



Transcript of audio file excerpt: October 1961 interview with Dr. Harlan Hoyt Horner about the New York State Capitol fire of 1911

Series A1445, Tape recordings, 1961-1962, New York Civil War Centennial Commission
Identifier: NYSA_A1445-78A-rtr_1961-10-aa_edit1 and edit2

Description: Interview from October 1961 with Dr. Harlan Hoyt Horner about the State Capitol fire of 1911. The State Capitol caught fire on March 29, 1911 and was reported at the time as the greatest library disaster of modern times: 450,000 books and 270,000 manuscripts were destroyed. Horner was Secretary to Dr. Draper, Commissioner of Education and went on to be Associate Commissioner of Education in the 1930s.

This excerpt (2:30) and the complete audio file (24:56) are available for order. Please contact our reference desk at ARCHREF@mail.nysed.gov or (518) 474-8955 for more information.

Dr. Horner: At 4:00 in the morning on March 29, 1911 I was awakened to be told that the Capitol building was on fire. It had been burning some time then. The State Library was located on the fourth floor and in the attic floors and the intense heat had already melted the steel rafters and had fallen in. And I found that the quarters of the Education Department on the first floor were being covered with water from the firemen up above.

Interviewer: What a mess!

Dr. Horner: Yes.

Interviewer: Why did this particularly concern you?

Dr. Horner: It concerned me especially because of the special historical documents owned by the State, which Dr. Draper had rescued from the Library because of his fear of fire, and installed in a safe in the Regents' Room on the first floor of the Capitol.

Interviewer: Were you fearful that these documents might perish even though they were within a safe?

Dr. Horner: Yes. I was fearful, not being sure that the safe was waterproof; and fearful that the ceiling of the Regents' Room might collapse; and that the heat might even destroy the documents in the safe. The heat could have crumbled the documents if the ceiling had fallen in. I felt that they should be gotten out of the Capitol.

Interviewer: Do you recall exactly what you found within the safe?

Dr. Horner: I can't enumerate all of them, but we found Washington's farewell address, the Dongan Laws; the Duke's Laws; several of the early constitutions; the ratification of the Constitution of the United States by the state of New York; and particularly, the signers of the Declaration – autographs of the signers of the Declaration; and perhaps the most precious

document: the copy, in Lincoln's hand, of the first Emancipation Proclamation issued in September 1862.

Interviewer: Which the state of New York then owned?

Dr. Horner: Yes.

Interviewer: Did it give you an enormous thrill to handle these documents in times of peril when they might have been destroyed?

Dr. Horner: Yes. I was terribly frightened for fear they might be lost.