAL LIBRARY ARCHIVES

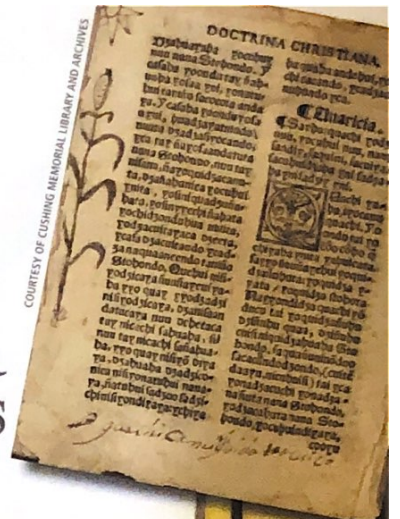
SAFEGUARDS RARE & UNUSUAL TREASURES

archival repository of "Game of Thrones" author George R.R. Martin. Replicas of the popular franchise's weapons Martin provided are some of the library's most viewed items.

As Texas A&M's archives, Cushing also preserves official university documents, student publications, photographs, and other artifacts, according to the library's website. "I love working with historic materials," Kilmarx says. "On a daily basis, I can work with books anywhere from the 1500s up to looking at digital collections."

All the library's items are available for public viewing, Kilmarx says. Visitors cannot browse the shelves or take any material home, but they can request the library faculty to pull items for them to read below the colorfully stenciled ceiling of the second-floor Kelsey Reading Room — provided they first wash their hands to remove any damaging natural oils, Kilmarx says. "We are not a museum," she explains. "[Our materials] are here to be used. So if people want to come in and look at the Gutenberg Bible leaf, they may."

Cushing also contains two floors of exhibits for visitors to explore. Some items are on long-term display, like an 1830 Texas map drawn by the "father of Texas," Stephen F. Austin. Others are part of the library's larger rotating exhibits,



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which have centered around themes ranging from climate change to Don Quixote, according to Cushing's website. The current exhibit, on display until December, shares LGBTQIA+ collections from Cushing as well as universities and archives in Houston. "We're always trying to show different points of views and the diversity of the collection," says Francesca Marini, Cushing's programming and outreach librarian who coordinates the library's exhibits and programs.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, a few thousand students, researchers and other history-loving members of the public took advantage of Cushing's services each month, Kilmarx says. Although physical traffic dropped during the pandemic, the library continued to meet researchers' needs through digitizing material, she adds. Cushing also connected with the public virtually through online talks and a blog, which Kilmarx says she plans to continue.

LIBRARY LIFE

Behind Cushing's collections and outreach is a dedicated team. Each collection has a curator responsible for

processing new materials, responding to patron and researcher questions, displaying the items through exhibits, and working with donors and vendors to grow the collection. "The curator of the collection is kind of the overlord of the collection," explains Jeremy Brett, curator of the science fiction and fantasy research collection.

Digital archivist John Bondurant collaborates with the curators to digitize items. He is also responsible for processing and retrieving digital materials, a role that often involves working with a wide array of technology and platforms, he says. "[Technology] is a toolkit to be able to help people find information or tell their story," he adds.

Library operations also rely on the behind-the-scenes work of catalogers, who add information about each item online. As Cushing's rare book and special collections cataloger, Felicia Piscitelli says she has developed quite the knowledge of different printers and historical periods through the books she catalogs. "You live with the collections in a way that you don't with a general collection," she says. "I love engaging with this kind of stuff."

Although everyone has a different role, the team works closely to fulfill visitors' requests that come through emails, phone calls, or in-person conversations. "It takes all of us working together to get over that finish line," says Anton duPlessis, curator of the colonial Mexican collection.

Sharing their passion for the literature and history they work with is a highlight of the job for many of the curators. "It's fun to watch people get really excited when they find they're allowed to interact with things," Brett says. "You're seeing people engaged," duPlessis adds. "You're expanding horizons."

No matter their interests, any visitor to Cushing can find something to get excited about, Kilmarx says. "We are open to all, and I would love them to come," she adds. "They can get lost in history in here."

Cushing's exhibits and reading room are open 9 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Mondays through Fridays. Walk-ins are welcome, but appointments are preferred. To schedule a tour or reserve items to view, call the library at (979) 845-1951 or visit cushing.library.tamu.edu. IN