

New Jersey & Company Magazine

Jun '09

Archiving Early America

With Jay Kislak, as told to Gina Marinelli
Photograph Courtesy Jim Reme/Monmouth University

I've always liked books. But when my book collection became too large for the small room I kept it in, I figured it was time to start focusing on collecting specific kinds of books. This was around the time I had moved to Florida, leaving New Jersey and the place where I grew up. I was 29 years old, and I decided to specialize in books about my new home.

I began to think about the beginnings of America—the pilgrims and the Mayflower in 1620, and even earlier, [since] when you get down to it, the Europeans were here at least 100 years before that. Explorers came here from Portugal, Spain, and of course, Italy. These people left their mark so much earlier on the Southeast part of the country.

The collection I eventually acquired was donated in 2004. It was primarily books, manuscripts, maps, and some monuments and pre-Columbian objects. Mrs. Kislak and I chose the Library of Congress because so much of what we had collected was in storage, and we wanted these great treasures to have a larger audience.

We had eight enormous paintings by Native Indian painters in the mid-1600s that deal with the conquest of Mexico, but we couldn't even see most of what we had actually collected. At the Library of Congress, there's so much that can be seen. This is a prime exhibition space of over 7,000 feet. It's open to the public and it's attracting crowds in throngs.

One of the greatest pieces we have is a five-page holograph document by a man named Bartoleme de las Casas. He came over to the Americas with Christopher Columbus on his second and third voyage. He became the first priest ordained in the Americas; later he was a bishop, writing several histories of what was then called the "New World," and



became known as the “Apostle of the Indians.” Rather than enslaving the Native Americans, he wrote back to Spain and told them that the natives were “creatures with souls” and converted them to Christianity. The whole story is quite interesting and it’s all contained in his writings.

Right now, the Library of Congress houses about 4,000 items that I’ve collected in an exhibition called “The Early Americas.” It covers the period from Columbus’s first visit in 1492 up to about the 1800s, just after the American Revolution, and it also includes a few pieces of George Washington and Thomas Jefferson memorabilia. Some of our most prized pieces are the last remaining copy of the first navigation map of the world from 1516, and Martin Waldseemüller’s 1507 world map, which was the first ever to include America. Maps were like trading secrets among the nations during the age of early discovery, and these are all rather significant to history.

Many of those of us who grow up in the Northeast are under the impression that our history was made by English and French explorers. But this other part of history, dealing with Hispanic explorers in the Southeast, is just as important; however, it has never received as much attention. There’s still so much that needs research and study.

With the Library of Congress exhibition, this history can be shared; plus, I get a chance to see my treasures, rather than burying my findings somewhere. Still, the collection is not just about the exhibition alone, but also the ongoing programs, speakers, and fellowships we have on a regular basis.

In following the example of my father, I believe in the importance of education. My father started a real estate business in Woodbridge, New Jersey, in 1906. In honor of its 100th anniversary, our family made a major donation to fund the Kislak Real Estate Institute at Monmouth University in his home state in 2006. There are other schools around the country with similar programs, but Monmouth University has found its specialty in this, and we’ve helped the university to do that. Monmouth’s is now the premium real estate program in New Jersey and it’s quite satisfying to be a part of that, as it also is to be a part of the “The Early Americas” exhibition.

Right now, Mrs. Kislak and I still continue to explore. We have been on polar expeditions over eight-week periods, usually around April and May. We have decided to study the early history of the voyages made there. As for the real estate study institute, we’re looking to plan something similar, but this time bringing a program like the one in my home state of New Jersey to my life here in Florida.