Rosemary Fry Plakas
Think again if someone tells you that working for a library is boring. Rosemary Fry Plakas, ’63, HON Ph.D., ’03. American history specialist and curator of rare Americana for the Library of Congress, dispels that with tales of fascinating discoveries in her 35 years at the Library.

On any given day she might be found clarifying historical information for a White House speech writer, interpreting founding documents for a freshman congressman, or bidding at a Sotheby’s auction on a rare female Indian captivity narrative or the first printing in Cherokee of an 1819 spelling book. Although she has focused on strengthening the Library’s holdings in women’s and African-American materials, one of her favorite recent acquisitions is the only known copy of the Jan. 2, 1804, issue of the New Orleans newspaper Moniteur de la Louisiane, describing the December 1803 ceremony during which the lowering of the French flag and raising of the American flag signified the transfer of the Louisiana Purchase to the United States.

On occasion, she “sweet talks and/or arm twists” prospective book/collection donors to contribute historical documents that she believes belong at the LC. “The thrill of the search is always energizing,” she confides, and she takes her stewardship of America’s historical and creative legacy very seriously.

From 1971 to 1980, Plakas served as associate editor of the first 10 volumes of the documentary history Letters of Delegates to Congress, 1774-1789, which recently was named one of the 100 most significant federal publications of the 20th century. (“I always loved to read other people’s mail!”)

After serving five years as the American history specialist for the LC’s Local History and Genealogy Room, Plakas became curator of rare Americana in the Rare Book and Special Collections Division in 1985. Here she oversees the development and interpretation of rare collections through acquisitions and presentations; recommends levels of conservation; selects collections for digitization; curates in-house and traveling exhibitions; and publishes resource guides and critical essays about the Library’s collections.

Plakas lectures at nationwide professional conferences and holds viewings of special Library treasures for congressmen, foreign dignitaries, celebrities, scholars and young people. She extends this offer to Park faculty, alumni and administrators.

She was a featured speaker for the Thomas Jefferson Library on C-Span’s
“I feel most blessed to have had the opportunity to work in a profession I love, where I learn something new and interesting every day and always find new ways to celebrate the stories of our people and share our cultural and historical legacy.”

Rosemary Fry Plakas in the Rosenwald Room surrounded by her favorite publications and rare items, including a scrapbook showing Elizabeth and Anne Miller, the creators of the seven suffrage scrapbooks Plakas is currently digitizing.
American Presidents Series and served as an adviser to Ken Burns on his documentaries about the Civil War and women’s suffrage. She is a principal curator of the American Treasures exhibition, has contributed to several White House exhibits, and was curator of Rivers, Edens, Empires, the Lewis and Clark Bicentennial exhibition.

Before she ever dreamed of working for the Library of Congress, however, Plakas lived in Kansas City, Kan., where her maternal grandparents devoted much of their retirement years to preparing her “for opportunities they had only dreamed about, including a college education.”

“Beginning in grade school, my grandmother encouraged me to study by promising me a dime for every high mark,” Plakas recalled. “My grandfather washed our dishes so that I had more time to practice playing the piano and singing. The love for books and music they instilled in me has continued throughout my life.”

Plakas learned of “the college across the river” when Dr. Jerzy Hauptmann, professor of political science, visited Wyandotte High School to lead a discussion of Machiavelli’s The Prince and when “Mother” Jean Curl, ’50, introduced her to Park by sponsoring Wyandotte’s Turkish delegation to Park’s United Nations Model Assembly.

“I was certain that Park was the right college for me,” Plakas noted, adding that she was delighted when Charles Edwards, ’42, told her that Park had offered her a scholarship.

Park provided a rich educational environment. “In small classes inspired by excellent professors, including Dr. Hauptmann, Dr. Peter D. Hilty [associate professor of English], “Prof.” Robbins [Leon A., professor of mathematics] and Elsa Grueneberg [professor of modern foreign languages], we were challenged to think critically, develop mutual respect and accept our share of the responsibility of serving and strengthening our extended family and community,” Plakas explained. “We were offered countless opportunities to grow in mind and spirit and become good stewards, while enjoying brother/sister clubs, intramural sports and pursuing special interests.”

One of her most cherished Park experiences was singing in various choirs and touring the United States with the Park Singers. “Although a sharp word or look from Director Kenn Seipp [assistant professor of music] could melt us, he inspired us to make beautiful music together and become lifelong friends. The many special people I met at Park have enriched my life and remain my extended family.”

After completing her bachelor of arts in political science at Park, Plakas earned a master of arts in American studies from the University of Wyoming, where she was a Coe fellow, and later she was a doctoral research fellow in American history at George Washington University. Over the last two decades, she has attended the rare book schools at Columbia University and the University of Virginia. Before joining the Library of Congress, she taught American history and government at Berkshire Community College in Pittsfield, Mass.

For years, Plakas has advocated sharing the Library’s primary source materials with a larger constituency. Long before the American Memory Digital Library or the internet, she would fill her suitcases with old LC exhibit catalogs to share with Park friends who were teaching.
Reaching that larger constituency is easier today, thanks to internet capabilities and digitization. As a member of the advisory team for the Library’s American Memory Project, she helped establish criteria for selecting and digitizing the Library’s multiformat collections. Her advocacy for digitization, along with the efforts of many technical experts, has resulted in the online availability of more than 700 African-American pamphlets, 320 Continental Congress/Constitutional Convention documents and more than 10,000 broadsides and printed ephemera on all of life’s subjects, spanning three centuries. Her current project, digitizing seven suffrage scrapbooks, 1897-1911, created by Elizabeth Smith Miller (1822-1911) and her daughter, Anne Fitzhugh Miller (1856-1912), of Geneva, N.Y., who were cousins of Elizabeth Cady Stanton, will be available online in August.

Plakas considers education “the rarest of all treasures, one that can never be taken away” and teachers “the hope of the future.” She encourages the educational use of primary materials online through the National Digital Library, and she has participated in five American Memory Fellows Institutes and numerous regional workshops to train high school and community college teachers to use digital historical collections in the classroom. She enjoys knowing that she indirectly contributes to the future by sharing resources “that may stimulate new insight and understanding about both the triumphs and mistakes of the past.”

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Plakas’ passion and pleasure have been mixed with some professional pain. As deputy chief negotiator for the Professional Guild’s master contract team and steward director for the Library’s Collections Services Department, she has fought for healthier and safer working conditions and expanded professional development opportunities for Library staff. She also facilitates labor-management cooperation. Staff members, she said, are dedicated stewards of our national legacy that deserve to be encouraged, protected and celebrated.

Plakas credits the liberal education she received at Park and the support of teachers, mentors and fellow students with preparing her for the personal and professional challenges of her life. And the University has benefited as well. She has been president of the Alumni Association and a member of the Board of Trustees, the Educational Policy Committee, the board of directors of the Park University Historical Society, and the Jerzy Hauptmann Distinguished Guest Lecture Committee.

She received the Distinguished Alumni award in 1995, and in 1996 was one of 120 outstanding alumni to be featured in a 120th-anniversary Park publication. In May 2003, she received an honorary doctor of humane letters from Park and gave the commencement address.

Plakas still enjoys music and has performed with the Colonial Singers at the White House and Kennedy Center. She enjoys singing with church and semiprofessional choral groups and has cut several tapes and records (“none on the Top 10 chart”).

She looks forward to travel, music and theater with trips to the family marina on the Chesapeake Bay in Virginia to see her son, Costa, whom she describes as a “sailor, photographer and world traveler.”

Note: The Library of Congress holds many treasures among its unparalleled collections. Through the American Memory Program, more than 7 million items are accessible at www.loc.gov/ammem.