Cellars and Attics for Archives: These and Rented Non-Fireproof... New York Times (1857-1922); May 4, 1919; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times pg. 84

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UNITED States Senator desired to consult a document of a former period of the Government. He went to the department concerned. A clerk took the Senator to another building which was not fireproof. The clerk raised a trap door and the two descended into a damp cellar, where, after much rummaging under the limited rays of an electric light, the Senator exclaimed, "I declare, I don't think I can find it," said the Senator afterward in recounting the experience, "that if a fire had occurred neither the clerk nor I could have escaped.

The rented building to which the Senator was taken was one of a hundred different places in Washington, which valuable Government papers are stored. This and many other buildings in which the papers are stored are not fireproof. The clerk raised a trap door and the two descended into a damp cellar, where, after much rummaging under the limited rays of an electric light, the Senator exclaimed, "I declare, I don't think I can find it," said the Senator afterward in recounting the experience, "that if a fire had occurred neither the clerk nor I could have escaped.

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In this country efforts to make Congress take a similar view of our own archives have been in vain. The agitation for a national archives building began in the seventies of the last century. Fifteen different archives bills have been introduced. Two got by the Senate, but not one past the House. Meanwhile a site was authorized and purchased, but on the eve of the long delay, while park-board measures were endured regularly—the site was used for another building. On the whole no other Congress has been more neglectful. Is this an example to the one, for there never has been any organized opposition to the idea; it was generally admitted to be a sound idea, even by members who did not apprehend its importance. The Government archives are a neglected part of our national heritage, a rather vague need compared with the insolent call of constituencies for commodious new Post Office buildings; so the fact that they have largely been allowed to lose by fire from year to year, and from lack of proper care have suffered many losses has had many causes irreversible, damaging. Naturally, too, lack of classification causes much time to be lost in looking for a paper when it is wanted.

A hundred-year-old contract affecting the War Department was wanted. Data in this department is filed in one department; the hunt was transferred to the Treasury Department, which keeps a record of the money paid by all departments. The contract involved the furnishing of ammunition and arms by the Treasury Department in 1876. At length the record was found, stored away in one of the War Department's many buildings. A file in an archives building, vanished by the experts, the paper could probably never be found again. After the war a claim for $138,000 was presented to the Government. It was the original demand. The papers were involved. If these could not be found the claim would have to be paid, fast. "We don't want any record against the Government never dies. Scoundrels, after much hunting, were given in the end the papers by the authorities, stating proving proof that the claim had already been paid.

Some of these records have already begun to come to Washington. Draft Board records were shipped in some weeks ago; truck load after truck load of them have been stored in a building at the War College. The Fuel Administration has ordered its records to be sent, but Washington. Officials are at their wit's end to find where to place all these papers, and yet the greatest volume of records of all, those of the A. E. F., have barely begun to arrive in Washington at all. Besides their historical value, these Government papers will be the subject of lawsuits and claims of one kind or another for years to come, and in order to give them fireproof protection pending some action by Congress, it is proposed to set aside for the records as large a space as possible in the semi-

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The Treasury Building is a good illustration.

Treasurer in a Storage Building in Washington. [Etched Wood Engraving]

A few years ago an important historical paper of the Navy Department was discovered to be right under a ledger; it was removed before it was utterly destroyed. Among the papers are many of great and known historical value. The value of such documents is twofold: They are written on materials that have been dry for a short time ago. He noticed an old, ancient-looking book. He fished it out, and found was the order book of the Massachusetts regiment at West Point during the year 1789, giving the basis for a picture of the life of the regiment for that period. For safekeeping, the officer sent the book to the Library of Congress. No one knew that such a book was in existence, and there is no doubt that a classification of the material would make it possible for any investigator of this sort of the most interesting and important historical account. As it stands now, historians desiring to make investigations of this sort are faced with a heavy disadvantage, as compared with investigators in the European capitals.

The paper was a copy of the financial accounts of the War Department and their records in search of old revenue stamps. He found many rare ones, but was not satisfied with simply discovering them. In order to cover the traces of his operations he destroyed a large number of vouchercs. Some time later a negro was discovered trying to dispose of two packs of old Indi-

n the buildings. New space was required at the rate of 25,000 square feet a year.

In the Government buildings themselves, attics, unused corridors in upper stories, closets, abandoned doorways, every available space, are stuffed full of Government papers. The files of the War Department, one of the best cared for, and the only one where the floors of all buildings are maintained under one head, occupy nearly 100 rooms in the State, War, and Navy Building. The archives of Spain it is said there are 100 miles of shelves devoted to archives, and that in these papers alone here would fill the Library of Congress twice. At this relation to conditions before the war, the war, it is estimated, will double all the papers that had been accumulated by the country up to 1917. Records

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Government Files in a Storage Building in Washington. Leett Bry.

A rickety stairway, hardly more than two feet wide, leads to the place where records of the greatest value are stored. Small skylights a good distance apart supply the only light, three being in each window. The papers are stacked on open wooden shelves which extend to the ceiling. They are covered with dust, and the older papers have been made so brittle by the excessive heat that at the first touch they begin to crumble.

Some of them taken out on occasion in the past have broken into small pieces load of them have been destroyed in the fire. In such cases, where the paper is impor-

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racy of the American public is the subject of much speculation and discussion. The value of the historical account. As it stands now, historians desiring to make investigations of this sort are faced with a heavy disadvantage, as compared with investigators in the European capitals.

Owing to the added material growing out of the war, a more determined effort to preserve will be made, and until provision is made from the next Congress authorization for the erection of a national archives building, a portion of not less than 3,000,000 cubic feet capacity with it, is estimated, would be required, under a plan that would provide for the enlargement of the present building to meet the need. Some of these records have already begun to come to Washington. Draft Board records were shipped in some weeks ago; truck load after truck load of them have been stored in a building at the War College. The Fuel Administration has ordered its records to be sent, but Washington. Officials are at their wit's end to find where to place all these papers, and yet the greatest volume of records of all, those of the A. E. F., have barely begun to arrive in Washington at all. Besides their historical value, these Government papers will be the subject of lawsuits and claims of one kind or another for years to come, and in order to give them fireproof protection pending some action by Congress, it is proposed to set aside for the records as large a space as possible in the semi-

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