

The Archives – The Washington Parade

Narrator: In Washington, the beautiful Archives building stands as a living memorial to the patriots who made and preserved our democracy. It contains the living record of their great works. Two fine statues guard the approach. They represent heritage and vigilance. Americans of the past, men who considered their everyday job to be the furtherance and preservation of our democracy, might well have nodded their heads in solemn approval as the sculptors chisel cut these words in the living rock: “Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty” – a warning that our heritage of freedom and liberty must be preserved.

At a gesture from the guard, the largest bronze doors in the world swing slowly inward. Some idea of their size can be gauged by the towering Corinthian columns. This magnificent entrance leads directly to the exhibition hall where two great works by the American mural painter Barry Faulkner mark milestones of American history. Here, Thomas Jefferson and his committee present the Declaration of Independence to the Continental Congress – a new America strikes its first united blow for freedom. The Declaration of Independence was the great plan on which this nation is founded. The Constitution is the supporting pillar of our democracy. Here James Madison offers the Constitution of the United States to George Washington and the members of the historic Constitutional Convention.

Within the exhibition hall, schoolbook history comes to life as a visitor sees documents which mark steps in the forward march of America. Among the important treaties here preserved is the first Treaty of Ghent, which ended the War of 1812 and reaffirmed our nation’s right to live in peace and freedom. Another represents a battle fought and won on the field of diplomacy. Its parchment yellowed, its ink faded, it is preserved as a vital link in our democracy forged when America took its place in the Congress of Nations. This seemingly unimportant document is actually acknowledgement by Great Britain in 1783 that her colonies are now the United States of America. This famous Treaty of Paris bears the signatures of three great Americans: John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, and John Jay.

The historian or scholar seeking facts or the plain citizen seeking a knowledge of his government heads for this nerve center of the Archives: the search room. Here, documents are cross-cataloged for easy access. R.D.W. Connor, appointed by the president as archivist of the United States, is in direct control of the entire building, and supervises the wide variety of activities of the 400 members of the Archives staff.

For years, the vital papers and documents of the United States were scattered throughout the city of Washington, in basements and dead files of various buildings and departments. Under this haphazard system, no one knew for certain where anything was, what was of vital importance, and what was worthless. Finally Congress stepped in, and in 1934 passed legislation creating the National Archives.

The Archives building became the consolidating force to bring order out of chaos. Here, in the Division of Repair and Preservation, the historical records of our government shed the dust of their years and are transformed and preserved as a precious heritage. Trundled on special trucks, our vital state papers take their first step from shoddy obscurity. In these large fumigating tanks, all papers entering the custody of the National Archives are placed for more than three hours – science making sure that all organic life is destroyed. Now the documents are carefully removed from the fumigating tanks, checked as to condition, and pass on to the next step. Experts using specially devised machines remove by compressed air every particle of dust and dirt which long years of neglect and oblivion have deposited. The stream of air even pries in between pages, separating brittle sheets more delicately than human hands. When the Archives building was first opened, these men had to wear gas masks to protect

themselves from the dust. Now each table is equipped with specially designed suction fans, by means of which the dust-laden air is conveyed to a filtering system, enabling the experts to work under healthful and comfortable conditions.

Cleaned and sterilized, the manuscripts and books go to the desks of expert binders. With their trained hands and specially adapted tools, these highly skilled men separate pages. And perhaps see for the first time in 100 years some document of state signed by John Adams, Alexander Hamilton, or one of the many other great patriots who figured prominently in the establishment of our liberty. The tender care with which these men handle the documents shows how extremely fragile many of these old papers are. It is often necessary to employ humidifying processes before further treatment is possible. After which, under carefully controlled heat and pressure, the papers are smoothed and the faded ink is made more vivid, easier to read. This is known as the ironing process, necessary for the flat filing of records. This important work of reconditioning state documents, some already in a dangerously poor state of preservation, goes on behind the scenes. But everyone who uses the Archives sees the results of the meticulous care exercised.

Here, papers are being bound in their individual jackets of cellulose acetate, so that they may be examined and studied closely without fear of injury. In fact, use of this cellulose acetate in many instances reduces the thickness of records and improves the legibility of the original. The cellulose acetate is completely transparent. Thin sheets are placed on the front and back of each document, after which they are placed on the bed of these specially designed presses. Here, under thousands of pounds of pressure and intense heat, the cellulose acetate and the document are forever wedded. Now the record, regardless of its former state, can be used without fear of further deterioration.

These documents are copied by Photostat. A direct copy in actual size is made on durable photographic paper. These Photostats may be studied and handled without fear of damage while the original rests safely in the vault. But with some larger exhibits, Photostatting is not practical. With items such as newspapers, a new and revolutionary technique is used: microphotography. Someday, perhaps through the use of this film technique, every school child in the land will see at first hand the state documents which have heretofore been only drab quotations of text.

Besides preserving the written and printed memorabilia of the United States, the Archives has undertaken to perpetuate the spoken word through recordings and the visual documents of progress through motion pictures. Here in fireproof vaults, ventilated by controlled, conditioned air, are stored thousands of feet of important films. Trained technicians maintain this film laboratory, selecting and editing all films before they're filed away in the vaults. These pictures are available to any responsible citizen upon the fulfillment of certain necessary requirements. Through the use of motion pictures, the Archives is taking full advantage of science in keeping records of the social and cultural life of America as it progresses. In the motion pictures is preserved an active mirror of our country's history in the making. In the Sound Department, the recorded utterances of our nation's leaders are carefully preserved. Tomorrow's younger generation will have not only pictures of our president; they will hear him speak.

President Roosevelt: I, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, do solemnly swear that I will faithfully execute the office of president of the United States, and will to the best of my ability preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution of the United States, so help me God.

Narrator: With its great storage vaults, exhibition halls, manuscripts, documents, and papers, the Archives building is truly a time capsule of Americana, from the earliest beginnings of our democracy to the present day. It houses the significant highlights of the country's history.

This paper, ratification of our Constitution, is a mute reminder of that dramatic moment in modern history when the voices of 13 original states were raised as one, proclaiming to the world our independence.

Abraham Lincoln speaks out from these pages; this is the proclamation which granted freedom to the slaves, vitally significant in the history of mankind's patient plodding toward a higher life.

The Bill of Rights of the Constitution, ensuring the right to free speech, free assemblage, free religion – another reminder of the basic principles on which our America has grown strong. Here are the truths which give force, body, and strength to the words "Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness."