

History brought to life through new digital collection

Digitization of Arctic Institute collection broadens access to documentation of exploration in the north in the 1800s and early 1900s

By Rob Alexander, Libraries and Cultural Resources

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Regina Landwehr, left, associate archivist with Libraries and Cultural Resources, and Rob Alexander, right, digitization and repository services, worked with Shannon Vossepoel, program manager from the Arctic Institute of North America, to digitize the collection. Photos by Riley Brandt, University of Calgary

It's one thing to read about 18th century explorer Sir John Franklin in the history books. It's another thing altogether to read a letter written and signed by him personally.

A newly digitized collection is bringing history to life through tales of adventure and discovery in the Arctic in the 1800s and early 1900s. There are 24 letters written by Franklin in the collection that belongs to the [Arctic Institute of North America](#) (AINA) at the University of Calgary. It has now been digitized and made available online as part of the [Arctic and Northern Studies](#) digital collection hosted by [Libraries and Cultural Resources](#).

In March 1836, Sir John Franklin wrote to a friend saying he had turned down an appointment as the lieutenant-governor of Antigua.

"I fancied the appointment to be little better than that of a 1st Lt. (first lieutenant) and that it was not a desirable one for me to accept," Franklin writes in a [letter](#) held by [Archives and Special Collections](#) at the university. "The salary was insufficient for the support of the station with anything like propriety . . . I declined the appointment on the ground of not considering the situation as quite such a one as the kind regard of the public towards my former services, and my station in Society as well as rank . . ."

If Franklin had accepted this position, perhaps he would have lived to a ripe old age. Instead, he died — along with the crew of two ships, HMS Erebus and HMS Terror — during the ill-fated Franklin expedition, which set out from England in 1845 in search of the Northwest Passage.



The cover of a letter written by Sir John Franklin in March 1818 includes Franklin's signature and seal in red wax.

The disappearance of one of England's great mariners launched a massive search that continued into modern times with the discovery of the [Erebus in 2014](#) and of [Terror](#) last summer.

A physical exhibition, curated by associate archivist Regina Landwehr, is on display in the foyer of Archives and Special Collections on the fifth floor of the Taylor Family Digital Library until the end of February.

Along with Franklin's letters, the collection contains materials such as [maps](#), [manuscripts](#), [photographs](#), [sketches](#), and [lithographs](#) that relate to Arctic exploration in the 1800s and early 1900s. One map dates as far back as 1595.

Shannon Vossepoel, AINA's manager of research data and information services, says this recently digitized collection gives Arctic researchers and enthusiasts the opportunity to explore materials previously inaccessible outside the university.

"With a lot of these rare, unique and fragile items people would have to travel to the University of Calgary specifically to look at them," says Vossepoel. "It's too difficult for us to send them out, whereas now that they are digitized, it means people from all over the world can benefit from the items we have in this collection and use it for scholarship and educational purposes."

And that, says Mike Moloney, a post-doctoral fellow with AINA, opens the door for interesting projects and questions.

"Having it available digitally expedites research," he says. "People can be braver in choosing the topics they might choose knowing that digitized resources are available."

The originals, most of which contain previously unpublished data, are held by Special Collections on behalf of AINA. The materials were prepared by staff with Digitization and Repository Services and Photo Services in Libraries and Cultural Resources. They were uploaded to the digital collection with metadata and transcripts.

"There was a need to make this library collection more discoverable and to tie this in with the university's focus on advancing research and scholarship, so it was a good opportunity along with the discovery of Franklin's ship, the Terror, and the publicity it is receiving," says Landwehr.

In addition to facilitating access to its substantial collection, AINA co-publishes the [University of Calgary Press](#) series [Northern Lights](#), a collection of scholarly publications examining various aspects of the North including natural sciences, social sciences, and the humanities.