

To the Mayor and Council,

I am writing this to you today as a private citizen of St. Catharines, and not associated in any way with the positions which I presently hold as a volunteer member of the Heritage Advisory Committee, the Heritage Permits Advisory Committee, or in conjunction with any other group.

I am quite concerned and alarmed with the recent “purge” that has taken place in the Special Collections department at the downtown Central Library. About two years ago, some rare book items that were not seen as having significance for the collection (ie, items that were not directly related to the history of the region) were withdrawn from the stacks and were either offered for sale to patrons of the library or they were purchased by area book dealers for resale. That deaccessioning provided some additional space within the Special Collections room, as well as revenue for the library. The bulk of the historical collection, reflecting the history of southern and central Ontario, as well as some books on nearby New York State and Pennsylvania, remained intact. It should be noted that the collection had been built up by purchases or by donations from the public (eg, the Philip Adshead collection), and it was one of the finest historical research resources in the peninsula.

Over the past year (starting in 2021, and continuing right up to the present time), this deaccessioning has continued with a major, devastating impact on the collection. It began initially as a purge of the duplicate items---even those directly related to the history of the city. If the library and/or museum held multiple copies of any item, the best was selected for retention at the library and the duplicates were discarded. At first these books and pamphlets were loaded onto shelving trucks and were offered for sale within, or just outside of, the Special Collections area. Since the end of February, the purging of the collection has reached a fever pitch, and nearly all the books that are outside of the Niagara region

have been withdrawn and pulled from the shelves. To my knowledge, none of those books have been offered for sale, or donated to any other local institutions (eg, Mayholme) that may have had an interest in acquiring them. Reliable sources have informed us that entire box loads of these discarded items, some of which have considerable retail value within the used book trade, have been slated for the dumpster. The unsold books that were offered for sale outside of Special Collections have also met this same fate (ie, they were simply trashed) within the past month.

Several individuals within the heritage community have been told that this culling of library materials was sanctioned by the “City archivist.” I was unaware of the fact that there is an official “archivist” for St. Catharines!

I feel that these books never should have been withdrawn without some consultation with the patrons or stakeholders who frequently used the Special Collections room. What was once an outstanding collection of top-quality local history books and a known “go-to” research venue has been significantly gutted. As the staff historian at Archaeological Resources Inc., I made frequent use of the resources that were formerly available at the library. The removal of them will certainly have a negative impact on the production of the reports which I am required to research as part of my day-to-day work.

Duplicate books and other items that were withdrawn should have been disposed of in accordance with best practices for deaccessioning---ie, offered to other institutions or sold to any interested patrons who may have wished to purchase them. It is criminal to think that perfectly good items that had potential usefulness were dealt with in this unthinkable and insensitive manner. Did the individual members of the library board know of this purge, and did they sanction it?

There appears to have been a blatant lack of communication on the part of library administration during this affair, and certainly no responsibility has been taken for accountability. The redeployment of personnel within the library has also resulted in a very apparent decrease in the level of staff morale; several staff members have resigned or have taken early retirement. It is a very disconcerting situation which ought to be investigated.

Respectfully,

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