

**A.J. F. Van Laer's Account of Salvaging Manuscripts
After the 1911 Capitol Fire¹**

**Transcribed and annotated by
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**New York State Library
University of the State of New York
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¹ New York State Library, Manuscripts and Special Collections. *A.J.F. Van Laer Papers*, Box 8, Folder 2

Biographical Note

Arnold Johan Ferdinand (A.J.F.) van Laer was a librarian and archivist with the New York State Library (1899-1915) and the Division of History and Archives (1915-1939), best known for his translations of New York's colonial Dutch records. Published works include four volumes of New Netherland records, two of Beverwyck, six of Albany County, four relating to Rensselaerswyck, and one of Lutheran records in Holland relative to the Colony of New York. He wrote numerous articles for journals, principally the *New York State Historical Association Quarterly*, the *Dutch Settlers Society of Albany Yearbook*, and the *New York Genealogical and Biographical Society Record*. His translations are considered superior to those of any of his predecessors or contemporaries, a result of his fluency in both Dutch and English, his research into colonial history and language, his understanding of Dutch customs and traditions, and his particular interest in the individual settlers. Frequently overlooked are his contribution to the developing professions of manuscript curator and archivist and his efforts to encourage the preservation of historical records.

A.J.F. van Laer was born in Utrecht and settled in the United States in 1897, living in Albany from 1897 until his death in 1955. He received the degrees of mechanical engineer at the University of Delft and bachelor of library science at the New York State Library School. He and his wife had three sons. Biographical information can be found in a memorial address by Charles K. Winne, Jr., published in the *Yearbook* of the Dutch Settlers Society of Albany for 1954-1956, and reprinted in volume one of *New York Historical Manuscripts: Dutch* (Baltimore, 1974).

State Archivist Van Laer resents State Historian's criticism that valuable historical papers were carelessly thrown away with debris²

In the Albany papers of April 1, Victor Hugo Paltsits, State Historian, charges the State Education Department with carelessness in not saving historical papers from the debris that were thrown from the windows of the burned portion of the State Capitol. This charge was made without knowledge of what was actually being done to rescue the priceless records of the State Library and creates a wrong impression as to the care exercised in saving every scrap that could be saved. That in the draft which prevailed in the gutted building a few fragments or even entire documents may have blown out of the window of the manuscripts room is altogether likely, but the finding of a single paper by no means indicates that many valuable documents could have reached the debris in the streets. Nothing was allowed to be thrown out that had not been sorted over twice.

On Thursday morning, as soon as the building had sufficiently cooled to allow the salvage of books and papers to begin, the State Archivist and Mr. I. N. Phelps Stokes, the salvage expert, whom the trustees of the New York Public Library sent to aid the department in organizing the work of rescuing valuable historical documents,³ made their way to the part of the building where the manuscripts room was located and with the help of a ladder climbed into the smoke filled room. The sight was appalling. Not a vestige of either books, or bookcases, desks or second mezzanine floors was to be seen. Nothing but an empty shell with four feet of smoldering debris on the floor. Fires were starting up in various places, a stream of water played on the ruins and water poured down from the floor above. It seemed well nigh hopeless to attempt to rescue anything under such conditions, but Mr. Stokes insisted that, if anything were to be saved, work must be begun at once. Hurrying to the main reading room of the library, the archivist secured the help of four or five members of the library staff, who worked with zest and

² Van Laer evidently composed this piece as a press release to respond to charges laid by the New York State Historian, Victor Hugo Paltsits. The public dispute between the two was a significant factor in a post-fire reorganization that resulted in the office of State Historian—previously a gubernatorial political appointment—being made a unit of the State Education Department. Paltsits resigned and was shortly replaced in the post by James Austin Holden.

³ Isaac Newton Phelps Stokes (1867 – 1944) was an architect. He designed St-Paul's Chapel at Columbia University and several urban housing projects in New York City. He was an expert in prints and documents, renowned as the compiler of a massive six-volume bibliography of the iconography of Manhattan Island. He was quick to volunteer his expertise in the effort to salvage the precious manuscript collections of the State Library.

under his direction soon recovered some of the older Dutch records in a fairly good state of Preservation. Later Adjutant General Verbeck appeared, who offered his services to Mr. Stokes in the name of the Governor and promptly organized a line of guardsmen to remove the records to the office of the clerk of the Senate. With the efficient aid of his men good progress was made. The men were directed to dig carefully where the most valuable used to be shelved and, as soon as anything came to light, it was carefully lifted and carried away. Many of the volumes were so hot that they could hardly be touched with the hand and some were actually burning along the edges. As soon as one spot was cleared down to the floor the debris within it were turned over and everything taken out that was still legible. Gradually about half the floor space was gone over and to make room the men were told to throw the already examined debris out of the window. The Archivist stood himself near the window and searched every shovelful that was thrown out, many fragments being rescued in that way. All this took place in a drenching down pour of water from the floor above. No stop was made for luncheon. When evening came, many of the most valuable records had been saved and Mr. Stokes and the Archivist felt themselves richly rewarded for their trying experience. To prevent the fire from breaking out afresh, water was turned on during the night and next morning at 7 a.m. work was continued. The condition of things that second day showed the wisdom of Mr. Stokes' timely action, all the books that were found being either more charred or thoroughly water soaked. By six p.m. practically everything that could be saved, including nearly one hundred volumes of colonial and state records, several hundred bundles of papers, about a thousand coins and medals, and the General Worth swords, were safely placed under a guard in the office of the Senate Clerk. Saturday morning, the last scraps of papers were gathered up and during the day everything was removed to 162 State Street, the new headquarters of the State Library, where Mr. Frank L. Tolman, the reference librarian, and the archivist were busy till 11:30 p.m. arranging the most valuable and water soaked materials on temporary lath racks, to let it dry over Sunday. The loss of historical documents is immense, but thanks to Mr. Stokes' wise counsel about 10% of the entire collection and perhaps 30% of the most valuable material is saved.

[Signed]

A.J.F. Van Laer,

Archivist,

Albany, N.Y., April 2, 1911