

# A Treasure for the Ages

By Anne Conable

*“These books are not merely physical objects, nor even just the learning of their contents. They are the story of ... the capacity of humans to achieve, of the value of objectivity in the search for truth, of man building upon the platforms of others, of the triumph of the intellect, the dedication to the task. They are the chain of existence of once living human beings with the environment and society of their times. They are precisely why we are here today in our environment and society.”*

*— Albert R. Mugel, 1998*



Rare books curator Amy Pickard displays *De revolutionibus orbium coelestium* by Copernicus (1543). This was Hamlin's first purchase for what became the Milestones of Science collection. Copernicus' theories so offended the Catholic Church at that time that all copies were ordered to be burned. Fortunately, this very rare copy survived.

MARGARET MILLIRON PHOTO 2013

The Buffalo & Erie County Public Library, one of America's oldest libraries, is significantly rich in its collections, a result of its long tenure as a leading cultural institution in a city that was once the eighth largest in the nation, blessed with many affluent, generous and civic-minded residents. The jewel of the library's collection is viewed by many to be the original manuscript of Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Less visible, but no less significant, is the Milestones of Science collection, featuring 197 specifically collected rare books, many of which are individually included in collections across the world but as an assemblage have no peer. The collection, assembled in 1938 at the Buffalo Museum of Science, is a uniquely Buffalo story.

These particular rare books are important for their revolutionary content – the greatest ideas in the history of science, the foundation for everything we know and live amongst in our world today. Seventy-five years later, how the Milestones collection came to be is the compelling story of brilliant community organizer and Science Museum leader Chauncey Hamlin, who turned the adversity of the Great Depression into an opportunity to create a distinguishing collection for the museum. A list of the world's greatest scientists

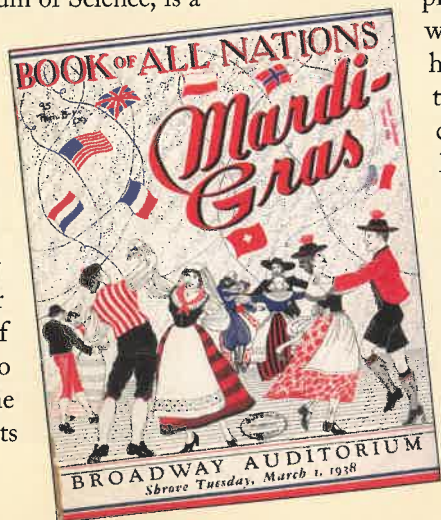
and the first publication of their discoveries in astronomy, botany, biology, physics, medicine, mathematics and chemistry was created; first editions were sought across the world and purchased.

From early on, Hamlin engaged the public in this unusual endeavor, particularly the many distinct first- and second-generation ethnic organizations operating then across Buffalo's neighborhoods. These groups contributed, at a time of few resources and high unemployment, to bring these great works by their countrymen to Buffalo. About 6,000 attended the massive “All Nations Mardi Gras,” held March 1, 1938, as an all-community ethnic pageant, which raised the funds needed to complete the collection.

Later that year, the books went on display in the Science Museum's main hall (now Hamlin Hall) and represented tremendous community and national pride for decades. Eventually, because of the threat of light exposure damage, the collection moved into storage.

The “All Nations Mardi Gras,” held March 1, 1938, at the Broadway Auditorium, drew 6,000 to a massive pageant celebrating Buffalo's ethnic communities and their traditions. This event, a source of community pride for decades, raised the remaining funds needed to complete the collection.

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Besides books, the Milestones collection also includes several maps. Shown here is a section of geologist William Smith's hand-painted 8-by-6-foot map, titled *A delineation of the strata of England and Wales, with part of Scotland* (1815), the first attempt to represent the geology of an entire country. Smith became known as "the father of modern geology."

MARGARET MILLIRON PHOTO 2013

A number of years later, in the 1990s, the existence and future of the collection drew considerable public attention when the museum hoped to assuage financial difficulties by putting the collection up for auction. Fortunately, a creative solution was negotiated that kept the collection in Buffalo: The Milestones collection was traded to the library for an incomplete Audubon *Birds of America* folio (the library had another complete set), which the museum then sold to address its straitened circumstances.

Time and fresh perspectives have brought new value to the riches contained in Milestones, also a veritable history of printing, beginning with a leaf from the world's first printed book, the Gutenberg Bible (1455). Each volume represents the first time anyone could read the earthshaking ideas of Copernicus and Galileo on the universe; Darwin's theories on evolution; Newton's laws of motion and the motion studies of Muybridge; Marie Curie's studies of radioactivity; medical discoveries by Hooke, Jenner, Lister and others; the invention of the microscope, X-rays and the daguerreotype; human anatomy, cells, radio waves, ocean currents, the properties of electricity – these books literally changed the world.

Today's fast-paced society perhaps generally cares little about rare books, thinking them only useful for museums, scholars and collectors. As artifacts, however, they can be appreciated for their handcrafted bindings, precious paper and

meticulously engraved (and in some cases, individually hand-colored) illustrations. Furthermore, as a compendium of the whole history of discovery and human achievement, of concepts fought for at the sacrifice of fortunes, integrity and lives, the Milestones of Science collection gives us another way to reflect on the imagination and invention that inspired descendant scientists, inventors and researchers – and future practitioners of the scientific arts as well – to keep pushing the boundaries of human knowledge. Chauncey Hamlin probably had that thought in mind all along.

The library will celebrate the Milestones of Science collection beginning in late 2013 and throughout 2014 with exhibits, all-ages programming, speakers and themed projects with many of the region's contemporary science, technology, education and medical institutions. The opportunity to discover anew these men and women of science, their life's work and the incredible legacy of discovery they left the world is far more important than "old books." Moreover, this legacy of Chauncey Hamlin, who had the vision to collect the Milestones for Buffalo, should remind us again that it is the books that are the vessels of knowledge for the ages. These treasures should not be taken for granted. 📖

Anne Conable manages special projects for the Buffalo & Erie County Public Library and has previously written on Wilson Bentley (Winter 2008) and the library's history (Summer 2011) for *Western New York Heritage*.



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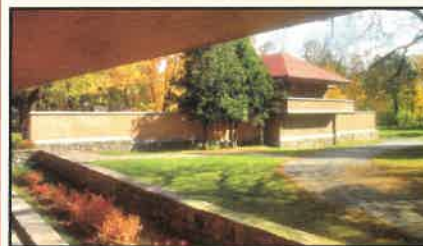
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