

**REMARKS AND DOCUMENTS
RELATING TO THE
PRESERVATION AND KEEPING
OF THE PUBLIC ARCHIVES**

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Remarks and Documents Relating to the Preservation and Keeping of the Public Archives by
Richard Bartlett

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RICHARD BARTLETT

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*State of New Hampshire
New Hampshire State*

REMARKS AND DOCUMENTS

RELATING TO THE

PRESERVATION AND KEEPING

OF THE

PUBLIC ARCHIVES.

BY **RICHARD BARTLETT**, Esq.
MEMBER OF THE NEW-HAMPSHIRE HISTORICAL SOCIETY.

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1837.

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AT a special meeting of the NEW-HAMPSHIRE HISTORICAL SOCIETY, held at Concord, December 21, 1836, the Communication of RICHARD BARTLETT, Esq. of New-York city, formerly Secretary of State in New-Hampshire, in relation to the *Preservation of the Public Archives* in the United States, having been read and considered, and the same appearing to the Society to be of great public interest, and to merit the prompt attention of most of our state legislatures, and of other bodies having charge of valuable public archives—

Resolved, That said Communication be immediately published, and copies thereof be transmitted by the Corresponding Secretary to the governors of the several states, to be submitted, if they shall see fit, to the legislatures thereof; also, copies to the President of the United States, and to the mayors of the cities of Boston, New-York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Washington, Richmond, Charleston, (S. C.) New-Orleans, and of such other cities as the Standing Committee may advise.

A true copy from the records—Attest :

MOSES G. THOMAS, *Recording Secretary*.

REMARKS AND DOCUMENTS

RELATING TO THE PRESERVATION AND KEEPING OF THE

PUBLIC ARCHIVES.

I. *Security against Fire.* To provide for the safe and perfect keeping of the Public Archives is so obviously one of the first and most imperative duties of a legislature, that no argument could make it plainer to a reflecting mind. They are treasures of so sacred a character, that the public enemy who wantonly devotes them to the flames is, by all civilized people, branded as a barbarian ; and of so priceless a value, that no money could purchase them of the poorest state in the Union, or replace them when once destroyed. And yet legislators, who would not sleep till their own title-deeds were on record and their buildings insured against fire, feel no concern for the safety of the archives and edifices of the state, although its purse is in their hands, and they have solemnly sworn to discharge their duty with fidelity. This astonishing apathy, in a matter of such interest to the whole community, may, perhaps, be deemed the less censurable because it is so general ; but what reproach will not justly attach to those constituted guardians of the common weal, who, after having their attention turned to the subject, shall carelessly and negligently leave the original records and

papers of the state—the only authentic materials of its history—to a remote, it may be, but ultimately certain, destruction by fire ?

With the view of attempting to awaken attention to this subject, (although I may be thought by some to meddle with things which do not concern me) I have endeavored to collect accounts of such conflagrations as have damaged or destroyed the archives of the individual states and of the nation,—believing that no good citizen would be able to contemplate the black catalogue without at once resolving to make an effort for the safety of the records of his own state.

Unfortunately for my purpose, I have succeeded in obtaining information from only sixteen states and four of the Departments at Washington, and *that* neither so full or positive in all cases as I hoped for ; but still it reveals an extent of destruction which will astonish any one who has not himself been raking among the ashes. Of the instances, thus discovered, of damage to public records by fire, it is surprising how little is now known. Several of them had passed into utter oblivion, and have been brought to light by chance only. From these circumstances it may be inferred, that more thorough investigations would disclose other forgotten ruins.

In six of the sixteen states from which I have some information, it is ascertained that the public archives have been partially destroyed by fire ; viz. in New-Hampshire in 1736 ; in Massachusetts in 1747, besides having been thrown into confusion, if not otherwise damaged, by three previous fires ; in New-York in 1740—1 and 1773 ; in New-Jersey in 1686 ; in North-Carolina in 1831 ; in South-Carolina in 1698—these were all accidental ; in Virginia in 1781, by the enemy under Arnold.

The national archives have been partially burnt at three several times—viz. in 1800, when the buildings of the War

Department were accidentally consumed; in 1814, when the public buildings and many of the records and papers of the War, Navy and Treasury Departments were destroyed by the British troops; and in 1833, when the Treasury buildings were burnt. It deserves special remark, as a striking evidence of the utility of fire-proof offices, that the valuable papers in the two fire-proof rooms of the War Office in 1814, and those in the fire-proof rooms of the Treasury Department in 1833, were *all saved*, while many of the others were consumed.

Now, without seeking to enlarge this melancholy list of conflagrations, we have here enough to excite a general feeling of grief and even of indignation at the inexcusable negligence which has consigned so many precious materials for our country's history to irretrievable destruction. That the general government, especially, should have lavished immense sums in the erection of splendid buildings, calculated rather for architectural display than for convenient use, and at the same time have left any portion of the national archives unprotected by fire-proof offices, will be a subject of wonder and regret to future generations. And it is almost incredible, that, at this day—upwards of half a century from the establishment of our independence—no fire-proof offices are occupied by the government at Washington, though two are now being built! But let us rejoice that a reform has commenced, though we cannot forget that, of the three conflagrations of our national archives, we owe one to the vandalism of the public enemy, and *two** to the improvidence of our own government. In truth, if other fire-proof rooms would have proved as effectual for the security of their contents as the two which belonged to the War Department in 1814, it was the fault of our government that any of those archives were burnt.

* Since these remarks were written, the conflagration of the Patent Office, the General Post-Office, and the City Post-Office, has occurred.

In Vermont and Massachusetts, all, and in New-York, New-Jersey, North-Carolina and Pennsylvania, most of the state archives are kept in offices called fire-proof. In New-York a building really fire-proof is nearly finished. The offices of the first two states are in the capitol, the others in separate buildings. In Maine, New-Hampshire, Rhode-Island, Connecticut, Ohio, Maryland, Virginia and Indiana, the offices are in the capitol, but not fire-proof. In Delaware and Kentucky they are in combustible buildings, separate from the capitol.

As every thing which can be procured by money sinks into insignificance in comparison with the original records of a state, I have not made inquiry concerning the destruction of public edifices and libraries, but it appears, that the court house (capitol?)—a “spacious and beautiful building”—and books, plans, pictures, &c. were consumed in Massachusetts in 1747; that the capitol of Kentucky has been twice burnt; that the state house of North-Carolina—“the pride of the state”—the whole of the state library, and the statue of Washington by Canova—“that *chef d'œuvre* of the great artist,” which cost about \$25,000, were destroyed in 1831; and that the national library perished with the public buildings in 1814.

It is probable that most of the states have valuable and increasing libraries which are kept in combustible rooms. New-Hampshire has one of about 2000 volumes; including public documents and journals of Congress, and Maryland one of 10,000 volumes, thus exposed. Since the destruction of the national library, the government has purchased the library of Mr. Jefferson, 6484 volumes, at an expense of \$23,950, and other books, making the entire collection about 24,000 volumes, at a cost of \$99,950, exclusive of Congressional documents. This *phœnix* library has already been damaged, and is *probably* liable to total

destruction by fire. It would be more worthy of the national character and resources if it were increased at least ten fold, and secured in appropriate fire-proof apartments.

Besides the condition of the state libraries, it would be interesting to know that of the other principal libraries in this country, such as those of our larger cities, and our colleges, universities, and historical and antiquarian societies. Some of these are very large and valuable, though greatly inferior to the European collections. The Philadelphia library contains 44,000 volumes; Cambridge University 42,000, besides 10,000 maps, charts and views; Boston Athenæum 29,100; New-York Society 25,000; Charleston, S. C. 15,000; Yale College 10,000, besides 15,000 in the society libraries; Dartmouth College 6,000, besides 8,500 in the society libraries. Several other colleges have libraries, including those of the societies, of 10,000 to 14,000 volumes. Are all or any of these protected by fire-proof rooms? The New-York Historical Society's library is said to contain 10,000 volumes, but it is now kept in the third story of a building which is far from fire-proof. Some other historical societies are equally careless of the treasures confided to their custody. But I will pass from this digression to the second part of my subject.

II. *Mode of Keeping.* Next in importance to fire-proof offices, is a mode of keeping the original papers so that they may at once be secure against wear and loss, and be in the best condition to be removed upon an emergency, or to be consulted with the greatest facility and advantage.

On this point it might be sufficient simply to refer to the letter of my Cambridge correspondent, whose extensive observation in the public offices of this and foreign countries entitles his opinion to all consideration and respect; and to the valuable communication from Mr. FELT, relative to the reform now in progress in the office of the