

Bulletin of the AAS

The J.M. Péridier Library: Its Past, Present, and Future

Lydia A. M. Fletcher¹

¹The University of Texas at Austin

Published on: Apr 27, 2022

License: [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License \(CC-BY 4.0\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

ABSTRACT

The closure of small departmental and branch libraries is all too common, but when closures are approached from the standpoint of understanding departmental constraints, needs, and improvements to service, a library closure can provide many opportunities. This paper presents the evolution of the J.M. Périquier Library at the University of Texas as its space and services have evolved to meet the needs of the UT Department of Astronomy and of McDonald Observatory. It will briefly outline the history of the Périquier Library, including how the original collection came to UT, before discussing the decision to transform the library's physical space into a new undergraduate computer lab and to combine the Périquier's print collection with the Kuehne Physics, Mathematics & Astronomy Library. The result of this decision is increased access to the Périquier collection—both recent publications and the historical French library from the observatory at Le Houga, France—by bringing them into the robust infrastructure of the UT Libraries, as well as increased access for undergraduate students to computers built and configured to do high-level astronomical research. It will share lessons learned and best practices from the process, and discuss how it has enabled the re-negotiation of the librarian role in supporting research in astronomy at UT in the 21st century.

Introduction

The closing of libraries or library branches on academic campuses is an all-too-common experience. According to a 2019 article, “the total number of science libraries [at Association of Research Libraries institutions] has decreased by one-third since 1983” [1]. Many librarians, especially at universities, are familiar with the process and rationales, but because there isn't much literature on astronomy library closures in particular and because astronomy libraries can contain a wide variety of unusual or atypical materials, this article presents the project we had here at the University of Texas (UT) Libraries and how we approached it.

History of the UT Astronomy Libraries

Périquier Astronomy Library

Julien Périquier was a French engineer and amateur astronomer. He founded a private observatory in Le Houga in 1933. For the next three decades, astronomical observations were made there by many astronomers from around the world and in

collaboration with several major projects. According to his friend and collaborator Gérard de Vaucouleurs, “His astronomical and scientific library was always maintained up to date and professional astronomers would occasionally appeal to him for the loan of hard-to-get publications, in particular during the [second world] war” [2].

To summarize a 1984 article by Margaret Dominy in *The Journal of Library History* [3]:

The Périquier Library was a result of a lifetime of collecting and included a wide range of subjects. It consisted of over 1,500 volumes, with about 600 reflecting Périquier’s interests in astronomy, astrophysics, astronomical optics, and stellar photometry. The remainder encompassed mathematics, relativity, classical and modern physics, optics, electricity, radio, meteorology, geophysics, and a substantial number of classical works in philosophy, history, and literature. ... The collection included nearly complete publication series of the major observatories of the world.

In 1966, Dr. De Vaucouleurs negotiated the sale of Périquier’s materials (including his library and telescopes) to the University of Texas. At the time, the UT Astronomy department was about three years old after being split off from the existing Physics department when operation of McDonald Observatory was transferred from the University of Chicago to the University of Texas.

Upon arrival in Austin, part of Périquier’s collection became the seed for the Astronomy department’s J.M. Périquier Library within the department offices in Austin. The then Humanities Research Center (now the Harry Ransom Center) was given the opportunity to select materials for a collection on the history of science that they were developing. These materials remain in the HRC collection to this day. The materials that were not included in either the Astronomy department library or the HRC were stored in the Collection Deposit Library, UT’s first library storage facility, where they remained for the next three decades.

It’s necessary to clarify that the Harry Ransom Center is a separate entity from the UT Libraries, much like the UT Libraries and the Department of Astronomy are separate entities. This fracturing of the collection across several campus units led to many inventory and access issues over the years.

John M. Kuehne Physics, Math & Astronomy Library

In 1972 the PMA Building opened to house the Physics, Math & new-ish Astronomy Departments. Prior to this, the Physics department had its own library (which included

literature on astronomy) and the Math department had its own library. These two collections were merged to form the John M. Kuehne Physics, Math. & Astronomy (PMA) Library on the ground floor of the new building. However, the new Astronomy department maintained their Périquier Library separately on the fifteenth floor of the PMA building with their own librarian. McDonald Observatory also maintained an onsite library and librarian, which in effect meant that for a time there were three “astronomy librarians” at UT. Eventually the Périquier librarian took over running the observatory library, but there were still three astronomy collections that overlapped in ways big and small. This overlap was especially noticeable in the area of journals—at one point UT boasted three very complete collections of *The Astronomical Journal*, none of which were being used because of the ease of discovery and access via the Astrophysics Data System.

Background for the Périquier Library’s Closure

All research and education endeavors require space—libraries, offices, labs, classrooms. There are inevitable pressures of campus growth and the ever-increasing needs for space. It’s a reality that libraries often occupy valuable real estate on any university or research institution campus—for example, the Kuehne PMA Library occupies half of the ground floor of the very busy PMA building, and occasionally administrators daydream about turning it into more classroom lecture space.

Over the past twenty years, the Astronomy department’s undergraduate and graduate programs have seen prodigious growth. Around 2010, the decision was made to reduce the physical space of the Périquier Library and build an undergraduate computer lab. With eighteen computers, the lab became an important component in the growing astronomy undergrad program and experience—allowing students access to the hardware and software necessary to actively participate in the research process. Students utilized the lab for their Research Methods Course, the Freshman Research Initiative (FRI) stream and the TAURUS and NSF REU summer programs. In addition, a large number of undergraduates at UT work with faculty members on their research projects—for example, on McDonald’s HETDEX project. The small lab became the hub of undergrad research and socialization within the department.

However, by 2015 the department recognized that the lab was simply too small. Eighteen computers meant that courses like the research methods course and the FRI stream had a hard cap on enrollment, and competition for use of the lab was high among the over 130 undergraduates in the program. By this time, too, the department no longer had an independent librarian, which meant that the library collection and

space were mostly underutilized. What good is a library if it's not actively serving its community? This was the fundamental question the astronomy department grappled with and ultimately the decision was made to repurpose the library space and create a larger undergraduate lab. In 2016, the Astronomy Department made the decision to pursue redeveloping the Périquier Library space. Because they no longer had a librarian to manage the process, they partnered with the UT Libraries' Physical & Mathematical Sciences Librarian based in the Kuehne PMA Library.

Overview of the Astronomy Collections in 2016

As mentioned before, the original Périquier collection—comprising the materials, mostly in French, sold by J.M. Périquier to UT in 1966—was broken up across several locations on the University of Texas campus, with some items still owned by the Astronomy Department in Austin or at McDonald Observatory, some items in the Harry Ransom Center collection, and some items in the UT Libraries' storage facility. The Astronomy Department's Périquier Library began with a subset of that original collection, but grew over the course of four decades to be a focused and cohesive library that directly supported the research activities of the department.

By 2016, the Périquier Library occupied about 1,000 sq ft on the fifteenth floor of the PMA Building. There were approximately 1,038 linear feet of journals with 70 titles represented and approximately 1,055 linear feet of other materials across several different categories: 41 atlases, 424 "reference data" items, 3,853 monographs, and 81 items of historical or high value held in a locked cabinet. There were also several flat file cabinets containing copies of plates and overlays from sky surveys such as the Palomar Observatory Sky Survey. Archival records, photographs, and audiovisual materials from the Department of Astronomy and McDonald Observatory were also held in shelving cabinets within the library space.

After the departure of the last librarian in charge of the Périquier Library, the space was primarily utilized as a study and meeting space for graduate students, and as "overflow storage" for some faculty members' personal libraries. Reference duties and handling of new books and issues of journals were taken over by the Physical & Mathematical Sciences Librarian, but there was no day-to-day management of the space. The process to "checkout" books from the library was for patrons to fill out a carbon-copy slip with their contact information and the details about the book being borrowed, one copy of which would be left in a plastic flag in the book's position on its shelf. When another patron wanted to borrow the book, they would contact the patron directly about retrieving the book from them. This "honor system" presented a major

security issue where library books made their way into patrons' offices or home libraries and were forgotten. It was also a major privacy issue because anyone could see what other patrons had checked out.

Methodology

The project began informally in the fall of 2016 when the Astronomy Department began drafting proposals for the construction of an expanded undergraduate lab—including the all-important pleas for funding. Initially, proposals were considered regarding retaining the Périquier Library and moving it to space on another floor of the PMA Building, but it was ultimately determined that the library's collection should be ingested into the UT Libraries' Kuehne PMA Library. During this initial planning phase, a literature review was conducted on previous experiences and methods related to the closure of branch libraries on academic campuses [4][5][6][7][8][9]. This review informed the methods used at UT to identify materials for transfer to the Kuehne Library, including items from the monograph collections, the basic data (or reference) collection, and the collection of atlases.

The timeline for clearing materials from the Périquier library and transferring them into the Kuehne library was roughly August 2017 to April 2018. By the summer of 2017, the department had the financial commitments it needed and began to move forward with the project. Planning, approvals, purchases of new computers, etc. all proceeded over the 2017-18 school year with construction occurring during the (relatively) quiet months of summer 2018. The lab opened in August, 2018 and hosted its first classes for the Fall 2018 semester.

The most critical part of the process was assessing and inventorying the materials in the Périquier Library. In 2009, the Astronomy Department and the UT Libraries reached an agreement to include the monographs of the Périquier and McDonald Observatory libraries in the global UT Libraries catalog. It was therefore easy to run through the roughly 4,400 cataloged items in the Périquier Library and identify any that were not owned by the UT Libraries.

It was more difficult to inventory and determine the disposition of the print journals and observatory publications. This process entailed identifying the titles and volumes held in the Périquier Library and then manually comparing these holdings against the UT Libraries catalog, the holdings of the Joint Library Facility (JLF, a Texas-wide shared storage), and the Astrophysics Data System. When volumes were missing from

the UT Libraries or JLF collection, those items were transferred from the Périquier Library to fill the gaps.

As part of the process of clearing out the library, we also had to make decisions regarding many of the more unusual types of materials often found in astronomical libraries, including copies of the Palomar and other sky surveys. For this portion of the work, we inventoried the plate and overlay holdings and then determined whether the survey had been digitized (e.g. the Palomar Digital Sky Survey/STScI Digitized Sky Survey). When a survey had been digitized, we opted not to retain the Périquier copy.

There were also several filing cabinets of archival materials related to the Astronomy Department, the McDonald Observatory, and even some exciting realia such as William McDonald's first microscope—according to legend, this was from his days as a student when he discovered his love of science that eventually led to his bequeathing the money to build McDonald Observatory. These archival materials, photographs, and audiovisual materials were moved into a new storage location within the Astronomy Department for future review for transfer to the university archives.

Once the inventory and assessment process was complete, we needed to physically clear the library space. All materials that were not selected for inclusion in the Kuehne Library were disposed of according to University of Texas policy. The University of Texas Regents Rules regarding state property dictate that UT Surplus Property offer all surplus material to state schools, organizations, non-profits, and various other institutions across the state. UT System schools and local schools and libraries are able to review surplus material for selection before the materials are offered at public auctions.

Results

Articles that discuss the closure or merging of branch libraries occasionally mention that there are silver linings or unexpected benefits to the process. At UT, the closure of the Périquier Library has ultimately been positive for both the Astronomy Department and the UT Libraries. Of course, it's never a happy occasion to close a library—many faculty and former students from UT shared their happy memories of studying in the Périquier Library during the process—but the benefits far outweigh the drawbacks. The new undergraduate computer lab has been a huge success for the Astronomy Department. It has thirty-seven computers, all of which were specced for running the software undergrad and graduate students would need for the courses and research projects they work on as part of their experience at UT.

In addition, as mentioned before, there was confusion about library support and collection growth for astronomy. There were duplicates (or triplicates) of materials. By absorbing the Périquier Library into the Kuehne Library, we were able to streamline what materials we own and re-introduce the UT Libraries, the Physical & Mathematical Sciences Librarian, and the services we offer to the Astronomy Department.

As far as the library materials are concerned, we completed the transfer and disposition of the materials on schedule in Spring 2018. From a collections standpoint, we now have greater control over the astronomy materials—bringing the Périquier Library into the Kuehne Library meant bringing it into the content management infrastructure of the UT Libraries. All the materials selected for the Kuehne and UT Libraries collections have been moved to their new homes and are now available to all UT students and faculty, as well as to the wider library community through our interlibrary loan agreements.

This also gives us the opportunity to finish adding the remaining items of the Périquier collection to the UT Libraries catalog and making those historical materials available to researchers as well. As mentioned earlier, after the Ransom Center made their selections from the Périquier collection, they sent the remainder to offsite storage. After sitting in storage for over thirty years, those materials were formally transferred to UT Libraries ownership. In Margaret Dominy's words in 1984, the Périquier Library had "superb coverage of early twentieth century astronomy" and the "collection of data, in the form of published observations, will never become obsolete in astronomy" [3]. Of course, this is a slow process involving several steps—checking for OCLC records, copy cataloging them, and sending the (mostly fragile) materials to our climate-controlled library storage facility. But the process is underway and while it may take a few years to complete due to the cataloging process and priorities at UT, it's exciting to see these materials become more accessible.

Acknowledgments

I want to acknowledge and thank the many people who helped make this project a success. First, my predecessors in the Périquier and Kuehne libraries, Elise Nacca, Roxanne Bogucka, and Molly White. Second, Lara Eakins from the UT Astronomy Department, who helped me in innumerable administrative ways and found a new home for the department and observatory archival materials we uncovered. And finally, Stephen Littrell, Britt Wilson, James Galloway, Ann Marchok, David Melanson, David

Flaxbart and Colin Marquardt from the UT Libraries, all of whom had a hand in either physically moving materials or digitally “moving” them within our catalog.

Citations

1. Doty, C., & Majors, K. (2019). Science Library Trends at ARL Institutions. *Issues in Science and Technology Librarianship*, 92, <https://journals.library.ualberta.ca/istl/index.php/istl/article/view/8> [↵](#)
2. Vaucouleurs, de G. (1968). Julien Périquier. *Quarterly Journal of the Royal Astronomical Society*, 9(2), 228–229. [↵](#)
3. Dominy, M. F. (1984). The Cover. *The Journal of Library History (1974-1987)*, 19(2), 305–308. Retrieved from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25541506> [↵](#)
4. Armstrong, W. W. (2005). The Closing of the LSU Chemistry Library. <https://doi.org/10.5062/F4W093V1> [↵](#)
5. Hitchcock, M., & Sager, R. (2005). And Then There Was One: Moving and Merging Three Health Science Library Collections. <https://doi.org/10.5062/F44J0C29> [↵](#)
6. Lewin, H. (2011). The Impact of a Reading Room’s Closure on Collection Development. <https://doi.org/10.5062/F4SF2T3R> [↵](#)
7. Sandy, J. H., Krishnamurthy, M., & Scalfani, V. F. (2014). Repurposing Space in a Science and Engineering Library: Considerations for a Successful Outcome. *The Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 40(3), 388–393. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.acalib.2014.03.015> [↵](#)
8. Twiss-Brooks, A. (2005). A Century of Progress? Adaptation of the Chemistry Library at the University of Chicago. <https://doi.org/10.5062/F4D21VJD> [↵](#)
9. Winterman, B., & Hill, J. B. (2010). Continued Viability: A Review of the Life Sciences Library at Indiana University in a Time of Institutional Change and Proposed Branch Library Downsizing. *Science & Technology Libraries*, 29(3), 200–215. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0194262X.2010.497725> [↵](#)