Maryland's New Chief of Archives

DR. JAMES H. ROBERTSON NAMED TO PROTECT HISTORIC DOCUMENTS AT ANNAPOLIS

by

P. STEWART MACAULAY

MARYLAND has been making history for a little more than 300 years; during most of that time she has done very little to insure its preservation. Like most bodies politic she has been concerned more with history in the making than with history already made. Some of her records have been saved through official action; others have been rescued by private or semi-public agencies and still others, unfortunately, have been lost.

This unsatisfactory situation is to be changed in the near future. As a part of the Tercentennial celebration the State set aside some $200,000 for the erection of a Hall of Records. The building is now complete, and on October 1 Dr. James A. Robertson, a scholar who has spent his life searching out, cataloging and studying historic documents, will take over the position of archivist. Maryland now enjoys the distinction of being the only State which has a building specially designed for, and dedicated solely to, the preservation of historic records. With the appointment of Dr. Robertson she has obtained the services of one of the country's outstanding archivists.

DR. ROBERTSON has pursued the elusive historic documents through the musty vaults of European capitals; he has ferreted them out in American attics and cellars; his search has carried him to the Philippines, to Spain and to other countries. He is a collaborator in the collection and publication of a massive fifty-five-volume work, "The Philippine Islands," which is a compilation of manuscripts relating to Philippine history. Just now he is completing another study on "Philippine Customary Law," which includes both historical [illegible]hnological data [illegible]es under the auspices [illegible]uncil of Learned Societies. [illegible] times, during a long career of [illegible]storic search and research, Dr. Robertson has worked in the archives of Portugal, Italy, France and England. He has engaged in historical research for the Carnegie Institution and has served as librarian of the Philippine Library at Manila. More recently he has been research professor of history at the John B. Stetson University, at Deland, Fla., and executive secretary of the Florida State Historical Society.

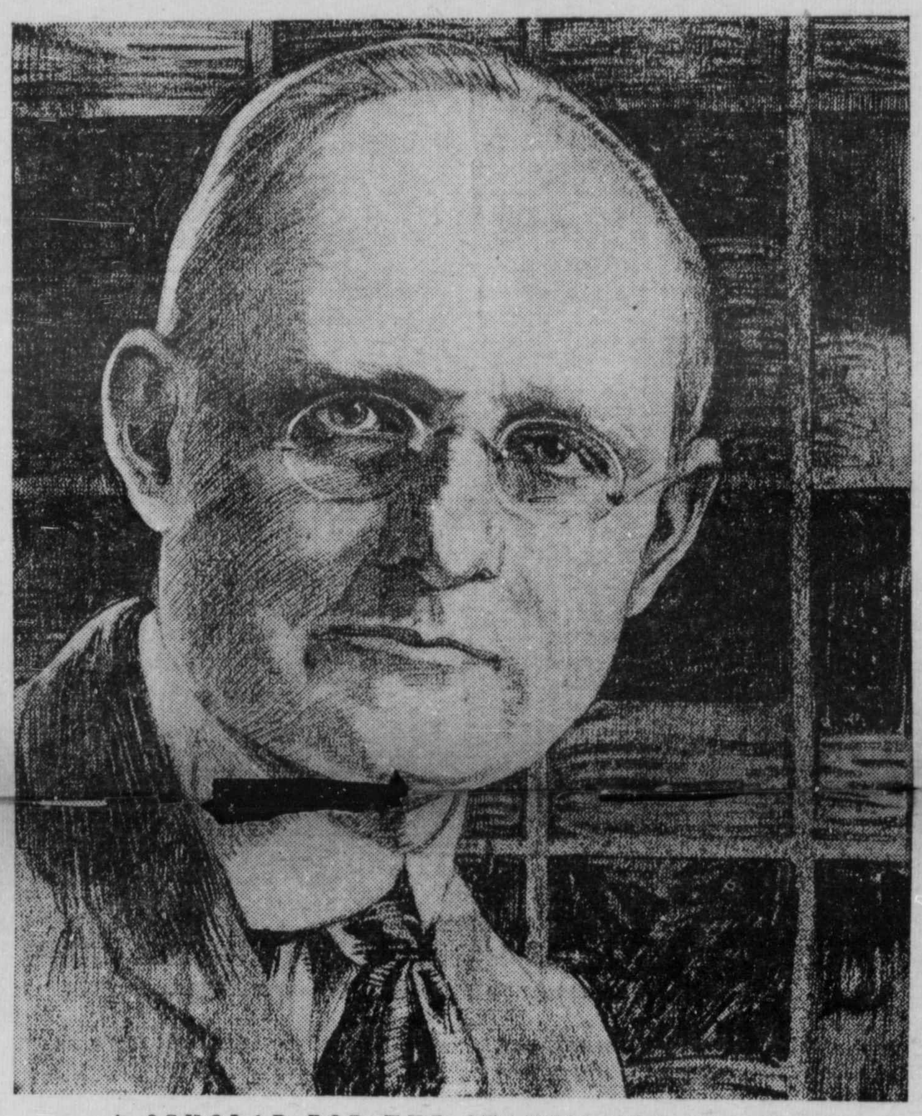
Dr. Robertson regards the position of Maryland archivist as a rare opportunity for valuable constructive work. Maryland, he points out, is one of the oldest of the States and, by comparison with some of the others, her records seem to have been fairly well preserved.

THE NEW MARYLAND ARCHIVIST has not yet had an opportunity to familiarize himself thoroughly with the status of existing Maryland records and so he is not prepared to discuss his plans in detail. He has seen the documents of the Land Office, which date back to about 1637, and which include a variety of material, since this office in the past has been a sort of general repository. These records, together with those of the Court of Appeals, form the nucleus of the Maryland archives and Dr. Robertson says that his preliminary examination has convinced him that the Land Office records are in remarkably fine condition.

Considering the limited facilities available in the past, he adds, the custodians of the land records have done an excellent job. Ancient documents, many of which have suffered partial destruction, have been repaired expertly; others which are too fragile to be handled have been photostated and the originals put away carefully. For this work, which has rescued many a valuable paper from destruction, Dr. Robertson pays special tribute to Arthur Trader, chief clerk of the Land Office and for years the State's [illegible]ief authority on the rich contents of that [illegible]fice.

While his plans for carrying out the duties of his new position are still in a formative stage, Dr. Robertson has some very definite ideas as to the general policy under which the Hall of Records will be operated. The duties of an archivist, he says, may be lumped under three heads. It is his job to find ancient records wherever they may be hidden; he must take the steps necessary to insure their preservation "forever," and he must make them available to serious students of history and to that section of the public which has legitimate interest in their contents.

Maryland, Dr. Robertson suspects, should be a gold mine for the document hunter. The records of two State agencies already are in the Hall; doubtless, he says, many other State departments possess records which are of almost equal value to the historian. These, he hopes, will be sent to the Hall of Records. Another fruitful source of such material is the county seat. Many of the Maryland counties are old and practically all possess records which should be preserved. In most cases the counties do not have adequate facilities for safeguarding their old documents against loss or deterioration. The Hall of Records, Dr. Robertson says, is the natural repository of all such documents, and it is his hope that they will be sent there.



A SCHOLAR FOR THE STATE'S OLD RECORDS

The new Hall of Records is pictured on page 3 of the Metrogravure Section

THEN, Dr. Robertson suggests, unless Maryland is an exceptional State, many valuable historic documents must remain in the possession of individuals. Some of these, undoubtedly, are collectors who appreciate the value of their treasures; others come into possession of ancient records by inheritance or by accident and these may or may not know what they have. Dr. Robertson hopes that many of these privately owned papers will find their way to the Hall of Records. This new State institution is empowered to receive gifts outright, but the individual who wishes to insure the preservation of his collection may deposit it in the Hall without in any way relinquishing title or control. He may even stipulate the conditions under which such material is to be used.

Once records have been placed in the custody of the Maryland archivist, either by gift or by deposit, the next job is to see that they are safe. This, really, is a complicated business. In the first place the repository must be as nearly fire proof as it can be made and it must be air-conditioned so that temperature and humidity can be held constant the year round. In addition it is highly desirable that the documents be exposed only to artificial light, since the actinic rays of the sun hasten their decomposition. All of these requirements are met in the new building.

The next step in the preservation of documents—really the first step as documents come in to the repository—is to attempt to repair the ravages of age and to prevent further deterioration. This is a job for an expert and it involves techniques which have been developed to high efficiency at the Library of Congress. Dr. Robertson says that he hopes to add to his staff, as soon as possible, an expert in this highly specialized field.

MOST DOCUMENTS in their "natural state" are folded and it is along these folds that destruction begins. The first job of the restorer is to flatten them out. Sometimes the documents thus unfolded are still in fairly good condition. If so, they need no special treatment and may be mounted and incorporated in a bound volume, if that is the way they are to be kept.

Others, however, require more heroic measures—the most effective of which involves the application, over the original document, of a film of very thin, transparent silk net, known to the specialists as "crepeline." An ancient manuscript may be so brittle that a touch will cause it to fall to pieces, but when it has been enveloped in this material, it may be handled readily without damage. All very old and very valuable documents that show the destructive effects of time, Dr. Robertson says, should be treated thus, although the process is relatively expensive. Less valuable records may be "embalmed" in a thin paper covering, which serves the purpose but not so well or so permanently as the silk net. Still others may require only mending at the breaks.

There are some rare documents, Dr. Robertson points out, which should never be used by the public at large even after they have received the attentions of the restorer. The archivist does not count time in years, but in centuries, and even the most efficient methods of repair will not enable an old paper to withstand the wear and tear of many years of handling. Such documents should be photostated and then put away permanently. The fac simile is just as valuable as the original to the student, since the camera misses nothing that the eye can see; in fact, in the case of faded manuscripts, the photographic plate often will reveal details that are invisible to the naked eye.

The third function of the archivist—the utilization of historic treasures which have been collected and preserved—certainly is as important as the other two. In fact, if they were never to be used there would be no point in collecting them.

YET the preliminary steps, if they are to be made readily available to students, are quite involved. The first necessity, of course, is a complete catalog by means of which the desired manuscript may be found. For the student who must pore through a mass of material it is almost as important to have at hand "calendars" which are, in fact, abstracts revealing in brief form the contents of documents—usually groups of documents representing separate collections or those which relate to specific branches of research. Some records may be of such general interest that they should be published *in toto*. Just how much work of this sort will be necessary or desirable in Maryland Dr. Robertson does not know, and will not until he has had an opportunity to explore the archives more fully.

The Maryland records, either originals or fac similes, will be generally available for anyone who has a legitimate interest in them. It will be necessary, of course, to exercise a measure of supervision over their use, since the purpose of the Hall of Records would be defeated if the treasures were to be left to the mercy of document thieves and vandals, whether veterans or novices. For the more casual visitor, the Hall is equipped with display cases by means of which Dr. Robertson plans to portray, through original documents, some of the interesting pages of Maryland history. The displays will be ch[illegible] frequent intervals.

THE building which will house Maryland's archives, Dr. Robertson says, is admirab[illegible] suited to its purpose. The six tiers of stacks which run up the center of the structure are fireproof and the air-conditioning within the stacks will relieve the custodian of the fear that documents will be destroyed by too much dampness in summer and too little in winter. Study rooms, a conference room and executive offices are arranged conveniently about the central stacks and an electric book-lift will facilitate the delivery of material from the stacks to the rooms.

Before he completed his plans for the building, Laurence Hall Fowler, the architect, consulted authorities on archives in this country and in Europe. He embodied in the structure many practical details which have been used elsewhere and some which are to be found nowhere but in Annapolis and in the new National Archives Building in Washington. Those familiar with the problems involved in storing rare documents say that the Maryland Hall of Records, from the purely practical point of view, is a model which other similar institutions might well follow.

Architecturally, the building is colonial, to conform with the character of the city in which it stands. Yet, in developing this colonial design, Mr. Fowler relates, some difficulties were encountered. The building had to be large enough to serve its purpose, yet it had to be made to appear "small enough to take its proper place among the less extensive structures on the St. John's College campus." To meet these conflicting requirements, the interior arrangement was made as compact as possible. The broken mass of the exterior and the use of a concealed roof, Mr. Fowler says, were devices employed to make the building look smaller. The concealed roof, the architect adds, is not typical of the colonial period, but it was not unknown in those days. He found several reproductions of structures of this type in books dating back to colonial times.

THE INTERIOR OF THE BUILDING carries out the colonial idea in design and, sometimes, in actual material. Some of the floors are made of boards taken from old Maryland homes. Lighting fixtures and lamps are either old or are reproductions of colonial designs. The furniture in the main study room and in some

Continued on next page