

First president owes library \$4,577 and two books

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CNN) -- He never told a lie, as the story goes. So maybe if he were alive today, President George Washington could tell a New York City library what he did with two books he checked out 221 years ago.

The two books -- weighty discourses on international relations and parliamentary debates -- were checked out on October 5, 1789.

The New York Society Library has other volumes of "Common Debates" but is missing Volume 12.

They were due on November 2, 1789, but weren't brought back.

Since then, they've been steadily collecting a fine of a few cents each day, adding up to more than \$4,000 by the New York Society Library's informal estimate.

"I'm sorry, math is not my thing at all," said Jane Goldstein, the assistant head librarian when asked to hazard a guess.

The fine at the time was 2 pence a day. Now, it's 15 cents -- "It's really gone up, hasn't it?" she quipped.

One of the librarians, Matthew Haugen, guessed the fine to be in the region of 3,000 British pounds, or about \$4,577.

"He stuck with the pence concept," Goldstein said.

The library first learned of the missing books when it discovered a yellowed ledger in its basement

It listed all the people who had checked out books from the city's oldest library between July 1789 and April 1792.

Next to the works "Law of Nations" and the 12th volume of "Common Debates" was the name of the person who checked them out: "President."

Was President Washington on his way to return his library books when more urgent matters came up?

At the time, New York was the capital of the United States, and the library was the only one in town.

Soon after, the capital was relocated to Philadelphia and then Washington D.C.

The New York library, a subscription library that was New York's first library open to the public, has known about the missing books since the 1930s. The matter came up again recently because the library is capturing the ledgers in digital form to preserve the records.

Library officials cross-checked the books mentioned in the ledger with the ones in their collection.

"Volume 12 (of "Common Debates") was still missing," as was the other book, Goldstein said.

The library is not so concerned about the fine as it is about each book. "We don't know where it is," she said. "We have tried to find it and we can't," she said.