

6th CONGRESS.]

No. 142.

[2d SESSION.]

BOOKS AND PAPERS DESTROYED BY FIRE IN THE WAR OFFICE, IN 1800.

COMMUNICATED TO THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES, FEBRUARY 17, 1801.

WAR DEPARTMENT, *February 12, 1801.*

The acting SECRETARY FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF WAR, in obedience to the direction of the House of Representatives, expressed in their resolution of the 2d instant, that he "communicate to the House such information as may be in his power in relation to the destruction of the books and papers in that Department by fire; designating particularly what description of books and papers has been lost thereby, and what the probable effect of such loss will be in the adjustment of the unsettled accounts of the United States," respectfully reports:

That he has very little doubt that the fire which, on the evening of the 8th of November last, entirely destroyed the house then occupied by the Department of War, was communicated from the adjoining house, as it was first discovered in the library, which was arranged against the partition wall directly behind the fire-place of that house, and at the distance of the whole width of the house (twenty-five or twenty-six feet) from the only fire-place in the apartment; in which last fire-place a fire had not been made on that day or for upwards of three weeks immediately preceding.

That the rapidity, with which a large library extended the flames, on the admission of fresh air into the room, entirely precluded the possibility of saving any books or papers that were deposited on the second or third floor; the whole of the former, and one apartment on the latter, then being occupied as the Secretary's office.

That not a book or paper of the office was saved, except one volume, in which the contracts and deeds for lands sold to the United States were recorded. This had been taken into the Accountant's apartments, on the ground floor, in the morning, for the adjustment of some accounts, and was saved, with his books and papers which were in those apartments.

That, immediately after the fire, measures were taken to secure a renewal of the most necessary and important documents in all possible cases. That the lists of invalid pensioners have already been renewed, and sundry communications of importance from the Department returned and copied. That additions to these are still making, and that the examination of the claims to land for services in the Virginia line on continental establishment, as directed by law, though now suspended, is expected soon to be in the usual state of progression.

That the library, which was entirely destroyed, was extensive, and contained many military works of celebrity, which it is scarcely expected can be replaced. In order, however, to effect so desirable an object as far as may be, the Secretary has added a proportionate sum to the estimated appropriation for the present year for the purpose.

That of the claims for continental military bounty lands, the entries of which were, by the act of 2d of March, 1799, limited to the 1st day of January, 1802, many still remain unsatisfied. That, from the manner in which the grants were made, the checks and books being all lost, a great difficulty will oppose the renewing issues of warrants for those lands. The Secretary has recommended to applicants that all claims be filed in the office before the day on which the above-mentioned limitation will take place, in order that the examination of them may thereafter be made under such regulations as may be judged most proper to secure to the claimants their lawful rights, and protect the United States as much as possible from fraud and imposition.

That it is not presumed that any consequences to affect the adjustment of unsettled accounts will follow from the loss of the papers of the Secretary's office, the original directions for expenditures being, it is supposed, to be obtained on the exhibition of the accounts growing from them; and it is not probable that any material injury will result from the losses sustained in the Accountant's office; the specification of which, with the remarks of the Accountant thereon, follows, viz:

Relating to the accounts of the old army.

Several cases containing muster and pay-rolls; others containing accounts and vouchers of sundry paymasters and agents for paying troops; and one case containing individual settlements made by the late paymaster general and commissioner of army accounts.

These papers could only be of use in the examination of claims for services prior to the establishment of the present Government, which, if not already settled, are all barred and foreclosed by acts of limitation. The loss will, therefore, not materially affect the unsettled accounts of the United States.

Relating to services and supplies under the present Government.

William Colfax's accounts, as contractor for the State of New York, from the 1st of January to the 31st of December, 1799.

Robert Ball's accounts, as contractor for North Carolina, for supplies furnished in 1799 and 1800.

These accounts had been examined, and the balances ascertained, but had not been entered on the principal books, owing to differences in the statements of the claimants and those made at this office, of which they had been informed, but had not finally removed the objections. No material inconvenience, it is thought, will arise from the loss of those accounts.

William Colfax & Co.'s accounts, as contractors for the States of New York, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and Vermont, from the 1st of January to 31st of December, 1800.

This account had not been examined; the amounts are, therefore, only known from the claimants' own statements when they were rendered. It is therefore thought that no settlement can be made until a principle shall be fixed for the settlement of accounts in this situation.

Nathan Starr's accounts, as contractor for furnishing swords, belts, and scabbards, per contract in 1779.

This account had not been examined, owing to a want of vouchers. It is probable that duplicates of the accounts can be furnished, and that no inconvenience will arise in the settlement.

Part of the vouchers belonging to the paymaster general's accounts.

Some of the muster and pay-rolls of this account were lost, but they can all be replaced. No inconvenience but that of having copies made from duplicates in the possession of the paymaster general will arise.

All which is respectfully submitted.

SAMUEL DEXTER,
Acting as Secretary of War.