

# To Build an Archives

By Bruce I. Bustard

The National Archives Building, with its massive columns, statues, and inscriptions, sits imposingly on Pennsylvania Avenue, halfway between the White House and the Capitol. Completed in 1935, it stands as the masterwork of its architect, John Russell Pope, as well as a showcase for some of the nation's most respected artists and sculptors. But completion of this beautiful, neoclassical revival structure did not come easily. Building the National Archives was the result of decades of political agitation and years of planning and construction. It involved site changes, design alterations, and debates over construction materials. Why and how the National Archives Building came to be is the subject of a new National Archives exhibition entitled "To Build an Archives."

From its founding, our federal government has documented its policies and decisions, but for almost 150 years it had no method or place to safeguard historically important records. During those years, officials occasionally decried federal neglect, or too often, fires destroyed important documents. These pressures reinforced the need for an archives. By the end of the nineteenth century, a few architects had even submitted plans to the government for an archives or a hall of records. By the early twentieth century, an organized effort aimed at creating a National Archives began, but not until 1926 did Congress finally approve a National Archives building.

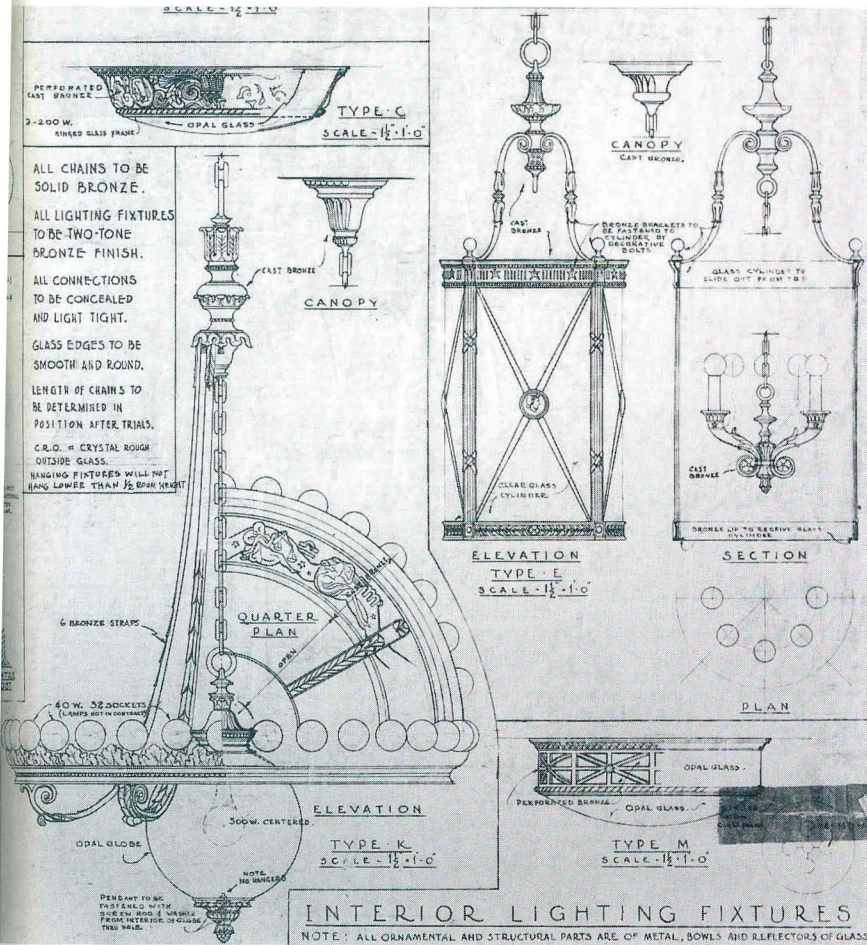
That year, Congress authorized construction of a National Archives building as part of a massive public buildings program designed to beautify the center of Washington, D.C., and provide office space for the growing federal bureaucracy. This program led to the design and construction of the Federal Triangle. Secretary of the Treasury Andrew Mellon gave the re-

sponsibility for designing the Triangle grouping to a Board of Architectural Consultants. Louis A. Simon, the supervisory architect of the Treasury Department, drafted a preliminary design for an archives building, placing it along Pennsylvania Avenue between Ninth and Tenth Streets, NW.

In late 1927, preliminary drawings of the individual Triangle buildings were incorporated into a formal presentation of the entire project. This became the basis for a three-dimensional scale model that was publicly unveiled in April 1929. The next month, after examining the model, the Commission of Fine Arts was highly critical of Simon's design for an archives. Commissioners suggested the noted architect John Russell Pope be added to the Board of Architectural Consultants and that he design the National Archives. Pope was asked to join when the death of a board member created a vacancy.

Pope's architectural vision transformed both the location and design of the National Archives Building. He successfully proposed relocating the Archives to the block between Seventh and Eighth Streets, arguing that the new site was a major cross-axis in both Pierre L'Enfant's original plan for the city and in the 1901 McMillan Plan for Washington, D.C., which had sought to update L'Enfant. Such a site and its "association with the great monuments of Washington" required a monumental structure rather than an ordinary office building. In place of Simon's unimaginative design, Pope's National Archives was to be a neoclassical temple befitting an institution dedicated to American history.

Ground was broken on September 9, 1931, and President Herbert Hoover laid the cornerstone of the building on February 20, 1933, declaring that the National Archives Building would be not only "one of the most beautiful



*Architect John Russell Pope's detailed plans included every feature in the National Archives Building, including the light fixtures.*

buildings in America" but "an expression of the American soul." However, even before the cornerstone was set, significant problems had already arisen. Because the massive structure was to be constructed above an underground stream, 8,575 piles had been driven into the unstable soil before pouring a huge concrete bowl as a foundation. Another difficulty arose over the choice of building materials. Both limestone and granite were authorized as acceptable, but construction began during the darkest days of the Great Depression, and suppliers of each material lobbied fiercely to have the government use their stone. Ultimately, as in the other Federal Triangle buildings, limestone was used for the exterior superstructure and granite for the base.

Constructing the National Archives was a mammoth task. Not only was the building the most ornate structure on the Federal Triangle, it also called for installation of specialized air-handling systems and filters, reinforced flooring, and thousands of feet of shelving to meet the building's archival storage requirements. The building's exterior took more than four

years to finish and required a host of workers ranging from sculptors and model makers to air-conditioning contractors and structural-steel workers.

The architect's hand is evident in the building's decoration as well as in its size and location. John Russell Pope deemed a building's symbolism as important as its function, and as a follower of the beaux arts school of architecture, he believed that a building's ornamentation as well as the structure's function should reflect a higher purpose. Therefore, the National Archives needed to be not only a working office building but also an appropriate setting for the key documents in American history. The Archives building's sculpture, art, and other decorations highlight this philosophy. Its exterior decorations are filled with classical allusion, symbolic meaning, and mythic reference. Inside the building, a magnificent rotunda houses our nation's most precious symbols, and large murals depicting scenes from early American history grace its walls. Throughout, Pope followed the rule that "allegory rather than realism be the means of conveying the significance of the sculptural decoration."

James Earl Fraser's pediment on the Constitution Avenue side of the Archives building, "Recorder of the Archives," demonstrates this approach. The pediment is an allegorical treatment of the archival process. In it, a male figure sits upon a throne holding the keys to the Archives. He accepts and catalogs the nation's most precious documents in a large book that rests on his lap. The throne rests upon recumbent rams, which symbolize parchment. Figures nearby accept important documents for cataloguing, while other groups gather less significant ones. Winged horses symbolizing inspiration stand in the background, and groups of dogs, symbols of guardianship, are at either end of the pediment.

Other examples of the use of symbolism are the monumental statues Pope placed around the outside of the building. James Earl Fraser's young female figure in "Heritage" holds a child and sheaf of wheat in her right hand as symbols of growth and hopefulness. In her left hand she protects an urn, symbolic of the ashes of past generations. In Robert Aitken's "The Past," an aged figure with a scroll and closed book imparting the knowledge of past generations "stares down the corridors of time." And Fraser's "Guardianship," uses martial symbols such as the helmet, sword, and lion skin to convey the need to protect the historical record for future generations.

In November 1935, 120 National Archives

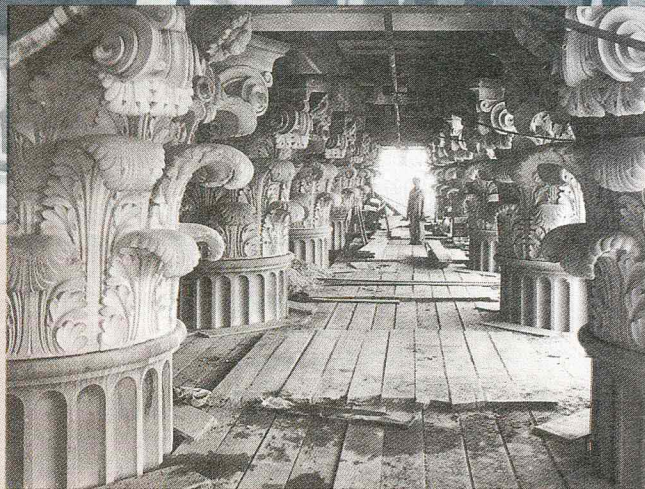
## PROLOGUE

staff members moved into their uncompleted building. Most of the exterior work was complete, but many stack areas, where records would be stored, had no shelving for incoming records. Work also continued on the Rotunda and other public spaces. More significantly, earlier estimates about the need for future stack space proved to be quite insufficient. Almost as soon as Pope's original design was complete, a project to fill the Archives' interior courtyard began, doubling storage space from 374,000 square feet to more than 757,000.

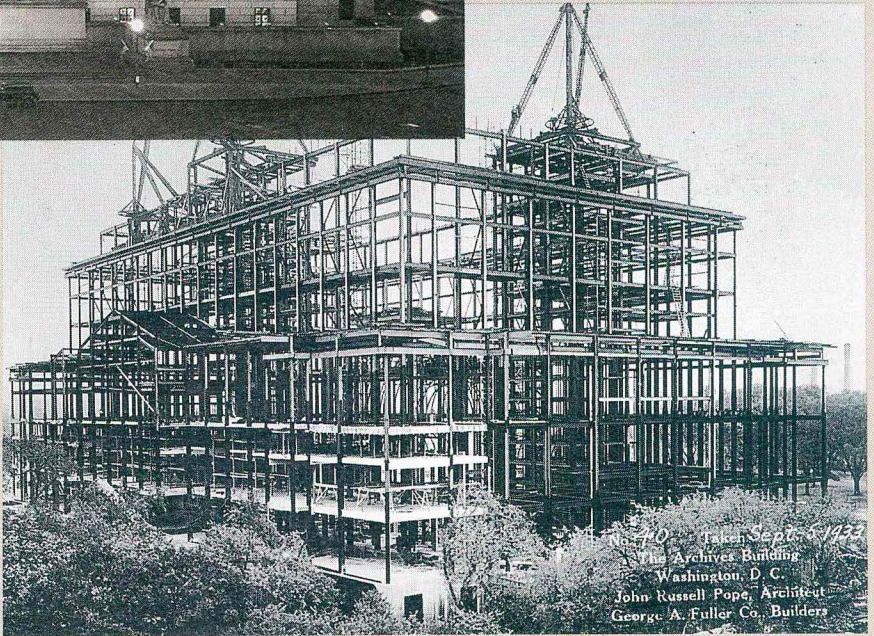
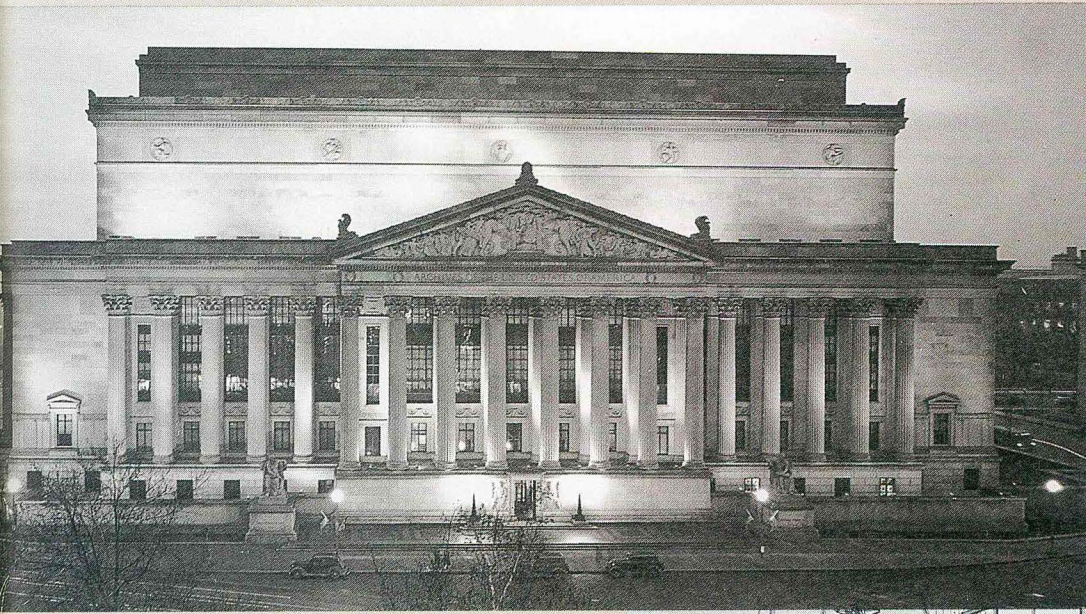
John Russell Pope's vision of the Archives as a temple to history has been preserved through maintenance and periodic restoration work on the building since the mid-1930s. Over the years, however, more records filled the building, and even the courtyard expansion proved to be inadequate. By the late 1960s, the building reached its storage capacity of 900,000 cubic feet, and the agency began renting large amounts of storage and administrative space. The 1993 completion of a second National Archives in College Park, Maryland, promises to relieve storage pressures on the original building as well as provide the nation with the most modern archives in the world. Despite these needed changes, Pope's temple will continue to hold many records and to serve as the focal point for public programs in the National Archives. It will also remain one of the most visible and meaningful structures in the nation's capital. □

"To Build an Archives" is on display indefinitely in the second floor lobby of the National Archives Building in Washington, D.C.

This article and the exhibit "To Build an Archives" are based on the files for planning, designing, and constructing the Federal Triangle and the National Archives Building, which are now among the holdings of the National Archives. Of special note are the Records of the Public Building Service, Record Group (RG) 121, and the Records of the Commission of Fine Arts, RG 66. Photographs of the design and construction of the Archives are in the Still Picture Branch of the National Archives in RG 121 and in the Records of the National Archives and Records Administration, RG 64. Architectural drawings of the building are in RGs 64 and 121 at the Cartographic and Architectural Branch. Two secondary works were especially useful. George Gurney's excellent *Sculpture and the Federal Triangle* (1985) is much broader in scope than its title suggests. The essays included in *Guardian of Heritage: Essays on the History of the National Archives* (1985) were also helpful. The author would like to thank George Gurney of the National Museum of American Art and Rod Ross, Greg Bradsher, and Chris Taddei of the staff of the National Archives for their comments on this essay and on the exhibit text.



Carvers (top) from the John Donnelly Company add final touches to "The Recorder of the Archives," ca. 1935. A stone carver (bottom) works on a few of the National Archives seventy-two Corinthian capitals, ca. 1934.



No. 40. Taken Sept. 5, 1933.  
The Archives Building  
Washington, D. C.  
John Russell Pope, Architect  
George A. Fuller Co., Builders

**Top:** *The National Archives at dusk, January 19, 1937.*

**Above right:** *The Archives under construction, September 5, 1933.*

**Above:** *Architect John Russell Pope, ca. 1935.*

**Bottom:** *Records from the Food Administration arrive, ca. 1935.*

