

What Can Be Learned from Hernando Columbus and His Library?



The only existing likeness of Hernando Colón, younger and illegitimate child of Columbus, curator of his father's legacy, and builder of the greatest library of the Renaissance.



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Brewster Kahle / February 12, 2022 / the club

A discoverer in the age of discovery, a renaissance man in the renaissance, [Hernando \(Ferdinand\) Columbus](#) was the son of Christopher Columbus. By the time he died at 50 in 1539, he had built the largest library in its day, based on the inspiration of the Library of Alexandria. Hernando actively tried to understand and affect his world, the whole world: he started a major dictionary project, started charting Europe in minute detail, was charged by the King of Spain to negotiate the circumference of the earth, built Europe's first botanical garden, and built Europe's largest library striving for universality in the early years of print. We know so much about him because so many of his prolific writings survive, and there is much we can learn from his successes and failures. While his work is astounding and inspirational in many fields, it is his drive to build a universal library at the critical time of the changing of a medium—the explosion of printing and the printed book, and then what came of it—that can shed light on current efforts including those of the Internet Archive. Contemporary projects can use his journey as a 500-year-old map to guide current projects. What lessons can we learn from Hernando Columbus and his universal library project? And why do so few know of his library?

Hernando was five when his father, Christopher Columbus, made his voyage to America in 1492, and was ten years old when he went on the third voyage to see Hispaniola himself. These experiences demonstrated that there was both so much more to know about the world, but also that the world was finite. To illustrate how small the world was assumed to be before Columbus's first trip, Columbus had brought converted Jews on board to speak to the people they would find because they believed that these people might be a lost tribe of Israel, or some other Christian lineage, since it was thought that all peoples started in Biblical times. Finding that there were completely different ways of thinking, living, and believing in a "New World" must have been shocking to all Europeans, and Hernando was there making these discoveries.

As the world suddenly revealed many more possibilities, it also became finite and measurable. The Columbus family had made maps in Genoa, which made it possible to measure and summarize the complexity of the world. With the voyages of Columbus and Ferdinand Magellan soon thereafter, the world could be experienced and measured.

These were not abstract philosophical thoughts for Hernando; they were very concrete and important for establishing the reputation of Christopher Columbus and securing his family's income from monies from the New World. When Christopher Columbus returned from his first voyage, he came back in a single ship of the 3 that set out, with a small crew and with bare masts. Furthermore, he landed in Portugal, Spain's rival. He did not come back victorious, and in fact, another of the boats, the Pinta, had returned to Spain, captained by Pinzón prepared to make the announcement and take the credit [Shipwrecked [page 20](#)]. Columbus hurriedly wrote and had printed a public letter to King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of the glorious victory his discovery was for Spain, what riches were waiting, and how interested the inhabitants were to become Christian. In this way, Columbus was working to secure his place; had he not done this, his life and indeed this period's history might be seen differently. A major occupation throughout Hernando's life was [securing Columbus' credit](#) and building the myth of the man behind the great deeds. This demonstration of the power of the printing press, and particularly pamphlets, would shape Hernando.

Leading the Spanish kingdom's efforts to fend off territorial claims by Portugal for islands halfway around the earth, Hernando leveraged his lifelong chronicling of the voyages and collected the books containing the predictions from the ancient Greeks as well as ships logs from other trips. Not only was Hernando at the right places at the right times, but he was also able to craft narratives that live to this day. The combination of staying in good graces with those in power, a deep and usable library, and an understanding of the power of the printing press to promote ideas helped Hernando secure his royal pension and secure his family's fame.

But Hernando took his approach to discovering, measuring, and mapping what must have seemed infinite in many novel directions beyond sea voyages.

Mapping the Land: Hernando's *Description of Spain*

Hernando launched a large project to create a new type of detailed map. He described local features in minute detail that he imagined would be used to create a large number of different maps and tools. For instance, this is the first entry in this project:

Monday, the 3rd of August 1517

here begins the itinerary

Zaragoza, a large city in Aragon, is five leagues from Perdiguera, which is reached by crossing a river by boat a mile outside of Zaragoza—the Ebro—and you pass another river beforehand near Zaragoza by bridge. Perdiguera is a medium-size town of around 100 inhabitants, and from there it is four leagues to La Naraja...

[Shipwrecked [page 179](#)]

Hernando recruited like-minded surveyors to this project and he supplied royal letters instructing local officials to cooperate with them in the exercise. This project gained him the recognition that would carry him to other projects, but it was stopped when the King suddenly rescinded his letter of authorization, probably because of political instability in the countryside.

While this ambitious project would not be completed, he and his employees did create at least 6,635 entries. These offered detailed accounts that were intended to be laid on a grid that could be reproduced at different levels of detail. This type of multiscale map was radically new and unlike the subjective maps of the time. He said “the lines should cross the map as they do on a chessboard, so that from the original picture others can be derived easily.” [Shipwrecked [page 180](#)] Previous maps were distorted to emphasize important locations; these were meant to be objective.

Dictionary of Latin: *Vocabulario*

The world was suddenly and provably finite, and therefore describable. Hernando not only realized this, but helped make it that way. As a private citizen, he sought to wrap his arms around the world for the first time and hold it. This large and philosophical idea has very practical consequences, but could be applied ever further. Hernando set out to map the human language.

Latin, the formal language of the day, was not formalized or well described. There were some dictionaries, but they defined only thousands of terms. What was needed was a full dictionary of the Latin language that could be printed and reproduced. Hernando set out to do this at age 30, starting with the letter A.

He never finished this Latin dictionary, as his financial situation deteriorated, which happened several times during his life. But he got further than others, and laid out an ambitious map for such a project. He got to the middle of the B's (the word Bobo), which may sound limited, but he wrote almost three thousand entries by that point [Shipwrecked [page 192](#)], more than in the [Latin dictionaries of the day](#). Given the number of entries he started with, it would have been well over the forty thousand entries in the Johnson dictionary 150 years later. [Shipwrecked [page 239](#)].

Botanical Garden

Hernando went further. Bringing together plants from around the world, he built and maintained what is described as Europe's first botanical garden.

Seville to this day is filled with new world plants, which by legend started in Hernando's gardens. "Prominent among those foreign plants putting down roots are the extraordinary ombus at the Cartuja de las Cuevas and elsewhere—a South American treelike plant, actually formed from the fused stems of a giant grass—as well as the ceibas that are littered around Seville, and the bizarre Indian laurel in the Plaza de San Leandro, which seems like a waxwork forest melting in the midday sun." [Shipwrecked [page 262](#)]

Here again, Hernando led an encyclopedic project to circumscribe the world and map it.

His detailed approach to recording and mapping Spain, and then Latin words and plants, may have been striving for objectivity, but these maps encompass a point of view, a story of how the world is organized and organisable.

Hernando explored, mapped, and explained the world and then started to explore, map, and explain knowledge.

The world, and the world of knowledge, could be described.

The Library of Hernando Columbus: *Biblioteca Hernandina*

Hernando Columbus's library was new in its conception and huge in execution. Libraries of his day, roiled by the Protestant Reformation, were transitioning away from the manuscript libraries of monasteries and royal holdings that were devoted to religious and legal works, but not particularly towards any coherent alternative. The new Universities did not build significant collections until the 19th century [Library [page 123](#)]. Printed books were often not seen as important possessions by large institutions, so the major European collectors of that time were doctors, scholars, lawyers, and merchants. [Library [page 123](#)]

Hernando set about to build a library of printed books, manuscripts, and single-page prints at a large scale. He traveled to the literary trade centers of Europe and purchased thousands of books. He commissioned small booksellers to find and purchase books he did not already own.

As his companion and coworker, Clenardus, said on the importance of the library: "just as Columbus had, by a prodigious act, planted Spanish power and civilization in another world, so he Hernando had gathered the wisdom of the universe to Spain. Sons often resemble their fathers in appearance... but some also bear a resemblance in spirit and moral qualities." [Shipwrecked [page 293](#)].

Hernando concentrated not on the major books or the important manuscripts, but rather on the full breadth of the published record.

In the recent biography of Hernando Columbus: “Hernando’s [...] instruction would have been astonishing to other collectors of the day: he ordered that they should not seek to recruit the help of grand booksellers in these cities, because these places would never deign to look outside their own stock rooms for the pamphlets and one-sheet ballads that Hernando was determined to have in his library. Owners of small bookshops, he reasoned, were much more likely to go out into the city and learn what was on offer there. In fact, the instructions for buying were exactly the reverse of those followed by other famous libraries of the day. The humble bookseller chosen to gather books in each of the six major cities should first buy as many of these ephemeral pamphlets as he could with the twelve ducados, only then moving on to larger printed books, and finally—if anything remained after all of this—buying those manuscript works that were the objects of lust to other librarians of the day.” [Shipwrecked [page 315](#)]

“That Hernando believed he had succeeded in doing so is reflected in the verses he asked to be inscribed near the door of the library:

The wise care little for widely held views

As most people are easily swayed

And that which they throw from their houses is later thought to be of highest value.

The meaning of this inscription, he says, is that I have founded my house upon the shit that others once threw upon the dunghill.” [Shipwrecked [page 316](#)]

Hernando’s concentration on cheap print was uncommon and possibly unique. He may have understood how important pamphlets were based on the effect they had in establishing the narrative of his father’s role in history soon after his first voyage. These cheap prints were ubiquitous and influential and had major cultural effects. Hernando invested in collecting, cataloging, and describing them in his library as proper additions.

He went further, which again must have been shocking to his contemporaries. “In a phrase he repeated often in the final documents of his life, Hernando stated the library would collect all books, in all languages and on all subjects, which can be found both within Christendom and without.”[Shipwrecked [page 316](#)] “The idea that Hernando’s library would not be bounded by language, subject, or religion once again marks a profound shift in European conceptions of knowledge.” [Shipwrecked [page 317](#)]

Hernando was building a universal library – a library of all the peoples of the world. As the humanists were reviving the Greek and Roman writings and ideals, and the goals of the Library of Alexandria [Canfora [page 120](#)], Hernando’s library project may have been the first serious attempt at such a goal in eighteen hundred years.

To accomplish such a project, Hernando needed new tools of organization, which serve as some of his major contributions to scholarship. As he purchased books, he was careful to keep a catalog of each book, pamphlet, and print, including the place of origin and price, and started to develop cataloging systems.

Catalogs, Summaries, and Access

Hernando's first catalog helped prevent duplication in collecting, but eventually evolved to assist in using the collection. He invented cataloging systems that were well ahead of their time. He developed a hierarchy of descriptive terms to keep his thousands of prints organized, for instance. In his system, Giovanni Battista Palumba's Mars, Venus, and Vulcan, would be cataloged as:

humans > folio-size prints > prints with four men > secular > naked [Shipwrecked [page 167](#)]

Cataloging the books started with lists of acquisitions, which have survived. He executed other discovery tools as well, such as reordered into alphabetic lists by author (called his Abecedarium). But he went further. He used a series of signs, like hieroglyphs, to indicate different categories.

209.8 ft 334.7 ft.

299 K. 576.

2100

526. 697

12071.

240340-550

$\boxed{2101} + 0.26$

555.

2106 40 98

2107-11-20

36844

also 40.1e

342b2

8. James

21124

12

2014 + 0

for 427 d.c. i.

He also wrote a “Book of Epitomes,” which are brief summaries of books that can be reordered into a kind of card catalog. Interestingly, this catalogue, some 2000 pages long, [was found in 2019](#) in a library in Copenhagen after not being known of for hundreds of years. This summary form was a practical method to help readers find their way through such a library, but one that was novel.



“Book of Epitomes” which summarize each book, resurfaced in 2019 in Denmark

Librarian A friend, Daisy Carlson, who worked in the Vatican secret archives in Rome, said that there was a section of this vast library that was organized by the system of “Ferdinand Colon.” It speaks to the enduring nature of his cataloging system. It is possible that there are also parts of his collection there, but I have not seen any references to it.

Hernando wanted the books to be accessed by the literate public. As lending and theft led to many books being lost, most libraries had strict policies. Usually books were only available, but not lent, to trusted members of staff, or professors. Even students were

rarely allowed to see the books in the library of universities of that time. What Hernando designed was a system where visitors could reach through a set of bars to read and turn pages, yet could not remove the books. A creative approach, albeit seemingly difficult in execution, showed he was interested in having his library used by a wide public. In this way, again, he was well ahead of his time.

Public access combined with being a library in all languages and of common as well as elite materials makes Hernando Columbus's library a vision that is global, public-spirited, and extremely rare, then as now.

Losing Books in a Shipwreck

On a major buying tour across Europe in 1522, Hernando bought 1,637 [Shipwrecked [page 236](#)] books which was a very large collection at that time. The cost of 2,000 ducats was a full year of his royal pension. (To understand how much that was, 3 ducatos/month was a high salary for one of his scribes in Seville [Prints [Vol 1 page 134](#)]). While Hernando went back to Seville on horseback, he sent the books back on a ship. Unfortunately, the ship sank, taking all of the books down with it. This was a disaster for Hernando, an expensive loss, as well as a loss for history. His careful catalog of these books, his first, he named '[The Catalogue of Shipwrecked Books](#),' a poetic title that also inspired him to put down roots in Seville – if for no other reason, to house his books in a stable location.

On Making It Last

"It is one thing," Hernando wrote in his letter to King Charles, who was, by then, the emperor, "to build a library of those things found in our time: but entirely another, to order things in such a way that all new things are sought out and gathered forever." [Shipwrecked [page 314](#)]

Hernando wanted his library to last forever, be accessed freely, and be forever growing. This is different from many collectors that want their curatorial choices to be the last word on their collection. Hernando wanted his library to continue to grow even after he died, and worked to ensure that it would. He imagined books being fed into his library over time from many collecting points around the world. He had a concept beyond his own achievement: an institution that would continue and flourish.

He understood it would need ongoing financial support going forward. That was the reason to write to the emperor to ask for his pension to be continued after his death, not to his heirs but to his library. This was very unusual: there were no corporate entities to endow in those days, and inheritance would go to individuals. Hernando wanted his

estate to go to his library. The Emperor did grant 500 gold pesos to the library, which made it the first-ever state-sponsored library [Prints [Vol 1, page 127](#)], but it is not known if anything came after that.

In a similar way, the Bodleian Library of Oxford University, launched almost a hundred years later, was successfully endowed with lands that helped support collecting new books to keep it relevant.

Hernando's Vision and Accomplishments

Hernando stands out as a man who understood the world was finite and mappable, that it could and should be discovered, measured, recorded, and made accessible.

Furthermore, he applied these ideas to other realms than mapping the globe – he wanted to map the world of plants, language, towns, and ideas. He wanted all human knowledge to be understood and mapped, no matter where it came from.

He was a visionary, but he went further: Hernando launched the projects, staffed them, and worked to see them continue.

The era he accomplished all of this in may have made it possible: the Renaissance, the printing press, and the discovery of the extent of the earth. These major changes in the early 16th century may make it seem this was all inevitable.

But those times also made it very difficult: the Protestant Reformation led to massive book burnings and conflict. Wars were dividing Europe, Spain from France, and Spain from Portugal. The Ottoman Siege of Vienna threatened the east by 1529, making the region dangerous and sapping resources. Upheaval was everywhere, which made large individual projects difficult to coordinate and fund.

Yet, Hernando Columbus did. An amazing man with vision and abilities.

Hernando Columbus, Who?

Yet, Hernando Columbus and his library are barely remembered. Why? The Internet Archive's millions of periodical issues from the last century only mention him in reference to his writing the biography of his father Christopher Columbus. Searches of Google Books reveal much the same.

The recovery of the catalog of his library and the resulting biography [[Shipwrecked](#)] have helped. A scholarly 3 volume set contextualizing and digitizing the catalog of his prints was put out in a small expensive set and is long out of print, less than 20 years

after its publication. The recent book [The Library: A Fragile History](#) covers him in a few pages.

Maybe with the recent recovery of his Book of Epitomes (the summaries of his books) he might become more of a discussed historical figure.

What Happened to the Library?

Hernando did not have any children, and his library was left to his nephew, Diego, the grandson and heir to Christopher Columbus. Diego was not interested in caring for the collection or the project. It went to the monastery of San Petro, and then, after an extended legal battle, to Seville Cathedral [The Library [page 99](#)]. The Spanish Inquisition culled all the non-Catholic books, such as Luther's, and the 185 books by Erasmus [The Library [page 92](#)], and the King took some for his own collection [The Library [page 99](#)]. What is left of the library, 4,000 of the original 15,000 books, still resides in the Seville Cathedral. None of the 3,000 prints survive.

The recent recovery of the Book of Epitomes might rekindle interest in the books and in the library as a whole, so there are reasons for hope.

What Can We Learn from Hernando and His Library?

With such a fantastic project from another age both succeeding and failing, prompts the question: what can we learn from the project? What can still be learned from the library?

New Technology Brings Disruption

The dissemination and disruption brought about by printing technology in Hernando's time might give us lessons for our newborn digital age.

The Protestant Reformation rose fast in the first decades of the 16th century, and with it large-scale burnings of monasteries and their libraries. Book burnings by the Catholics were also on the rise. Erasmus's works were spread widely and helped fuel the Reformation. Martin Luther was a master of the printed pamphlet, with many of these coming out and circulating widely. The introduction of printing technology allowed more voices to be heard, including radical ones that spread and provoked popular rebellion. Where many of these new printed pamphlets said that the Catholic Church did not have a God-given right to assert control over people, these same works were also interpreted by many as saying that the rich and nobles do not either. Many took to burning, killing, and upending the power system around them based on printed words spread on paper.

In our present day, cable television, the World Wide Web, and social media have enabled millions to publish to millions. This new capability has undermined the authority of traditional news media and allowed new, highly politicized news organizations to spring up and dominate. The spread of social unrest and misinformation has resulted in calls for government regulation of these new technologies, but to little effect so far in the western democracies. Looking back to the 16th century, we see attempts to control what was printed, including the monopoly control in England by the [Royal Stationary Guild](#) as means to dictate who could print what. Printing presses were illegal in many countries for decades [[Library](#)].

Some countries, such as China, are currently heavily regulating what is on the Internet, but most are using a lighter hand., This might change if history is a guide.

“Cheap Print” Made a New Type of Library Possible

Another lesson from Hernando’s library could be that the advent of “cheap print” meant that a library many times larger than previous ones could be built, and built by individuals rather than institutions. Indeed, it was not the government or the Church that set out in those early days to build such a library – it was a visionary with connections and means that conceived of and executed the project. It would take many decades before institutional libraries would catch up on the raw numbers of books, but it may be centuries before anyone attempts to build a Universal Library with the expansive vision that Hernando started.

Even though it may have been possible to build a Universal Library in the 16th century, it was pursued in earnest by only one person that we know of.

Don’t Keep All Your Books in One Boat

The shipwreck containing 1,637 books is a tragic story, but the bigger tragedy is the loss of Hernando’s larger library and momentum.

Shortly after his death, most of Hernando’s 15,000 books were quickly “culled” by the Church and the King, resulting in only 4,000 books in a coherent collection surviving. Even more poignant, all of his 3,000 illustration prints were lost. Monasteries were declining rapidly and Universities were rising, but all were within a context that did not support the broader vision of the universal collection and the goal of public access.

The rapid destruction of such a great collection was caused by the purposeful culling of the collection on religious grounds, but also a withering of support and lack of continuity

of the vision. The Library of Alexandria, apparently, did not end with a purposeful burning either, but rather a shift in attitude from the broad Greco-Roman concept of learning to the ascendant Christian focus on their God.

Hernando's library was a working example, a prototype, of a new type of library that did not catch on. Not only did it not survive physically or institutionally, but the story of its vision and accomplishments did not make it into the history books and is only now that it is the subject of scholarship and a few popular writings.

Maybe now will be the opportunity for Hernando's ideas to be reborn.

Universal Access to All Knowledge

The idea of a universal library has lived since the Library of Alexandria, where the founding King commanded the librarian to [“collect together all the books of the world”](#) in 300 BC. This ideal was talked about by the humanists in the 15th century, but may not have been attempted again until Hernando Columbus. And then after him, another major attempt at such a goal may have waited until our present day.

The public library system of Andrew Carnegie shared the vision of public access to knowledge, but built curated collections rather than universal ones. This limitation was somewhat overcome with the growth of interlibrary lending in the 20th century, but making it useful would wait for the digital age.

Even the Library of Congress, the largest library in the world by far, does not have a goal of building a universal collection or of broad public access. While the Library of Congress has a legal deposit rule to require all US publishers to give 2 copies to them, and has 10 staff in Cairo and 30 staff members in Delhi to acquire published materials, it does not set out to be universal. It throws away $\frac{2}{3}$ of the works that are submitted via legal deposit, and picks carefully what it wants from foreign lands. The Library of Congress' selectivity may somewhat reflect the cost of cataloging and preservation traditionally. Just cataloging an item was [\\$17 in 1989](#), which is [\\$37 today](#). Another factor may be that the Library of Congress, and National Libraries, do not support much public access to their collections, so there is not a feedback of demand. University and school libraries do support access, but only to specific users, which directs their collection criteria. Public libraries similarly collect carefully and deaccession regularly. There are no print libraries, that I am aware of, that strive for universal collections, other than the current Open Library, which is allied with the Internet Archive. Few physical libraries allow the full public to have access. Google and the Internet Archive are the only digital libraries that strive for universal collections.

So how could Hernando Columbus be so bold as to want to collect it all and then make it accessible to everyone? One reason could be that he lived in a very special time: a new technology, printing, brought down the cost of acquisition. This lower cost was for made for a blossoming of popular books, not just monastic and legal accounts. Therefore, the number of books that would be desirable for many people to read grew quickly, which would make a library popular.

Some argue that printed books then became too numerous to collect them all, but this does not quite make sense. Even now, the total production of print books from major publishers to an American audience is expanding at approximately 200,000 titles a year. At \$20 per book, acquiring one of each would only be four million dollars a year. Even if these are low estimates, a city library, such as the San Francisco Public Library, with its annual budget of [\\$170 million](#), could acquire them all if it had the motivation to do so.

It could be that Hernando Columbus's background in discovering, exploring, and mapping gave him a different approach to knowledge than others: that all published works could be contained and understood. A different perspective, a reassessing of the opportunities, and applying ideas from the successful circumnavigation of the earth, could have been a necessary condition of Hernando's vision.

After Hernando came similar dreams and visions, such as Diderot's *Encyclopédie* in 1751, and H. G. Wells' collection of essays in [1936](#), [World Brain](#). Vannevar Bush, in his [1945 paper in The Atlantic](#), ([as appeared](#)), describes the "Memex," and Ted Nelson devised Hypertext systems. These all pointed in a direction of expanded access to the library, but the bold vision of collecting everything published might wait further.

With the promise of ever-declining costs of computer storage, the idea of recording all published works seemed possible to some of us in the early 1980s. As computing capacity increased exponentially, search, manipulation, and artificial intelligence would become possible, and computer networks could help in distribution and collection. I led many conversations from 1983 to 1986 with Richard Feynman, Steven Wolfram, Danny Hillis, and Marvin Minsky on the subject of how long it would take us to get everything ever published all online, and what we would do then. Our timings proved optimistic, but not because we were wrong about the technology; rather because we did not appreciate the resistance that corporations would mount.

So technologists, such as myself in 1980 at MIT, and Larry Page and Sergey Brin in the mid-1990s at Stanford, certainly saw the opportunity to collect all the published works in digital form, and then acted on it. The idea was in the air. Mike Lesk, the father of digital libraries, wrote [How Much Information Is There In the World?](#) in 1997, and Peter Lyman,

the University of California Berkeley librarian and early Internet Archive board member, wrote a paper in 2003 on [How Much Information?](#) All of these efforts tried to quantify information production, both published and unpublished, and then some would attempt to build the Great Library.

Other efforts also stand out. Michael Hart started Project Gutenberg in 1970 which was a volunteer project to key all public domain books into readable computer forms, with aspirations to have all books in all languages available to everyone. Raj Reddy, an artificial intelligence professor at Carnegie Mellon, led the Million Books Project in the early 2000s, which involved the Internet Archive, successfully digitizing over one million books. Reddy issued a call for [Universal Access to Human Knowledge](#) in 2001.

The Google Book project (2004) set out to digitize all books. They currently estimate 100 million titles, and have achieved at least [25 million so far](#). The Internet Archive similarly attempts to digitize all books (currently over [6 million titles](#)), but also everything else – all audio, film, television, radio, and digital artifacts such as webpages and social media posts. The Internet Archive seems to be the most similar project to Hernando's Library project.

Hernando's vision has taken root once again in many projects, similarly coming from outside the established library institutions.

Fate of Libraries

Will the Internet Archive and other projects befall the same fate of dispersal destruction and being forgotten?

My purpose in writing this paper is to help understand what might happen to our current libraries, but also to help avoid pitfalls. What can be learned from Hernando's Library to inform current projects to build Universal Access to All Knowledge?

As two recent books, [The Library: A Fragile History](#) and [Burning the Books: A History of the Deliberate Destruction of Knowledge](#) illustrate, most libraries do not persist in a useful and used form, either because of active destruction, or based on a shift in power that makes the collections illegal or inaccessible to new generations.

A rare counterexample raised in A Fragile History is the Bodleian Library at Oxford, which was endowed, had rules against lending, and rules to be accessible to outsiders, all of which may have been required to survive. But its survival may have been a matter of the times it was formed (in 1602) in the rising nation-state of England. Another library in the same place, founded just 100 years earlier, did not last. The previous library at

Oxford, Duke Humfrey's collection from 1488, was [destroyed within 60 years](#) as part of religious shifts, so what leads to longevity may mostly be based on external factors.

Conclusion

If we reconstruct Hernando's library from surviving materials, what more could we learn?

Scholars are using the catalogs to understand the collection and what can be learned. The Book of Epitomes was recently [refound in a library in Denmark](#) so more work will proceed in the next ten years as that is digitized and translated.

If a project is launched to rebuild the library, say in digital form, what could be learned? For instance, what works have not survived at all? Since we have catalogs and summaries of the books, we could try to find these books, digitize them, and fulfill Hernando's vision of public access.

Just attempting to find the books could yield interesting insights into our society's priorities as to what types of books and pamphlets were preserved. We know that it would not have been very expensive to preserve them as there were only 15,000 books and, properly cared for, they could be preserved inexpensively for centuries. But did they make it, and can we find them? The copyrights have expired (and barely existed in the early 16th century), but controls limiting access are still in place. Attempting to rebuild the library might lead us to learn a great deal about ourselves.

The professor that [recovered the Epitomes of Books](#), Guy Lazure of the University of Windsor, said in private correspondence, this would be a very interesting project but would likely be very difficult. It would require cooperation with the Cathedral in Seville, which may not be easy. If there are holdings in the secret archives of the Vatican, they might be difficult to access. There was a digitization project decades ago with IBM and the Vatican archive, but I understand it ended in frustration. A digitization project at the British Library by the Internet Archive with Microsoft funding ended in frustration because that Library did not want to have digital images of pages of older, out-of-copyright books, leave their building. Some other projects have been more successful in bringing public access to digitized books, but what materials will be available to the public can be an interesting reflection on current institutions.

For the books that could be found, digitized, and made publicly available, it would be interesting to see what uses they would come to. Would there be new scholarship possible about Europe at that time? Would a large-scale collection, available in digital

form, give a snapshot of the popular culture, the people's perception of their changing world, that can inform our own transitions?

If these works were translated and republished into our modern era, would any of them find a broad audience today? Would the plays, games, and recipes from that era find a resurgence because they would be as new as discovering a new land? If a library were reborn and recontextualized for a modern public, what would be popular, and what would be learned by it?

Would keeping a library in use help its longevity, or make it a target for those that want new ideas to supersede the old? Is there much value in having old materials around?

Hernando Columbus led a fascinating life as a visionary and a builder – a man with a perspective that makes his experiences relevant to our current day as technology once again shifts the power structures and changes how we understand the world and ourselves.

Maybe the most important effect of rebuilding the Library of Hernando Columbus would be to bring attention to his project and enliven the idea of a Universal Library in our modern era.

Showing support for a visionary, even one from the 16th century, could inspire a new generation of visionaries and builders to work with and fight against the inevitable forces – then King and Church, now Government and Corporations – to build grand projects. Maybe we, as a society, will rise to the challenge of supporting a Universal Library so that it is available to everyone, so that this time it carries forward for generations to come.

Epilogue: How Writing this Paper Illustrates my Hybrid Digital and Print World

I learned of Hernando (Ferdinand) Columbus by reading a print book “The Library: A Fragile History,” and wanted to learn more. I looked him up in Wikipedia and found a citation to a biography “The Catalog of Shipwrecked Books” and immediately purchased a copy on Better World Books that had originally been purchased by a library and then deaccessioned to Better World Books. This would take a week to arrive. It turns out the Wikipedia citation had a link to a page of an online book that was on the Internet Archive which allowed me to read immediately. I found the online reading experience difficult so I borrowed the encrypted, protected PDF version. Which I find much more useful. Cutting and pasting, while technically doable on a protected book has been turned off to mimic the restrictions publishers do with their books.

The physical book arrived, and I lent it to a friend before thinking of writing this paper. Getting it back was slow, so I ordered another one, which took almost 2 weeks. Because paper now seems ephemeral, I did not make notes in the book, but rather in a Google doc.

I read the printed book but had the computer always there so I could search the book easily. Clunky but the best I could do.

I found another book referenced, the actual catalog and some scholarly essays, but that one was not online, and it was published in 2004 out of print and cost \$400 online. I purchased this, and again it took 2 weeks to arrive. It turns out this is the catalog of his printed images collection not the printed books.

I wrote this paper on [Google Docs](#), which I find a distracting environment to write because other activities are just a click away. I feel like I am living in, and helping to cause, a transitional period.

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