

# the sunday break

A tour of the Decatur House in Washington includes detours through Norfolk, Portsmouth history



## The most exclusive rental in US history

By James F. Lee | Correspondent

Susan Wheeler Decatur's husband lay dying in the parlor of their grand house in Washington, D.C., in late March 1820, wounded in a duel with a fellow naval officer. Her husband ordered the door shut, insisting that she not see him suffer in agony. He died at dawn.

Susan was the wife of Commodore Stephen Decatur Jr., a naval hero famous throughout the country for his exploits in the Barbary Wars and the War of 1812, arguably the most popular man in the United States at that time. His funeral was attended by more than 10,000 mourners lining the streets of Washington.

(Decatur was a familiar figure in Norfolk, Susan's hometown; they married there 14 years before and lived there in the early months of their marriage. The man who shot him, James Barron, was a familiar face too; he was a Hampton native. The Commodore Theatre in Portsmouth is named for him and he's buried in the courtyard next to it.)

Now, what was Stephen Decatur's widow to do?

Only 14 months before, she and Stephen had built their elegant home on the corner of Jackson Place Northwest and H Street Northwest, a house made for entertaining, renowned for the galas held in its opulent ballroom. The brick Federal-style, three-story mansion was the first private residence constructed in President's Park, now Lafayette Square. In time, this would become the city's most fashionable neighborhood, home to diplomats, senators, Cabinet secretaries, generals and the capital's social elite.

My wife, Carol, and I visited Decatur House recently for the

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This photo from the ballroom shows the large windows overlooking Lafayette Square. The portrait of Stephen Decatur is probably by John Vanderlyn, c. 1815. It is a copy of the Decatur portrait by Gilbert Stuart. **BRUCE WHITE/WHITE HOUSE HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION**

## Book banning efforts surged to the highest level in 20 years

These titles were the most targeted in 2021

By Elizabeth A. Harris and Alexandra Alter  
The New York Times

Attempts to ban books in the United States surged in 2021 to the highest level since the American Library Association began tracking book challenges 20 years ago, the organization said Monday.

Most of the targeted books were by or about Black and LGBTQ people, the association said.

Book challenges are a perennial issue at school board meetings and libraries. But more recently, efforts fueled by the country's intensely polarized political environment have been amplified by social media, where lists of books that some consider to be inappropriate for children circulate quickly and widely.

Challenges to certain titles have been embraced by some conservative politicians, cast as an issue of parental choice and parental rights. Those who oppose these efforts, however, say that prohib-



A provided image shows Laura Murphy in a screengrab from an advertisement for Glenn Youngkin's campaign for Virginia governor. Murphy had tried to have Toni Morrison's "Beloved" banned from her son's curriculum. Democrats saw a coded racist message. **FILE**

iting the books violates the rights of parents and children who want those titles to be available.

"What we're seeing right now is an unprecedented campaign to remove books from school libraries but also public libraries that deal with the lives and experience of people from marginalized communities," said Deborah Caldwell-Stone, the director of the American Library Association's office for intellectual free-

dom. "We're seeing organized groups go to school boards and library boards and demand actual censorship of these books in order to conform to their moral or political views."

The library association said it counted 729 challenges last year to library, school and university materials, as well as research databases and e-book platforms. Each challenge can contain multiple titles, and the associ-

ation tracked 1,597 individual books that were either challenged or removed.

The count is based on voluntary reporting by educators and librarians and on media reports, the association said, and is not comprehensive.

Librarians and free speech advocates have also noticed an increase in heavy-handed tactics, including high-profile political pressure against certain books

and legal threats against librarians responsible for choosing reading material — and even against the books themselves.

Gov. Glenn Youngkin of Virginia, a Republican, ran a campaign ad featuring a mother who did not want Toni Morrison's "Beloved" to be a part of her son's high school curriculum. Another Republican, Henry McMaster, the governor of South Carolina, asked for an investigation into what he called "obscene and pornographic" materials in the state's public schools, specifically mentioning the book "Gender Queer: A Memoir," by Maia Kobabe, which the library association said was the most frequently challenged book in the country last year.

A county prosecutor's office in Wyoming considered criminal charges against library employees for stocking books such as "This Book is Gay" and "Sex Is a Funny Word." A school board member in Flagler County, Florida, filed a complaint with the sheriff's department against a book called "All Boys Aren't Blue."

Law enforcement officials

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— Deborah Caldwell-Stone, the director of the American Library Association's office for intellectual freedom





**Harmony Project Community Concert: A Tribute to Martin Luther King Jr.**, presented by Virginia Symphony Orchestra and the City of Norfolk. 7 p.m. April 10 at Second Calvary Baptist Church, 2940 Corprew Ave., Norfolk. Free. virginiasymphony.org.

#### MORE FUN

**"Alton Brown Live: Beyond the Eats,"** a culinary variety show. 6 p.m. April 10 at Ferguson Center for the Arts, 1 Avenue of the Arts, Newport News. Tickets start at \$52. To purchase, visit fergusoncenter.org.

#### Virginia Stage Company presents

**"Dreamgirls."** Preview performances are 7:30 p.m. April 13-15 with opening night 7:30 p.m. April 16 at Wells Theatre, 108 E. Tazewell St., Norfolk. Tickets start at \$25. To purchase, visit vstage.org. Through May 1.

*Events may change. Check before attending.*

## Decatur

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weekly tour offered by the White House Historical Association, which manages the property. We were greeted by docent Margaret Lineberger. She explained that after Decatur's death, Susan could not afford to keep up the house, and she decided to rent it out.

Given the house's location and elegance, she had no trouble finding tenants, including the French and Russian ministers to the United States and three sitting secretaries of state: Henry Clay, Martin Van Buren and Edward Livingston. Her last tenant was the British minister to the United States.

I couldn't help thinking that Decatur House became the most exclusive rental in U.S. history.

Susan owned the house until 1836, when it was purchased by John Gadsby, the famous hotelier. It was taken over by the U.S. Army during the Civil War.

Our tour started at the impressive entry, a showcase of neoclassical archways, oval recesses and a curved doorway leading to the main staircase. Be sure to look for the lock in the curved door with an upside-down British coin in it, Decatur's way of sticking it to the English. To the left is the parlor where he died.

Hampton Roads readers will be interested to know that Decatur was killed with one of the dueling pistols borrowed from John Myers of Norfolk, a friend of his adversary, and currently on view at the Moses Myers House on East Freemason Street.

Decatur items in the parlor include a desk from his ship, the USS President, and a ceremonial sword given to him by the commonwealth of Virginia for his actions in capturing HMS Macedonian during the War of 1812. Other furnishings come from the Beale family, owners of the house from 1871 to 1956, and include twin couches from the 1870s and a pair of candelabra on the mantel.

The family dining room is set with items from the Beale family and period pieces from the collection of the White House Historical Association. Portraits on the wall include Stephen Decatur Jr. and his father, and a fascinating painting depicting the camel brigade commanded by Edward Beale in his survey expeditions of the Southwest.

Beale was the famous West-



Stephen Decatur died in this first-floor parlor on March 22, 1820, from wounds suffered in a duel. The ceremonial sword on the mantel was presented to him by the commonwealth of Virginia for his capture of HMS Macedonian during the War of 1812. **JAMES F. LEE**



The formal dining room on the second floor of Decatur House shows the influence of Edward and Mary Beale. **BRUCE WHITE/WHITE HOUSE HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION**



The Decatur House on the corner of Jackson Place Northwest and H Street Northwest. Stephen and Susan Decatur built this house in 1818-19. **JAMES F. LEE**

ern explorer, surveyor, rancher and later a diplomat who made his fortune in California. He and his wife, Mary, purchased the house in 1871 and initiated extensive renovations, restoring it as a center of Washington entertainment. Their son, Truxtun, inherited the house, and upon his death in 1936, it passed to his widow, Marie Oge Beale.

One of the house's more interesting features is that it was built with the kitchen as a first-floor front room. At the time, a kitchen in the main house was unusual because of heat, odors and fire risk. Later the room served as a billiard room and a study. Today it is used for storage.

We climbed the back stairway used by the family and by servants and enslaved people carrying food, water, laundry and wood to

the third-floor bedrooms, which today are closed to the public. On the second floor, we entered the large formal dining room with floor-to-ceiling windows and flowery stencil work on the ceiling. A huge chandelier and an exquisite parquet floor made with 22 varieties of native California wood are additions by the Beales. The Great Seal of California is inlaid in the center of the floor.

The next room, the ballroom, is really the heart of the house. I could easily imagine foreign diplomats and secretaries of state holding balls and receptions here. Tall windows fronting the square let in light that illuminates the grape leaves and urns stenciled on the high ceiling. Today, portraits of Stephen and Susan Decatur flank the entranceway.

Our guide pointed to the wavy

patterns in some of the windowpanes, indicating that these are original to the house. Carol couldn't help thinking about all those famous people who lived or visited here looking out these same windows at Lafayette Square.

**But not all the residents** of Decatur House were from the diplomatic and political elite of the time; the house couldn't operate without domestic servants and enslaved people. While there is no evidence that Stephen Decatur owned slaves, it is most likely that enslaved labor went into the construction of the house.

A long, two-story ell fronting H Street was added around 1821 to house a new kitchen, storerooms and servants. Dozens of enslaved people occupied the quarters

over the years, especially during the ownership of John Gadsby in the decades before the Civil War.

Today, the second floor has been stripped to its studs and chimneys, revealing four rooms used as slave quarters. Panels on the wall explain the role of slavery in Decatur House and in Washington, D.C.

One resident of these quarters was Charlotte Dupuy, an enslaved servant of Henry Clay. She sued him for her freedom, claiming that her previous owner had promised her emancipation and that Clay must honor that request. Clay was about to return to Kentucky; he'd been secretary of state for President John Quincy Adams, who lost his re-election bid in 1828. A court ruled that Dupuy must be allowed to stay in Washington while the case was adjudicated, so she remained in Decatur House after Clay's departure, working for Van Buren.

Dupuy lost her case. Clay sent agents to forcibly remove her and imprison her in Alexandria, eventually sending her to his daughter's plantation in Louisiana. She was granted her freedom 11 years later.

#### In 1936, Edward Beale died.

His wife, Marie, inherited and restored it to its neoclassical elegance, removing many Victorian elements added in the 1870s by her mother-in-law. She entertained lavishly in the ballroom, hosting the annual New Year's Day reception for diplomats, one of the most sought-after events on the Washington social calendar. But she knew the house's days were numbered. For years, she resisted the federal government's plans to retrofit and even demolish the buildings on the square for government office space.

Decatur House was saved by her insightful gift of the property and its contents (and its incredible history) to the National Trust for Historic Preservation shortly before she died in 1956, ensuring that Decatur House would remain as it is forever.

Reach James F. Lee at jameslee@bucknell.edu

#### IF YOU GO

**Where:** 748 Jackson Place NW, Washington, D.C.

**Hours:** Open Mondays only.

**Tours:** at 10:30 a.m. and 1 p.m. Enter the door on H Street Northwest.

**Tickets:** Free

**Details:** tinyurl.com/WHHAhouse; 202-218-4300

## Book

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determined there was no basis for a criminal investigation in either instance. But librarians say that just the specter of having to defend against charges, or to withstand such a public spectacle, is likely to have a chilling effect, discouraging library employees from ordering certain books in the first place.

### The top 10

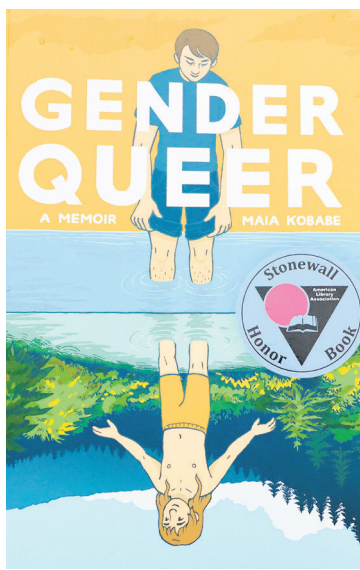
Here are the 10 most frequently challenged books of 2021, according to the library association.

#### 1 "Gender Queer" by Maia Kobabe

In this 2019 illustrated memoir, Kobabe, who is nonbinary, explored questions surrounding sexuality and gender identity and the process of coming out as gender nonconforming. Most objections to the book, which has been pulled from school and public libraries across the country, point to brief references to masturbation and an illustration based on an erotic image of an older man and a boy depicted on a Greek urn. But Kobabe and others note that many of the challenges stem from the memoir's frank discussion of gender fluidity.

#### 2 "Lawn Boy" by Jonathan Evison

Evison's 2018 novel follows a young Mexican American man who works as a landscaper and is coming to terms with his sexual identity. While it was written for adults, the novel found an audience with prize and won an Alex Award, a prize given by the Young Adult Library Services Association to books written for adults that hold appeal to young adults. Critics seized on a scene that describes a sexual encounter between two



boys. Evison has said he has received death threats as a result of the campaigns to ban his book.

#### 3 "All Boys Aren't Blue" by George M. Johnson

Johnson's memoir earned glowing reviews for its unflinching and at times exuberant look at the challenges and joys of growing up Black and queer. The book, which includes scenes that depict oral and anal sex and sexual assault, has been challenged in school libraries across the country.

#### 4 "Out of Darkness" by Ashley Hope Pérez

Set in 1930s Texas, "Out of Darkness" centers on a romance between a Mexican American teenage girl and a Black teenage boy. The novel has been widely challenged, including by a parent at the Lake Travis Independent School District in Austin who complained about a passage where teenage boys make explicit sexual and racist comments about a Mexican American girl. Pérez has argued that her novel deals with racism and sexual abuse because those are issues that young people confront in their own lives.

#### 5 "The Hate U Give" by Angie Thomas

Thomas' young adult debut novel centers on a Black teenage girl whose friend is shot by a police officer during a traffic stop. A bestseller, it helped stir conversations about police violence, but has been challenged across the country for what critics say is profanity, violence and an "anti-police" agenda.

"There's the assumption that it's an anti-police book, when the fact is it's anti-police brutality," Thomas said in an interview with Entertainment Weekly.

#### 6 "The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian" by Sherman Alexie

Based on the author's own experience, this young adult book follows a boy on the Spokane Indian Reservation who attends an all-white school where the only other Native American is the school mascot. It won a National Book Award in 2007 in the Young People's Literature category.

The library association said it has been targeted for banning because of sexual references, profanity and the use of a derogatory term.

#### 7 "Me and Earl and the Dying Girl" by Jesse Andrews

A novel about an awkward boy named Greg who hopes to make it through high school by keeping a low profile; his friend, Earl; and a girl who has cancer, whom Greg's mom pushes him to befriend. A New York Times bestseller, it was made into a movie written by Andrews and directed by Alfonso Gomez-Rejon.

The book has been challenged because it was considered degrading to women and sexually explicit.

#### 8 "The Bluest Eye" by Toni Morrison

Published in 1970, Morrison's debut novel is considered a canonical work of American fiction. Narrated by a Black girl



Angie Thomas with her novel, "The Hate U Give," at an October 2018 book signing in Jackson, Mississippi. The book, a bestseller about a Black teen murdered by police, was adapted into a feature film. **ROGELIO V. SOLIS/AP**

in Ohio, the book follows a tragic heroine who believes that she is ugly, and prays for blue eyes.

The book has been challenged because it depicts child sexual abuse and because it was considered to be sexually explicit.

#### 9 "This Book is Gay" by Juno Dawson

A nonfiction exploration of growing up as LGBTQ, this title addresses a variety of issues including sex, politics and stereotypes. The book has been

challenged because of its LGBTQ material and themes, and for "providing sexual education," the library association said.

#### 10 "Beyond Magenta" by Susan Kuklin

This book profiles the lives of six transgender or gender-neutral teenagers, largely in their own words. The book was challenged for its LGBTQ content and because it was considered sexually explicit, the association said.