

How Probers Saved Evidence

Washington

When Richard Nixon fired Archibald Cox as Watergate prosecutor two years ago this weekend it stunned the nation and touched off the "firestorm" of public outrage that eventually led to Mr. Nixon's downfall.

But Cox and his staff anticipated what was coming and hid their most crucial evidence in bank vaults so it could not be destroyed.

This vignette of the dramatic hours of Cox's ouster was tucked away in the prosecutor's report to the nation released yesterday.

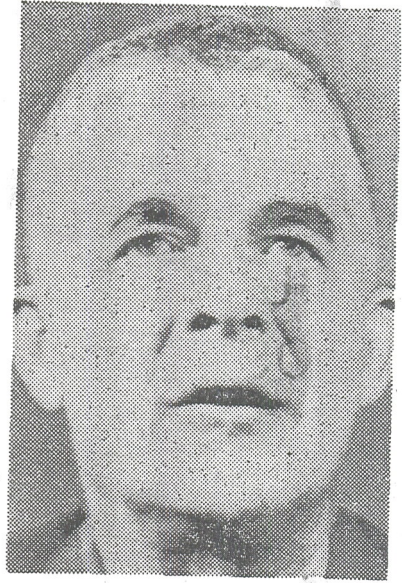
Unbudging in his subpoena for White House tapes, Cox was warned twice that mid-October week by the White House that "we will be forced to take the actions that the President deems appropriate under the circumstances."

On Saturday night, October 20, he was fired and FBI agents swept in to occupy his offices.

"Although official documents could not be removed, the most important and sensitive documents had been copied earlier in the week," the report said. "... Task force leaders and other senior staff members then removed copies of certain items from the office ... Copies of documents of a particularly sensitive nature were placed in two safe deposit boxes in nearby banks."

The copies were replaced six days later when Chief U.S. District Judge John Sirica ordered the files protected.

In the 16 hours FBI agents controlled Cox's offices, staff members transferred other crucial documents to a central safe



ARCHIBALD COX
'Massacre' victim

"to secure files from anyone who might want to, or be ordered to, read or destroy the files."

The agents were replaced the next day by U.S. marshals.

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