

# WITHOUT A PRAYER

Washington Times, Dec. 20, 1990

## Relics of religious heritage relegated to federal closets

By George Archibald  
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

The federal government has banished from Independence National Historical Park in Philadelphia a historic painting that shows the Founding Fathers kneeling in prayer at the start of the First Continental Congress.

The treatment of the large group portrait by the painter of the more famous "Spirit of '76" is perhaps the most prominent example of what religious groups say is the government's cavalier attitude toward treasures of the nation's Christian

heritage.

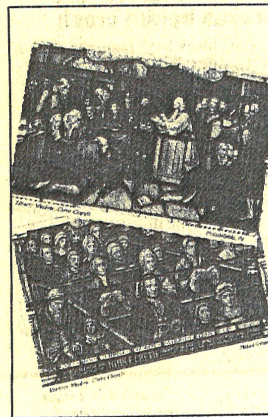
The Library of Congress, the Interior Department and other government agencies have come under fire for misplacing or losing historic religious objects, including the family Bibles of George Washington and Abraham Lincoln.

At the same time, thousands of rare books and artifacts with religious themes have been virtually hidden away from the public. It's easier to obtain an old copy of Playboy in the Library of Congress than it is to get certain religious books.

see ART, page A6



The Library of Congress has found the Lincoln family Bible (above). Windows removed from Christ Church in Philadelphia can be seen on postcards (right).



## ART

From page A1

"The government's hostility against the true Christian history of America in removing the evidence from public view is all too apparent," said Catherine Millard, president of the National Christian Heritage Foundation, who for five years has been trying to rescue many of these treasures.

"Are we, as a nation founded upon Christian principles, to see our country stripped of its godly heritage?" she asked.

Miss Millard has enlisted members of Christian groups throughout the country to help her.

Tompkins Mattheson's historic painting "The First Prayer in Congress, September 1774" was taken out of Independence Park's exhibits and put in permanent storage because federal authorities deemed it "inappropriate for display," according to supervising curator Doris Fanelli.

Some scholars have suggested it was lost, destroyed or stolen by Interior officials. An official report released in July by Interior's inspector general lends credence to their concerns.

The report said the department was negligent in caring for millions of valuable artworks and museum objects it has acquired over the years. Thousands were found ruined or damaged. Hundreds more were missing or stolen.

Independence Park and 11 other Interior agencies were cited by the inspector general for having improper security measures for irreplaceable artworks and relics.

A photograph of the stored Mattheson group portrait from the archives at Independence Park shows it to be an engraving from the original painting.

Several art and religion scholars have searched unsuccessfully over the past few years for the original masterpiece, which the federal government acquired from the city of Philadelphia in the 1950s.

The original oil painting is listed as "unlocated" on a computerized inventory of American paintings compiled by the National Museum of American Art.

"Furthermore, sometimes these things find their way into the private art market," said Donald D. Keyes, curator of American paintings at the Georgia Art Museum in Athens, who has searched unsuccessfully for Mr. Mattheson's original oil painting of "The First Prayer in Congress."

Miss Fanelli said Philadelphia "incorrectly recorded" the Mattheson painting as an original when it was donated in 1918. "What the city received was an original print or a print of this painting," she said.

Miss Millard lodged formal complaints with then-Interior Secretary Donald P. Hodel in 1987 about the National Park Service's loss of the original masterpiece — once a popular picture postcard for tourists visiting Philadelphia.

Miss Fanelli, in justifying the Park Service's removal of "The First Prayer in Congress," said the 1848 painting is historically "inaccurate" and "does not fit within the scope of our collections."

"Whether the painting exists or not is immaterial because it is not a documentation of the event. It is a history painting, a conjectural piece executed after the fact and intended to evoke emotion in the beholder," she wrote in a report to her superiors.

"This idea of historical accuracy is a bunch of nonsense," Mr. Keyes countered. "Mattheson was being as accurate in spirit as he could be, or the spirit as he conceived of it. . . . There's no reason why you shouldn't display this any more or less than the John Trumbull painting ['The Signing of the Declaration of Independence'] in the rotunda of the Capitol."

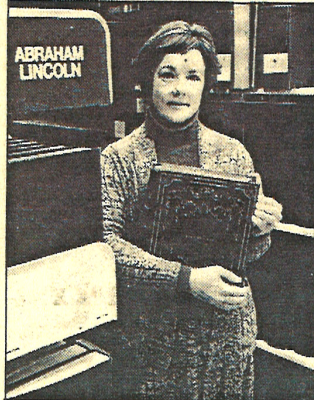


Photo by Martha Rial/The Washington Times  
Catherine Millard holds the Lincoln family Bible. Because of her persistence the book was found.

In addition to removing the Mattheson painting, Independence Park officials also removed a building marker outside Carpenters' Hall, where the first meeting of Congress was held, that had an engraved reproduction of the picture.

Another new sign about the first meeting of Congress emphasizes the aristocratic and wealthy backgrounds of the Founding Fathers rather than the importance of their religious faith in developing the new government, said Kathleen Dilonardo, chief of the park's interpretation division.

"There was no intent to remove religious subject matter," Miss Dilonardo said. Other exhibits, she said, "dealt with religious stuff," including several 18th century Quaker meeting houses and the home of Bishop William White, Pennsylvania's first Episcopal bishop.

According to government documents, National Park Service officials even succeeded in pressuring Christ Church in Philadelphia — the nation's oldest Episcopal church that is on a government tour route — to remove two-century-old stained-glass windows of "The First Prayer in Congress" and the so-called "Patriot's Window" that shows George Washington and others worshipping at the church.

"The NPS has partnership agreements with all the churches on Independence Park grounds. The NPS is responsible for preserving the authenticity of all structures," said one department report justifying the action.

"Christ Church is 200 years old. The stained glass windows are 125 years old," the report said. "In order to preserve the 18th century church, the windows were replaced with 18th century type glass. . . . Church officials concurred with this decision to authenticate the 18th century integrity."

The Library of Congress is notorious for misplacing, losing or making inaccessible historic treasures with importance to the nation's Christian heritage, Miss Millard charged.

"Scores of religious books are charged to the rare-book collection or are 'missing in inventory' on their [shelf] cards," she said.

Abraham Lincoln's richly illustrated leather-bound family Bible containing his handwritten family history was misplaced and could not be found by rare-book chiefs or the library's manuscript division when she requested it in early November, Miss Millard said.

Library officials also appear to have trouble finding George Washington's three-volume autographed Bible.

While Library of Congress officials initially denied having the treasures, both Bibles are listed — without classification numbers — in the rare-book section's card catalog.

Both Bibles were found last month after Miss Millard pressed the matter.

But yesterday a Library official said they didn't have Washington's Bible.