



New Netherland Institute  
Exploring America's Dutch Heritage

## OUT OF THE ASHES

### A.J.F VAN LAER AND THE 1911 FIRE

By Peter Douglas



On March 29, 1911, the New York State Library, then in the Capitol, burned, and with it went some half a million books and 300,000 manuscripts, among them priceless colonial documents. In charge of the state archives at the time was a Dutch immigrant called A.J.F. van Laer (1869-1955), for whom that day's destruction was a particularly hard blow. As we mark the centenary of the fire, it's fitting that we remind ourselves of the great contribution to New Netherland scholarship that Van Laer made, not the least of which was what he did in the days following the fire.

Earlier in his career, Van Laer discovered the huge number of Dutch manuscripts from the 17<sup>th</sup> century in the state archives. Attempts had been made to make these documents available in English, but upon discovering that these translations were full of errors, Van Laer decided to do his own. When the fire struck, his translation and the original records were on his desk in the State Library, so his work was destroyed, together with the Dutch original. The 1911 fire, then, was a personal catastrophe to Van Laer, both in his official position and in his capacity as translator of Dutch colonial manuscripts.

Van Laer was eager to salvage anything he could, and on the second day after the fire he enlisted the assistance of I.N. Phelps Stokes, sent by the New York Public Library

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with sympathy and the offer of help. Access to the Manuscripts room on the third floor of the building was difficult and hazardous. The staircases were gone so they found a way in from above, using ladders. Preceded by two firemen, they climbed down to a gutted passageway through twisted beams and dripping water. Icicles had formed, the weather having turned colder. Behind the charred door of the Manuscripts room, "*The sight,*" Van Laer later wrote, "*was appalling. Not a vestige of books, bookcases, or desks 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, and water poured down from above. It seemed well-nigh hopeless to attempt to rescue anything under the conditions.*" Despite the apparent futility of their efforts, Van Laer found where the Dutch records were buried. They pulled away the blackened and soggy mess and deep down they found paper, which, although heat-damaged and burned around the edges, still bore decipherable writing.

Van Laer and Stokes reported to Governor John Dix that there was material to be recovered in the wreck of the Capitol so they formed an urgent plan. From a nearby laundry they borrowed several large clothesbaskets and, with members of the National Guard forming a line, they gradually removed and passed to safety and preservation what remained of the documents.

That's easy to write, but the personal danger that Van Laer and Stokes risked cannot be minimized. Van Laer reported: "*Many of the volumes were so hot they could hardly be touched with the hand and some were actually burning along the edges.*" The smoke was thick and choking, and twice Stokes was overcome by it and had to be taken outside to recover. Chunks of stone, mortar, and bricks were coming down, and a sentry was cut by falling glass. Later, most of the State Library staff pitched in despite the risk and discomfort. Fire hoses sprayed the ruins for thirty-six hours; it was cold and wet, and Van Laer and Stokes were soaked through, and they carried on with the work well

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after dark. As the sifted remains were removed, Van Laer examined every shovelful lest a single vital scrap be overlooked.

For Van Laer, this went on day after day in that chilly April. His co-workers marveled that he didn't catch pneumonia. He did, however, succumb to the traumatic consequences of the fire and the devastation wrought on the documents in his charge. The magnitude of the disaster seemed to check his erstwhile drive, and it was almost a decade before he resumed translating in earnest. The work was now, he said, "*heartbreaking*." It was a bitter irony too, for when the library burned it was about to move into new quarters across Washington Avenue.

The Dutch records had endured numerous hazards, from normal wear and tear over the centuries to war and rebellion, relocation to Boston and back, and rats and mildew in the holds of British ships. The fire of 1911, however, was the worst misfortune to befall them, for never had they been so close to total destruction. For all the damage they suffered, that so much was saved is directly attributable to A.J.F. van Laer. In all, the surviving corpus of Dutch colonial records consists of about 12,000 pages; setting aside for the moment his excellent and groundbreaking translations, without his brave and selfless efforts in the days after the fire, that number could so easily have been much smaller. We owe him a great debt.