

Richard Bartlett, Minor Archival Prophet¹

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AMONG the galaxy of minor "archivists" of the nineteenth century gleams faintly the star of Richard Bartlett. Producing only one published work, and that almost on his deathbed, he sought to arouse the conscience of State and Federal record keepers by his questionnaires and his conclusions drawn from them. Although he is never remembered as are Sparks, Force, Draper, and other pioneers of his time, nevertheless his contribution is not without interest. It is the purpose of this paper to delineate his efforts to preserve the records of his period.

Richard Bartlett was born in Pembroke, New Hampshire, on January 8, 1792. He was the son of Caleb and Ruthy (McClintock) Bartlett. At the age of 15 Bartlett, by his "regular and handsome" handwriting, attracted the attention of Philip Carrigain, New Hampshire's secretary of state, who made the boy a clerk in his office. After 3 years in this capacity, Bartlett entered Phillips Exeter Academy; later he was graduated with the class of 1815 from Dartmouth College, where he had become a member of Phi Beta Kappa. He read law with George Sullivan of Exeter and hung out his shingle as a lawyer in Concord in 1818. While practising law he also served as deputy secretary of state under Samuel Sparhawk, 1818-23, was clerk of the State senate, and was a leading light in the Unitarian Church in Concord. In 1825 he became secretary of state in his own right, and he continued in this office until 1829, when he lost the position by a legislative vote of 127 to 102.

After this political activity, Bartlett purchased the *New Hamp-*

¹ Bartlett's "Remarks and Documents Relating to the Preservation and Keeping of Public Archives," which was printed in vol. 5 of the *Collections* of the New Hampshire Historical Society in 1837, and also as a separate, was the author's principal source for this paper. Data on Bartlett's career, however, was found chiefly in the following: N. F. Carter, *History of Pembroke, N. H., 1730-1895* (Concord, N. H., 1895); C. H. Bell, *Bench and Bar of New Hampshire . . .* (Boston and New York, 1891); *General Catalogue of Dartmouth College and the Associated Schools, 1769-1925* (Hanover, 1925); the *New Hampshire Patriot and State Gazette*, Nov. 20, 1837; the *New Hampshire Journal*, June 15, Nov. 30, and Dec. 7, 1829, and May 16, 1831; and the New Hampshire Historical Society *Proceedings*, vol. 1 (Concord, N. H., 1874-88).

shire Journal from Jacob B. Moore and editorially supported the Adams rather than the Jackson wing of the "Republican" Party. He continued as a journalist until May 1831, when his paper was merged with the *New Hampshire Statesman and Concord Register*. During the 1820's, too, Bartlett was actively concerned with the New Hampshire Historical Society. He was one of its founding members in 1823 and served on its standing (executive) committee in 1829 and on its publishing committee for volumes 2 and 3 of its *Transactions*.

In 1820 Bartlett also was aide-de-camp and acting inspector of the militia on Maj. Gen. Timothy Upham's staff, and hence he is sometimes referred to as Colonel Bartlett. In 1830-31 he represented Concord in the State legislature.

Bartlett left New Hampshire in 1832 and settled in New York City, where he entered business with his brother Caleb, who owned a bookstore. We are told that Bartlett had never liked the practice of law and was well aware that lawyers "linger year after year on the banks of the Styx and starving on the hope of crossing to the Elysian fields of wealth and fame, while the ferry-way is so thronged that few never get near the boat, and very few indeed ever find passage." When he returned to Concord for a visit a few years later Bartlett, already marked for death, expressed the hope that he could still be of service to his fellow men. To this end he undertook to compile for the New Hampshire Historical Society his work on archives as "almost the last work of his life." During the summer of 1836 he sent out questionnaires to the States, and on December 21 his paper was read before the historical society. Early the next summer his findings were printed in the society's *Collections* under the title "Remarks and Documents Relating to the Preservation and Keeping of Public Archives," but by October 22, 1837, he had died of cancer in New York City at the age of 45.

Bartlett did not present his data on archives in the form of a polished essay. Instead he was content to make some observations regarding the security of records against fire and the contemporary methods of record keeping and to print the replies that he had received in answer to his questionnaires.

Bartlett began in righteous indignation with a stricture against the legislator who did not rest until his own titles were secure and his property insured against fire yet who, by withholding the legislative purse, showed no concern for the records of his State. "To provide for the safe and perfect keeping of the Public Archives," Bartlett stated dogmatically, "is so obviously one of the first and

most imperative duties of a legislature, that no argument could make it plainer to a reflecting mind." Archivists could add to their repertory of archival dogma such other statements as "... everything which can be procured by money sinks into insignificance in comparison with the original records of a state . . .," and archives are "of so priceless a value, that no money could purchase them of the poorest state in the Union, or replace them when once destroyed."

Bartlett found that the public archives had been partially destroyed by fire in six States: New Hampshire, Massachusetts, New York, New Jersey, North Carolina, and South Carolina. He further found that the Federal archives had been partially burned on three occasions. A few days after he completed his essay, there was a fire in the Patent Office, an account of which Bartlett appended to his section on documents. He bluntly charged that the destruction of records by fire was the result of "inexcusable negligence." He blamed the Federal Government: "In truth, if other fireproof rooms would have proved as effectual for the security of its contents as the two which belonged to the War Department in 1814, it was the fault of our government that any of those archives were burnt." In addition, Bartlett predicted the destruction of the Library of Congress when he prophesied, "This *phoenix* library has already been damaged, and is *probably* liable to total destruction by fire."

Bartlett also inquired into methods of record keeping prevalent in his day. He learned that most States kept their enrolled statutes in files, and he felt this was the poorest method. He was gratified to learn that New York, Maine, and New Hampshire enrolled their statutes on good paper and bound them, with indexes. Kentucky enrolled its statutes on vellum but did not bind them. Virginia used parchment but kept the documents in cylinders. Massachusetts inscribed its statutes on vellum and bound them with indexes, and this method was preferred by Bartlett. A Massachusetts project for converting all the files in the archives into volumes with suitable indexes found favor with him, and he predicted the universal adoption of the practice. To this end he printed a letter from Jared Sparks to buttress his own opinion. It is safe to say, however, that Bartlett never contemplated binding a record group of 42,000 cubic feet!

In calling the roll of the States for answers to his questionnaires Bartlett was his own best witness for New Hampshire, of which his personal knowledge was great. During his own incumbency as sec-

retary of state he had had the statutes enrolled on good linen paper, bound, and indexed. He described the fire of 1736, when Mr. Secretary Waldron was able to save seven featherbeds and most of the records though his house burned down. Bartlett listed the records in the custody of the New Hampshire secretary of state in 1827.

Bartlett's Massachusetts informant related the details of a fire in 1747, which destroyed a portion of the Colony's records, but cheerfully noted that the State archives were now in fireproof rooms and that recently a binding project had been inaugurated. In Maine there had never been any archival fire, but the records were kept in the nonfireproof Capitol Building. Statutes were enrolled and bound; other records were in unbound files. Vermont also reported no archival fires. Archives in that State, until recently widely separated, had just been centralized in the new fireproof Capitol. Statutes were engrossed on paper and bound; other records were in files. In Rhode Island, although part of the town records of Newport and Providence had been burned, there had been no fire among the State archives. Records were centralized in the State House, which was not fireproof. Statutes were enrolled on paper but were still kept in files, as were the other records. To round out the New England picture, Connecticut reported no losses by fire but admitted loss by negligence. State records there were maintained in the non-fireproof State House. Statutes were engrossed on paper and preserved in files, as were the remaining records.

Passing on to New York, Bartlett learned from its secretary of state, John A. Dix, later famous as a Civil War general, that New York, taking warning from the burning of the Treasury Building in Washington, was constructing a building to be ready for its archives in 1838. Before 1803 statutes had been engrossed on paper and kept in files; after that year they were bound. Other records were in files. Dix did not know of any archival fires, but Bartlett ascertained that there had been two conflagrations during the colonial period. New Jersey's secretary of state reported that in 1686 an archival fire had taken place. Not all of the New Jersey State records were kept in fireproof rooms. Statutes were engrossed on paper and were unbound, as were the other records. Many New Jersey records of the Revolutionary period were in a "state of great confusion." The Keystone State happily advised Bartlett that there had been no fires and that fireproof offices were the order of the day. Statutes were engrossed on paper and kept in files or rolls. Although no fires were reported from Delaware, Bartlett's correspondent was concerned about the lack of fireproof facilities for

records. Statutes were engrossed on paper and kept in files. Other records were stored in boxes. Maryland authorities confessed that, though only a few records had been destroyed by fire, their current depositories were not fireproof. Statutes were engrossed on paper but kept in files.

A part of Virginia's archives had been burned during the Revolution because they had been removed to Westham, where, at Benedict Arnold's order, they were stored in public buildings that also contained war materiel. The Capitol Building at Richmond, where the records later were placed, was not fireproof. Statutes were engrossed on paper and placed in tin cylinders. The remaining records were both in volumes and in files. In 1831 the State House in Raleigh, North Carolina, took fire; but the records were saved. This is apparently all the information that Bartlett obtained relating to that State. Although Bartlett's correspondent from South Carolina denied any knowledge of fires, Bartlett found out from another source that the records in the secretary's office had been consumed by fire in 1698. Records in Charleston were kept in 1836 in fireproof rooms; those in Columbia were not. Statutes were enrolled on parchment and published. Records were in files and not bound. Some records had perished through dispersion, damp, and rats. J. P. King, reporting for Georgia, stated that no records had been destroyed by fire except the Yazoo Act. The nonfireproof Capitol contained Georgia's records. Statutes were enrolled on paper and kept in files, as were the rest of the archives. None other than Henry Clay answered for Kentucky to the effect that the records were deposited in a building that was not fireproof. Statutes were engrossed on parchment and filed. Ohio's archives had not been damaged by fire but were maintained in the nonfireproof State House. Statutes were enrolled on paper and filed, as was the case of the remaining documents of the State. The same situation obtained for Indiana.

Indiana completed Bartlett's roster of the States. It is interesting to note that Michigan was not represented although in his questionnaire to Lewis Cass as Secretary of War, Bartlett asked him to comment on the archival situation in Michigan.²

Bartlett had not finished with the States before he began to ply the departments of the Federal Government with his queries. The clerk of the Senate considered that his record rooms in the Capitol were fireproof; he could not foresee the later Library of Congress

² Bartlett to Cass, July 1, 1836, Letters Received, Secretary of War, 385 B (40), RG 107, Records of the Office of the Secretary of War, National Archives.

fire in that building. He did not consider that the records lost by the British foray into Washington in 1814 were of much importance. The Senate records were partly in volumes and partly in files. Bartlett assumed that this information about the Senate records would apply equally to those of the House of Representatives.

Our inquiring "archivist" next printed documents relating to the War Department fire of 1800. This fire destroyed all records except one volume that was in use elsewhere. Bartlett reprinted a group of documents relating to the losses caused by the British in 1814. The Treasury Department reported that its comptroller's, auditor's, and revenue offices suffered little from this incursion by the British, but that its treasurer's and register's offices did not escape destruction. The War Department stated that the Office of the Secretary saved its volumes of letters but that some unbound letters received "more than seven years previous" were lost. This no doubt explains why there are so few letters received, 1800-1807, in Record Group 107, Records of the Office of the Secretary of War, in the National Archives. Within the War Department, the offices of the accountant, the paymaster, the superintendent of military supplies, the adjutant, and the inspector general described various losses. In the adjutant's office the loss of certain post returns is felt to this day. The State Department was fortunate enough to have removed its records before the British entered Washington.

Bartlett devoted five pages to an account of the fire of 1833 in the Treasury Department; and, if this were not enough, just as he was compiling his report, there occurred the fire of December 1836, which reduced the General Post Office and the Patent Office to ashes. Bartlett hastened to add this account to that of the three previous fires.

In this fashion did Richard Bartlett seek to arouse the conscience of the Nation in matters related to record keeping. Subject to the frustration of unanswered questionnaires and limited by the theory that all records could be bound, he sought to spread the doctrine of archival responsibility to his own generation. His appeal was presumably not very successful if measured in terms of establishing State archives, for these institutions were slow to appear. He did, however, present a picture of destruction which, he averred, "will astonish anyone who has not himself been raking among the ashes." If his was but a voice crying in the wilderness, at least the voice was firm and clear.