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[Special](#)
[Collections](#)
[and](#)
[Archives](#)

UNH Graduate Student Finds Music of the Monks in Dimond Library Storage

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UNH News Bureau

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DURHAM, N.H. -- University of New Hampshire graduate student Amanda Nelson had no idea her work study job in the library's Special Collections would result in the discovery in a storage building of two monastic chant books believed to date to the 15th century.

And University Librarian Claudia Morner says it probably would not have if Amanda hadn't taken Peter Urquhart's renaissance music class as an undergraduate two years ago.

"This isn't the first time we've found something valuable," says Morner, "but it's a pretty big deal when something this old is discovered. We've apparently had the books since 1969, but without a student like Amanda, who knew what she was looking at when she first opened them, several more years might have passed while they lay on a shelf."

According to Morner and William Ross, head of special collections and archives, the library receives hundreds of boxes of donated items every year.

"The books were donated by a local doctor, and we were aware they were here, but with the move from Dimond during construction, we never had a chance to look at them closely or identify them," says Ross. "The next step is to get them catalogued and available for people to study."

Eventually, Ross hopes the books can be scanned for inclusion on the library's web site, but one of the first groups to delve into the history of the books will be Urquhart's graduate class this fall.

The books are leather bound and written in Latin. Both contain chant, the music of the Roman Catholic Church, and one is arranged by saints' feasts, psalm texts and liturgical texts like invitatories, hymns and responsories. It follows the traditional church year, and Urquhart says the books would have sat on a big music stand and all the monks would gather around it to sing.

Urquhart says he consulted with Tom Kelly, chair of the music department at Harvard University and a medieval chant scholar, who thought the books might date from the late 15th or early 16th century. He also noted that the parchment endpapers in one book date to the 11th to 13th centuries. One book includes references to St. Odelia, patron saint to the blind who lived during the 8th century. That may mean that the book was used near Strasbourg on the border between France and Germany where Odelia is venerated to this day. How the books got to the United States remains a mystery.

"I did my dissertation on music of the 15th and 16th centuries," Urquhart, a UNH professor of music, says. "I would go to great lengths to get into libraries and archives in Europe to see books like this. I never expected to find two of them outside the back door of the music department. To find them here in our library is astonishing, and when Amanda told me what she found I didn't believe it."

"It's a lot of fun to think UNH has something like this," Nelson adds. "You hear about these kinds of things in Europe, but not in New Hampshire. I've been to opera houses in Paris where books like these are behind glass under lock and key. To actually have something I was able to pick up and touch and look at is amazing."

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