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# DM | DANBURY MUSEUM



Hello and the Happiest of Holiday Wishes to All! The Staff and Trustees of the Danbury Museum want to wish you all a very happy and healthy season. The museum will be closed from December 23 through January 1, opening for regular hours on Thursday, January 2.

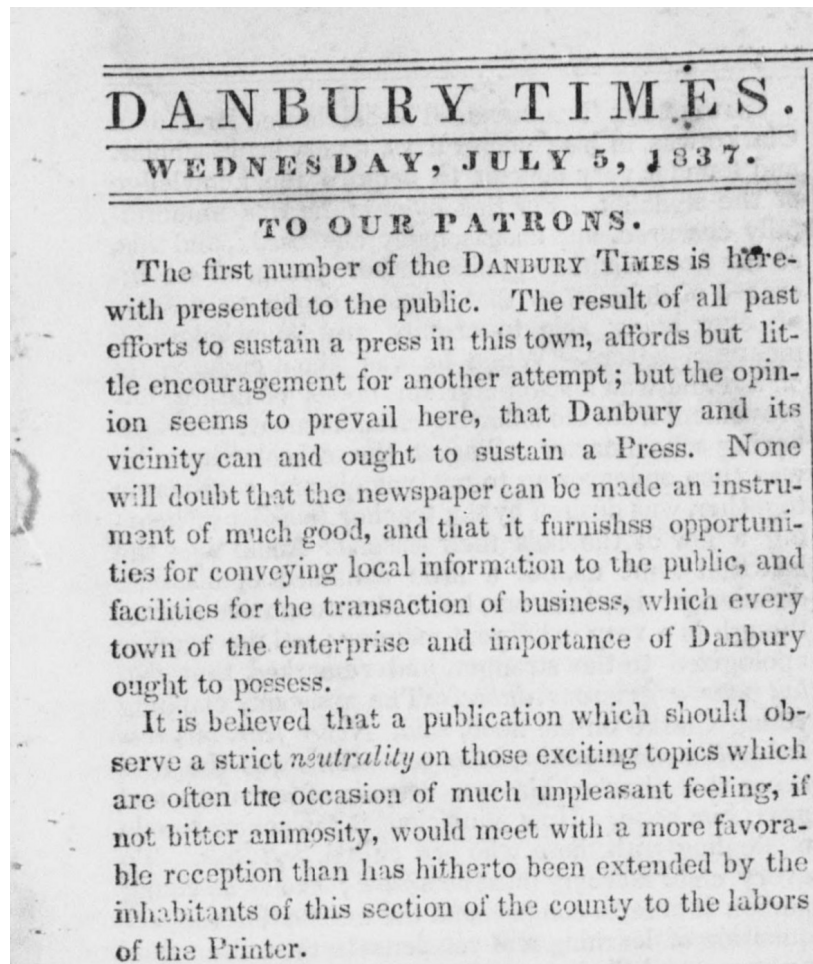
Thank you to everyone who generously donated to our #GivingTuesday campaign earlier in December. With the amount raised we will be able to update all three of the staff computers we had hoped to "refresh." We are grateful.

If you're looking for last minute presents for family or friends, (or for yourself!) tickets are on sale for the 2025 Danbury Museum Gala! Join us

for a night of **History, Mystery, and Magic** at the Amber Room Colonnade on Friday, February 28 at 6pm. We are thrilled to announce that history personality and host Don Wildman (you'll know him from *Mysteries at the Museum* and more!) will be presenting a special program as the evening's premiere entertainment. This is a new format for the Museum Gala and we think it's going to be great fun!

Thank you to John O'Donnell for this month's most interesting essay on Napoleon and his librarian, and we'd also like to recognize our other frequent essayist, Dr. Tom MacGregor and thank him for all his contributions this past year! Our best wishes for the season to both John and Tom.

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If you follow us on Facebook, you might have noticed that there was exciting news from the Connecticut State Library and the Connecticut Digital Newspaper Project--there are several years of the Danbury Times (1837-1870) digitized and available for research (or browsing!) on the

Chronicling America pages at the Library of Congress. We were proud supporters of this initiative by the State Library.

The microfilm of these papers is important (and available here at the Danbury Museum, just [book a research appointment](#). The museum's microfilm collection is roughly 1837 through 2012.) but having access to these digital copies from the comfort of your home, well that's pretty great. And zooming in on your tablet or desktop makes reading the small-ish print so much easier.

Our only caveat is to make sure you allow yourself ample time, or, like us, you will find that hours have passed and you're still browsing news--local and global--from the 1840s. Enjoy!

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*Antoine-Alexandre Barbier, from Archives départementales de Seine-et-Marne*

# Napoleon's Library and Librarian

by John O'Donnell

Recently I had the pleasure of watching an interview with Louis Sarkozy, son of former French president Nicolas Sarkozy, talking about his book *Napoleon's Library*. I thought Sarkozy did a very good job speaking about his book and it led me to thinking about this rarely touched upon aspect of Napoleon's career and a huge influence on the Napoleonic Era.

We are all familiar with the meteoric rise of Napoleon from humble beginnings on the island of Corsica to becoming Emperor of France in 1804 and virtually conquering the whole of Europe at a relatively young age. His talents and energy level were staggering. He was a military genius, astute statesman, as well as a codifier of the law (Napoleonic Code). But he was also a voracious reader, a bibliophile, and a man who wanted to keep up with intellectual developments throughout the world. One of the most important men in his entourage was his personal librarian, Antoine-Alexandre Barbier (1765-1825) who took a very difficult job (Napoleon was notoriously demanding) and aided the Emperor in a multitude of ways, including standing up to him when necessary which few men would dare to do. Let us take a look at this little-known aspect of the emperor's career. We need to answer the question how books became indispensable in the emperor's life.

Napoleon Bonaparte's father, Carlos, was a minor politician and instructed his son in political matters while his mother, Maria, was the dominant influence in his life and taught him to read. He became a voracious reader at an early age. He was first educated by monks who encouraged his love of reading and gave him a solid educational grounding. He then went to a French military school at Brienne. According to his classmate (and later private secretary) Louis Bourienne, Napoleon was an avid reader while attending military school: "Napoleon would run to the library, where he read with great eagerness books of history, particularly Polybius and Plutarch." He continued to read classical authors as well as more recent French and Italian authors. He also read a number of English works in translation.

Napoleon's military career blossomed, and his talents brought him early

recognition and greater responsibilities, which only increased his reliance on books, especially when he needed help for a campaign he was undertaking. His rise to power was accompanied by an increase in his already passionate devotion to books. In 1798, about to depart on his Egyptian campaign, he gave Louis Bourienne a list of books he wanted in his camp library. These included works in : Sciences and Art (for example a treatise on Geography and Travel-Cook's Voyages), History (Thucydides, Frederick II), Poetry, Novels (such as Goethe's *Sorrows of Young Werther* which was his favorite novel and while later campaigning in Prussia he sought out and had several meetings with Goethe) and 40 volumes of English novels, Politics, and Morals (Bible, Koran, Vedas). In addition to his camp library, Napoleon brought along 167 Savants-scientists, engineers, and scholars-to better understand the ancient Egyptian people, culture, and environment. These hard-working civilians produced massive volumes of scholarship entitled *Description de l'Egypte*. In addition, their discovery of the Rosetta Stone played a key role in the deciphering of ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics in 1822. The expedition led to the foundation of Egyptology.

In the Egyptian campaign we can see the kernel of Napoleon's most important ideas. He would still indulge his love of reading and desire for knowledge even while on campaign. But Napoleon had even more expansive ideas for cultivating his love of reading. Because of the demands of wielding supreme power, however, he needed a partner in this great cultural work that he envisioned. He had already had two personal librarians before 1807 who had been unable to fulfill his demanding nature. In 1807 he hired a third personal librarian who would be able to facilitate the monarch's grand plans for his library empire. This man was Antoine-Alexandre Barbier.


Barbier took the job in spite of knowing how demanding Napoleon was. Napoleon expected Barbier to be on call at all hours to read to him, to report to him on new books, to find sources of information on particular subjects (especially countries he was thinking of invading) and to summarize content. Barbier proved equal to these challenging responsibilities. He was in charge of Napoleon's physical libraries at Compiègne, Rambouillet, and Trianon. This was a large undertaking. But Napoleon was dissatisfied with his camp libraries and he and Barbier came up with a masterful solution. In July 1808, Napoleon dictated a

memorandum to Barbier to create a purpose-built traveling library. Napoleon was quite specific about what he wanted: “a portative library of one thousand volumes ...printed in good type, without margin and composed as nearly as possible of 40 volumes on religion, 40 of epics, 40 of plays, 60 of poetry, 100 of novels, 60 of history, the remainder, to make up the 1,000 of historical memoirs.” Napoleon clearly knew exactly what he wanted and Barbier quickly supplied his needs for the traveling library.

Even during the rigors of the Russian campaign in August of 1812 from Vitebsk, Barbier received this note from Napoleon: “The Emperor desires to have some amusing books. If there be any new novels which are good & older ones which he does not know, or memoirs of light reading, you will do well to send them, for we have leisure moments here which are difficult to fill up.” During the retreat from Moscow, a number of books from Napoleon’s traveling library were burned by the French. After Napoleon’s abdication and exile, reading still provided the monarch with pleasure. His librarian on St. Helena wrote that the Emperor still was infinitely fond of reading. He had not changed!

**John O'Donnell first became a history devotee while in elementary school. He was raised in Brooklyn and frequently went to Prospect Park which has a Revolutionary War monument. He was hooked!**

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# HISTORY, MYSTERY, & MAGIC!

## The 2025 Danbury Museum Gala

Friday, February 28, 2025  
6-10 pm  
The Amber Room Colonnade

The Friends of the Danbury Museum are incredibly  
pleased to welcome **DON WILDMAN**,  
star of *American History Hit* podcast and host  
and narrator of *Mysteries at the Museum*,  
as our special guest presenter!

Our 2025 gala will feature a wonderful program  
by Don Wildman, the delicious food you know and  
love from the Amber Room, and of course, some  
fabulous raffle baskets.

Join us for this very special night of History,  
Mystery, & Magic to benefit the Danbury Museum.

Sponsorship opportunities and event details at  
[DanburyMuseum.org](http://DanburyMuseum.org).

[DanburyMuseum.org](http://DanburyMuseum.org)

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Join us for the 2025 Danbury Museum Gala!

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## Winter Weather Policy & Holiday Hours



The Danbury Museum follows the lead of the Danbury Public Schools. If schools are closed, we are closed. If the schools are delayed, we will open as usual at noon.

The Danbury Museum will be closed from 12/23/24 through 1/1/2025, resuming normal hours on 1/2/2025.

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