

Alabama Treasures

THE BOOK CATALOGUE OF 1848: A TIME CAPSULE TO THE HISTORY OF THE UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA

BY JOHN H. SANDY

Great books are remembered long after publication. *The Catalogue of the Library of the University of Alabama With an Index of Subjects*, published by the University of Alabama (UA) Library in 1848, is one such book, and it merits attention as a special artifact and a historical treasure. For many years after its publication, this catalogue was a primary tool for managing collections, but today it represents far more and is a major piece of Alabama's cultural history.

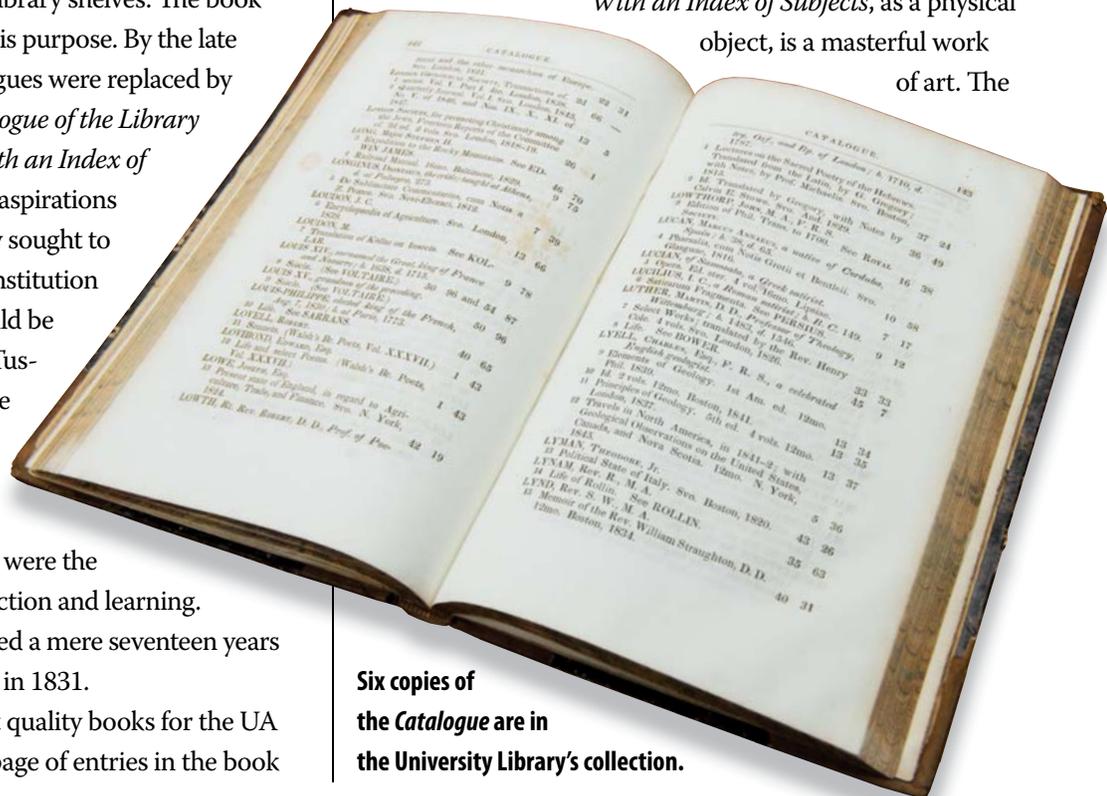
Before delving into this story, a little background on the organization of books in early libraries is necessary. Even while most mid-nineteenth-century university libraries were small, a system was needed to help manage collections and at the same time show readers what was available and further to help locate books on library shelves. The book catalogue admirably achieved this purpose. By the late nineteenth century, book catalogues were replaced by card catalogues. The 1848 *Catalogue of the Library of the University of Alabama With an Index of Subjects* revealed the hopes and aspirations of the university's leaders as they sought to show Alabamians that a major institution dedicated to higher learning could be carved out of the wilderness in Tuscaloosa. In essence, the catalogue would show readers what the university wanted to achieve and become. More basically, the books listed in the catalogue were the foundation of support for instruction and learning. The book catalogue was published a mere seventeen years after the university was founded in 1831.

The great care taken to select quality books for the UA library is evident on page after page of entries in the book

catalogue. Books on science, literature, religion, technology, and other fields from the early nineteenth century are represented, along with a few titles from earlier years. Scholars at the time would immediately recognize many classics and other important works, such as the fifth edition of *Principles of Geology* by Charles Lyell, the *Lectures on the Discovery of America and the Colonization of North America* by William Darby, and *Paradise Lost*, translated into French, by John Milton.

After evaluating the book catalogue, an editor at the Southern Literary Messenger observed, "We have been struck with the judicious selections that have been made and the choice editions of the works." In his Preface to the book catalogue, librarian Wilson G. Richardson indicated that the UA library owned 4,231 volumes in 1848.

The Catalogue of the Library of the University of Alabama With an Index of Subjects, as a physical object, is a masterful work of art. The



Six copies of the *Catalogue* are in the University Library's collection.

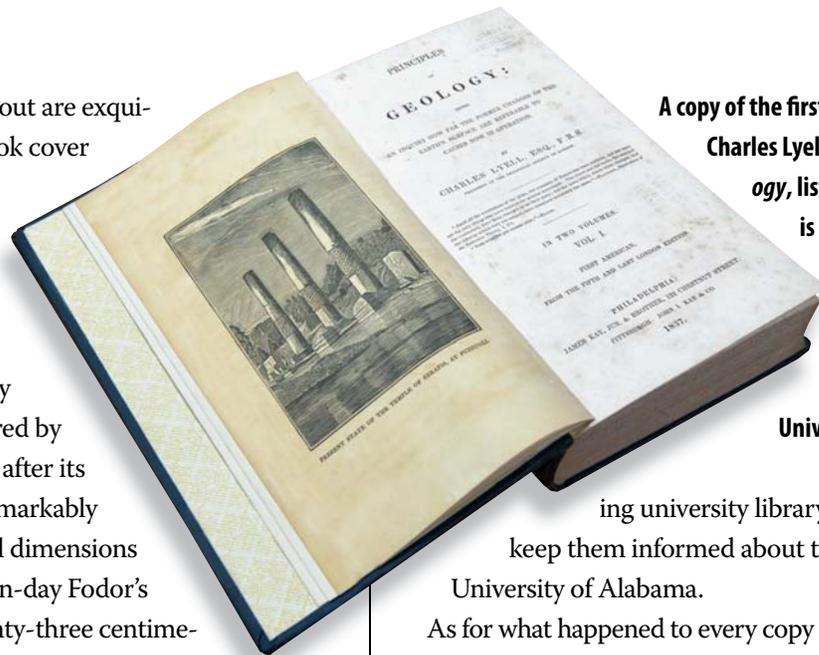
binding, typography, and layout are exquisite. On some copies, the book cover features a beautiful textured design and is dusty plum in color with medium brown wrapping on the spine. This makes for a very elegant presentation and may be the original binding ordered by the librarian. Even 167 years after its publication, the pages are remarkably white and supple. In physical dimensions the book resembles a modern-day Fodor's travel guide, measuring twenty-three centimeters in height by fourteen centimeters in width. It consists of one preliminary leaf and 257 pages, and it was printed by M. D. J. Slade in Tuscaloosa.

The book catalogue was modeled after the Signet Library of Edinburgh. The main part of the catalogue is a list of books in the library organized by author, with titles shown for each author, followed by a detailed subject index in the final twenty-three pages. About thirteen to fourteen bibliographic entries appear on each page.

It was compiled over two years, 1847–1848, and 225 copies were ordered, all unbound, to be sold for seventy-five cents per copy. Archival records show that the University paid \$1.75 per page for printing the book, with the total cost for printing being \$449.75. An additional cost of twenty-five cents per book was incurred to bind 210 copies.

The 1848 book catalogue was produced for practical reasons, but Richardson, author of the book, had grander motives in mind as well. The librarian wanted others in America to know about progress in higher education in Alabama. From handwritten notes in two of the copies, we know that the book catalogue was sent to literary publications and institutions outside Alabama. One copy, now owned by Widener Library at Harvard University, has wording on the flyleaf, "To the Editor of the N. Am. Review, from the Author."

Another copy carries a bookplate inside the back cover, on which appears the wording, "Presented to the South Carolina College Library, by the Author." For reasons and circumstances unknown, the copy sent to South Carolina College Library is currently in the collection of the W. S. Hoole Special Collections Library on the UA Campus in Tuscaloosa. By distributing copies to others, Richardson would help other libraries and scholars learn about build-



A copy of the first American edition of Charles Lyell's *Principles of Geology*, listed in the *Catalogue*, is still in the university's collection. (Photos by Robin McDonald; W. S. Hoole Special Collections Library, the University of Alabama)

ing university library collections and keep them informed about the then still-young University of Alabama.

As for what happened to every copy of the 1848 book catalogue, this remains a mystery. But six copies are still available today in the collections of the UA Libraries. Other copies are held by Yale University, Newberry Library, Amherst College, Boston Athenaeum, Harvard University, Duke University, Dartmouth College, Columbia University, Brown University, the University of Virginia, American Antiquarian Society, the Library of Congress, and the University of Leeds in England. In addition, electronic versions are accessible from HathiTrust Digital Library and Google Books.

Events that occurred on April 4, 1865, would later endear the early UA library and its remarkable book catalogue in ways few could have imagined or anticipated. On this date, a few days before the end of the Civil War, the United States Union army attacked the University of Alabama. During the assault, the Rotunda building, which housed the library and its precious books, was set on fire and destroyed by soldiers under the command of Brig. Gen. John T. Croxton. Details of what happened on that fateful day in 1865 are often discussed and debated. Significantly, six years later, on January 25, 1871, UA Pres. W. R. Smith would write a report to Joseph Hodgson, Superintendent of Public Instruction, State of Alabama, stating the condition of the library. Smith noted, "The library consists of about 1,200 volumes. This is the remnant of the burnt library. The attention of the Regents should be directed, at an early day, to this subject."

If not for Richardson's timely efforts in compiling, printing, and distributing the library's book catalogue, a vital and compelling piece of the University of Alabama's history would have been forever lost.

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