

Cellars and Attics for Archives

These and Rented Non-Fireproof Buildings House Many of the Most Valuable Records in Washington

A 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 he observed 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 lantern, the paper was found. "I thought," said the Senator afterward in recounting the experience, "that if a fire had occurred neither the clerk nor I would have got out alive."

The rented building to which the Senator was taken was one of a hundred different places in Washington in which valuable Government papers are stored. In this situation Washington stands alone among the capitals of the world. All other countries of importance have their archives concentrated in a special building furnished with every possible protection against loss by fire or deterioration. The archives are carefully preserved, first, to prevent the establishment of false claims; second, as the basis of true history.

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. Fifty different archives bills have been introduced. Two got by the Senate, but not one past the House. Meantime a site was authorized and purchased, but on account of the long delay—while pork-barrel measures were attended to regularly—the site was used for another building. On the whole no other Congressional neglect furnishes a parallel to this one, for there never has been any organized opposition to the idea; it was generally admitted to be a sound one, even by members who did not apprehend its high importance, but after all it was a rather vague need compared with the insistent call of constituencies for commodious new Post Office buildings; so the Government's papers have been exposed to loss by fire from year to year, and from lack of proper care have suffered much, and in many cases irreparable, damage. Naturally, too, lack of classification causes much time to be lost in looking for a paper when it is called for.

A hundred-year-old contract affecting the War Department was wanted. Data could not be found in the records of that department; the hunt was transferred to the Treasury Department, which keeps a record of the money paid out by all departments. The contract involved the furnishing of ammunition and arms to the Government from 1790 to 1814. At length the record was found, stored away in one of the non-fireproof buildings. In an archives building, supervised by experts, the paper could probably have been found in five minutes.

Before the war a claim for \$136,000 was presented to the Government. It antedated 1820, and several Government papers were involved. If these could not be found the claim would have to be paid, for as the law stands a claim against the Government never dies. Searchers, after much hunting, were able to lay their hands on the papers, providing proof that the claim had already been paid.

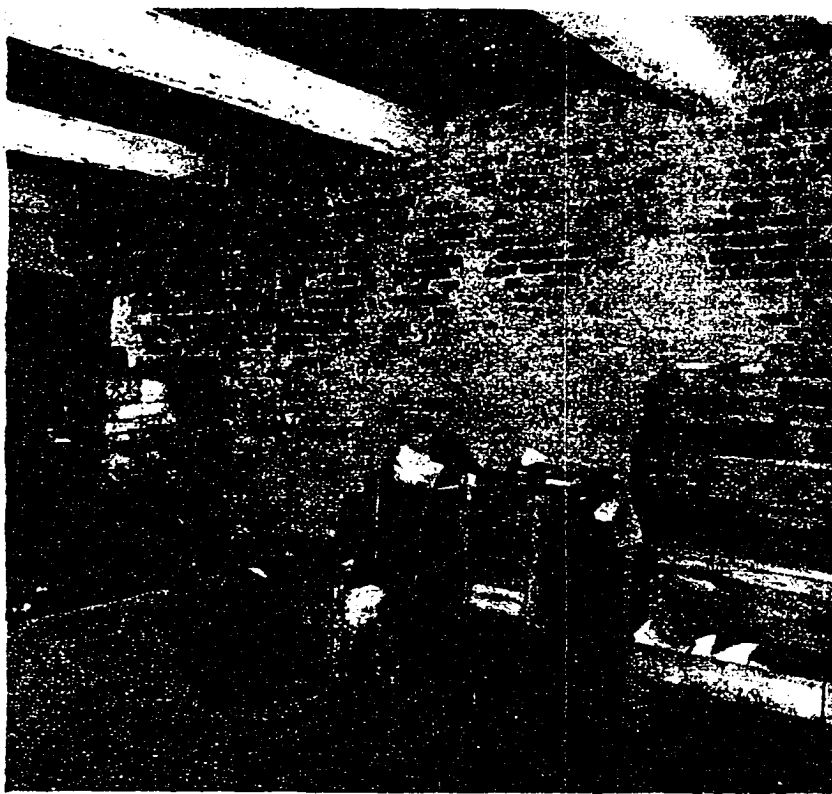
Not only has there been no centralization of Government archives in Washing-

ton, but valuable papers have been kept in other parts of the country. A few years ago a man named Revis made a claim against the Government for a principality of about 15,000 square miles in Colorado. He had records from the national archives of Spain. The case seemed a good one, but among old Spanish papers in our Government records in San Francisco discoveries were made which defeated the claim. Later these papers were destroyed in the San Francisco earthquake, and it has been stated that, if Revis had made his fight after the earthquake instead of before it, the Government would have had great difficulty in proving the claim to be false.

These cases illustrate from the business standpoint the importance of properly protecting Government papers in the past, but the war has vastly enhanced that importance. Before the war some claim was filed against the Government practically every day. Wars are the great producers of claims, and a large number is certain to spring out of the war. Their determination will in the main rest on Government records. Up to the war these records had multiplied since the beginning of the country to such an extent that all the available space in Government buildings had long ago been filled and the overflow taken to outside leased buildings. Before the war the Government was paying \$50,000 a year

the Railroad Administration, and War Industries Board. Some of these records have already begun to come to Washington from centres over the country. The 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 to Washington. Officials are at their wits' 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 hardly 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-fireproof Munitions Building.

At present the greater part of the Government's archives are stored in the two worst places to prevent them from deterioration, in attics and in cellars. To preserve papers under the best conditions requires an even temperature, light, and an absence of excessive moisture. In the attics the papers are subjected to a terrific heat in the Summer time, so great that spontaneous combustion has been feared. The attic of the Treasury Building is a good illustration.



Government Files in a Storage Building in Washington. Leet Bros.

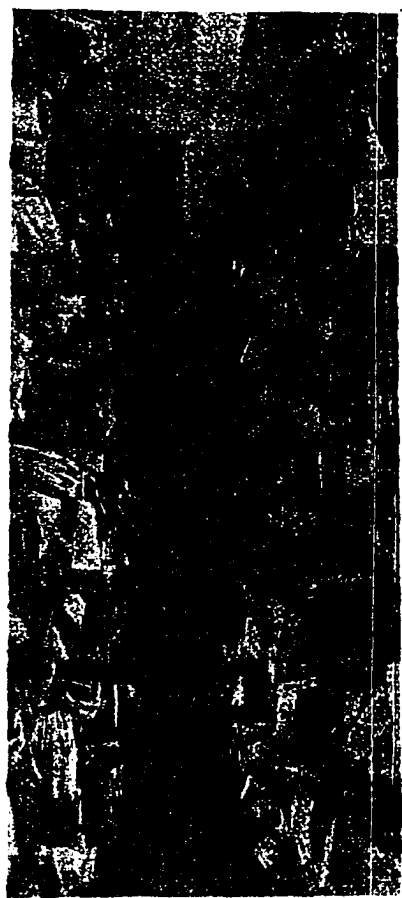
for rent on these buildings. New space was required at the rate of 25,000 square feet a year.

In the Government buildings themselves attics, cellars, 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 papers of all branches are centralized under one head, occupy nearly 100 rooms in the State, War, and Navy Building. In the Treasury Department it is said there are 100 miles of shelves devoted to archives, and that the papers here alone would fill the Library of Congress twice.

All this relates 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 include not only those of the army and navy and other regular departments, but of special activities, such as the Food Administration, the Fuel Administration,

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, there being no windows. 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 threaten to crumble.

Some of them taken out on occasion in the past have broken into small pieces when an attempt was made to open them. In such cases, where the paper is important, it is necessary to call in a manuscript restorer. In other parts of the Treasury Building, through necessity, are kept in places where they are threatened with mold; Treasury archives are stored in chambers constructed around the superstructure of the sunken fountain at the north end of the building. Adjacent steam pipes have caused damage to valuable archives. Leaks have also contributed their share of damage.



Treasury Files in a Storage Building in Washington. Note Wooden Shelves.

A few years ago an important historical paper of the Navy Department was discovered to be right under a leak; it was rescued before it was utterly destroyed.

Among the papers are many of great and known historical value. The value of many more is unknown, and until the papers are gathered in one building, under one management, and properly classified, will not be determined. An officer of the historical branch of the War College happened to be poking through an old box of papers at the War College a short time ago. He noticed an odd, ancient-looking book. He fished it out, and found it was the order book of the Massachusetts regiment at West Point during the year 1789, giving the basis for a definite 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 result in many discoveries of interest, and some of great importance. As it stands now, historians desiring to make investigations at the source are at a heavy disadvantage, as compared with investigators in the European capitals.

The marvel is that the archives have not suffered more than they have from theft and vandalism. A few years ago a laborer employed by the Treasury Department raided its records in search of old revenue stamps. He found many rare ones, but was not satisfied with merely detaching them. In order to cover the traces of his depredations he destroyed a large number of vouchers. Some time later a negro was discovered trying to dispose of two sacks of old Indian Office records. The archives of the House of Representatives have been among the most ill-used in Washington. Old papers there show that the auto-graph hunter has been abroad, and it is a tradition of the file room that the open grate fire of the file room that once kept burning an entire Winter with bundles of old petitions and papers.

Owing to the added material growing out of the war, a more determined effort than ever before will be made to obtain from the next Congress authorization for the erection of a national archives building. A structure of not less than 3,000,000 cubic feet capacity to start with, it is estimated, would be required, under a plan that would permit of enlargements as new demands arose. Such a building would cost, it is said, not much in excess of \$1,500,000. The present outlay for rental of buildings to hold overflow papers would pay the interest on this cost.