

News from the Field: Connecting Librarians with Patents & PTRCs

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Since leaving Sacred Heart University, I have visited libraries across the county. I have found that few – even librarians at colleges and public libraries – understand the relevance of patent information for their users, beyond applicants for patents or trademarks. Some librarians may know of a famous inventor associated with their locale. Many are unfamiliar with of the resources available with which to explore patents, including the specialists and unique tools of the more than eighty Patent and Trademark Resource Centers.

I'm sharing what I've learned about patents and trademarks, paying it forward, to increase patent and trademark information awareness. Before a library visit, I pre-search IP connections to that locale. I offer to show them local genealogical, cultural, and historical information that resides in patents. The amazing database developed by honorary PTRCA member Russ Allen and the DATAMP (2018) team help when fielding questions about mysterious antique items. Among the public libraries where I've made the patent information pitch are:

- Gouverneur, Cranberry Lake, and Lake Placid (NY);
- North Hero and Northfield (VT);
- Cheshire (MA);
- Woodbury, Bethlehem, Norfolk, Middlebury, Naugatuck (CT).

Some libraries invited me to conduct more formal classes. Attendees view key search concepts and strategies through PowerPoint presentations and live search demonstrations, interspersed with active learning games putting the skills in practice. I show ways that patent information connects beyond STEM: business and economics, manufacturing, history, public policy, sociology, art and design, genealogy, and K-12 curriculum, among others. I remind librarians how these connections can market the library and inspire support from administrators, donors, users, and communities. Classes were at:

- St. Lawrence University
- Norwich University
- Connecticut Library Service Center
- Connecticut State Library

Historical societies appreciate the opportunity to incorporate local patents and trademarks of bygone days in their story. I have helped archivists at these historical institutions identify the role of intellectual property in the history that they preserve:

- Connecticut Historical Society
- Mystic Seaport – The Museum of America and the Sea (CT)

- Litchfield (CT) Historical Society
- Goshen (CT) Historical Society
- Southbury (CT) Historical Society
- Windsor (CT) Historical Society

Only recently have archives in museums, historical societies, and universities begun to index the individual items contained in file boxes of family and business papers. Often museums and archives are unaware that they are holding valuable original patents. Some have been hidden from the public since the 1836 Patent Office Fire (Dobyns 1997). In other cases, USPTO records are missing important parts of the patent, such as the drawings. Museum also collect models or samples of patented inventions, invaluable in understanding the inventor's concept.

Those that were issued on parchment have survived surprisingly well despite significant fading and degradation of the ink, although the colored ribbons and wax seal may not. Sadly, some original patents have been surgically altered with an X-ACTO® knife by autograph collectors seeking the signatures of Presidents, Secretaries of State, and Attorneys General from the early republic. Librarians were unaware that the patents contained such “collectibles” or that these pieces were missing. Archives where original patents were discovered include:

- Litchfield Historical Society (CT)
- Connecticut Historical Society
- New York Historical Society (NY)
- Cornell University Library Archives
- Princeton University Library Archives
- Yale University Library Archives

In recent decades, archives and museums have realized that they can be victims of theft (Griffin, 2013; Latest Thinking, 2003; Ruane, 2016; Shenon, 2008; U.S. National Archives, 2017; Williams, 2013). Security experts recommend a range of strategies to protect archival materials, and to make recovery more likely (International Foundation for Cultural Property Protection; Layne, 2014; O'Neill, 1997; RBMS, 2009; Trinkaus-Randall, 1995). Consultants can show librarians examples of museum and archive security issues and solutions in on-site workshops, such as one hosted by the Windsor Historical Society, Windsor, CT, in 2017. Austin Sharpe (President of the International Foundation for Cultural Property Protection, New England Chapter) and Dan Lazuta (a Principal of Acuity-VCT) demonstrated ways that art and artifacts can be damaged or destroyed, accidentally or intentionally, and steps to minimize this risk. PTRCA librarians can help protect archival patent records by sharing these resources with archives and museums, especially the most vulnerable smaller institutions with minimal staff.

PTRC librarians, past and present, can conduct outreach efforts beyond the walls of their home libraries, while researching, studying, or touring. Just pick a library and introduce yourself.

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