



In Girard College, Letters from Key People of Early America

– by Alfred Lubrano –

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Elizabeth Laurent works in white gloves to keep the past pure.

“I touch history,” said the woman whose job is to handle letters written by the men who invented America. “I have my fingers in things of the past.”

As director of historic resources at Girard College, Laurent presides over 100,000 documents connected to college founder Stephen Girard - the 18th- and 19th-century banker, merchant, and philanthropist who was one of the young United States’ richest men.

Respectful of the slender slices of history in her covered hands, Laurent, 52, minds her finger oils and preserves the Girard papers in 288 boxes, 23 huge books, and numerous display cases. All of it is stored beneath 20-foot ceilings in the campus’ white-columned Founder’s Hall.

Powerful men attract powerful friends, and Girard, who lived from 1750 to 1831, received letters and documents signed by giants of U.S. history, among them Presidents George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, James Monroe, and John Quincy Adams.

In addition, there are signed documents and letters from other titans - Benjamin Franklin, Alexander Hamilton, and Joseph Bonaparte, Napoleon’s brother and the former emperor of Spain who fled Europe and landed in Philadelphia.

Few if any of the missives that Girard exchanged with America’s dynamos were touchy-feely notes brimming with personal revelations.

“There’s nothing from Stephen Girard to Jefferson like, ‘Hey, Tom, great time at Monticello last week! Hope we can do it again,’” Laurent said.

Instead, the documents relate mostly to business, often Girard’s shipping concerns.

Presidents and the rich have long associated with each other, historians tell us. Presidents need money to get elected, and the rich often covet friends in high places.

To that end, one of the most intriguing letters in the Girard collection came from Monroe, sent while he was president, on Oct. 25, 1822.

In the letter, Monroe asks Girard for a five-year loan “of from \$25,000 to \$40,000,” with interest.



Elizabeth Laurent with a 1822 letter to Stephen Girard from President James Madison asking for a loan. (CLEM MURRAY / Staff Photographer)

“My long employment in the service of my country... rendered it impossible for me to pay due attention to my private concerns,” Monroe writes, adding he was “afforded compensations inadequate to my support.”

He puts up a farm as collateral, and uses as a reference the owner of the adjoining property, none other than Jefferson.

“It’d be like President Obama writing to Warren Buffett saying, ‘A life of public service didn’t leave me much. Could you help me?’ “ she said.

Laurent is familiar with Monroe’s handwriting, and noted that Monroe himself wrote the letter, not a secretary. “Monroe didn’t want his clerk to know that he was asking someone for a loan,” Laurent surmised.

Monroe used pale tan rag paper with the watermark “Butler and Ward U.S.”

Neatly rendered and surprisingly unfaded, the two-page letter is written in iron-gall ink - the same kind used by Leonardo da Vinci and the writers of the Dead Sea Scrolls, historians of chemistry say. It's made from crushed portions of oak trees.

At the end of the letter, Monroe makes sure to tell Girard, "I shall always recollect" any service Girard could provide.

Laurent said she has been unable to ascertain whether Girard ever granted the loan, or even wrote back to the president.

Jefferson wrote to Girard as well, in a letter on June 17, 1817, thanking Girard for help securing wine and books from France, and noting "there is probably some balance still owed to you." Laurent doesn't know whether Jefferson paid up.

Like a child let loose in an ice cream factory, Laurent, who lives in Merion, happily inhabits the almost too-large

rooms on the second floor of Founder's Hall. There, she often hosts a "captive audience of Girard College kids," children from grades one through 12 from families with limited financial resources, each headed by a single parent or guardian.

The children rarely ask about the letters. They point to a green bed in an adjoining room and want to know whether Girard died in it. (He did.)

Asked to assess the significance of the Girard letters, Laurent didn't hesitate: "They prove that Philadelphia was the business and financial center of America once, and that Mr. Girard corresponded routinely with the greats of this country.

"They also prove that if Mr. Girard were alive today, he'd have a great Rolodex."

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