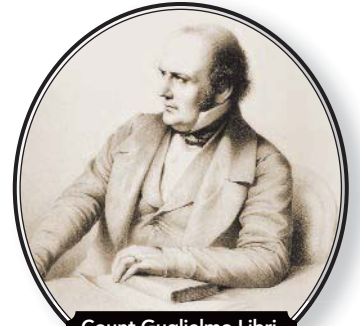


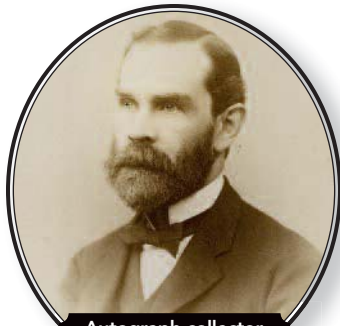


French philosopher  
René Descartes

# Descartes, *the Document Thief* and *Doing the* Right Thing



Count Guglielmo Libri,  
notorious  
document thief



Autograph collector  
Charles Roberts,  
Class of 1864

A long lost letter by the 17th-century French philosopher turns up in Special Collections, spawning an international news story and an opportunity to show the Haverford spirit to the world.

***It all began with a late-night Google search, keyword: “Descartes.”***

Dutch scholar Erik-Jan de Bos had been doing such searches regularly, looking for Descartes documents as he helped to edit a new edition of the philosopher’s correspondence. What the Utrecht University researcher found this night was a list of autographed documents and letters in Special Collections at Haverford College. On that list was a 1641 Descartes letter that had long been thought missing.

Bos quickly contacted Head of Special Collections John Anderies, who scanned the missive and emailed it to Bos. In short order, Bos and his supervisor, in conference with French scholars, determined that this was indeed a Descartes letter that had been stolen from the library of the Institut de France in Paris

by a notorious thief more than 160 years ago. Just as startling: Its contents could change our view of one of the philosopher’s major works.

The news broke on February 25, with articles reporting on the find appearing in the *New York Times*, *Philadelphia Inquirer* and *Chronicle of Higher Education*. In the following days the story would be picked up by news outlets around the world, and a major focus of that story was the Haverford response to learning that the College had a purloined letter in its collection.

Alerted to the likelihood that this valued—and, no doubt, valuable—document had most probably been stolen, Haverford president Stephen G. Emerson ’74 immediately contacted his counterpart at the Institut with the exciting news of the dis-

covery, and an offer to return it. “There was only one responsible course of action,” says Emerson. “Do the right thing.”

## The Letter

René Descartes, best known for the phrase *Cogito, ergo sum* (“I think, therefore I am”) wrote the letter on May 27, 1641 at Endegeest castle, close to Leiden, the Netherlands. Densely written in iron gall ink on four pages of fine laid paper, it is part of an intensive exchange between Descartes and his friend Marin Mersenne concerning the publication of Descartes’ *Meditations on Metaphysics*, which, together with a series of “Objections and Replies” by other philosophers and theologians, would be published in Paris later that year, August 1641.

The letter provides insight into the

manner in which that work was printed and sheds light on certain key elements of Descartes' philosophy. It also shows that in their original form the *Meditations* were organized differently. According to Bos, the letter shows that Descartes changed the book's outline and cut out three sections entirely. Before he wrote the letter, "Descartes had a very different idea about how this book should appear," Bos told *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. "When I started reading it, I fell from one surprise to another."

Originally part of the collection of the Institut de France, this correspondence along with thousands of other letters and documents were stolen by Count Guglielmo Libri (1803–1869), professor of mathematics at the Collège de France and secretary of the Committee for the General Catalogue of Manuscripts in French public libraries. In 1850, Libri was sentenced in absentia for several robberies, including that of the Descartes letters, but he had fled to England by then and sold the documents to collectors and booksellers.

Which is how the letter wound up at Haverford. Charles Roberts, Haverford Class of 1864 (for whom Roberts Hall is named), collected thousands of autographs in his lifetime—the Descartes letter among them—and his widow bequeathed the massive collection to

the College more than 100 years ago.

Since then, the collection has played a role in furthering Haverford's core mission of enabling undergraduate students to conduct original research and scholarship with primary source material, in close partnership with faculty. [See sidebar story on Conrad Turner '81 and his encounter with the Descartes letter.]

Still, when the letter's true provenance was revealed, the decision to return it was made instantly. "Haverford values social responsibility and commitment to community as much as we value rigorous academics," says Emerson. "While we've certainly benefited from having the Descartes letter in our collection, there was really only one thing to do. We certainly hope someone else would do the same for us if the shoe were on the other foot."

And while Emerson wasn't particularly surprised when the head of the Institut replied—effusively—that he'd be happy to accept the offer, Emerson says he was "stunned" to further read that he was being invited to Paris to accept, on Haverford's behalf, a cash award from the Institut in recognition of the College's repatriation of the letter.

"The gesture honors you and exemplifies the depth of moral values that you instill in your students," wrote Gabriel de Broglie, Chancellor of the Institut. "I

propose to offer a prize on behalf of the Institut de France in the amount of 15,000 euros."

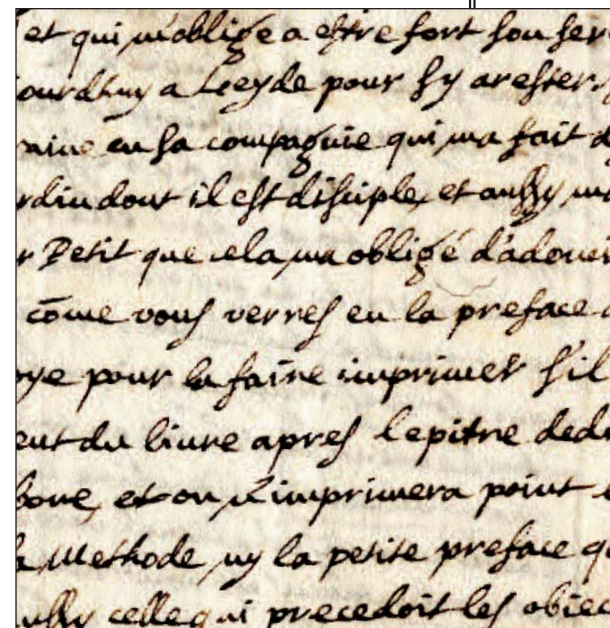
de Broglie also detailed the notorious history of this and other so-called "Libri letters," named after the thief. "[In] 2006 and 2009, another of the 'Libri letters' was sold at auction in Switzerland," he said. "After I protested vociferously and publicly on both occasions in the name of the Institut, the letter didn't find a buyer, but it proved impossible for us to raise the very large sum that the seller demanded..."

The College has not yet decided how to use the award, but will very likely use the funds to directly support student work in philosophy, history and French thought, thereby deepening the intellectual resonances inspired by the Descartes letter itself.

"We couldn't be more pleased with how this has been resolved," concludes Emerson, who met with Institut officials during a visit to Paris in March and will return in June to hand off the letter. "In our ever-shrinking world, when strangers become friends and then partners at the click of a mouse, we want to do all we can to show, by example, what it means for scholars and citizens to collaborate for the common good."

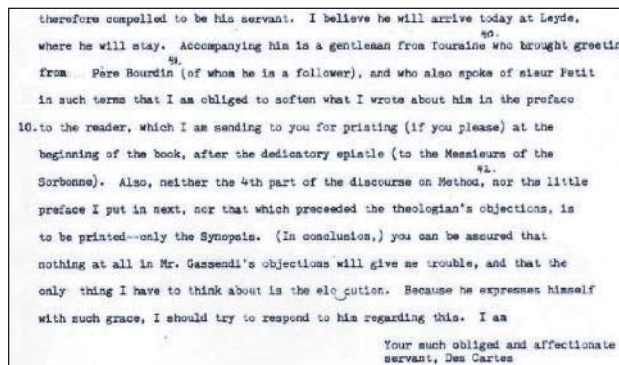
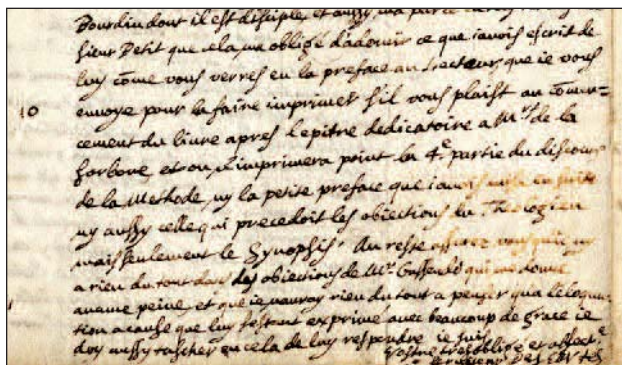
Reporting by Chris Mills, John Anderies, Roy Keeris and Eils Lotozo.

PORTRAIT OF RENÉ DESCARTES BY WILLIAM HOLL. CHARLES ROBERTS AUTOGRAPH LETTERS COLLECTION, HAVERFORD COLLEGE LIBRARY. PORTRAIT OF GUGLIELMO LIBRI BY A. N. NOËL. ARCHIVES OF THE ACADEMIE DES SCIENCES. HAVERFORD STUDENTS BY JONATHAN YU '12.



Bi-co students (left) get a look at the Descartes letter (right), which was on display in Special Collections in Magill Library.

# Conrad Turner '81: Discovering Descartes



The Descartes letter and the translation (right) done by Conrad Turner '81 (below, left) as a junior history major.



When a Dutch scholar asked for a scan of the Descartes letter, Magill Library Head of Special Collections John Anderies went to the vault to retrieve it and discovered something else packaged with the document. It was a translation and research paper done by **Conrad Turner '81** when he was a junior history major.

At the time, Turner was taking the legendary "Seminar on Evidence" course then taught by long-time Haverford history professor John Spielman. In the class, Spielman, who died last year, gave students the chance to analyze real historical objects and documents and to write papers based on their own original research. (Along with the Descartes letter, among the documents made available to the students that year were letters written by John Quincy Adams, Susan B. Anthony, Simon Bolivar and Hegel.)

Anderies scanned and sent a copy of Turner's analysis to Erik-Jan de Bos, along with the letter. The Descartes scholar declared the student effort "truly a fine piece of work. Had the author submitted it to a major international journal, it would have been published immediately."

Post-Haverford, Turner was a Peace Corps volunteer in Sierra Leone, and then joined the State Department's Foreign Service. He has served in Croatia, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Austria, Russia and Belarus, and is now stationed in Belgrade, serving as Counselor for Public Affairs.

*Via email, we asked Turner a few questions about his youthful experience with the Descartes letter.*

**Why did you choose that particular letter to work with in the class?** When we were invited to choose an object to research I arrived a little late, and there were only a few items left. When I saw the Descartes letter among them, I was surprised it hadn't been taken, and even wondered briefly if I was crazy to be so excited, whether this was too big a project to take on. This was direct contact with history, and I had recently completed a summer immersion course in French and was intrigued by the chal-

lenge of deciphering a 17th century handwritten letter. So I claimed it immediately.

**What do you remember about working with the letter?**

It was very well-preserved. I do remember being able to hold it at least once and inspecting the ink and handwriting closely—that was the point when Descartes became a human being for me, instead of some distant academic concept. I think this is the main thing I gained from the experience. A good education makes academics relevant, while helping the student understand how an individual can influence the world. Working directly with this letter did both for me. I had just transferred to Haverford from a much larger university, seeking more intimacy with scholarship. Right away I found myself among some of the strongest students I had ever encountered, learning the discipline of history in the living rooms of my professors, and I was learning about Descartes from an original letter. A very inspiring and humbling experience.

**What was your Descartes paper about?** My modest paper was an attempt to place the letter in the context of his writings at the time, and included a transcription and translation. I wasn't a philosophy or math major, let alone a Cartesian scholar, so my investigation mainly addressed Descartes' professional and personal circumstances. I worked with tri-college resources that were available. As I recall, Professor Spielman wished I had dug further. With the Internet and the ease of communications I can see it is far simpler today to place something like this in its fuller context.

**What has it been like to have a college paper you produced 30 years ago become part of an international news story?** With the Internet, nothing surprises me, though this did come out of the blue. As with most Haverford memories, I confess I had filed this one away as another singular experience and moved on. The real news (which isn't news to anyone who knows Haverford and its Honor Code) was that the letter would be returned to its original owner, and I'm happy to see Haverford get a bit of deserved recognition. 🐾