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Key NY document from 1775 on display at Capitol

Associated Press

ALBANY, N.Y. — Five weeks after the first shots of the Revolutionary War were fired at the battles of Lexington and Concord, scores of prominent New Yorkers put their wealth, property and lives on the line by signing a document that publicly announced their willingness to revolt against British rule.

Experts say the two-page document, signed by 100 mostly wealthy, upper-class men, is one of the most important in the state's history because it was the first indication that top government leaders in England's New York colony were unified in their opposition to British policies. Despite its importance, the document known as the General Association disappeared from state records in the 1800s, only to resurface later in Syracuse before getting lost and forgotten amid a local historical group's massive archives.

Now, for the first time in more than a century, the document is back in Albany, where it's on public view among other state artifacts in the state Capitol and the neighboring Empire State Plaza.

"This was the first document where they all came together, basically, in a unified voice in the colony," said Dennis Connors, curator of history for the Onondaga Historical Society, the Syracuse-based group that owns the document. "For the first time, there's a government body in New York saying, 'We're basically declaring a revolution here.'"

The document was thought to have been lost in the state Capitol fire in late March 1911, when hundreds of thousands of state records, many of them dating back to the 17th and 18th centuries, were consumed in the flames that gutted the State Library and State Museum, both then located in the same building.

It turned out that someone had removed the General Association from the library, likely a few years after the Civil War, Connors said. It wound up among the collection of an antiques dealer from Philadelphia, whose son, George Fryer, brought the General Association with him when he moved to Syracuse in 1889.

Fryer served as president of the Onondaga Historical Association for more than 20 years, and before his death in 1936 he donated his collection of early American manuscripts to the organization, including the General Association document. After a brief public display in a Syracuse bank lobby in 1949, the document was returned to the historical group, where it went unnoticed until being rediscovered during an inventory project in 2007, when an archivist found the papers among the 150-year-old organization's nearly 1 million manuscripts and photographs.

"We said, 'Well, jeez, this thing isn't supposed to exist,'" Connors recalled.

He said he spent several weeks verifying the document's authenticity and its significance with historians, then alerted the New York State Archives to the find. In late December, a fellow curator delivered the General Association to archives officials in Albany. Plans call for the General Association to return to Syracuse when the Capitol artifacts displays end later this year. Afterward, an official change of ownership ceremony will be held,

and the document will once again become state property, Connors said.

Signed on May 26, 1775, the General Association document preceded the U.S. Declaration of Independence by more than a year.

"Like everything else, New York leads," said Harold Holzer, a historian and Lincoln biographer who helped the Cuomo administration refurbish the Capitol's second-floor Hall of Governors, where the document and other artifacts are on display.

Holzer, a senior vice president at Manhattan's Metropolitan Museum of Art, said the artifacts carry a very high "inspiration quotient" for New York state residents.

"New Yorkers have been almost shame-faced about their recent history," he said. "This installation is going to remind them that the history of this state is pretty glorious."

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