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The Washington Merry-go-round

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## Historic documents face ruin: National Archives — 'Us? Worry?'

WASHINGTON — Gross mismanagement and negligence by the National Archives brass are destroying vital parts of our American heritage. Priceless documents and films that record the history of the United States back to George Washington's time are slowly crumbling into dust or otherwise deteriorating beyond repair in the Archives' vaults.

Sources within the Archives tell us that even the expenditure of millions of dollars cannot retrieve hundreds of thousands of treaties, letters, public documents and one-of-a-kind film negatives.

The gradual destruction of our written and graphic history is one of the most closely hushed-up secrets in Washington. We discovered the situation while investigating last year's disastrous fire at the Archives' storage facility in Suitland, Md.

Half the Archives' film collection — 26 million feet — went up in flames. Lost forever were such documentaries as the "March of Time" films of the 1930s and a unique filmed history of the Japanese invasion of Manchuria.

The problems at Archives have a common cause: refusal of the agency's management to heed repeated warnings from experts that poor storage and negligent supervision will inevitably destroy much of the material entrusted to the Archives' care.

Here are some of the shocking conditions we discovered:

— Colonial papers, including about 250,000 pages of Continental Congress documents and original letters of Washington, John Adams and Benjamin Franklin, have never been treated to neutralize the acid in the paper that is slowly eating them away. Many of these historic documents lie scattered on the floor, unbound; others have been stored improperly for so long that archivists

fear they'll crumble to dust if the files are opened.

- All the Indian treaties remain rolled up, instead of being flattened out as official preservation procedures dictate. Most of the treaties have not been microfilmed against the day when they will eventually disintegrate.

- Records of the General Accounting Office, tied together with string, are in such deplorable condition that they're barely usable anymore. The Interstate Commerce Commission's records are in a similarly pitiable state of decay.

- Priceless documents have been mutilated, stolen or simply have disappeared. For example, what may be the only original document in this country bearing Karl Marx's signature is missing. This was a manifesto from the Communist International, congratulating Abraham Lincoln on his re-election in 1864. Numerous wartime telegrams of Lincoln's also have been lost or stolen.

- Spontaneously combustible nitrate film, continues to be stored in corridors, despite repeated warnings by experts in fire prevention. Some of the nitrate film, in fact, was being stored in a fifth-floor vault at the main Archives building in downtown Washington, directly behind the projection booth of the 300-seat movie theater, endangering the lives of audiences at the regular film showings.

"At one time that film was cooking," an insider told us. "The temperature in the corridor was in the 90s." Nitrate film, we were told, can blow up in adverse humidity conditions when temperatures reach the 80s.

The fire hazard of nitrate film has been known for years in the movie industry, but Archives was curiously indifferent to the danger posed by its vast accumulation of old films. In 1969 an internal report warned of the self-igniting potential of the material and urged management to undertake a crash pro-

gram to copy the nitrate film on a safer chemical base.

The warning was ignored, and in 1977 and 1978 spontaneous combustion caused millions of feet of historic films to be destroyed.

Following the 1977 fire, an internal safety committee made numerous suggestions for preventing another explosion. These recommendations were basic fire-prevention measures, such as installation of thermometers outside each storage vault, modification of air handlers inside the vaults, storage of decomposed nitrate film in metal containers under water, pending disposal, and prohibition of film storage on vault floors or building corridors.

These ABCs of safety were also ignored by Archives management.

Even the preservation devices that are in place often don't do the job they're supposed to do. An internal study six months ago showed that 60 percent of the hydrothermographs, which measure humidity and temperature, were not working and that temperatures were rising to dangerous levels in the vaults.

The National Archives employs some of the top preservation specialists in the world, and it is not their fault that so many of our most valuable historic documents are deteriorating. For years these specialists have been calling their bosses' attention to the rot that has set in among bound volumes, letters, manuscripts, treaties and maps. Their warnings have simply been shrugged off.

Footnote: Archivist James Rhoads did not respond to our request for an interview. A spokesman, however, said that Archives management considers the conditions under which treaties and documents are stored to be "acceptable and climatically controlled."

In other words, they don't even concede that there's a problem.