

# Archivists Battle Time To Save Pieces Of History



**by Boris Weintraub**  
**National Geographic News Service**  
**WASHINGTON--** There is a tiny hole in the Atlantic Charter, and a little brown spot where a second hole may develop.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, and a host of other Allied leaders signed the Charter, a sort of bill of rights for all nations after World War II.

Now the priceless document is in the preservation laboratory of the National Archives in downtown Washington, where specialists are trying to figure out how to repair the damage and protect it.

The Charter is one of about 150 so-called treasures of the National Archives that are part of a pilot project to identify the condition of documents and determine what

needs to be done to preserve them.

### Story of Nation

Reading the list of treasures is like a lesson in the basics of American history. They include Washington's acceptance of the post of commander in chief of the continental army, the Treaty of Paris that ended the Revolutionary War, the Louisiana Purchase, the United Nations Charter, and the 1963 Nuclear Test Ban Treaty.

Also included are some oddities, such as Washington's Revolutionary war account book and designs for the Great Seal of the United States.

Preservation is a major problem at the National Archives, Alan Calmes, the agency's preservation officer, says preservation has the highest priority -- with limitations.

"The National Archives has 3 billion document pages in its custody, and we can process only about 300,000 a year," he says. "So, if all of them needed to be preserved in their original state, it would take about 1,000 years."

Fortunately, not all need to be kept in their original state. Many are more important for the information they contain than for their intrinsic value, and can be duplicated, either by microfilming or by photocopying.

But nobody knows how many documents are in which category, which is why the "treasures" project is a first step. These are papers that everyone agrees are intrinsically valuable. The question now is: What shape are they in?

### Page by Page

To find out, the Archives has contracted with two paper conservators from the Library of Congress, who are going over the treasures page by page.

A contract was necessary because the Archives has no paper conservators of its own. The budget for the new fiscal year calls for hiring two such experts, and approval is expected despite budget slashing.

Once the experts report on the condition of the treasures, Archives officials will decide what to do next. "A pot of money, about \$150,000 has been set aside for that purpose," says William Leary, preservation officer on the Archives' program coordination staff.

Preservationists also are concerned with saving records on materials other than paper, such as

film, much of which is highly flammable. But for paper, the key culprit is acid.

"Some papers start out acidic," says Chandru Shahani, chief of the preservation laboratory. "This is especially true of paper such as newsprint, which is made from wood pulp."

Wood-based paper, Shahani explains, contains cellulose and lignins, which are acidic. After a time, the acid begins to eat away at the paper, first showing up as brown spots, then turning to holes, and eventually destroying the paper.

Ironically, the older documents in the Archives are in better condition than many recent ones, because paper used to be higher in quality and more acid-free than it is today.

### Chemical Bath

The painstaking deacidification process involves treating the paper with a chemical that neutralizes the acid and adding an alkaline reserve to prevent a future acid attack. Either the paper is dunked in a chemical bath, or the solution is painted or sprayed on. Once deacidification is completed, preservationists remove any surface dirt and any other "foreign" elements.

Then they encapsulate the document, sandwiching it between two pieces of Mylar, a thin but extremely strong modern material, and seal it with clear, pressure-sensitive adhesive tape. This enables a researcher to hold and see the document without further endangering it.

Unlike the specially selected treasures, most of the documents sent to the preservation laboratory are chosen at random, usually by archivists in a given field.

Because the Archives' holdings are so fast and the number of archivists so small, it is impossible for all but a few documents to be examined by these specialists; budget pressures will reduce the number of archivists even more. A planned study to be made under contract with the National Bureau of Standards should help officials judge how severe the preservation problem really is.

### No Imminent Danger

Archives officials emphasize that few valuable documents are in imminent danger, despite the slow preservation process and the relatively few dollars -- \$4 million out of a total agency budget of \$89 million last year -- devoted to preservation.

But, until current experiments lead to a mass deacidification process, budgetary problems will cause delays in preservation. And that frightens specialists who work with these documents.

"Every document has its story," says Milton Gustafson, head of the Diplomatic Records Branch. "These will all turn to dust eventually. We ought to make sure the most important ones turn to dust later rather than sooner."



Read Galatians 5:1-6

WHO among us has not recoiled at the idea of visiting a prisoner? Yet we hear that resounding echo of Christ's teaching: When we visit a prisoner we are visiting the Lord.

As I have attempted to be faithful in this area of ministry, I have learned valuable lessons. In a former pastorate, I was often welcomed by a friendly jailer. One day he left for lunch soon after "dropping the bolt behind me." He became ill and was replaced by another jailer whom I did not know. Sometime later I discovered the real meaning of release and freedom: A police officer who knew me had to intercede in my behalf.

Jesus knows us and provides that spirit of freedom that can truly set us free. Our faith in the work and person of Jesus makes the difference.

PRAYER: Lord Jesus, we stand in awe of Thy grace. We pray for those who have never experienced it. Amen.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY: The prison door of sin has been unlocked by Christ. Are we willing to walk through and leave sin behind?

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--Charles L. Potts (Mississippi)

### Rockfish News

by Polly Barnard

Due to an extended holiday vacation there is no Rockfish News this week.

Catch up on it all next week. Happy New Year!! Polly Barnard



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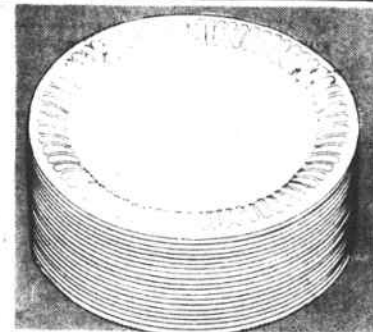
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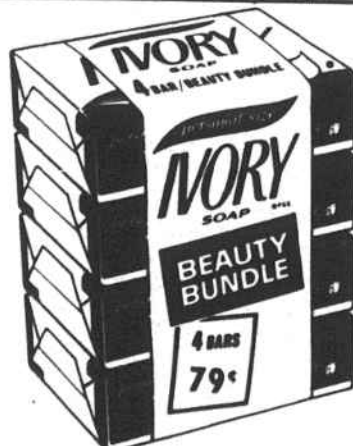
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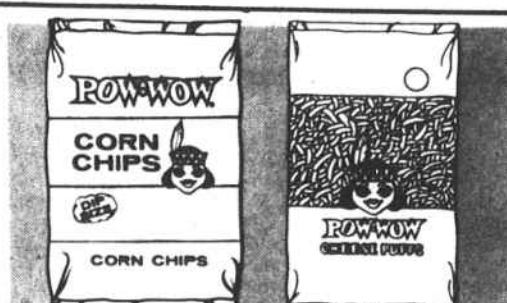
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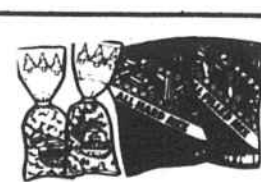
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