

View from the Hill

courtesy of syracuse university special collections



This painted vellum document, honoring legendary historian Leopold von Ranke, is now part of the University's extensive Ranke collection. The letter recognizes his contributions to world history.

Remembering Ranke and His Mark on History

On August 8, 1885, the Lord Major of Berlin visited renowned German historian Leopold von Ranke to present a letter declaring him an honorary citizen of Berlin. "Ranke was working on the history of the Empire of Otto III and he had to stop," says Siegfried Baur, a Ranke scholar visiting SU from Germany. "He did not like to stop." Despite the interruption, the painted vellum document impressed Ranke, with its "artistic and graceful art of representation," according to his diary.

Created by artist Ernst Albert Fischer-Cörlin, the letter recognizes Ranke for his contributions to world history and for making Berlin "a center of modern historiography only by doing his silent work." The letter features such images as the school where Ranke first taught, the University of Berlin, the Prussian eagle, and a cast of world leaders lined up before the muses of history and justice. "World History is the Last Judgment," reads a line between the muses.

This historic piece, donated recently by trustee emeritus Joseph '38, G'41 and Elaine '42 Spector, is the latest addition to Syracuse University's Ranke collection, joining the legendary historian's portrait, desk, chair, and library of 25,000 books and documents in the Department of Special Collections. According to Baur, Ranke's honorary citizenship was long overdue when he received it a year before his death at age 90. Perhaps the greatest historian of the 19th century, Ranke was lauded worldwide for his groundbreaking work as a scientific historian. At home, however, he was a forgotten man, Baur says, because of his refusal to side with political factions and propagate their versions of history. "He was always chasing the authentic," Baur says. "He wanted to know the truth and built a tradition of writing objective history."

Baur has spent more than a year combing through the collection, book by book, researching Ranke's methods. "That this whole history exists here, like it is frozen in time, is a miracle," Baur says. "You can reconstruct how he worked." At the heart of Ranke's exhaustive research was a profound commitment to using multiple sources, and a dedication to his students that produced exemplary teamwork, Baur says.

One of those students was Charles W. Bennett, a former SU professor and librarian who negotiated the University's purchase of the highly prized library in 1887. A major coup for the University, it prompted scorn elsewhere. The *Chicago Tribune*, for instance, wondered: "What do the Syracuse salt boilers want of von Ranke's historical library?"

In March 1888, 83 boxes of Ranke's material—a hefty 19 tons worth—arrived on the Hill. A century later, this wealth of knowledge is accessible to the online world, Baur says, thanks to the devoted efforts of Professor James Powell, who revived the collection in the seventies, and the special collections staff. "This is a wonderful thing Syracuse University did for historiography," Baur says. "When you work on Ranke, you find the name Syracuse. I had no idea of the treasure here."

—JAY COX