WSU’s rarest book?
Frederick Meserve’s Historical Portraits

By Trevor James Bond, Special Collections Librarian

Each 28-volume set of Frederick Hill Meserve’s Historical Portraits contains more than 8,000 Civil War-era photographs. Due to President Holland’s determination, WSU owns one of only seven copies produced.

One of the great joys of my job at Washington State University is the time I spend in the rare books vault in Manuscripts, Archives, and Special Collections. “Rare books vault” is a romantic way to describe two large, secure, climate-controlled rooms located on the ground floor of the Terrell Library, but it’s fitting, given the treasures held within.

I’ve been aware for years of our 28-volume set of Frederick Hill Meserve’s Historical Portraits, a terrific source for locating photographs of leading Americans of the Civil War era. The collection’s gilt-tooled, crimson, Morocco-leather spine cry out “open me.” In addition to its beauty, the set is exceedingly rare. Only seven copies were ever produced.

Frederick Hill Meserve began collecting Civil War-era photographs to illustrate his father’s military memoir. At the time, there was not much interest or value placed on 19th-century photographs. In 1902, Meserve seized the opportunity to purchase more than 15,000 Mathew Brady glass negatives. In 1913, Meserve decided to share his collection by privately printing the Historical Portraits. Each 28-volume set contains more than 8,000 actual photographs. A busy New York City textile executive by day, Meserve spent his evenings pasting the photos onto preprinted sheets. One of the most striking things about WSU’s copy is the note in pencil on the verso of the title page:

Meserve v. 1–4, v. 7–8, v. 27–28
Library request of Dr. Holland
2–29–45 v. 5–6, v. 9–10
gift of Dr. Holland
$195.00 per volume.

This little inscription is a bombshell. It tells us the provenance of the purchase and the price per volume. During the 1940s, the State College of Washington Library could buy any number of books for a few dollars. The purchase also ran counter to the inclinations of W.W. Foote, the WSC librarian, who was concerned about the library collection by counting “pieces,” which included anything that could be had for free, such as brochures and railroad time tables. Indeed, in 1943 and 1944, the library accessioned 27,637 volumes, but total accessions were 32,637 (this larger figure reflects the vast numbers of “pieces”). During the 1940s and prior to the construction of the Holland Library, the lack of space for library collections was so acute, that library materials were crammed into basements and attics across campus. Had Foote had his druthers, he certainly would have used the $5,000 to buy several thousand books, instead of the 28 volumes of the Historical Portraits. Why then does WSU have a copy?

There are two reasons. Since the early 1940s, the WSC Library had developed a Lincoln collection; more importantly, President Holland wanted it. In 1941, the library acquired a major collection of Lincolniana that had been developed by C.P. Bissett, a Seattle businessman.

It’s clear from President Holland’s papers that he ordered Historical Portraits and then went about raising the money for it. In 1938, Holland had created the Friends of the Library, the first such organization for an academic library in the West. With support from two alumni, he ordered facsimiles of a portrait of Abraham Lincoln and his Gettysburg Address and, through the Friends of the Library, sent them to 204 banks in Washington State. The resulting gifts totaled more than $9,000. Even before it was clear that this effort would succeed, in a letter to Ralph Newman of the Abraham Lincoln Book Shop, Holland wrote, “Librarian Foote has been authorized to send a check to you for $140 to be used to pay for the leather for the binding of the twenty-eight volumes of the Meserve collection of photographs... I am quite sure we can take care of the purchase of six or eight volumes, and I have every reason to believe we can receive additional gifts in order that we may purchase the entire set.”

To ensure that the Library received the entire set, Holland purchased four of the volumes and donated them to the library.

Reading Foote’s annual report and budget request for 1946 to President Wilson Compton, we can glimpse Foote’s feelings about the purchase. “Meserve Lincoln Collection... $2,000. This is not a legitimate Library expenditure but commitments were made by the former administration. This account should be paid through a general college fund when bills are submitted.”

Today we may sympathize with Foote’s position—why devote limited library resources to such an extravagant purchase?—yet feel grateful for the efforts of Holland and the many previous donors who have helped develop collections that make the WSU Libraries distinctive.

You are welcome to view the Historical Portraits or any of the other collections in Manuscripts, Archives, and Special Collections weekdays between 8:30 a.m. and 4:30 p.m.