

# People

## Local Author Zeroes in on Folgers, Shakespeare

Arlington resident Stephen Grant will discuss his book, "Collecting Shakespeare: The Story of Henry and Emily Folger" during a program at Central Library on Monday, Dec. 1 at 7 p.m.

The book details the lives of the couple, who shortly after their marriage in 1885 began buying, cataloging and storing a vast array of materials related to the Bard. Funds from their purchases came from wealth accumulated during Henry Folger's stint as president of Standard Oil of New York and a trusted confidant of John D. Rockefeller, yet the couple lived modestly and shared a long and fruitful marriage.

Grant is a senior fellow at the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training in Arlington. The Sun Gazette asked him about the experience of researching and writing the book.

**What led you to conceive of doing this book, how long did the process take, and what was the experience like?**

Henry Clay Folger is a legend at Amherst College, from which institution I graduated, 84 years after he did. In 2007, following a career in the Foreign Service, I took a curator's tour of the Folger Shakespeare Library on Capitol Hill. Erin Blake showed us Henry and Emily Folger's oil portraits and his marble bust, and described their shared passion for Shakespeareana, anything to do with Shakespeare. I learned that this one couple, childless, had constituted the largest Shakespeare collection in the world.

At the end of the tour I asked eagerly, "Do you have a biography of the Folgers in your gift shop?" Her answer floored me. "No one has written one yet."

I was a published biographer ("Peter Strickland") and a collector (vintage picture postcards). The Folger leadership allowed me, an independent scholar, to take on the project, offering me a fellowship to launch what became a six-year endeavor taking me to 35 archives in the U.S. and

U.K. I was not prepared for the sheer amount of archival material preserved among the Folgers' personal papers in the Folger underground vault: 424 linear feet. That is more than the length of a football field.

**How did Mr. Folger make his money, and why did he turn to collecting Shakespeare?**

Henry Folger worked 49 years for the Standard Oil Co., starting as a statistical clerk in 1879 and ending as chairman of the board of SOCONY, the Standard Oil Co. of New York, that later became the Mobil Oil. Henry's uncle James founded Folgers Coffee in San Francisco. They are two distinct fortunes.

Henry was born in the 1850s, when many American family libraries possessed only two books: the Bible and Shakespeare. He grew up deeply imbued with the language and aura of both. He received as a gift his first Collected Works of Shakespeare as a college freshman. He was smitten.

There were no "Shakespeare courses" back then, but he joined a Shakespeare reading group at Amherst College. As a senior, Henry heard the aged orator, Ralph Waldo Emerson, speak at Amherst. Exposure to the poet's eloquence sent Henry to read Emerson's writing on Shakespeare, and to read Shakespeare itself in a new light.

**Who was Folger's main competition in accumulating Shakespeare material, and how would you describe their rivalry?** Henry Folger's main rival was another Henry, Henry E. Huntington, who with his wife, Arabella, created the Huntington Library, Museum and Gardens in San Marino, Calif.

Folger and Huntington were acquaintances, not close friends. They belonged to the same Hobby Club in New York. I devote an entire chapter in "Collecting Shakespeare" to the Henrys' similarities and differences. It was a cordial, Victorian rivalry.

An erudite and astute book-



Stephen Grant of Arlington is the author of "Collecting Shakespeare: The Story of Henry and Emily Folger." PHOTO BY DEB KOLT

seller, Abraham Rosenbach of Philadelphia, successfully played one Henry off the other, never losing their confidence and trust. Bibliophiles around the world gravitate to the Folger and Huntington Libraries to study the choicest antiquarian books.

**Was there any specific item Folger truly coveted but never obtained?**

Dealers were incessantly dangling before Folger what they claimed were genuine Shakespeare signatures. He purchased some of them. Folger did not claim he had acquired a genuine signature of the Bard. He became an excellent judge of forgeries.

The Folgers looked unsuccessfully for a volume of Shakespeare that had belonged to Ralph Waldo Emerson.

On the other hand, Folger did acquire unique volumes of Shakespeare plays that Henry Huntington did not have in his collection.

**The relationship between Mr. and Mrs. Folger seems to have been a fruitful one. What was the secret to their success? What role did Mrs. Folger play in the collection, both before and after Mr. Folger's death?**

The Folgers were a childless couple. They could devote themselves single-mindedly to collecting. I cannot imagine a more perfect collecting team.

Emily was the Shakespeare scholar, having earned a master's degree from Vassar College in Shakespeare Studies. When Henry arrived home after his lucrative day job, Emily had gone through reams of book-auction catalogs, marking in pencil in the margins the items she perceived they needed for their collection. Henry stayed up half the night calculating how much he would bid on each.

When the items they won came in the mail, Emily entered their detailed characteristics in a card catalog. By the age of 50, she had developed painful writer's cramp.

Her husband died before he had seen the collection transported from New York to Washington, and without having seen one stone of the white-marble Folger Shakespeare Library only two blocks from the U.S. Capitol.

Emily took over as the principal decision-maker concerning many of the details leading up to the dedication of the library

on Shakespeare's 368th birthday, April 23, 1932, in presence of President and Mrs. Hoover.

**How did Washington win out in the selection process for the library?**

Nothing predestined Washington, D.C., to house the unique Folger collection. The Folgers considered Nantucket, "home" to Folgers since the 1660s. Manhattan was in the running until Henry found real estate prices prohibitive. American universities tried to lure the Folgers to bequeath the collection to them.

Exerting the most pressure was Stratford-upon-Avon. They wanted all the literary treasures back on home soil! Henry confessed, "I did think of placing the Shakespeare library at Stratford, near the bones of the great man himself, but I finally concluded I would give it to Washington; for I am an American."

Related to his patriotism, Folger thought that American scholars should have their own Shakespeare learning center, without having to travel to England.

**The authorship of Shakespeare's works remains hotly debated. Do you have an opinion on the subject?**

Personally, I don't have a horse in that race. But allow me to make three points.

The Folgers believed profoundly that Shakespeare wrote Shakespeare. Secondly, despite that belief they acquired all the books and articles they could about the authorship controversy. Their goal was to assemble as complete a Shakespeare collection as possible, to be of increased usefulness to the researchers, scholars and professors.

The same goes for Shakespeare forgeries, that Henry became very astute in recognizing.

Thirdly, when people have asked the director of the Folger Shakespeare Library his opinion on the authorship controversy, Michael Witmore has responded, "The Folger does not have opinions. It has collections."

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