OUR NATIONAL ARCHIVES FIND A NEW HOME

In a Stately Grecian Temple at Washington Will Be Gathered and Preserved the Documentary Records of American History

(Continued from Page 6)

the American Revolution is here in two copies, an exchange copy sent from England and signed by George III, and the original signed by D. Hartley for England, and by John Adams, John Jay and B. Franklin for the United States with a decisiveness in the signatures which tells its own story. That, apparently, is the custom of treaties—to have an original which is the actual paper that negotiating delegates fight over and sign, and an exchange copy sent by each country to the other as a sort of memorial. The latter is frequently a very fine piece of bookmaking, bound in velvet, decorated with gold, lying in its own velvet box. In this particular instance the parchment is held by a red and gold cord and tassel ending in a silver box which has the great seal of England on the cover, and holds a beeswax reproduction of the personal seal of George III.

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OF modern treaties, the Kellogg Pact is very picturesque. Ending no war, but designed in the hope of preventing such conflicts, it has about it an air of established content which is belied by the nervousness of its signatures. It is bound in green morocco decorated with gold and it is deposited in a silk-lined box of the same material. Printed, this one, in French and English on opposite pages, red margined, tied with a red ribbon and a gold cord. It bears fifteen names and seals representing signatory countries, and those signatures—the nervous hand of Kellogg, the shaking tracery of Australia's McLachlan, of Italy's Manzoni—tell their own tale of the strain that must have prevailed during the making of the pact and of the emotion that gripped statesmen when they came to the final symbolic act of signing it.

Another long roll of parchment contains a treaty with Siam signed in 1833 and written in Siamese, Portuguese, Chinese and English, running lengthwise in parallel columns—a work of art whose fine tracery and Oriental intricacy of decoration are so fascinating that one forgets to read the plain English meaning of it.

It is as exotic, as foreign to our daily ways, as a certain letter that Burma sent over on a fine parchment roll, decorated in gold leaf and flowing lines of red, written in subtly rounded characters that suggest the stylized dances of the Cambodians, and contained in an ivory box tipped with a carved lotus bud. Even in English translation there is a hint of the rich complexity conveyed by the handling of it.

"We, who are the Ministers and generals of the King of Burma," it reads, "the Overlord of all the kings of Orient, the Most Powerful Sun-Rising King, the Lord of Saddan Elephant King, the Lord of Many White Elephants, and the Great Righteous Ruler; and we who are doing homage to the King by bowing our heads to his Golden Feet which are like the Paduma lotus flowers, write this letter to the President and Ministers who are the rulers of both Washington and the countries of the West." After asking for a treaty of friendship and commerce, it says shyly: "If the treaty is made between Burma and America, and if it be lasting from sons to grandsons, and from grandsons to great-grandsons, there will be advantages both for traders and common people."

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FASCINATING as treaties are, there are other treasures here. Ceremonial letters from foreign rulers which give the whole flavor of a time more richly than ever historian was able to present it to his readers. Letters to George Washington in stately Spanish from that Carlos whom Goya painted, signed "Vuestro buen amigo." Volumes of bound letters from France, which in the swing of phrases, the engraving on letterheads, the signatures, tell the whole story of that cataclysm that was the French Revolution.

Louis XVI used to write to Washington as though they were personal friends—telling him of the death of the dauphin, of a marriage in which he should be interested, of the birth of a princess. Then comes a letter not signed by the chatty Louis nor written in familiar phrases. A burning, pompous, frantic letter carrying the name of Robespierre and other "Representantes du Peuple Française," written on paper that bears not the slogan which is familiar but an earlier and more sinister one: "Liberté, Egalité, ou la Mort."

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THE movement to put these treasures and their fellows into safe and adequate storage began almost as soon as the seat of government was moved from New York and Philadelphia to Washington. Like any housewife, the United States has always been needing spare rooms and more closet space. As early as March 27, 1810, which was 124 years before the Archives Bill was passed, a committee reported that they found "all the public records and papers, belonging to the adoption of the present Constitution of the United States, in a state of great disorder and exposure; and in a situation neither safe nor convenient, nor honorable to the nation. Your committee, therefore, are of opinion that provision ought to be made, without delay, for their preservation and orderly arrangement."

They were then in a building "west of the President's house," which housed the State, War, Navy and Postoffice Department, the superintendent of the city and the surveyor. The committee recommended three additional fireproof rooms to take care of them.

It was a modest recommendation, but not carried out until three hundred times three fireproof rooms would be too few. All sorts of things happened meanwhile. The British burned the Capitol and the President's house, and with them whatever papers Dolly Madison failed to save in her famous red trunk. The Treasury was burned and reburned, and a whole series of fires still left Congress as placid as a certain official in the Archives of the Indies at Seville who, showing tourists a blank wall space in a room that was otherwise lined with priceless parchment-wrapped bundles of sixteenth-century documents, said blithely, "Those were burned a few months ago. But it doesn't matter. We have plenty more."

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THE nation went on collecting papers. In 1878 the then Quartermaster General actually drew a plan of an Archives Building with a water tower in the centre. Ten years later the State Department appointed a Custodian of Rolls and Manuscripts who actually set about the task of sorting, repairing and mounting what he found there. The Constitution was in six or eight separate sheets, each rolled into a tin box. Philosophic manuscripts of Franklin's were torn, stained and muddy from the gutters of Philadelphia where the soldiers of Sir William Howe had flung them when they took the city and sacked the house.

How these things were to be repaired, no one knew. But Congress appropriated a little money; foreign methods were studied; a commercial firm did some of the work, and then taught the delicate technique to women trained in the Government Printing Office.

The new Archives Building is the crown and fruit of all this effort. For it the Bureau of Standards has made special studies of the various kinds of paper and how best to preserve them. It lists the enemies of paper—sunlight and humidity, termites, cockroaches, silverfish, bookworms, mildew and acidity in the air—and tells how best to combat them.

The building is to have its air washed with an alkaline solution "to remove acidic contamination" which might get into storage spaces. Its temperature will be kept within a degree of 80 F. in the Summer and 70 F. in the Winter—a compromise between the needs of paper and the needs of humans working with it. The humidity will be kept at 55 per cent in storage spaces and 45 per cent in workrooms.

It is much easier to set up this paper paradise than to decide what is to go into it. Not only must there be a steadfast weeding out of the apparently unimportant, with its always possible corollary of neglecting some paper which the future may render vital. There must also be gentle persuasion tactfully applied to departments which would like to get rid of recent accumulations, but see no reason for parting from their treasures.

That problem lies in the hands of the governors of the new building—the Archivist, and a National Archives Commission, whose duties are defined in the long-pending Archives Bill which was passed by the last Congress in the last week of its life.

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