Smallest to Tallest: Shelving by size at the Library of Congress

Jamie Roberts
Rare Book & Special Collections Division, Library of Congress

The Problem

Thomas Jefferson’s personal library was acquired by Congress in 1815; those 6,487 Jefferson volumes became the foundation of the modern day Library of Congress, and are today part of the Rare Book and Special Collections Division (RBSCD). As the RBSCD continued to grow, additional rare materials were acquired through purchase and gift, most notably the Vollbehr Collection (including the Gutenberg Bible), the Lessing J. Rosenwald Collection on the History of the Illustrated Book, and major collections of Americana.

Today, the Library’s Rare Book and Special Collections Division holds nearly 1,000,000 items. Many of these items can be accessed in our reading room, which was modeled after Philadelphia’s Independence Hall.

Like all libraries, the Library of Congress is a growing organism. Adding to this challenge is the fact that its main campus is made primarily of historic buildings that cannot be seriously altered or expanded. With new offsite storage space several years away, the RBSCD must find creative solutions to increase its storage capacity without expanding its footprint. This poster gives an overview of a plan to relieve crowding in our stacks by increasing shelf density.

Terms

Face: a single vertical unit of shelves, with supports on either end. A face can have a variable amount of shelves, usually 3 to 8 total. Most, but not all, faces in the RBSCD main stacks are 28 inches wide.

Range: a run of adjacent faces of shelves, usually from one end of a room to another. Typical ranges in the main RBSCD stacks are 10 – 13 faces long. To maximize shelving space, ranges of shelving are structured to accommodate these three sizes as efficiently as possible. Folio ranges have 5 shelves per face, Quarto ranges have 4 shelves per face, and Midi have 7 shelves per face.

RBSCD describes its stacks in terms of shelves, faces, and ranges. A shelf is pretty self-explanatory. A face is a single vertical unit of shelves, with supports on either end. A face can have a variable amount of shelves, usually 3 to 8 total. Most, but not all, faces in the main RBSCD stacks are 28 inches wide. A range is a run of adjacent faces of shelves, usually from one end of a room to another. Typical ranges in the main RBSCD stacks are 10 – 13 faces long. To maximize shelving space, ranges of shelving are structured to accommodate these three sizes as efficiently as possible. Folio ranges have 5 shelves per face, Quarto ranges have 4 shelves per face, and Midi have 7 shelves per face.

How can we create more shelf space without increasing our footprint? Hang more shelves.

The Plan

The Rare Book & Special Collections Division divides its stacks into Rare Books and Special Collections. For this project, we’re focusing exclusively on our books. RBSCD shelves by Library of Congress call number, but also by size. All of our books fall into one of three sizes: Folio (33 cm and taller), Quarto (17 cm to 32 cm), and Midi (16 cm and shorter).

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However, the Midi size designation wasn’t created until the late 1980’s. From that point forward, all incoming books 16 cm and under were shelved separately, but no one ever went back through the Quarto collection to claim the Midi volumes already there. A fast visual survey of the stacks revealed a noticeable amount of Mids in the Quarto ranges. Armed with this knowledge, as well as the fact that Midi faces have over 30% more shelves than Quarto faces, we embarked on the pilot phase of our project.

The Pilot

For the pilot we scanned the first 215 shelves of the Quarto ranges, from AC1 to BV4571. HS455, for Midi-sized volumes. We used a jig to quickly identify items 16 cm or shorter.

The Midi volumes were then pulled from the stacks and their MARC records were updated to reflect their new shelving location before they were integrated into the Midi ranges.

During the pilot, 10 shelves of books were removed from the Quarto ranges and added to the Mids, almost 5% of the shelves scanned.

Because of the higher density of shelves in the Midi ranges, those ten shelves filled 1.25 faces of Midi shelving instead of 2 faces of Quarto shelving.

Outcomes

While relocating nearly 5% of our collection to shelving that is over 30% more efficient might not seem like a significant gain, it was immediately noticeable in our stacks. Gaining even a few inches per shelf not only allows for collection growth but also facilitates easy re-shelving.

It’s also important to realize that while the pilot was a useful planning tool, the density of Mids in the Quartos will vary with subject matter. The initial pilot phase included the bulk of our books on philosophy and religion - an area where smaller, portable books have traditionally been more prevalent. We suspect that the density of Mids in the “P” ranges, which included literature, will be as high or higher. The Rare Book & Special Collections Division plans to move forward with this project, and in the process find more shelving space by improving storage density wherever possible.

Questions? Feedback? E-mail jaro@loc.gov