

Historians and the National Archives of Canada

by John G. Reid, Chair, CHA Archives Committee

On July 4, 1990, a water pipe burst on the 4th floor of the National Archives of Canada building on Wellington Street in Ottawa. The result was serious damage to a number of irreplaceable items in the national map collection. Ten volumes were soaked badly enough to require freeze-drying, and almost 100 other atlases and rare books were also affected. The contents of the wet vault included early Ptolemy and Mercator maps, and it was only the presence of a map curator who happened to be working late that night that enabled Archives staff to intervene quickly and prevent a total disaster. This latest episode serves as a reminder that important national records are in danger. It reinforces the warning delivered by the National Archivist, Dr. Jean-Pierre Wallot, in testimony before the House of Commons Standing Committee on Communications and Culture in May 1987, that "the storage facilities now available to us do not, in truth, serve to safeguard and protect our holdings - they are actually threatening them."

Matters have improved somewhat since 1987. By the mid-1980s, it had become clear that the situation was critical. The Wellington Street building, which houses both the National Archives and the National Library, had been full since 1972. The laboratories, offices, and storage spaces of the Archives were spread throughout 14 different locations in the Ottawa/Hull region. Many of the buildings were entirely unsuitable, and two disastrous floods in the basement of the Journal Tower South building (in November 1986 and June 1987) were only examples of many such incidents in which documents were damaged. The Wellington Street building itself had been an up-to-date facility when it opened in 1967, but twenty years later it no longer met minimum standards, as the routing of water pipes through storage vaults clearly indicated.

In December 1987, the Commons Committee recognized the urgency of the Archives' needs, and recommended immediate governmental action. The government, to its credit, responded quickly. In May 1988, it announced that the future headquarters of the National Archives would be in the West Memorial Building, across Wellington Street from the current location. A "satellite building" would be constructed elsewhere for

storage. In June, a temporary storage facility was identified, in the former Mitel building in Renfrew. Then in September 1988, the permanent satellite building was designated for Gatineau and 92 acres of land were purchased there.

The remaining hurdles were financial. The West Memorial Building required total renovation, and the construction of the Gatineau building would obviously require a further major expenditure. Thus, although immediate storage problems were partly resolved by moving records to Renfrew from the scattered locations where they had previously been kept, uncertainties remained over funding priority. This became even more evident in December 1989, when the government cited fiscal restraint in delaying for two years the start of the renovation of the West Memorial Building. The Gatineau project was authorized to proceed, though budgetary negotiations with the Treasury Board still lay ahead. The present timetable, incorporating the two-year delay on the West Memorial Building, calls for both facilities to open in 1996.

Historians have at least two important concerns arising from this entire situation. One of them is the need to ensure that the processes of renovation and removal are carried through with minimal disruption of services provided to users of the Archives. When the permanent facilities are opened, most service to users will be centered in the West Memorial Building, but there will also be research space at the Gatineau building and the Archives intends to provide regular shuttle service between the two locations. In the interim, many records must be retrieved from Renfrew for consultation in Ottawa. There will also be an extended period during which staff from the West Memorial Building - which already houses personnel from several Archives departments - will be displaced to a location as yet unspecified. The Archives has undertaken that disruption to service will be kept to a minimum, and Dr. Wallot has spoken on the matter both to the CHA council and to its Archives Committee. The Archives Committee will continue to keep in touch with developments as they occur, and the thoughts and suggestions of members of the CHA are also welcome.

The second major concern of historians, and a pressing one at this point, is the

need to ensure that the government follows through on its announced plans. We are all aware of the chilly fiscal climate that still prevails. As historians, we also have good reason to be acutely conscious of the danger in which Canada's national records now stand, and of the irreversible damage that will be done if action is not taken quickly. Even if all goes according to plan, it will be another six years before a satisfactory conclusion is reached. If further delays come about, it is anybody's guess how long the process will take. In the meantime, disruption to service and the danger of more burst water pipes will be prolonged. It is therefore in the national interest as well as in our own professional interests that pressure should be kept on the federal government to adhere to the present timetable. Again, the CHA council and the Archives Committee will be active in this area, but the participation of all CHA members will also be important. There is nothing good that can be said about an episode such as the July water leakage, but perhaps it will at least provide an added stimulus to all of us to put our active support behind the push for proper facilities for the National Archives.

CHA Joins the Canadian Federation of the Humanities

For many years part of the membership of the CHA has felt that the society should be a member of the Canadian Federation for the Humanities (CFH) in addition to its membership in the Social Sciences Federation of Canada (SSFC). **Both organizations promote scholarly work in their respective disciplines and represent their member societies to government, the public and granting agencies.** During the course of the summer the CHA became a member of both associations when both agreed to share the membership fees that the CHA had previously paid to the SSFC. With its dual affiliation the CHA hopes to be in a better position to defend the interests of its members and participate in the great debates that touch the social sciences and the humanities.