

German Society Toasts the Library's Two-Hundredth Birthday

Dignitaries, Invited Guests, Society Members, and Library Volunteers Gather to Celebrate German Literary Culture

The second floor of the German Society of Pennsylvania bustled with excitement on the morning of Sunday, May 21st, as Society members, visiting dignitaries, academics, and Philadelphia-area library and museum professionals convened in the library reading room to celebrate the two-hundredth anniversary of the founding of the German Society of Pennsylvania Library. Following a series of presentations honoring the significance of the library's collection as well as a temporary exhibition of rare library materials, celebrants enjoyed hors d'oeuvres and took part in a champagne toast in honor of the library's birthday. The event drew new attention to the library collection's great importance to the modern-day study of German-American history and culture.



Society Vice President for Culture and Heritage Maria Sturm and President Anton Michels offered introductory remarks to open the event. They were followed by Brita Wagener, the Federal Republic of Germany's Consul General in New York, who shared reflections on the importance of the German Society of Pennsylvania and its library in sustaining positive bilateral diplomatic relations and encouraging cultural understanding. Axel Jansen of the Ger-

man Historical Institute in Washington, D.C. and Frank Trommler of the German Languages and Literatures Department at the University of Pennsylvania each offered comments on the important place of the library in fostering scholarship on topics in German-American history. Historical remarks by Alex Ames of the Department of History at the University of Delaware concluded the formal program.

The library's rich, two-hundred-year history offered numerous stories worthy of sharing at the event, but Ames's comments focused on the library's role in German-American identity formation from 1817 to the present, with much attention being paid to the 1880's and 1890's, the years surrounding the construction of the Society's current headquarters in 1888. In particular, the comments examined how German language, literary works and learning shaped the sense of shared German-American cultural heritage at the time, and how the Society's library itself reflected cultural values in its collection composition and visual aesthetic. Ames compared the history of the Society's library, as well as the 1888 building, to other libraries in the city of Philadelphia that catered to an English-speaking clientele and analyzed why the German Society's own library once contained so many English books. (The dual-language nature of the collection was seemingly the result of the German ethnic community's desire and practical need for English books, both to learn the language and especially as descendants of immigrants lost command of German.) The analysis confirmed the library's status as an important site of German-American cultural formation from its earliest days.

Following the presenters' remarks, library volunteers welcomed visitors to tables and exhibition cases where some of the library's rare historical treasures were displayed, including three printed and heavily annotated library catalogues from 1839, 1864, and 1879; World War One-era receipts for books purchased for the library collection, as well as several of the books mentioned on the documents; and books published in the early nineteenth century that were some of the library's earliest acquisitions. Other treasures on display included pieces from the German-American collection, including a 1683 German-language translation of a tract authored by William Penn, a 1745 Ephrata imprint, and a 1752 German-language almanac printed by Benjamin Franklin. Champagne and other refreshments were then enjoyed by all.



With its evocation of a bygone era in German-American history and hands-on opportunities for visitors to engage with books from the collection, the event reminded attendees of the central role played by German art, literature, and culture in ethnic identity formation during centuries past, as well as the central role of the library in the Society's history of vibrant cultural offerings. Many thanks to those who attended this event, and all who worked so hard to make it a success!

- Alex L. Ames