Leading a Rare Society

Housed within an Italianate building on Manhattan's Upper East Side, the 265-year-old New York Society Library might seem more fitting as a place requiring white gloves than a venue offering a Drag Queen story hour. Head librarian Carolyn Waters is dispelling that preconception.

"In the 18th century, 'society' just meant a group of people with similar interests, and today that's exactly who we are—readers, writers, and families united in our love of books and reading," says Waters DC'86 about the city's oldest library. Besides its impressive collection of circulating and research materials, the library hosts staff-curated exhibitions, writing groups, author readings, comedy nights, and open mic events showcasing members' work.

Waters is right at home heading an institution that counts George Washington, Aaron Burr, and Alexander Hamilton among its early members. An economics and political science double major, she worked on Wall Street before changing paths in 2006, taking a job as a circulation assistant at the library while earning her master's degree in library science. Only three women have led the library, and two of them are Rutgers graduates: Waters and Edith Hall Crowell DC'30, appointed in 1936.

Waters' business background has been essential in her role, from addressing budgets to ensuring access to digital materials. She works long hours but is inspired by her mission "to help position [the library] well for the next 265 years," she says. "It's an awesome obligation."

— Nancy Novick

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOHN EMERSON