

BOOKS

History-making librarian of Congress: one year later

PABLO MARTINEZ MONSIVAIS/AP/FILE



Librarian of Congress Carla Hayden (r.) takes the oath of office, administered by Chief Justice John Roberts (c.).

WHEN CARLA HAYDEN was sworn in as the librarian of Congress on Sept. 14, 2016, she made history as the first woman and the first African-American to hold that position. "It is personally humbling to realize that I'm a descendant of people who were forbidden by law to read at times," she says as her first anniversary arrives. "To then be the head of an institution that's centered around learning and scholarship and reading is something that really touches me every time I think about that aspect."

Ms. Hayden is continuing an effort to digitize the library's vast holdings to make them more accessible online. There is an emphasis on putting up intriguing items that can't be seen elsewhere, such as the papers of 23 US presidents. Other collections include the works of Frederick Douglass, Clara Barton, and Rosa Parks, many in their own handwriting. "You can really get a sense of that primary source. That's the magic of it," she says.

The library is also working with cultural institutions around the world. A joint exhibition slated for 2021 between the library and the Royal Archives in the United Kingdom will explore the relationship between George Washington and George III. And making the physical library accessible to more people is something that Hayden is particularly proud of. The Young Readers Center expanded its hours to include Saturdays. The library also launched "Touch History" tours for visually impaired people, during which docents describe the library's Thomas Jefferson Building in evocative language. Participants can run their hands over the wall carvings and sculptural features.

Hayden has also launched a series of on-site pop-up exhibits of the library's unique holdings, including displays of comic books and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender items. "I would really like people to cruise around the website and type in something they're interested in," Hayden says. "I bet they'd be surprised at what the library has."

— Robert Leroose / Contributor