

Letter from Archibald MacLeish about Relocating the Charters of Freedom during World War II

Protecting our founding documents in war and peace — Michael Hussey and Lee Ann Potter

As tensions mounted in Europe during the 1930s, the United Kingdom, France, the Netherlands, and other European countries formulated plans to protect their national artistic and cultural treasures. By the summer of 1939, these governments put their plans into motion. Museums such as the Louvre sent much of their collections to relatively safer locations in the countryside. In March 1941, the U.S. government began to make similar plans; three weeks and three days following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the librarian of Congress, Archibald MacLeish, sent a heartfelt letter to the secretary of the Treasury, Henry Morgenthau. In

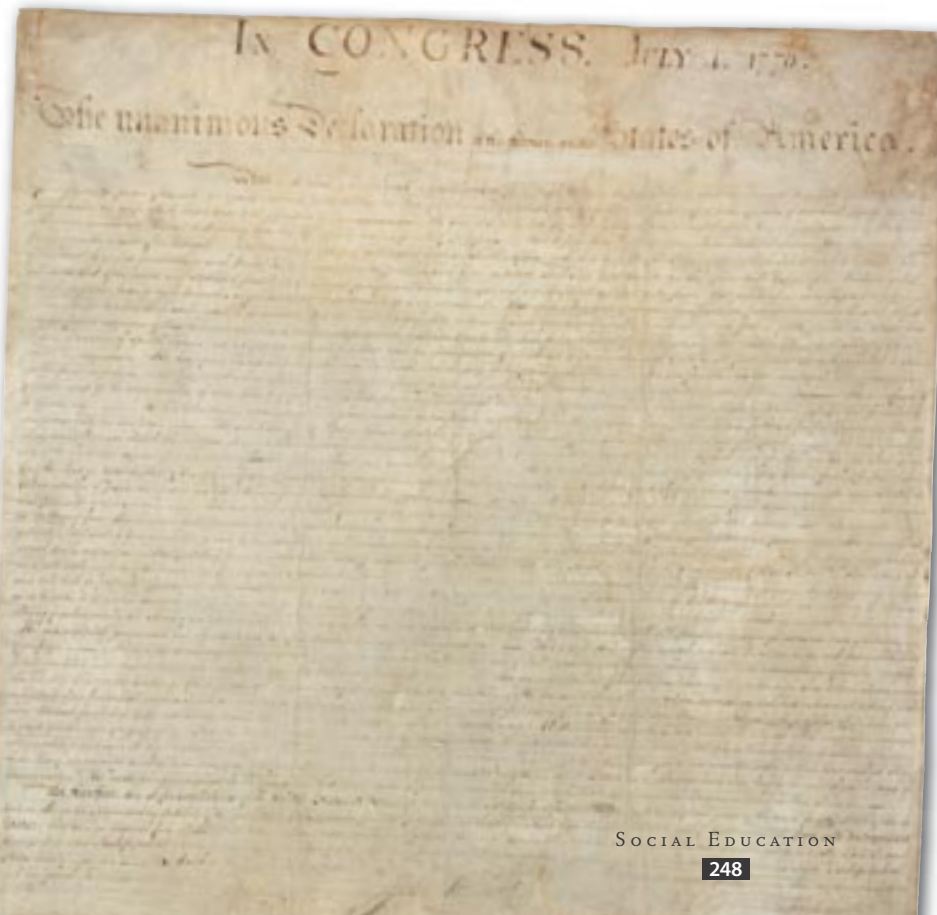
that letter, which is featured in this article, MacLeish thanked Morgenthau and the U.S. Secret Service for their help in protecting the “documentary history of freedom in our world.” He was referring to the successful transfer of the library’s copy of the Magna Carta, the Constitution, the Declaration of Independence, and other precious manuscripts from the Library of Congress to the Bullion Depository in Fort Knox, Kentucky.

Plans for the transfer had begun in March 1941, when the National Resources Planning Board, a New Deal agency that planned public works and coordinated federal planning regarding

natural resources, created the Committee on the Conservation of Cultural Resources (CCRP). CCRP functions included establishing measures for the protection of books, manuscripts, records, works of art, museum objects, historic buildings, and other cultural resources from wartime damage. Among those serving on the Committee were David E. Finley, the director of the National Gallery of Art; Robert D. W. Connor, the archivist of the United States; and the librarian of Congress, Archibald MacLeish.

In April 1941, MacLeish contacted Morgenthau to ask if there was any space available in the newly constructed Fort Knox Bullion Depository for some of the Library’s most precious items. Morgenthau replied that there was 60.3 cubic feet available within the Depository for “the priceless heart of the country’s greatest collection of books and manuscripts.” The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor eight months later testified to MacLeish’s foresight and created a heightened sense of urgency to protect the nation’s historical documents and other cultural treasures.

MacLeish quickly requested that the Secret Service transfer the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and selected other items to Fort Knox. “The transfer of the documents was deemed advisable,” the Secret Service reported in 1943, “because of the war in which the United States is now engaged and because of the possibility that in Washington they might be destroyed or damaged in the event of air raids by the enemy.”¹ In November of 1944, novelist Robert Penn





In 1952, the Charters of Freedom were delivered under military escort to their new home at the National Archives in Washington, D.C. After almost 50 years, they were removed from public display on July 5, 2001 for conservation treatment. On September 17, 2003, the founding documents will be displayed once again, in the newly renovated rotunda.

Welcoming Back the Charters of Freedom



Earl McDonald/NARA

In 1952, the Declaration of Independence, pages one and four of the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights (collectively known as the Charters of Freedom) were first exhibited in the Rotunda of the National Archives Building in Washington, D.C. Shortly before they were displayed, the documents had been sealed into protective encasements under the best conditions that science and technology of the time could provide.

For half a century, staff at the National Archives monitored the condition and evaluated the safety of the Charters to ensure their survival for future generations. As technology improved, new monitoring techniques were used. In the late 1980s, small irregularities were observed on the inner surface of the encasement glass. Closer examination revealed tiny crystals and droplets on the glass interior. Glass experts advised that the irregularities were symptoms of glass deterioration. Although the documents were not in danger, the experts warned that eventually the deteriorating glass would turn opaque, obscuring the documents.

The deteriorating glass presented the opportunity to entirely redesign the encasements. Using the best technology available, an interdisciplinary team of conservators, archivists, engineers, design and exhibit specialists, architects, chemists, and physicists worked with materials and fabrication experts to design and build new, state-of-the-art encasements to preserve and protect the Charters for generations to come.

On July 5, 2001, the exhibit halls of the National Archives closed for renovation and the Charters of Freedom were taken off public display to be re-encased. Once the documents had been removed from their encasements, conservators at the National Archives had two years to complete their work. They began with painstaking examination of the ink on the documents—letter by letter—to look for lifting flakes of ink and to apply tiny droplets of a parchment gelatin adhesive to reattach insecure flakes. Further work included relaxing the parchment to soften distortions and undulations and return the parchment to a flatter state. Old tears were cleaned and mended with stable materials. After treatment, the parchment documents were allowed to stabilize in a controlled environment that closely matched the interior environment within their new encasements. During the course

of examination and treatment, microscopic samples of parchment and ink were taken from non-text areas, to permit further study and analysis. Information gained from the parchment samples will provide data on the condition of the documents relative to other parchments from the same time period.

On Constitution Day, September 17, 2003, the conservation treatment and re-encasement of the Charters, as well as the renovation of the National Archives Rotunda will be complete. Visitors are invited to come to the National Archives Building in Washington, D.C., and see the Charters, including for the first time all four pages of the Constitution, in new fully accessible display cases. Visitors should also make plans to visit more of the National Archives Experience soon.

A new theater will begin hosting author lectures and premiering documentary films in the spring of 2004. The Public Vaults—new, state-of-the-art public exhibition spaces featuring hundreds of additional documents from the holdings of the National Archives complemented by media presentations, computer interactives, and immersive environments—are scheduled to open in the fall of 2004. And a new Learning Center will make an exciting schedule of interactive workshops and a parent and teacher resource room available in early 2005.

Additional information about the renovation of the National Archives Building, the Charters of Freedom Reencasement, and the National Archives Experience is available online at www.archives.gov/national_archives_experience.



Interface Media

Warren stated, "Though there was reason for hope, there was no reason for certainty, that the capital of this country would be spared the destruction already brought on the capitals of several of the European belligerents."²

According to a February 1945 article published in the *Louisville Courier-Journal* of Kentucky, Library of Congress staff removed the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution from their shrine two days before Christmas 1941. The documents were placed between sheets of acid-free paper, and then into a container reinforced with millboard. Library staff placed the package in a custom-made bronze container and padlocked it shut. On December 26, the Library received a statement from the attorney general saying that it had the legal right to transfer the documents. Staff also proceeded to pack the Gutenberg Bible (St. Blasius-St. Paul copy), Magna Carta (Lincoln Cathedral copy), the Gettysburg Address, Abraham Lincoln's first and second Inaugural Addresses, and the Articles of Confederation in copper-lined oak cases. The entire shipment consisted of four document cases.

The Secret Service then assumed responsibility for the documents' safe delivery to Fort Knox. The Secret Service placed these treasures in an armored truck and transported them under heavy guard from the Library of Congress to Union Station in Washington, D.C. The cases were then carried under armed guard into a special car of the Baltimore and Ohio's National Limited train to Louisville, Kentucky. In adjoining compartments, Secret Service agents sat guard throughout the journey. The documents departed Washington, D.C., at 6:30 p.m., and arrived safely in Louisville at 10:10 the following morning.

Four additional Secret Service agents and the Thirteenth Armored Division met the original agents on arrival. The document cases were transferred to an army truck and transported to the Bullion Depository. The documents were then placed in an underground vault in a "massive structure of steel and

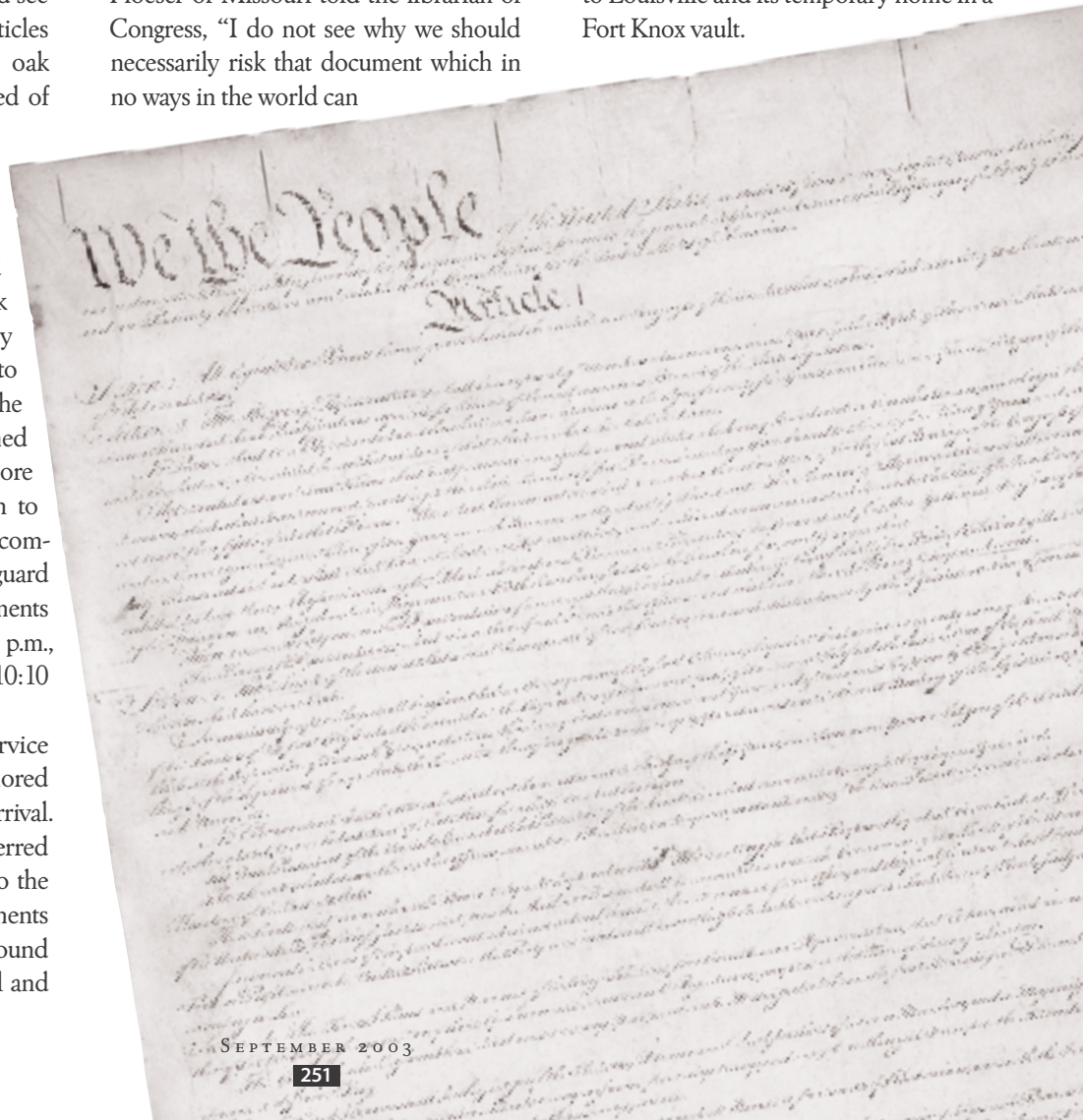
concrete considered invulnerable to bombing attack."³ Secret Service agent A. A. Andrews reported that "everything moved along smoothly and there were no hitches anywhere along the line."⁴

In his December 30, 1941, thank you note to Morgenthau, MacLeish expressed his hope that should it become "necessary to move these documents again—as it, of course, may—I hope I may again entrust them to care as conscientious, as intelligent and as scrupulous."

Indeed, less than two years later the Secret Service did provide security for the transfer of one of these documents—the Declaration of Independence—to Washington, D.C., for the dedication of the Jefferson Memorial. During testimony before the House Subcommittee on Appropriations, members of Congress questioned MacLeish regarding the risk posed by this move. According to the April 6, 1943, edition of *The Washington Star*, then-Congressman Walter Christian Ploeser of Missouri told the librarian of Congress, "I do not see why we should necessarily risk that document which in no ways in the world can

be replaced." MacLeish responded, "My feeling about it is that if there is any document in the United States which should be allowed to be exhibited to the people of this country at this moment, it is that document." He assured legislators that the document would be under twenty-four-hour Marine guard and would be contained within a steel case with bulletproof glass.

Following congressional approval, on April 10, 1943, two army trucks with seven military police arrived at the Fort Knox Bullion Depository. The Declaration was placed in the truck equipped with a machine gun. Both trucks, with their contingents of military police, Secret Service agents, a Library of Congress employee, and officials from the Depository, departed for the Louisville railway station. By 8:30 the following morning, the Declaration had been safely returned to the Library of Congress. After being displayed as part of the Jefferson Memorial dedication, the Declaration safely made the return journey to Louisville and its temporary home in a Fort Knox vault.





THE LIBRARIAN OF CONGRESS

WASHINGTON

December 30, 1941

*Prot. in by
Miss Shannon*

Dear Henry:

I want to express to you and through you to the Secret Service the profound and really inexpressible gratitude of the Library of Congress, and particularly of the Librarian, for the safe conveyance of the Constitution of the United States, the Declaration of Independence, the Magna Charta, the Gutenberg Bible, and other priceless papers from the Library of Congress to a place of greater safety.

I think you can appreciate what it means to bear responsibility for the safety of these documents in this time. The responsibility had weighed heavily upon me for many months, but never as heavily as on the night when the shipment left the Library of Congress. I suppose it is quite literally true that no shipment of a value even remotely approaching the value of this shipment was ever made in this country. Here in one small group of containers was the documentary history of freedom in our world. When I say, therefore, that I am profoundly grateful for the help you gave us, I am speaking with great sincerity.

I should appreciate it if you would express my gratitude in particular to Mr. Neel, Mr. Moriarty, Mr. Shannon and Mr. Andrews who had immediate responsibility for the transport. If it becomes necessary to move these documents again - as it, of course, may - I hope I may again entrust them to care as conscientious, as intelligent, and as scrupulous.

With all good wishes,

Faithfully yours,

Archibald MacLeish
Archibald MacLeish
The Librarian of Congress

The Honorable
Henry Morgenthau
Secretary of the Treasury
Washington, D. C.

In September 1944, the president and the Joint Chiefs of Staff authorized the return of the Charters of Freedom from Fort Knox. Again, the Library of Congress requested the assistance of the Secret Service. Luther Evans, as acting librarian of Congress, wrote to the chief of the U.S. Secret Service and requested assistance in “assuring the safe return of certain documents belonging to the collections of the Library of Congress which are now in security storage outside of Washington.” On September 19, an armed guard arrived at the Bullion Depository in Fort Knox and escorted the packing cases containing the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the other items to the Louisville railroad station. A Secret Service report titled, “Return of Confidential Documents to the Library of Congress from Fort Knox, Kentucky,” noted that the documents were placed in “Drawing Room A, Car 42” at 5:30 p.m., although one of the cases was too large to fit in the room. It was left “in the vestibule of the same car, under guard.”⁵ The train arrived in Washington the next morning, on September 20. The cases were then placed in a Bureau of Engraving and Printing armored truck and delivered to the basement of the Library of Congress Annex—now known as the Adams Building—where Archibald MacLeish was waiting to greet them. The Charters had come through the war unscathed, and in 1952, were transferred to the National Archives, the nation’s repository of the official records of the United States government, for permanent safekeeping.

Teaching Activities

1. Write the words “The Documentary History of Freedom in Our World” on the board and ask students to pretend that it is the title of a book. Lead students in brainstorming a list of documents or artifacts that they think would be included in such an anthology. Ask students to list the criteria they used to suggest the items.

2. Distribute copies of the featured document to students or project it on an overhead. Ask one student to read it aloud while the others follow along. Lead a class

discussion by posing the following questions: What type of document is it? What is the date of the document? Who was the intended recipient? Who created it and for what purpose?

3. Ask students to compare the items they listed in activity 1 with the documents mentioned in MacLeish’s letter.

4. Remind students that in 1941, the Librarian of Congress was only granted 60.3 cubic feet of storage space in Fort Knox. As a result, he had to make some difficult choices about what items would be transferred. Ask each student to assume the role of either the Librarian of Congress, the archivist of the United States, or the director of a major museum. Ask them to list the criteria they would use to determine the most important items in their organization’s collection. Discuss with students the similarities and differences between this list and the list they created in activity 1.

5. Inform students that although the Committee on the Conservation of Cultural Resources no longer exists, a number of other organizations dedicated to conservation and preservation do. Divide students into small groups to conduct research into the mission and activities of such organizations as the National Trust for Historic Preservation and UNESCO’s World Heritage Committee. Direct students to present their findings to the rest of the class.

6. Tell students that museums, libraries, and archives often loan items from their collections to other institutions for exhibition purposes. Generally, a registrar or collections manager coordinates and oversees such a transfer, and in case of an emergency, he or she would be responsible for coordinating and transferring items to places of greater safety. Invite the registrar or collections manager from a local museum to speak to your class about their job and their responsibilities. Instruct students to prepare questions ahead of time for the guest.

7. Direct students to read the article by Milton Gustafson entitled “Travels of the Charters of Freedom” available online at www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/

winter_2002_travels_charters.html and create a timeline illustrating the Charters’ history.

8. Remind students that the Charters were transferred from the Library of Congress to the National Archives in 1952. Divide students into pairs and ask one to conduct research on the mission and holdings of the National Archives and Records Administration and the other to conduct similar research on the Library of Congress. Encourage them to share their findings with each other. 📖

Notes

1. Letter from Harry E. Neal, secret service agent, to Frank J. Wilson, chief of the U.S. Secret Service (December 27, 1941), 162. Library of Congress Documents Moved; General Correspondence and Subject File, 1932-50; Records of the U.S. Secret Service, National Archives Record Group 87; National Archives, College Park, Md.
2. “War and the National Monuments,” *Library of Congress Quarterly* 2, no. 1 (1944): 64.
3. “For Nearly Three Years Fort Knox Vault Held Declaration of Independence and Constitution,” *The Courier-Journal*, Louisville, Ky. (February 4, 1945), 162. Library of Congress Documents Moved; General Correspondence and Subject File, 1932-50; Records of the U.S. Secret Service, National Archives Record Group 87; National Archives, College Park, Md.
4. Letter from A. A. Andrews, supervising agent, to Frank J. Wilson, chief of the U.S. Secret Service (December 27, 1941), 162. Library of Congress Documents Moved; General Correspondence and Subject File, 1932-50; Records of the U.S. Secret Service, National Archives Record Group 87; National Archives, College Park, Md.
5. Letter from James R. Stringfellow to Frank J. Wilson, chief of the U.S. Secret Service (September 25, 1944), 162. Library of Congress - Documents Moved; General Correspondence and Subject File, 1932-50; Records of the U.S. Secret Service, National Archives Record Group 87; National Archives, College Park, Md.

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NOTE TO THE TEACHER

The document featured in this article comes from the Records of the U.S. Secret Service (Record Group 87), and is housed at the National Archives at College Park, MD.