



News Release

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Major Astronomy
Collection Donated to
State Museum, USC

Columbia, S.C. --- The South Carolina State Museum and the University of South Carolina have acquired a major collection of historic telescopes and astronomy books, documents and equipment.

Donated by Robert B. Ariail of Columbia, the collection comprises more than 5200 rare books and star atlases, scientific journals, rare offprints and manuscripts, historic and modern telescopes plus binoculars, lenses and other scientific equipment related to the study of the universe and dating back nearly 500 years.

It will be called the Robert B. Ariail Collection of Historical Astronomy. The telescopes and scientific equipment will be housed at the museum, and the books and documents will be housed at USC's Ernest G. Hollings Special Collections Library.

The telescope collection is considered among the best collections of American-made telescopes, and the book collection is the best collection of historical astronomy in the Southeastern United States, authorities say.

“Robert Ariail has put together a vintage collection of astonishing proportions, not only the finest assembly anywhere of early American telescopes, but a library to match,” said Owen Gingerich, professor of astronomy and history of science at the Harvard-Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics. “With respect to popular astronomy of the 19th century, his book collection rivals, and in critical areas exceeds, the Library of Congress itself.”

“This is a collection that was amassed over a lifetime,” said Tom Falvey, director of education and curator of science and technology for the State Museum. “It is priceless. The historic scopes, which date back to 1730, were individually made, not mass-produced. This collection could not be duplicated anywhere in the world.”

USC President Harris Pastides said the joint arrangement between the university and the museum is an excellent example of cooperation between two public entities for the public good.

“This partnership between the museum and the university is an outstanding example of what visionary leadership and collaboration can accomplish for our state,” Pastides said. “Each part of this collection has landed in its rightful place. The curators at the Hollings Library will be caring stewards of these wonderful documents and books and will ensure that they are accessible for students of history and astronomy around the world.”

Tom McNally, dean of libraries, said the collection will provide a unique understanding of the study of astronomy.

“This collection is important for teaching and research and will provide students and researchers a unique understanding of this area of study,” McNally said. “It provides a historical and artistic dimension to a scientific field and is a reminder that in every field of study, achievements are built, as Sir Isaac Newton said, ‘on the shoulders of giants.’”

Among the items in USC’s collection is a manuscript written by William Stukeley, a contemporary and colleague of Sir Isaac Newton. In the manuscript, Stukeley expands on his conversations with Newton and provides detail on his theory of the Milky Way, which predates other scholarship on the topic by 30 years.

The collection also includes the earliest printed star atlas, compiled in 1540 by Alessandro Piccolomini. Titled “De la sfera del mondo,” the atlas is also the oldest book in the Ariail collection.

“This world-class collection will attract historians, researchers, astrophysicists and other scientists, plus hobbyists, from every corner of the planet,” said Falvey.

“We are honored and thrilled at this major gift, and the people of South Carolina and their visitors will be the beneficiaries.”

USC and the museum will operate a joint Web site that will spotlight the collection. The site can be accessed at www.southcarolinastatemuseum.org or www.library.sc.edu/ariail.

The books, manuscripts and documents are on display in the Irvin Department Gallery at USC's Hollings Library Sept. 13-Oct. 31. The exhibit is entitled, "Mapping the Heavens: An Exhibition Introducing the Robert B. Ariail Collection of Historical Astronomy."

Many of the scopes can now be seen on exhibit in the museum's fourth-floor Palmetto Gallery, and will be joined in the future by the remainder of the telescope collection in a large, designated space being planned by the museum.

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