

“Freely Thrown Open to the Use of All”: The Library of Virginia and Alexandre Vattemare’s *Système d’Echange International*

by Leah M. Thomas

Il n’y a rien à comme le rêve créer le futur. —Victor Hugo, *Les Misérables*, 1862

During this past year, a map intern was working on an unidentified collection of French and Dutch maps. Each map was stamped with “Système d’Echange International, A.V.” Based on the intern’s research, I was able to identify this map as *La Carte l’Etat-Major*, a topographical map of France and a portion of the Netherlands consisting of approximately 250 sheets, dated circa 1851. I had also asked him to try to figure out the significance of the stamp. In his final report, he indicated that the initials A.V. stood for Alexandre Vattemare, who had been a ventriloquist. Naturally, this information piqued my interest, the ventriloquist part in particular. The question that came to mind was why the Library of Virginia, a state library, would have maps from a French ventriloquist.

Participation in Vattemare’s Exchange Program

The Library of Virginia maintains collections related primarily to Virginia but also includes historically significant materials. In 1839, Nicolas-Marie-Alexandre Vattemare (1796–1864) began promoting his exchange program in the United

States for the purposes of exchanging duplicates and multiples of government publications and other materials between France and the United States.¹ Seeing that state libraries generally housed legal works for members of the legislature that were of minimal interest to the public, Vattemare believed

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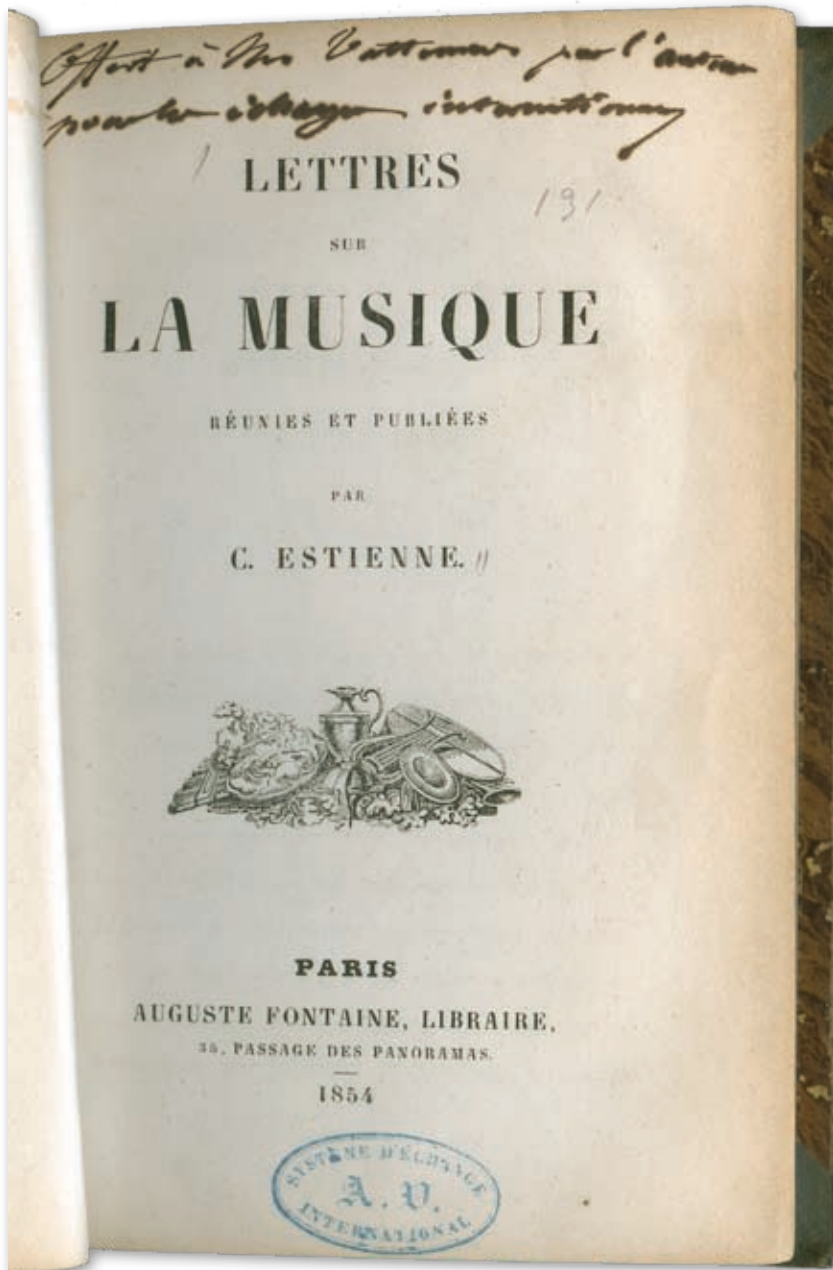
that state libraries could house cultural resources for laypeople and scholars alike.² In January 1847, *The Southern and Western Literary Messenger and Review* reported that Vattemare was expected to visit the United States again, bringing with him “many rare and valuable books for the U.S., and for several of the States, Cities, &c. Among them is Denon’s great work on Egypt, one of the most splendid, if not the most splendid work ever issued from the press.”³ Baron Dominique Vivant Denon’s *Travels in Upper and Lower Egypt*, 1803, is housed in the Library of Virginia’s Special Collections. The materials that can be identified as having come from Vattemare’s System of

Exchange, most of which are in French, include letters, reports, and books in addition to maps, and can be identified by his stamp, inscription, or dedication. The dates on the materials that were acquired through the program range primarily from 1836–1855. Some of the titles are *Souvenirs et Impressions; ou, Lettres a Lady ****, 1855; *Aide-Mémoire à l’Usage des Officiers d’Artillerie*, 1851; and *Etudes Politiques et Historiques*, 1836.⁴ Examples of the items that Virginia contributed to the exchange program include the following:

- Collection of the laws of Virginia from 1619 to 1808 in sixteen volumes
- Reports to the State Convention in 1776
- Journals of the legislature from 1776 to 1790 and from 1831 to the present
- A map of Virginia, published in 1826, yet incomplete
- Geological survey of Virginia.⁵

According to the Virginia State Records Collection Auditor of Public Accounts (1776–1928), which includes the International Literary Exchange vouchers and receipts

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Title page from an 1854 monograph with author's dedication to Vattemare for the exchange program at top and Vattemare's stamp at bottom.

from 1859–1860, the Virginia General Assembly endorsed the international exchange program, authorizing the state librarian to exchange materials with France on March 23, 1848. Less than a month later, on April 4, the General Assembly appropriated \$250 for participation in the program.⁶ During this month, *The Southern*

Literary Messenger again reported on Vattemare's System of International Exchanges, indicating he had made a visit and had "been received with cordiality by the Legislature of Virginia." The article continues, stating that "[h]e brought with him many valuable contributions to the State Library from corporations and societies in Europe."⁷ Shortly

thereafter, the United States Congress passed an act regulating Vattemare's exchange program on June 26, 1848.⁸

Dedicated to his vision of the exchange system, Vattemare was able to garner enthusiastic support for his program. Virginia was one of many participants. The following participating institutions and states are listed in Vattemare's 1848 report: Department of War, Department of Navy, Department of the Post Office, the Patent Office, Office of the Coast Survey, Observatory, National Institute (what would become the Smithsonian Institution), City of Washington, U.S. Mint, American Colonization Society, Maine, Vermont, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, Indiana, and Michigan.⁹ However, for his exchange system to work and be meaningful, Vattemare realized that United States libraries needed to be freely accessible to the public.

Inspiring the Public Library Movement

Upon Vattemare's arrival in New York, his "first sentiments were those of despair, for...[he] found no public institutions like...[his country's] own, open free to the public."¹⁰ During his visit to Boston, he established long-standing relationships with Josiah Quincy, the president of Harvard University, and his son Josiah Quincy Jr., the future mayor of Boston. Vattemare proposed that Boston unite its private libraries into a single public library, free and open to the public.¹¹ He encouraged this idea, which eventually resulted in the establishment of the Boston Public Library. In a letter to Vattemare, Josiah Quincy Jr. stated, "The example of Boston has been followed by most of the cities and towns in New England—And Libraries really public



First sheet of a four-sheet 1835 map of Brussels, Belgium, by famous cartographer and geographer Philippe Vandermaelen with Vattemare's stamp in lower left corner of cartouche.

have become almost a necessity with our People." Quincy Jr. credits Vattemare, "I look upon you as the originator of this great & beneficial movement."¹²

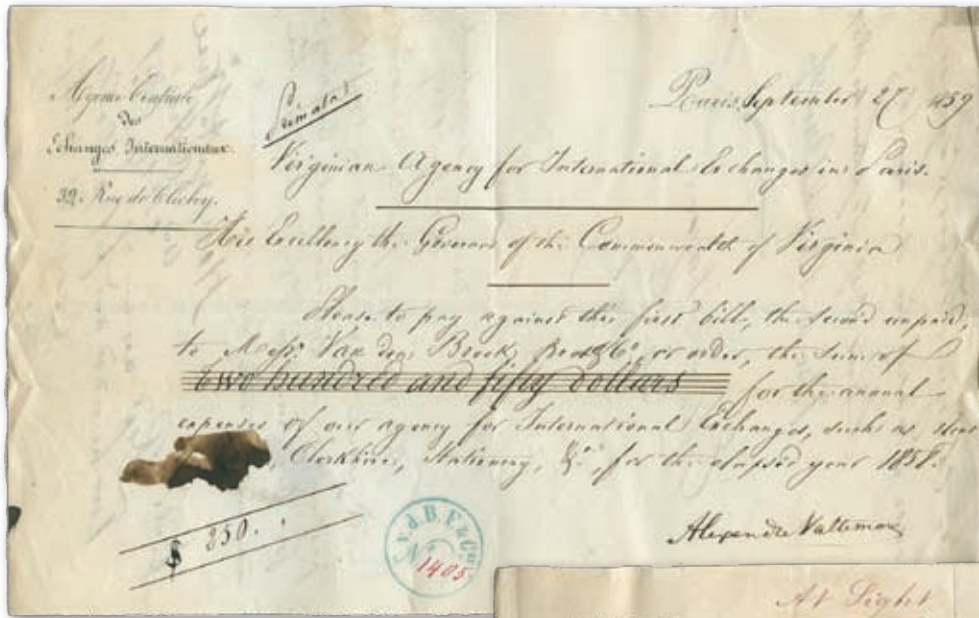
Alexandre Vattemare: A Brief Biography

Of minor Norman nobility, Vattemare was born in Paris in 1796 during the Napoleonic Wars. He was initially directed toward priesthood but was dismissed due to insubordination and then sent to the Hôtel Saint Louis in Paris for medical school. He was yet again dismissed: this time for his ability to make it seem as though the cadavers were speaking from their storage areas or when the students were performing surgery on them.

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Although denied a diploma, he had proven to be an excellent medical student and was put in charge of approximately three hundred Prussian prisoners due to the few medical personnel available. The Prussian authorities awarded Vattemare the *Croix de fer* for the prisoners arriving safely as a result

of his diplomacy. After the fall of Napoleon in 1814, Vattemare was told he could either go to "prison as an enemy alien" or enlist in the Prussian army. Choosing neither, he became a refugee. Upon his father's death in 1815, Vattemare had to provide for himself. It was at this point that he embarked on his illustrious career as a ventriloquist, using talents he had discovered as a child when he would trick the townspeople into believing that someone was stuck in a chimney or drowning in the river. When visiting a city for a show, Vattemare would patronize its libraries, museums, and other cultural institutions. He got his *idée fixe* for the System of International Exchanges from seeing the duplicates that he thought would be useful to other



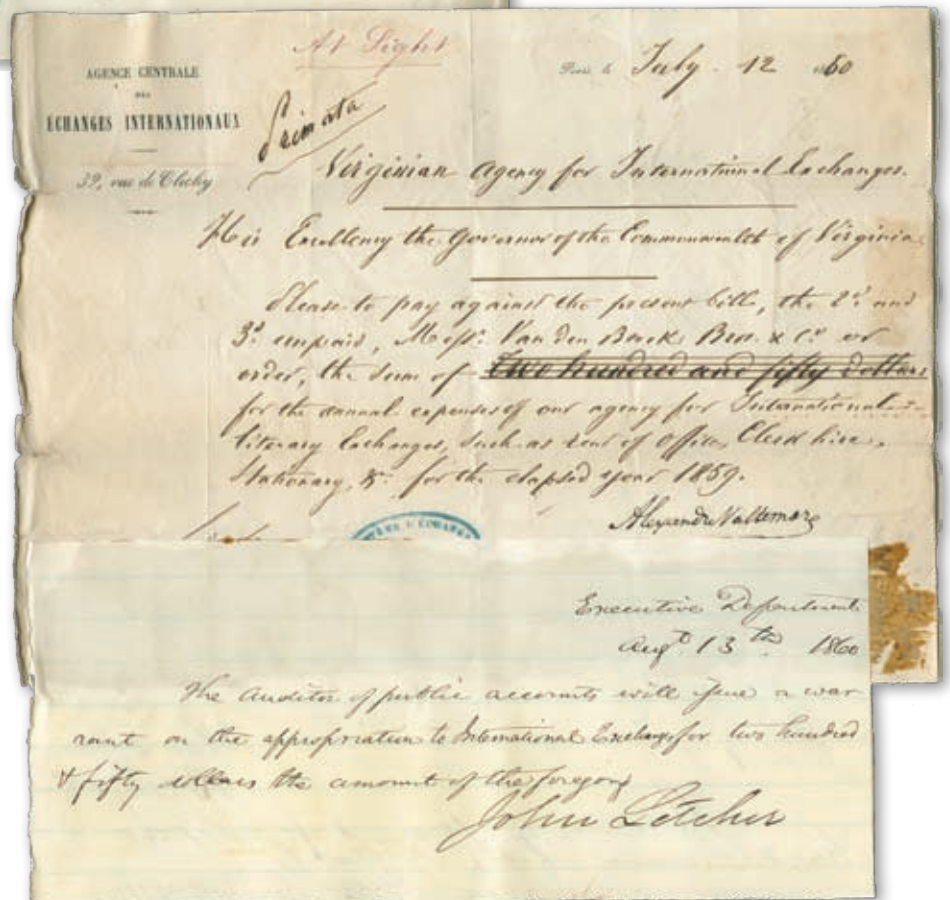
Initial invoice for \$250 from Vattemare to the governor of Virginia dated September 27, 1859.

Below, invoice for \$250 from Vattemare to the governor of Virginia dated July 12, 1860, with correspondence attached from Governor John Letcher dated August 13, 1860.

institutions. He used the earnings from his entertainment career to launch his philanthropic system.¹³

Vattemare's Legacy

Although having inspired an exchange system among libraries and by extension the public library movement in the United States, Vattemare's name fell into obscurity. Institutions' enthusiasm for the program declined around 1850, resulting from his lack of organization,¹⁴ which included not maintaining detailed records of exchanges and accounts. Congress rescinded the law appointing him agent on August 31, 1852.¹⁵ Elizabeth Richards attributes the failure of Vattemare to establish his system permanently to a character flaw, describing him as "temperamentally unfitted to carry out the System he originated" because he was "an artist, with the dreams and impracticalities of one." She then states, perhaps more correctly, "that the System was on too grand a scale for one man to handle."¹⁶ However, in 1955 the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) recognized Vattemare as founder of



its mission of exchange among governments.¹⁷ In 2007, Boston Public Library hosted a joint exhibit with France, "The Extravagant Ambassador: The True Story of Alexandre Vattemare, the French Ventriloquist Who Changed the World."¹⁸ Vattemare's exchange program

may have been short-lived, but not shortsighted. He planted both an idea and an ideal for what he perceived as an "intellectual democracy," libraries "freely thrown open to the use of all,"¹⁹ that only one with the "impracticalities" of a dreamer could have accomplished.

Notes

1. Nash, "Alexandre Vattemare." Nash states that most of what is known about Vattemare "has been transmitted through oral reminiscences and transcriptions of his own autobiographical accounts by his descendants" (16).
2. York, "Alexandre Vattemare's System," 13. See also Vattemare, *Report*, 27.
3. "English Reviews," 64.
4. I was able to locate these titles among others in LVA's online public access catalog because the stamp with the initials A.V. had been noted.
5. From *Movement of the International Litterary [sic] Exchanges*.
6. Virginia, Auditor, *International Literary Exchange*. In Vattemare's *Report*, it states that Virginia appropriated \$400 for the exchange program in April 1848.
7. "International Exchanges," 260.
8. Vattemare, *Report*, 6.
9. *Ibid.* Institutions and states are listed as they appear in the report.
10. Quoted in "Mr. Alexandre Vattemare," 238.
11. Havens, "The Ventriloquist." See also Tilliette and Havens, *The Extravagant Ambassador*.
12. Quoted from letter in Richards, "Alexandre Vattemare."
13. See the following for Vattemare's biographical details: Nash; Tilliette, "Alexandre Vattemare's International Document Exchanges"; Richards; Havens, "The Ventriloquist"; Tilliette and Havens, *The Extravagant Ambassador*.
14. Kipp, *The International Exchange of Publications*, 12.
15. Quoted from letter in Richards.
16. *Ibid.*
17. Havens, "The Ventriloquist."
18. Homren, "Alexandre Vattemare Exhibit," and Tilliette and Havens, *The Extravagant Ambassador*.
19. Quoted in Vattemare, *Report*, 27: "This would be a true intellectual democracy—the best books [read "resources"], selected to suit the wants of all classes and professions, freely thrown open to the use of all."

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