

THE AMERICAN GEOGRAPHICAL SOCIETY LIBRARY:
A TREASURE TROVE FOR TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY
GEOGRAPHICAL SCHOLARSHIP*

CHRISTOPHER BARUTH

When the Library and the Map Collection of the American Geographical Society (AGS) arrived at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee (UWM) in 1978, they were combined and given the name “American Geographical Society Collection” (AGSC). Although the record is silent on this matter, it is likely that the term “library” was not used then because “AGS Library” had referred to only one of the two parts of the new entity, and the UWM Library—fighting the trend at the time toward branch libraries on campus—reserved the designation “library” for itself alone. Less than twenty-five years later, in 2002, with these issues in the distant past and then director Peter Watson-Boone wishing to have his “collections” receive their due measure of respect, the name of the AGSC was officially changed to American Geographical Society Library (AGSL). For this essay, I have elected to use the current form of the name.

In 1976, now thirty years ago, the Council of the American Geographical Society selected UWM as the new home for its distinguished Library and Map Collection, which at the time consisted of approximately 350,000 maps, 5,200 atlases, 200,000 volumes of books and periodicals, and large collections of photographs and pamphlets. Legal obstacles delayed the actual move for two years, and an additional three years were required to install the AGSL in its new surroundings—map cases, bookshelves, and card catalogs.

The grand opening on 22 October 1981, a quarter-century ago, was a gala affair, featuring a banquet, many distinguished guests who came from far and wide, including the AGS Councilors, and an address by the nation’s top map librarian, John Wolter, chief of the Geography and Map Division of the Library of Congress (LC). It was the culmination of the efforts of many individuals in both the East and the Midwest over a sustained period: from the initial quest by the AGS in the mid-1970s to find a permanent institutional home for its treasures, through the selection process, the arduous move, the enthusiastic reception in Milwaukee, and the painstaking reassembly.

THE AGS–UWM CONNECTION

At the time of the move to Milwaukee, UWM had a relatively small but highly regarded Department of Geography. Milwaukee had hosted the annual meeting of the Association of American Geographers (AAG) in 1975, which had attracted the

* To learn more about the AGS Library, visit its Web site, [www.uwm.edu/Library/AGSL].

✎ DR. BARUTH is the curator of the American Geographical Society Library at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, Milwaukee, Wisconsin 53211.