

Originals Only

Growing up in Duluth, David Karpeles nurtured a dream. Someday, he promised himself, he'd become a teacher. With a classroom filled with students eager to learn, he'd keep ahead of them by absorbing knowledge about many fields of endeavor. What a thrill it would be to impart understanding and skill to young people every day!

After graduation from Denfield High School in 1953, he enrolled at the University of Minnesota at Duluth where he received a bachelor's degree. Then he went to Saint Paul to work on a master's degree.

Well on the road toward reaching his boyhood dream, Karpeles married and found that his specialization in mathematics was opening doors he had not expected. Turning his back upon academia for the moment without completing the work for his advanced degree, he accepted a job offer from Remington Rand Univac, a firm noted for its pioneer work in the brand-new world of computers. This vocational change of direction was soon followed by a geographical shift when his employer sent him to California.

While working in the Golden State the man from the Land of Lakes transferred his credits, earned a master's degree, and began his studies for a Ph.D.

As he neared the finish line, he and his wife, Marsha, who was reared in the Twin Cities, woke up to the fact that his salary was big enough for them to invest in a piece of rental property. Still expecting one day to devote all of his time and energy to the classroom, Karpeles later said, "I couldn't help being aware of the huge number of boys and girls moving through school

David Karpeles is the son of a Duluth bus driver who has become an internationally known collector of manuscripts.
[COURTESY OF DAVID KARPELES]



systems, but not yet widely known as baby boomers. Every one of them was a potential occupant of a rented or purchased home."

Realizing there would be a seller's market in housing by the time the baby boomers reached maturity, he bought another house, then another, and another, and another. "Soon I had so many houses on my hands that it took full time to look after them," he recalls from the distance of more than a quarter of a century.

One day late in the seventies, the two Minnesotans and their four teenage children visited an art museum in Pasadena. Most of the paintings and artifacts on display evoked a ho-hum reaction from the youngsters, but a display of old documents unexpectedly spurred their interest. Karpeles's son peered at an Albert Einstein manuscript and spontaneously blurted, "This is great! The father of the theory of relativity crossed out words and rewrote his sentences, just like I do!"

Real estate had brought the Duluth native so much money that he didn't know how best to invest it. This dilemma fused with the serendipitous reaction of his children to handwritten documents in a museum, and a passion was born. Karpeles



Charleston's Manuscript Library Museum at 68 Spring Street is housed in an elegant old building reminiscent of Robert E. Lee's Arlington and other mansions.

began surveying the market of manuscripts and historical documents with the combined interests of an investor-collector and a teacher outside the classroom. In 1978 he had pulled off an important purchase; the manuscript of Anthony H. Hawkins's novel *The Prisoner of Zenda* was his. Many a curator of a major museum would have relished this prize, but now it was the property of David Karpeles!

For a decade he pored over auction catalogs of rare documents. The son of a Duluth bus driver has become an internationally known collector of manuscripts, but he is reluctant to discuss his wealth and refuses to answer such questions as, "What did you pay for the piece you most prize? How much have you invested in your collection?"

Determined to acquire a 1787 letter written by Ethan Allen of American Revolutionary fame, he reputedly paid thirty-eight thousand dollars for the rare document. For much less he was able to purchase Thomas Edison's check paying an 1876 gas bill of \$15.93. A letter from John Sutter, on whose property the California gold rush began, cost the Duluth native twenty-two

Done at the city of Washington, this first day of
January, in the year of our Lord one thousand
eight hundred and sixty three, and of the

L.L. Independence of the United States
of America the eighty-seventh.

Abraham Lincoln

By the President;
William H. Seward,
Secretary of State

Closing lines of the Emancipation Proclamation, signed by Abraham Lincoln and penned by his secretary of state, William H. Seward.

thousand dollars. His first really big purchase, for which he is said to have spent forty thousand dollars, was the original draft of Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation. Since he entered the market, interest in historic manuscripts and documents has multiplied, and values have jumped accordingly.

Today Karpeles holds one of the world's largest collections of original manuscripts—thousand upon thousand of them. Karpeles has made legal arrangements for his entire holdings to be accessible to the public without charge after his death. He owns the original draft of the lyrics of "The Star-Spangled Banner" as well as music that Beethoven wrote and a twelfth-century proclamation by Pope Lucius III prescribing a code of conduct for knights embarking on one of the crusades. His most valuable single piece, estimated by experts to be worth seven figures today, is the original U.S. Bill of Rights.



Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel about slavery had such an impact that a special Karpeles exhibit is at a Florida museum dedicated to her.

Karpeles owns and exhibits a first draft of the Constitution of the Confederate States of America, adopted in Montgomery, Alabama, in 1861. He also holds original-autograph copies of the national constitutions of Spain, France, Ireland, and Mexico. He is proud of a proclamation signed by George Washington naming November 26, 1789, a day of general thanksgiving, and believes that he has the only Final Declaration of Allegiance Treaty between the United States and its many Indian tribes. Martin Luther, who launched the Protestant Reformation, also is represented by one of his original documents.

By 1983 the University of Minnesota alumnus's long-delayed urge to teach became a reality in an unusual way. He opened a no-admission museum whereby he could effectively teach without going into a classroom. In Montecito, California, boys and girls flocked into the Karpeles Manuscript Library Museum to see and then to discuss twenty-five exhibits.

Karpeles then expanded his idea to other small cities. On a visit to his hometown for a high school class reunion, he spotted a For Sale sign in front of an abandoned church. Buying the

once-elegant edifice for around two hundred thousand dollars, he then spent half as much on an elaborate renovation job, turning it into another Karpeles Museum. He now has manuscript libraries in Jacksonville, Tacoma/Seattle, Buffalo, Santa Barbara, and Charleston. Special exhibits have been placed in the Harriet Beecher Stowe Museum in Mandarin, Florida, and other specialized centers. Minimuseums are maintained in schools throughout the nation, where documents are changed every two months. Each permanent library, whose exhibits also rotate regularly, displays no more than twenty-five manuscripts at a time from such fields as history, music, science, literature, and art.

In each manuscript library, while the unseen presence of the investor-collector cannot be escaped, it is the would-be teacher who dominates. Because the Civil War began in Charleston, it seemed appropriate to send the Emancipation Proclamation to the opening of the learning facility there. Karpeles, the teacher, poses a number of questions in brochures that are handed out at each of his sites. Of South Carolina schoolchildren, he inquires whether an analysis of Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation indicates that the document freed the slaves in America.

"Indeed it didn't," his answer to his own question correctly stipulates. Boys and girls who visit the Manuscript Library Museum learn that slavery was not officially abolished in the United States until the U.S. Constitution was amended.

Educational research indicates that information acquired informally outside the classroom is more lasting than the same data imparted by a teacher during a formal learning session. Karpeles, whose acquisition of a doctorate was interrupted by the boom in California housing, is certain that this is true. Hence he plans to continue expanding and displaying manuscripts as long as he has the money to do so.