A New Home for Old Treasures

MARYLAND'S HALL OF RECORDS EXPECTED TO BE COMPLETED IN DECEMBER

by

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A TREASURE hunt that began in Maryland a hundred years ago and has enlisted scores of searchers here and abroad will reach a climax, if not an end, with the opening in the near future of the new Hall of Records at Annapolis. The object has not been buried gold, but ancient journals, papers and letters that tell fresh details of Lord Baltimore's colony and its growth in the American wilderness. Involved in the long hunt are elements of the popular mystery story, ranging from disappearance of the valuables, conflicting testimony and keen detective work, to an underground search for the allegedly buried treasure, and—believe it or not—a butler, named Keep.

The completion, probably next December, of the Hall of Records, built by the State as the principal memorial of its founding three centuries ago, will provide for the first time a suitable storehouse for archives that have been called richer in colonial source material than those of any other State.

THUS THE SEARCH for original records that was first undertaken in a systematic way in 1835 will reach one of its chief goals when a mass of uncatalogued documents are transferred from the vault and cellar of the Court of Appeals to the new building, where they will be unfolded, repaired, read and put in order for the use of students. With them will be gathered an even greater collection of documents, already bound and indexed, taken from the Land Office and elsewhere. Only after examination of the mass of disordered material will it be possible to know with exactness what records the State possesses.

Needless to say, the search will not be dropped when the immediate goal has been reached, but will go on as long as historical students have reason to suspect the existence of undiscovered documents, a condition unlikely to change short of the millenium. Little has been explored beyond the government buildings of Annapolis and certain collections in Europe, and other parts of the State, especially some of the courthouses, remain to be canvassed. However, the new fireproof building marks a milestone in the effort to provide suitable protection and care for priceless manuscripts, an effort, by the way, that is older than the search.

WHEN THE CAPITOL was moved from St. Mary's City to Annapolis in 1694, there was also a transfer of the provincial records, given into the care of the Anne Arundel Sheriff. The new State House was planned expressly with a view to record storing as well as legislative proceedings, for the Assembly, in 1697, assigned "the two rooms on the Right hand above Stairs, for Jury and Land-Office Records to be kept" and enumerated seven other kinds of public documents, including naval records, and the room or portion of room in which each group should be kept. Of the various lofts, but one escaped duty as a storeroom for documents—it was "to be for hanging a lanthorn out" on nights when the Assembly should be in session.

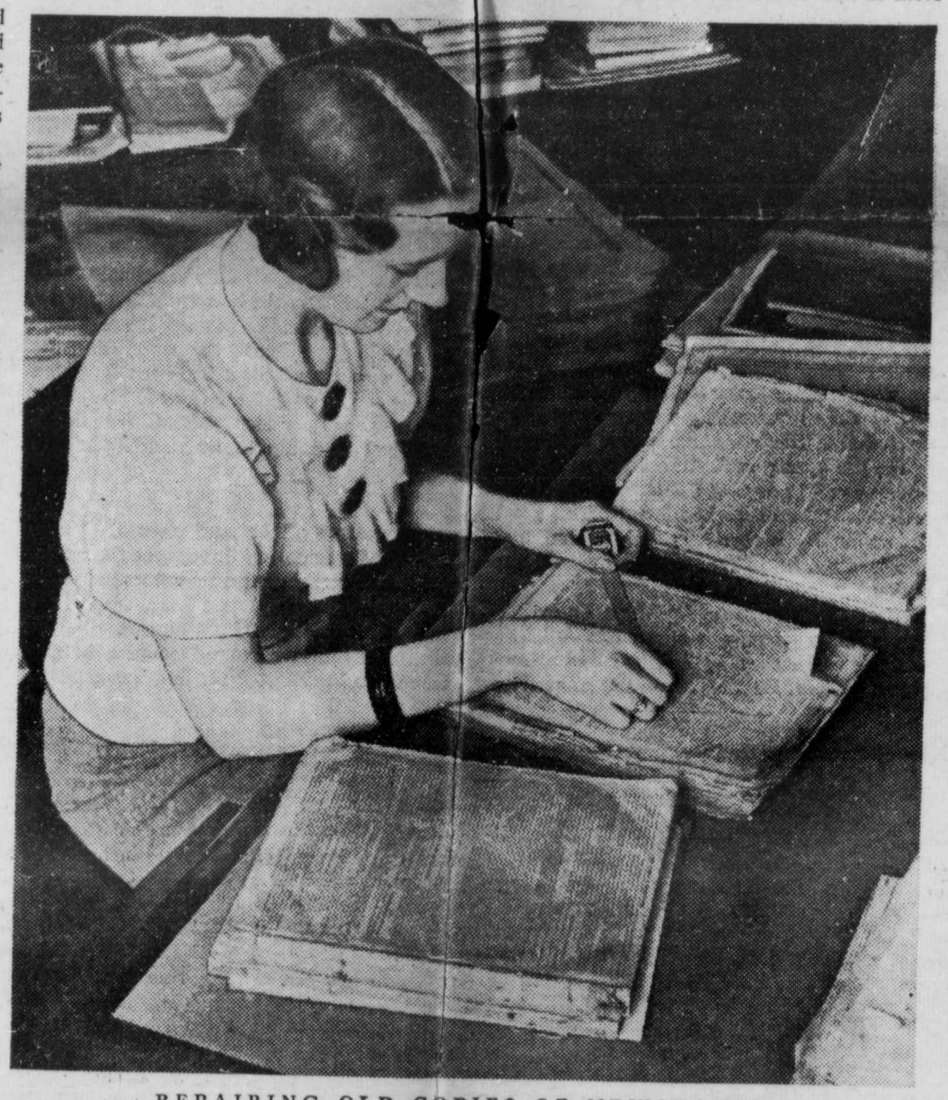
THE BUILDING, doubtless bulging with the huge folio record books of that day, was once struck by lightning and later burned to the ground. What records perished then will never be known, but their loss was a disaster that has hampered Maryland historians for two centuries.

The capitol was rebuilt on the old foundations and a quarter century later, under the scholarly Gov. Benedict Leonard Calvert, a committee appointed to "inspect and amend the ill condition of our public records" advised a separate repository for the various State documents, in order to "secure us" from loss by fire or accident. What steps, if any, were taken to preserve these materials are not known, but quite likely provision then made is responsible for the existence today of many seventeenth century records.

For the next hundred years, while political, economic and territorial problems, as well as three wars, absorbed the energy and thought of Marylanders, the fate of the accumulating achives received scant attention. The rebuilt capitol lasted until 1771, when it proved inadequate and was replaced by the present one.

Of the early State buildings but one remained. This was the Treasury Building, the low brick structure still to be seen on the lawn of the present State House. In 1826 a youth of only 15, John Henry Alexander, a student at St. John's College, noticed in the woodhouse of the treasury three large boxes containing State documents. These, he found on examination, to be so interesting and important that he spent his spare time arranging them in chronological order.

YOUNG ALEXANDER'S ZEAL, however, was lost on the authorities, although the next year the Legislature established the State Library, where some of the woodshed papers ultimately found a safe haven. Furthermore, the various State departments were known to house in their cupboards, desks, lofts and cellars other accumulations of papers and, in 1835, the General Assembly, on motion of Delegate Joseph Cottman, of Somerset county, initiated the first organized search for all available documents owned by the State. The task fell to David Ridgely, first State Librarian, who was instructed to examine all the public buildings for valuable and important documents "in an unarranged and useless state and subject to be lost or destroyed"; to collect and arrange them and finally to deposit them in the offices in which they seemed to belong.



REPAIRING OLD COPIES OF NEWSPAPERS
An endless task of the Enoch Pratt Library's History Section

Now begins the search. Treasure was found in the loft of the old Treasury Office, where many papers were already damaged beyond repair; in the Land Office, in the treasuries of the Eastern and Western Shore, in the State Auditor's Office, in a committee room of the Senate, "under the stairway as you ascend the dome of the State House," and in the vault under the Treasury Office. In the last-named place he discovered the remains of two large sea chests and a box, all containing papers of great age but completely ruined. These, he believed, had they been discovered in time, might have furnished "in bold relief, the early struggles and manly virtues of our hardy and self-relying ancestors as well as the infant characteristics of our native State."

In the pile of papers carelessly thrown years before under the State House stairway, where Ridgely found them quite by accident, were such all-important documents as the original journal of the Maryland Convention in 1775, letters from the Continental Congress, letters from Washington and other Revolutionary officers, and numerous muster rolls of Maryland troops in the war. Elsewhere he unearthed scores of original journals and Acts of Assembly, as well as thousands of papers dating from 1666 to the close of the Revolutionary War.

Copyists were set to work, transcribing into folio volumes these moldy documents. Seemingly the work fell to jobseekers rather than persons prepared for it. At all events, those engaged in it failed to recognize the value of original manuscript and much, if not all, of it was destroyed or otherwise disposed of. Nothing but copies remain of those documents so transcribed. Since copied papers are not exempt from casual error nor proof against the all too human tendency to "improve" the original, there are lost to the investigator the advantages of consulting first-hand documents, however fragmentary.

UPON THE FORMATION of the Maryland Historical Society in Baltimore in 1844 the Assembly placed in its custody a considerable number of papers for safekeeping. Then came Alexander's search abroad.

In London some years before, this brilliant Marylander, who seems to have possessed the detective instinct as well as more formal scientific attainments, had visited the British Museum, where, in an anteroom, he saw two large chests marked "Calvert Papers." Twenty years later, in 1859, he was engaged by Governor Hicks, at the instance of the General Assembly, to search in London and Rome for early papers relating to Maryland with a view to securing copies for the State. He promptly went to the British Museum and asked to see the contents of the chests.

To his surprise he was told that such papers were unknown, and he came to the conclusion that they had been left at the museum by the owner possibly for examination with a view to sale, and that nothing had come of it. However, he did secure from the British archives copies of important papers relating to Maryland. In reporting the success of the mission he added that he had reason to believe the quantity of archives at Annapolis had diminished since the first examination, and concluded that many of them had served the State only as kindling material.

The hunt was dropped until after the Civil War, when Brantz Mayer tried unsuccessfully to revive interest in surviving colonial papers. Finally, in 1887, Mendes Cohen, on behalf of the Historical Society employed an agent in England to run down the missing Calvert papers. How they were traced through *Notes and Queries* to the Harford family, descended from the last Lord Baltimore; how a twenty-year stay in a debtors' prison by the owner had obscured the trail first picked up by Alexander; how the bulk of the papers were acquired for the society by purchase and how a ten-day search over a section of the Harford garden at Down Place, near Windsor, for other documents supposed to have been buried by the butler, Keep, because they were too moldy to burn, proved fruitless, are further highlights in the saga of Maryland archives that are not unfamiliar to Marylanders.

THE REV. ETHAN ALLEN, who aided Alexander while the latter was abroad by examining the Annapolis archives, found on hand 200 volumes of manuscript, including the proceedings of the Governor and Council as early as 1637, within three years of the founding of Maryland. However, many of the items listed by Ridgely in 1835 had altogether disappeared. Indeed, nearly half of those placed in the Governor's chamber had vanished and Allen urged the preparation of a fireproof room where the remaining archives might be deposited, especially since they were available to the curious visitor and their leaves might easily be disarranged, injured or stolen.

The Legislature neglected the matter and it was not until urgent appeals had been made by members of the Maryland Historical Society that in 1882 the General Assembly agreed to turn over to it more than one hundred volumes of Colonial and Revolutionary records, with a small annual appropriation, on condition that the society repair, preserve and publish the important material in them. This has been done, and the results of the program are continuing in the publication of the Archives of Maryland, of which fifty volumes have now appeared.

Another attempt to safeguard papers in possession of the State was made in Governor Warfield's administration, when the late Mrs. Hester Dorsey Richardson was appointed chairman of a Public Records Commission, but the recommendations of qualified advisers once more went unheeded by the Legislature.

NOW AT LAST a home for State documents will be supplied in the Hall of Records, where there is abundant space for manuscript archives of today and for archives yet to be. The building, erected on land given by St. John's College, faces the college campus and is a short step from the Court of Appeals building. Three stories high and measuring 80 by 80 feet, it is of brick, in the Georgian tradition, after plans by Laurence Hall Fowler, who also designed the War Memorial in Baltimore. Intended to be a practical recognition of the Tercentenary, the building is simple both in design and decoration, harmonizing with eighteenth century Annapolis as well as serving utilitarian purposes. Of the funds provided for Tercentenary observances, about four-fifths have gone into this structure, or about $200,000.

The stackroom is six tiers high, inclosed in a huge vault occupying the center of the building, from cellar to top floor. On the main floor are the Land Office, where will be housed the considerable collection from the present crowded offices in the Court of Appeals building; a catalogue room, research room, conference room, exhibition room and several offices. On the second floor workrooms for the staff, a study room, research room and offices for the archivist and assistants occupy all the space not included in the stackroom. Above there is an unassigned room, in addition to the space devoted to the stacks. Photostat and blue-print plants as well as storage and service facilities are located in the basement.

Plans are afoot, though the details have