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# Ross Collins and the Incunabula\*

by Martha Swain

In 1954 Mark Ethridge, editor of the *Louisville Courier-Journal*, wrote to a former United States Congressman from Mississippi, “It must strike you as anomalous that the prime contribution to the country’s literature was sponsored by a Congressman from a ‘country district’ in Mississippi which Mencken called ‘the Sahara of the Beaux Arts.’”<sup>1</sup>

Rosser A. (Ross) Collins of Meridian was the congressman, and the priceless book was a Gutenberg Bible, printed sometime in 1494 or 1495 and purchased along with some three thousand other valuable incunabula for the Library of Congress in 1930 at the cost of \$1,500,000. Ethridge could have added that perhaps an even greater anomaly was that later as chairman of the House Armed Forces Appropriations Subcommittee, the “country congressman” was better known as the “father of the B-29 bomber.”

Ross Collins was born in Collinsville (Lauderdale County), Mississippi, on April 25, 1880, and inherited a love of literature and learning. His grandfather, John Burroughs Collins (1812-1866), migrated from Kentucky to the Pine Springs community in Lauderdale County intent upon farming. But, as a local historian wrote, “John was more a reader than a farmer.”<sup>2</sup> He undoubtedly was primarily self-taught, studied law, and became an elected sheriff and justice of the peace, adjudicating

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\* Incunabula: early printed books, especially books printed before 1500 (*Webster’s Dictionary*).

The author is grateful to Leigh McWhite, political papers archivist, J. D. Williams Library, University of Mississippi, for her assistance in locating Collins material. She also wishes to thank Dr. Charles Westmoreland, Jr. of Delta State University for his helpful suggestions to give greater attention to Collins’s cultural instincts and Nancy Traylor-Heard of Mississippi State University for assistance with the final manuscript.

<sup>1</sup> Mark Ethridge to Ross Collins, June 15, 1954; Ross A. Collins Papers, Box 9, Library of Congress (hereinafter LC). H. L. Mencken was the acerbic columnist for the Baltimore Sun.

<sup>2</sup> Mary Ellen New White, *The First Hundred Years of the Pine Springs Community of Lauderdale County, Mississippi* (Meridian: Lauderdale County Department of Archives and History, Inc., 1992), 31.

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*Ross Collins with an autographed copy of Winston Churchill's Blood, Sweat, and Tears, courtesy of the Ross A. Collins Collection at the J.D. Williams Library at the University of Mississippi*

many local disputes. He began a school in the community, taught there, and kept it open during the Civil War.<sup>3</sup>

John's son, Nathaniel Monroe ("Dink") Collins, born in 1840, became a general store owner and created a school in the community now known as Collinsville. Ross was his son. Presumably the earliest learning of young Ross came through the books accumulated by his grandfather and father, but by the record he later provided to an archive, he was educated in the Meridian public schools.<sup>4</sup> He attended Mississippi Agricultural and Mechanical College (now Mississippi State University) at Starkville, but after one year transferred to Kentucky University (now Transylvania University) in Lexington, where he could receive

a liberal arts education. After graduation in 1900, he attended the University of Mississippi, where he studied law in 1901. His literary proclivities must have made an impression upon his law classmates. When they spoofed one another by naming the man they most resembled, they dubbed Collins "the irrepressible Hamlet."<sup>5</sup> Collins married Alfreda Grant, and the couple had two children, a son named Melville (perhaps for Herman Melville) and a daughter named Jane (for Jane Austen?).

In 1912 Collins became attorney general of Mississippi and remained in that post until 1920. Late in his tenure as attorney general, he broke with the pugna-cious governor Theodore G. Bilbo (1916-1920) and became involved in infighting with his former allies who threatened Collins's political ambitions. As a result of the shifts, when Collins ran for governor in 1919, he came in last in a field of four, losing to Bilbo's protégé Lee Russell. Collins turned his sights to Congress and was elected in 1920 and to six successive Congresses (March 4, 1921-January 3, 1935). That run ended with his candidacy in 1934 for U. S. Senator and defeat by Bilbo.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ross Collins vertical file, Mississippi Department of Archives and History (MDAH), Jackson; Biographical Directory of the American Congress, 1774-1971 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1971), 768-769.

<sup>5</sup> Ole Miss, 1911.

Collins returned to Congress and served from January 3, 1937, to January 3, 1943.

Politics pure and simple cast Collins in competition with Lester Franklin, a perennial candidate for public office from Tupelo, and Bilbo for popularity with the poor farmers of northeast Mississippi. According to Turner Catledge, the Mississippi-born managing editor of the *New York Times*, Collins adopted a “backwards drawl to profess ignorance as far as he could” for fear that people would learn of his “cultural instincts.”<sup>6</sup> His liberal bent was almost fatal to his run in July 1920 against Webb Venable, also of Meridian and the incumbent representative from the 5th District, when he stated at Newton during the campaign that the radical pronouncements of the anarchist Emma Goldman came under free speech protection. Therefore he believed that the federal government had no right to deport her.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps as attorney general he had disagreed with U.S. Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer’s massive deportation of aliens during the Red Scare.

The saga of the Congressional purchase of the incunabula began in 1926 when St. Paul Abbey in Austria, which had become so fiscally distressed after World War I that it had to sell its Gutenberg Bible to Otto Herbert H. F. Vollbehr, described by *Time* as “an eccentric German tycoon,” for \$350,000.<sup>8</sup> Vollbehr had begun his collection in response to the advice he had received to begin a hobby as a means to help him recuperate from injuries incurred in a railway accident in Turkey. The Bible became the centerpiece of the acclaimed Vollbehr Collection of incunabula, described by Pierce Butler of Chicago’s Newberry Library as “an imminently well-chosen selection of the whole literature printed before 1501.” Butler did not believe that the collection, which included works of Aristotle, Cicero, Pliny, and Boccaccio, ranging from the subject of law and medicine to witchcraft and wood-working, could be duplicated by any other collection for less than \$2,500,000. The collection preserved “a vivid record of the intellectual and social life of Europe before the Protestant Reformation.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Chester Morgan, *Redneck Liberal: Theodore G. Bilbo and the New Deal* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985), 20; Turner Catledge, interview with author, March 20, 1973, transcript in Special Collections, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University, Starkville.

<sup>7</sup> *Winston County (Mississippi) Journal*, August 13, 1920.

<sup>8</sup> *Time*, July 7, 1930.

<sup>9</sup> Lawrence E. Tomlinson, *Gutenberg and the Invention of Printing: An Anniversary Review* (Washington: Judd and Detweiler, 1938), 50; Butler report on the Vollbehr Collection (April 1926) in Collins Papers, Box 6, LC; *Time* 56 (July 7, 1930), 17; “Pierce Butler,” *Dictionary of American Biography*, IV (New York: Oxford University Press), 98-99. For a full description of the collection and its provenance, see Frederick A. Ashley, *A Look Back: The Story of the Vollbehr Collection and Incunabula* (Lexington: Washington and Lee, 1934), copies in Collins Papers, Box 10, LC.



*The Gutenberg Bible at the Library of Congress, courtesy of the Ross A. Collins Collection at the J.D. Williams Library at the University of Mississippi*

Portions of the Vollbehr Collection went on display in August 1926 at the National Arts Club in New York City, later at the Eucharistic Congress in Chicago, again in St. Louis, and finally at the Library of Congress. On display were 250 items with some 3,000 available for inspection elsewhere at the National Arts Club, which advertised the Vollbehr Collection as containing ten percent of all known books published before 1501. Whatever institution or community that acquired the collection would be famed “so long as books are known and the printed word is cherished.”<sup>10</sup> George Parker Winship of the Widener Library at Harvard, who prepared the exhibition catalogue, described the collection as one to “make visible the fifteenth century as a whole from the Rhine to the Tagus, and one that was never [to] be done again as well as Dr. Vollbehr has done it.”<sup>11</sup>

In March 1929 Vollbehr gave the Library of Congress a collection of some 20,000 woodcuts from early illustrated books as a goodwill contribution to honor the anniversary of the birth of Carl Schurz, the German-born U. S. statesman of the

<sup>10</sup> “Earliest Printed Books Form a Rare Treasure,” *New York Times Magazine*, August 29, 1926. For an account of the Bible’s history, see Edwin Emerson, *The Gutenberg Bible in Vellum in the Vollbehr Collection* (New York: Tudor Press, 1928).

<sup>11</sup> Booklet in Frederick Melcher Collection, LC.

nineteenth century.<sup>12</sup> Prominent newspapers already were calling for the purchase for the Library of Congress of the famed Vollbehr Incunabula Collection, including the Gutenberg Bible. Pleas went forth for contributions to the Library's trust fund to permit the purchase, but it was unlikely that citizens or institutions could raise the necessary funds.<sup>13</sup>

On November 26, 1929, Vollbehr announced through the *New York Times* that he intended to sell his collection at auction as soon as a catalogue was available. Financial reverses compelled him to sell his collection, and he had made numerous contacts to do so. According to one writer on the subject, Vollbehr was "a promoter operating in high gear." He anticipated the sale would occur in the spring of 1930.<sup>14</sup> One week later, on December 3, 1929, Ross Collins made his move by introducing in the House of Representatives a bill (HR 6147) that authorized the secretary of the treasury to pay \$1,500,000 to purchase the Vollbehr Collection for the Library of Congress.<sup>15</sup>

Collins recalled, "I began to receive a surprisingly large number of letters from all sections of the country – an upsurge of sentiment from the bookish people of the nation." Herbert Vollbehr wrote, "My chief aim is that this collection shall be preserved and remain intact," and he expressed his willingness to accept \$2,500,000. Adolph A. Oko, librarian of the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati, Ohio, endorsed Vollbehr's asking price, and added his support of Collins's "moving thought" that the collection be named for Dr. Herbert Putnam, who had served as the Librarian of Congress for thirty-three years. George Winship, the Harvard assistant librarian who had appraised the collection in 1926, believed that no other collection could ever place the Library of Congress on an "unquestioned" par with European national libraries. Edward F. Stevens, director of the (Detroit) Pratt Institute School of Library Science concurred that the collection was one that contained the "choicest specimens of the most notable presses" and would be a "great tribute" to Putnam's three decades of distinguished service. Frederick Melcher, editor of *Publishers' Weekly*, also estimated the worth of the collection at \$2,500,000 and stated that it presented a "complete picture of the state of culture in that most important period." To his credit Putnam hesitated to join the host of supporters because of the awkwardness

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<sup>12</sup> *New York Times*, March 3, 1929.

<sup>13</sup> *Baltimore Sun*, May 13, 1929; *Washington Post*, March 4, 1928, p. 30; *New York Times*, May 13, 1919.

<sup>14</sup> *New York Times*, November 26, 1929; Frederick R. Goff, "Uncle Sam Has a Book," *Quarterly Journal of the Library of Congress*, 25 (Summer 1981), 123.

<sup>15</sup> *Congressional Record*, 71 Cong., 2nd Sess., Part 1 (December 3, 1929), 62.

of Collins's intent that the acquisition be consummated in his honor.<sup>16</sup>

On February 7, 1930, Collins made an inspired speech in Congress for which he had spent thirty days in preparation with the assistance of two "vastly intelligent men" in the House Reading Room in the U. S. Capitol. In a sweeping history of the Library of Congress from its inception by an act of Congress in 1800, the purchase of the library of Thomas Jefferson in 1815, the physical construction of the present Library in 1897, and on to the directorship of the Library under Herbert Putnam, Collins elaborated upon the vast benefits that the Library provided to the members of Congress and that would accrue to the national citizenry if the purchase of the Vollbehrr Collection were made. In lamenting the failure of Congress to appropriate funds to purchase the libraries of George Washington and the historian George Bancroft, Collins pleaded that Congress now seize the opportunity to "still further add to the greatness and richness of its Library." Such an opportunity would never come again for the acquisition of "these cradle books," which otherwise would be returned to Europe and sold at auction. He concluded, "It is a matter of grave doubt if the foreign governments will ever allow another Gutenberg Bible to leave their borders."<sup>17</sup>

Collins was able, the *Chicago Evening Post* reported, to hold the interest of the House for one hour. The speech, a Californian wrote, was steeped in "research and erudition," a "fine piece of belles lettres," and "a noble contribution to our best American literature." The publisher Alfred A. Knopf wrote Collins, "I could not conceive of the cause being better put." Newton D. Baker, a former secretary of war under President Woodrow Wilson, praised the speech as a "most fascinating historical survey," and another admirer even compared Collins's outpouring with the "pithy utterances of Woodrow Wilson during the war."<sup>18</sup> "Intellectual preparedness is what [Collins] favored most," said the *Wilmington (Delaware) News*. From England a rare book seller extolled the speech as "the very high water mark of culture," while a Canadian admirer doubted that "so remarkable an address ever before fell on the

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<sup>16</sup> Vollbehrr to Collins, January 17, 1930; Oko to Collins, January 21, 1930; Stevens to Collins, January 21, 1930; Melcher to Collins, January 25, 1930, all in Collins Papers, Box 6, LC; Putnam to Collins, February 5, 1930, in Collins Scrapbook, III, LC. On Herbert Putnam, see Jane A. Rosenberg, *Herbert Putnam and the Library of Congress* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998) and "For a Greater Library," *Nation* (May 21, 1930), 590.

<sup>17</sup> Collins's account, March 7, 1930, Collins Papers, Box 9, LC; *Congressional Record*, 71 Cong., 2nd Sess., Part 3 (February 7, 1930), 3251-56.

<sup>18</sup> *Chicago Evening Post*, March 21, 1930; Lincoln Wirt (San Francisco) to Collins, April 1, 1930, Collins Scrapbook, I, LC; Newton D. Baker to Collins, April 24, 1930, in Collins Scrapbook, II, LC; W. H. Wright to Collins, April 30, 1930, Collins Scrapbook, III, LC; Alfred A. Knopf to Collins, May 26, 1930, Collins Scrapbook, IV, LC.

ears of a deliberative body.”<sup>19</sup>

The speaker of the house referred Collins’s bill to the House Committee on the Library, and hearings began on March 10, 1930. A number of witnesses discussed the ramifications of the purchase. Herbert Putnam, one of the first to speak, described the tenuous position in which the Vollbehr purchase placed him and informed the lawmakers that he was reluctant to advance a purchase that would be made in his honor. Privately Putnam told Frederick Melcher of *Publishers’ Weekly* that he would “be delighted to see the bill passed upon the initiative of Congress itself.” However, he noted that he had already placed before Congress a request for \$6,500,000 to construct a new annex for the Library, a plea he did not want to jeopardize. Robert Luce, a Massachusetts representative and the House Committee chair, addressed the difficult decision of favoring the request for the purchase of the incunabula over the customary work of the Library. Whether public or private funds should be expended for such a collection was an overriding question before the committee.<sup>20</sup>

Hebrew Union College librarian Adolph Oko, who had earlier supported the purchase, had no objection but questioned the expense of cataloguing and maintaining the collection. Collins estimated the initial cost of these expenses at only \$5,000, a figure Oko discounted. Winship of Harvard, however, ended the discussion when he pointed out that each of the items in the collection was already adequately described and required only a translation of Vollbehr’s methods.<sup>21</sup>

By March 4 Collins had sent a letter seeking support for his bill to a number of congressmen and senators, literary patrons, private school headmasters, college presidents, church leaders, historians, library associations, and even German consulates in the United States. He received numerous responses of support. Utah senator William H. King wrote, “You have presented some very important and significant data.” King’s assurance of his “very best attention” hinted that Senate support was forthcoming. So did a similar statement from Washington senator Clarence C. Dill. House colleagues Emanuel Celler of New York and Morris Sheppard of Texas wrote Collins of their support of his “worthy project.”<sup>22</sup>

Collins was sanguine about passage of the bill for he saw absolutely no opposi-

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<sup>19</sup> *Wilmington News*, May 23, 1930; Maggs Brothers (London) to Collins, February 28, 1930; Lewis Blake Duff (Niagara Falls) to Collins, March 13, 1930, Collins Scrapbook, II, LC.

<sup>20</sup> Hearings, U. S. Congress, House Committee on Library, 71 Cong., 2nd Sess., 1930; Herbert Putnam to Frederick Melcher, March 7, 1930, Frederick Melcher Collection, LC.

<sup>21</sup> *Hearings*.

<sup>22</sup> William H. King to Collins, March 4, 1930; Clarence C. Dill to Collins, March 6, 1930, Emanuel Celler to Collins, March 8, 1930; Morris Sheppard to Collins, March 3, 1930, all in Collins Scrapbook, I, LC.



tion to it. A groundswell of letters boosted his optimism. One proponent wrote, "Would it not be possible to deny ourselves the pleasure of owning a second-rate battle cruiser in order to obtain these, the greatest books on earth?" Fervent supporter Carl Keller of Boston believed the millennium would arrive if such a purely cultural proposition should appeal to Congress.<sup>23</sup>

Accolades in the press added to Collins's confidence that the bill would pass. *The St. Louis Post-Dispatch* saw no reason why Congress could not spend \$1,500,000 for incunabula and classics if it could spend \$4,500,000 for a battleship. The *Miami Herald* echoed that the purchase would "symbolize our desire for parity in culture as well as in cruisers." Repeating that theme in alliteration, the *Saturday Review of Literature* intoned, "Let us have parity in scholarship as well as ships, in culture as cruisers, in books as battleships." Said the New Orleans *Times-Picayune*, the Library of Congress should have "the pick of the lot among foreign cradle books."<sup>24</sup>

Eminent historians endorsed the purchase. Charles A. Beard wrote Collins that he always gave "special attention to your remarks knowing that I shall find substance and wit." The University of Chicago's William E. Dodd, however, offered a slight dissent and preferred that the Library of Congress income be designated for the collection of the private papers of America's great leaders. Dodd's remark led Collins to return to his argument that the purchase of the Vollbehr Collection would remedy the egregious failure of the Library of Congress to acquire the papers of Washington and Bancroft. Collins wrote a Virginia congressman "it would be a great calamity not only to the Library but to the American people as well for Congress not to acquire this great collection."<sup>25</sup>

It surely pleased Collins that praise for him also included kudos for his home state. "God bless the state of Mississippi for sending such an advocate to Congress," wrote a non-Mississippian, while a Meridian constituent admitted, "It isn't the sort of thing that one would ordinarily expect from our state." "How on earth did they come to elect you?" asked an astonished Franklin Bache, a Philadelphia philosopher and Benjamin Franklin descendant.<sup>26</sup> "You have compelled me to make a mental apology to Mississippi," wrote still another, an Alabamian, who added, "there is

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<sup>23</sup> Collins to Frederick Melcher, March 14, 1930, Melcher Collection, LC; Frost Woodhall (Miami) to Collins, March 14, 1930, Carl T. Keller to Collins, March 13, 1930, both in Collins Scrapbook, II, LC.

<sup>24</sup> *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, March 18, 1930; *Miami Herald*, March 20, 1930; *Times-Picayune*, May 4, 1930; E. Paul Sanders, "The Vollbehr Collection," *Saturday Review of Literature* (March 15, 1930), 832-33.

<sup>25</sup> Charles A. Beard to Collins, March 13, 1930; William E. Dodd to Collins, March 15, 1930; Collins to R. Walton Moore, March 18, 1930, all in Collins Scrapbook, I, LC.

<sup>26</sup> Charles Frankenberger to Collins, March 17, 1930; Leroy R. Stevens (Meridian) to Collins, March 28, 1930; Franklin Bache to Collins, n.d., all in Collins Scrapbook, II, LC.

something more than Bilboism still coming from a state that developed Prentiss, Davis, Lamar, and George.<sup>27</sup> “It is especially refreshing to me to see this kind of activity come from Mississippi,” wrote a Washington, D. C. admirer, and the dean of the University of Mississippi Graduate School, Alexander Bondurant, predicted to Collins that “scholars yet unborn will rise up to call you blessed.” A William Morrow book company executive surmised that “it must be a pleasure to argue for ideas which are above the contests of party.” Harry Ayers, the well-known editor of the *Anniston (Alabama) Star*, wrote to Collins, “It is a source of consolation to know that there is a representative from a neighboring state whose intellectual appreciation is sufficiently developed to enable him to be motivated in belief of such a commendable cause.”<sup>28</sup>

By early May, Collins was less optimistic about his proposal, for the House Committee had yet to release its report to the full House. He feared that House Republicans would adhere to President Herbert Hoover’s insistence upon economy as the Great Depression that began in 1930 deepened. Louis Ludlow, an Indiana congressman, was sensitive to Hoover’s call for cutbacks as were other fiscal conservatives. Collins wrote a supporter of the bill that “all administration forces in Congress are hard bent on holding down appropriations and the outlook for this legislation is not good at the present session.”<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, Collins was disturbed by reports that wealthy Texans, unnamed by Collins’s informant, were prepared to buy the collection for the University of Texas.<sup>30</sup> In spite of favorable sentiment from across the nation, Collins was leery that, if Simeon Fess in the Senate and Robert Luce in the House persisted in holding up their reports, the collection would be lost to the United States.<sup>31</sup> Senator Fess had predicted to constituents in the late spring that Collins’s proposal was not likely to gain authorization; rather he hoped that an “enthusiastic capitalist” would make the purchase. A Boston supporter wrote Collins that he surmised that “mere books, particularly old ones which almost nobody can read, must leave most Congressmen or Senators as cold as the South Pole.” Regarding the likelihood that Congress would purchase the Vollbehr Collection, Neil Harris,

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<sup>27</sup> William Vizard (Mobile) to Collins, May 14, 1930, referring to Seargent S. Prentiss, Jefferson Davis, L. Q. C. Lamar, and James Z. George, Collins Scrapbook, III, LC.

<sup>28</sup> John W. Blodgett (Washington, D. C.) to Collins, April 21, 1930; Alexander Bondurant to Collins, April 2, 1930; John Macy (of William Morrow) to Collins, April 24, 1930; Harry Ayers to Collins, April 26, 1930, all in Collins Scrapbook, I, LC.

<sup>29</sup> Louis Ludlow to Dr. Frederick D. Kershner (Butler University), April 30, 1930, copy in Collins Scrapbook, III, LC.

<sup>30</sup> Marcellus E. Foster (Houston) to Collins, April 29, 1930, Collins Scrapbook, IV; Collins to O. A. Kennedy (Ogden, Utah), May 5, 1930, Collins Scrapbook, II, LC; New York Herald Tribune, May 6, 1930.

<sup>31</sup> Collins to William A. Shirley, May 6, 1930, Collins Scrapbook, IV, LC.

a University of Chicago historian, wrote reflectively in 1996, “with unemployment rolls growing daily, with state and local governments unable to meet their most basic contractual obligations, such a transaction actively sponsored by a rural Mississippi congressman, seemed a conjunction of improbables.”<sup>32</sup>

Near the end of May, Collins wrote his House colleagues to urge committee chair Luce and committee members Bernard Snell of New York and John Tilson of Connecticut to release their report on his bill to the full House for debate.<sup>33</sup> Tilson favored the bill, and Luce had expressed his support, but inexplicably on June 4 the committee submitted the bill without recommendation. Its rationale was that the House as a whole should assume responsibility for such an expenditure.<sup>34</sup> However, discussion of the bill was limited to a litany of pros and cons that Luce thought should be considered before the House members voted. He raised the question whether the House should consider the purpose of the Library of Congress to serve the executive and legislative branches and not scholarship in general, as the Library had done for countless historians and interested citizens for many years. Moreover, should Congress question an expenditure of \$1,500,000 beyond its annual appropriation for the Library, and should it examine the appropriateness of a Library acquisition of cultural resources in competition with private collections? His remarks seemed merely perfunctory and repetitive and obviously had no bearing on his colleagues in light of the House’s passing the bill unanimously on June 9, 1930.<sup>35</sup>

As soon as his bill cleared the House, Collins fired off a round of letters to members of the Senate. “Your colleague Ross Collins is a wonder,” a Bostonian wrote to a Wisconsin congressman. Collins knew through access to their correspondence that the Republican majority whip in the Senate, Simeon Fess, who was also chair of the Senate Committee on the Library, was on record in opposition to the expenditure. Fess was convinced that the \$1,500,000 could be better spent on more practical and useful books. Massachusetts Senator Frederick H. Gillett agreed that the sum of over \$1,500,000 for “a mere curiosity like the Gutenberg Bible” was not a proper expenditure for the federal government to assume. Senator Gillett, described by *Time* as “the only possible obstacle,” dropped his objection to the purchase although he demurred, “I think the precedent a bad one [but] I will not object to the passage

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<sup>32</sup> Simeon Fess to George Phieffer, April 19, 1930, Collins Scrapbook, III; Fess to Charles L. Miller, May 3, 1930, Collins Scrapbook, IV, LC; Carl T. Keller (Boston) to Collins, May 13, 1930, Collins Scrapbook, III, LC; Neil Harris, “Public Funding for Rarity: Some American Debates,” *Libraries and Culture* 31 (Winter 1996), 50.

<sup>33</sup> Collins’s letters in Collins Scrapbook, IV, LC.

<sup>34</sup> *Washington Evening Star*, June 4, 1930; House Report 17696, 71 Cong., 2nd Sess.

<sup>35</sup> *New York Times*, June 10, 1930.

of the bill.”<sup>36</sup> Fess and Gillett were minority voices on the Senate Library Committee that favorably reported its bill on June 16, 1930.

Herbert Putnam, who no longer had reservations about the purchase of the Vollbehr Collection since the House had removed his name as the honoree, had made the sole appearance before the Senate committee. Putnam, who now had assurance that the Library addition he wanted was to be funded, conjectured that passage of the bill would dispel the view that Congress was interested only in materialistic matters. The Senate passed the bill sponsored by Connecticut senator Hiram Bingham by a unanimous vote on June 24, 1930.<sup>37</sup> Funds would come through the second deficiency appropriations bill, signed by President Hoover on July 3. Collins remarked at the conclusion of the final official act that consummated the largest book sale of all history, “The gratitude of the entire people of the land is due the Seventy-first Congress for its wisdom in the purchase... not a voice was raised against this Act.” He added, “It seems especially fitting that the whole public share in the purchase.”<sup>38</sup>

In mid-July 1930 that part of the Vollbehr Collection in storage in New York City, said to be the most valuable book shipment ever made in America, arrived over roads with armed guards. In August Vollbehr himself traveled to the Austrian monastery to arrange for the delivery of the Gutenberg Bible to the U. S. legation in Vienna. The chief of the Library of Congress Music Division, then in Austria, transported the three-volume Bible to France where Herbert Putnam received it to bring to America aboard the *Leviathan*. And thus the Gutenberg Bible arrived at the Library of Congress to repose there until today except for a period of time when it was transported to Fort Knox for safekeeping during World War II. By Neil Harris’s account the Library of Congress through its purchase of the Vollbehr Collection had quadrupled its collection of incunabula.<sup>39</sup>

Numerous congratulations poured into Collins’s office. “I am, of course, delighted that the bill went through,” New York governor Franklin D. Roosevelt

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<sup>36</sup> Carl T. Keller (Boston) to William H. Stafford, June 10, 1930, Collins Scrapbook, IV, LC; Simeon Fess to George F. Bowerman (Librarian, District of Columbia Public Library), June 12, 1930; Frederick H. Gillett to Carl T. Keller, June 14, 1930, both in Collins Scrapbook, V, LC; Collins’s round of letters, June 10, 1930, Collins Scrapbook, IV.

<sup>37</sup> *New York Times*, June 25, 1930; *United States Daily*, June 25, 1930; *Wall Street Journal*, June 26, 1930; Senate Report 965, 71 Cong., 2nd Sess.

<sup>38</sup> *Washington Post*, July 5, 1930. Collins quoted in Frederick W. Ashley, “Vollbehr Incunabula and the Book of Books,” copy in Bridwell Library, Perkins School of Theology, Southern Methodist University (Dallas).

<sup>39</sup> *Washington Evening Star*, July 13, 1930; August 18, 20, 1930; *New York Times*, August 19, 1930; September 14, 1930; Goff, “Uncle Sam Has a Book,” 126-27; Harris, “Public Funding,” 52.

wrote. "Your name ought now and forever to be associated with this great gift to the American people," wrote Lincoln Wirt from California. Another admirer thought the congressman to be "rather remarkable for a public man." Dr. Putnam could recall but "few achievements in legislation so definitely creditable to one individual in Congress." Immediately after passage Collins wrote to all those persons who had given him support and contributed to "what may prove to be a true Renaissance in education and culture in our country."<sup>40</sup>

And then there were more expressions of disbelief that such an achievement was that of a Mississippi congressman. "It is a little lad from Mississippi that just put across this important cultural project," wrote Carl Keller, the Boston bibliophile who had written numerous letters to House and Senate members in support of the purchase. Possibly Collins's strongest backer, the *Washington Evening Post*, noted that Collins concealed under "the exterior of a practical man... the broad scholar, lover of learning, student of human culture."<sup>41</sup>

In 1930, E. H. Merriam, the lexicographer, wrote to Collins, "I imagine a thing of this kind can hardly be counted upon to help you to reelection in your district."<sup>42</sup> Collins retained his seat in Congress in 1932, but chose not to seek the post in 1934 because of his hope to unseat Senator Hubert D. Stephens of New Albany. In a long farewell speech to his colleagues on June 1, 1934, he said, "I am voluntarily leaving the House." Likely intended as an opening volley for his Senate campaign, he recounted his loyal support for virtually all New Deal legislation. Still, he added that as "a firm believer in the institution we know as the library," he had proposed legislation to place a library in every county seat in the United States, and he elaborated upon his consistent friendship for the Library of Congress.<sup>43</sup>

Theodore G. Bilbo eliminated Collins from the Senate race in the first primary. According to Turner Catledge, Bilbo decried in every county in the state, then knee-deep in depression, what a million and a half dollars could do to alleviate distress. Collins reverted to his populist rhetoric and proclaimed that it would have been

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<sup>40</sup> Franklin D. Roosevelt to Collins, June 26, 1930; Lincoln Wirt to Collins, July 7, 1930; Edward R. Stokes to Collins, July 18, 1930; Collins to "My Dear Friend," July 10, 1930, all in Collins Scrapbook, V, LC.

<sup>41</sup> *Washington Evening Star*, July 4, 1930; Keller to Collins, July 8, 1930, Collins Scrapbook, V, LC.

<sup>42</sup> E. H. Merriam to Collins, July 4, 1930, Collins Scrapbook, V, LC.

<sup>43</sup> *Congressional Record*, 73 Cong., 2nd Sess., Part 9 (June 1, 1934), 10234-38. Collins's friend, Clarence Cannon of Missouri, inserted into the *Congressional Record* Collins's remarks of June 1, 1934, that were then printed at no government expense to be circulated, no doubt as campaign literature for Collins.

worth a "billion dollars to secure these sacred books from the heathen Germans."<sup>44</sup> Bilbo went on to an ultimate victory over the incumbent Stephens. Collins regained a seat in the House in 1936 and remained a champion of libraries including increased funding for the public libraries of the District of Columbia. In 1938 the American Library Association named him an honorary member.<sup>45</sup>

Had Bilbo known what was to be revealed in hearings before the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) on November 30, 1934, he would have had a powerful weapon against Collins in that summer campaign. As it was, the reading public was unaware of the hearings until December 16, 1934, when John W. McCormack, a Massachusetts Democrat, made public through the *New York Times* Vollbehr's testimony before HUAC. Vollbehr had spent most of the \$1.5 million on pro-Nazi and anti-Semitic propaganda in the United States. In an executive session held in New York City, HUAC committee member Samuel Dickstein, a New York Democrat, interrogated Vollbehr about his disposal of the money paid for his famed collection. The issue had come to the committee's attention after many of Collins's correspondents who had championed the purchase began receiving messages from Vollbehr that defended Germany's aggression in Europe and treatment of Jews who Vollbehr insisted were communists. He justified the seven "Memoranda," as he called his mailings, as an answer to anti-German accounts in the American press: "I see those reports are at least incomplete. They are an injustice to Germany." Contrary to Vollbehr's defense of his mailings, Congressman Dickstein described them as "a direct attack upon certain creeds and races of this country." The exchange between Vollbehr and the congressman was civil, but when the committee chair McCormack made public Vollbehr's testimony, he stated that Vollbehr had "intended to incite American against American." Soon after the hearings, Vollbehr left for Germany but later returned to the United States to sell the remainder of his collection through Gimbel's Department Store in New York City. He left the country in 1939 when World War II began "with the FBI breathing down his neck." He died sometime after the war ended "almost without resources."<sup>46</sup>

In 1940 an article in the *Saturday Review of Literature* caused a brief furor. Burton Rascoe, a *Saturday Review* reader, wrote a blistering criticism of the purchase of the

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<sup>44</sup> Catledge, interview with the author, March 10, 1973, transcript in Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University (Starkville).

<sup>45</sup> Burton Rascoe, "Uncle Sam Has a Book," *Saturday Review of Literature*, 32 (May 18, 1940), 3-4, 14-15; *American Library Association Bulletin*, 32 (October 15, 1938), 771; Carl Nilam, ALA secretary, to Collins, June 27, 1938, Collins Papers, Box 1, LC.

<sup>46</sup> *Hearings*, Subcommittee of the Special Committee on Un-American Activities, 73 Cong., 2nd Sess., (November 30, 1934), 709-10; *New York Times*, December 17, 1934. On Vollbehr's subsequent activities, see Goff, "Uncle Sam Has a Book," 127.

Vollbehre Collection, particularly that of the Bible. He charged that the collection was “over-priced” and that Vollbehre had looked upon Americans as “a prize bunch of suckers.” According to Rascoe, the German native had conducted “one of the most impressive lobbies ever staged for any bill,” one that would “stagger any old-time professional lobbyist.” Rascoe further declared that at a cost of \$1,500,000, “Uncle Sam became the proud possessor of a Gutenberg Bible and some early printing do-dads.” Adding fuel to his fire, Rascoe raised the question of whether Vollbehre had used any of the money to establish German credits in America for spy work.<sup>47</sup>

Frederick A. Goff, former chief of the Library of Congress Rare Books and Special Collection Division, wrote a vigorous defense of the Vollbehre acquisition and dismissed Rascoe’s article as a complete “misunderstanding” and a misrepresentation of facts pertinent to the 1930 transaction. Goff, however, did not deny that upon his return to Germany, Vollbehre became “an active propagandist” for the Nazi party. While Archibald MacLeish, librarian of the Library of Congress, condemned Vollbehre for his acts, he did not discount the merits of the acquisition of the Vollbehre Collection.<sup>48</sup>

Among those who decried Rascoe’s article, George Bowerman, head of the District of Columbia library and a devotee of the *Saturday Review* declared, “What a preposterous thing... to be given currency in the pages of the *Saturday Review of Literature*.” He added “no one who has ever sat in Congress has done more to advance library interests than had Mr. Collins.” Pierce Butler responded that it was war hysteria that had promoted Rascoe “to strike at innocent things of permanent social worth.” Butler attributed some of Vollbehre’s ardent Nazism to his large, unwise investment in American gold mines after 1933. Butler diminished Rascoe’s tirade as “almost juvenile in its misstatement of facts.” In a much later footnote to the saga over Vollbehre’s disposal of his money, Elizabeth Snapp, director of the library at Texas Woman’s University, expressed a relief that since the Vollbehre debate, acquisition librarians “have been spared the chore of investigating the political ideology of book dealers and the use to which foreign nationals might put monetary credits.”<sup>49</sup>

Ten years after his sponsorship of the Vollbehre purchase, Collins launched a new

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<sup>47</sup> Burton Rascoe, “Uncle Sam Has a Book,” *Saturday Review of Literature*, 32 (May 18, 1940), 3-4, 14-15.

<sup>48</sup> Goff, “Uncle Sam Has a Book,” 127.

<sup>49</sup> George Bowerman to the editor of the *Saturday Review*, May 21, 1940; Pierce Butler, “What Are the Incunabula Worth?,” *Saturday Review of Literature*, June 6, 1940; Elizabeth Snapp, “The Acquisition of the Vollbehre Collection Incunabula for the Library of Congress,” *Journal of Library History*, 10 (April 1975), 160. For exhibit purposes the three volumes of the Gutenberg Bible are rotated by the Library of Congress every three to four months. They have been digitized for viewing on CD discs. *Washington Post National Weekly Edition*, July 28 – August 3, 2003.

crusade that won for him national acclaim that far surpassed whatever glory was his in 1930. He was, by 1940, chair of the House Subcommittee on War Appropriations and a strong advocate for a mechanized army. In June 1941 *Reader's Digest* published an article by Collins, "Do We Want a Mass Army?," which addressed the effectiveness of Germany's mechanized army and air power in crushing France in June 1940. The piece won wide circulation and a year later Lee H. Miller, a Scripps-Howard correspondent, called Collins a "sharp-tongued crusader" for his advocacy of replacing foot soldiers and army mules with tanks and air power.<sup>50</sup>

Collins hoped to parley his profound concern for national defense into the Senate seat left vacant by the death of Pat Harrison in June 1941. Although Delta planter James O. Eastland held the seat for ninety days through an interim appointment by Governor Paul B. Johnson, he chose not to announce for the September 23 special election to complete the balance of Harrison's term.<sup>51</sup> Collins ran in that election but narrowly lost to Congressman Wall Doxey of Holly Springs.<sup>52</sup> Collins fared even less well in the August 1942 regular election for the full term. He billed himself as "the nation's No. 1 defense champion." Eastland plunged into that race and vigorously denounced Collins's claims about his defense record. In the first primary Collins dropped to third in the balloting that placed Eastland and Doxey in the run-off in which Eastland prevailed.<sup>53</sup>

Despite Eastland's efforts to debunk Collins as a champion of the nation's military prowess, Collins's reputation remained intact. He had led Congress to its first appropriations for the modern tank, but he was best known for his insistence that the nation's air power be strengthened. In 1921 he had witnessed General William ("Billy") Mitchell's demonstration of air power and had become a staunch defender of the beleaguered and later court-martialed general. He recalled, "I went over [to the east coast of North Carolina] to watch the operation and got the idea that the military could use this kind of power." Subsequently, Collins's advocacy of air power won for him the sobriquet "Father of the Flying Fortress," the B-29 bomber. He prized the note written by Major General H. H. (Hap) Arnold, World War II Air Corps chief: "Dear Collins, you brought into being the flying fortress with its

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<sup>50</sup> Collins, "Do We Want a Mass Army?," *Reader's Digest* 38 (June 1941); "Collins Policy Lauded by Author," *Jackson Daily News*, July 8, 1942.

<sup>51</sup> Chris Myers Asch, *The Senator and the Sharecropper: The Freedom Struggles of James O. Eastland and Fannie Lou Hamer* (New York: Free Press, 2008), 90.

<sup>52</sup> Doxey defeated Collins by 818 votes (50.3% to 49.7%). *Mississippi Blue Book Biennial Report Secretary of State to the Governor and Legislature of Mississippi*, July 1, 1943 to July 1, 1945, 206.

<sup>53</sup> *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, August 2, 22, 26, 1942.



crew of 8 or 10.”<sup>54</sup> National magazines and House colleagues deemed him the most outstanding military expert in the country. The columnist Drew Pearson recalled in 1961 that when the Army “hung back” in ordering the Christie tank, Collins himself inserted an appropriation in a military bill.<sup>55</sup>

And yet, Ross Collins always pointed to the acquisition of the Vollbehr Incunabula Collection as his greatest achievement. Even as he pressed for a modern mechanized military, he continued to make lengthy, erudite speeches in the House for federal grants for school libraries. He advanced the development of additional libraries in the District of Columbia that would create “An American Acropolis” in the nation’s capital. In 1955 Lewis Mumford, the Librarian of Congress, wrote to Collins, “We are bringing together the materials on this subject (the Vollbehr Collection), and we hope that someday there will be a good account written.”<sup>56</sup> In 1962 Collins presented to the Library of Congress Manuscript Division his scrapbooks pertaining to the acquisition of the Vollbehr Collection. Five volumes contain more than 2,000 letters; the sixth is a compendium of newspaper articles and periodical clippings. Acknowledging receipt of the Collins Collection, Mumford wrote “your preeminence in that outstanding acquisition ... will always be profoundly appreciated.”<sup>57</sup> A decade later the chief of the Library’s Rare Book Collection reassessed the value of the Vollbehr Incunabula Collection; the Gutenberg Bible alone was worth much more than the total cost of the Vollbehr Collection. In view of the wartime destruction of many rarities, the collection was of inestimable worth.<sup>58</sup>

Collins left Congress in January 1943. In 1946 he adopted a “Bilbo retirement plan” to oust the feisty, embattled senator who was already under investigation for shady financial transactions for personal benefit. Collins lost his campaign for the Senate seat. In the words of the *Commercial Appeal*, “It was the first big year

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<sup>54</sup>“Little Man’s Vision Helps to Win a War,” *Miami News*, January 6, 1963 (Arnold note); “Ross Collins at 85 Recalls Conflicts, Accomplishments,” *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, September 26, 1965 (Collins’s quotation on Mitchell).

<sup>55</sup>“Pearson Puts Finger on 2 Mississippians,” *Jackson Daily News*, April 16, 1961.

<sup>56</sup> Lewis Mumford to Collins, October 31, 1955, quoted by William Matteson, *Quarterly Journal of the Library of Congress* 30 (July 1973); Collins, “The Nucleus of an American Acropolis,” *Washington Sunday Star*, April 28, 1940.

<sup>57</sup>Mimeographed newsletter of the Library of Congress (July 18, 1968), 397, copy in Collins’s Vertical File, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University (Starkville). Copies of the letters are in the Ross Collins Papers, J. D. Williams Library, University of Mississippi. Each is designated by scrapbook volume number and page. The Grolier Club in New York City has a small collection of materials relating to the Vollbehr Collection.

<sup>58</sup> William Matteson, “Seeking the Rare, the Important, the Valuable,” *Quarterly Journal of the Library of Congress*, 30 (July 1973), 211-27.

of the Negro issue and Bilbo was unbeatable.”<sup>59</sup> When Collins sought to win the deceased Bilbo’s seat in the special election in 1947 to fill the vacancy, he polled only 623 votes, finishing last in a field of six that was led by circuit judge John C. Stennis of DeKalb.<sup>60</sup> In retrospect, wrote the *Clarion-Ledger*, “It very well could be that Mississippians who denied him the Senate seat he sought made a serious mistake.” In view of Collins’s defeat in five Senate races, Hansford Simmons, a former Wall Doxey adviser who clearly admired Collins, summarized Collins’s political misfortunes by stating that “there was never an opportune time for Collins to realize his Senate ambitions.”<sup>61</sup>

Following his departure from Congress, Collins returned to the practice of law in Meridian. In 1950, at age seventy, he ran again for Congress, but was overwhelmingly defeated by the incumbent Arthur Winstead. He said of his resounding defeat, “I knew I wouldn’t be elected. It was bad advice, and the people that got me to run left me.”<sup>62</sup> In June 1967 Collins made a tour of his old congressional district. Upon returning home he declined his wife’s urge to sleep by saying that he “just wanted to cry a little.”<sup>63</sup>

In retirement Ross Collins divided his residences between Meridian and Coral Gables, Florida. He died in a retirement home in Meridian on July 14, 1968, and was interred at Magnolia Cemetery in Meridian.<sup>64</sup> A year before his death, when Collins was then eighty-seven years old, a writer for the *Commercial Appeal* recalled a statement Collins once made in Congress: “Let us give our people the best facilities for study and research that have ever been amassed; that will enable them to express themselves in works of literature, science and art.” Such deeds Collins insisted would “help us to understand one another...”<sup>65</sup> It was a fitting statement to summarize what Ross Collins considered his greatest achievement.

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<sup>59</sup> *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, September 26, 1967.

<sup>60</sup> *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, September 26, 1967; John Ray Skates, “World War II and Its Effects, 1940-1948,” *A History of Mississippi*, ed., Richard A. McLemore (Jackson: College and University Press of Mississippi, 1973), 138.

<sup>61</sup> *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, July 16, 1968; Simmons’s letter to editor in response, *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, August 2, 1968.

<sup>62</sup> *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, July 14, 1967; *Jackson Daily News*, June 13, 1950; *Mississippi Official and Statistical Register*, 1949-1951, 347.

<sup>63</sup> *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, July 14, 1967.

<sup>64</sup> “Political Legend Dies at 88,” *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, July 15, 1968; *Jackson Daily News*, July 15, 1968; obituary, *Meridian Star*, July 14, 1968.

<sup>65</sup> *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, July 14, 1967.

