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Catlin's North American Indians.

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Report No. 820.

[To accompany Joint Resolution H. R. No. 39.]

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES.

CATLIN'S NORTH AMERICAN INDIANS.

AUGUST 8, 1848.

Mr. PALFREY, from the Joint Committee on the Library of Congress, made the following

REPORT:

The Committee on the Library, to whom was referred the memorial of R. R. Gurley, praying for the purchase of Catlin's collection of paintings and curiosities illustrative of the manners and customs of the North American Indians, have had the same under consideration, and ask leave to report as follows :

Accompanying said memorial are the following papers, viz :

1. A memorial of George Catlin, presented to Congress in 1846, setting forth the design, character, and extent of the collection, with various particulars indicating its authenticity and value.
2. A memorial of American artists in Paris, praying for the purchase of the same by Congress.
3. A memorial of Louis McLane, American minister, and other American citizens, residents in London, of the same tenor.
4. A report of the Joint Committee on the Library in 1846, recommending a provision for the said purchase at a price not to exceed sixty-five thousand dollars.
5. Letters from Lewis Cass, then American minister at Paris, and from S. F. B. Morse, and G. P. A. Healy, artists, testifying to the artistic merit of the portraits and other delineations, and to the authenticity, comprehensiveness, and permanent curiosity and value of the collection.
6. Testimonials to the same effect from various publications of high authority in Great Britain and this country.

These papers have been printed by order of the Senate, and are

in the hands of members of both Houses. It is unnecessary for the committee to recapitulate their contents. Several members of the committee are able, from personal knowledge, to confirm the material parts of the statements therein contained. Already an artist of reputation, Mr. Catlin, a citizen of Pennsylvania, conceived the singular enterprise of devoting the best years of his life to a collection of permanent memorials of the vanishing aboriginal nations. At an expense of more than \$20,000 he devoted eight years to this project; in which time he visited no less than forty-eight Indian tribes, observing and recording with his pencil all that was most interesting and characteristic in their scenery, manners, superstitions, polity, and modes of life, depicting their dwellings, persons, and costumes, and collecting specimens of their decorations, utensils, and arms. The collection now offered to Congress, understood to be in perfect preservation and order, is the fruit of these labors. It may safely be pronounced to be not only unique in its kind, but to be destined forever to remain so. There is not one chance in millions that such an enthusiasm, for an object so peculiar, will again take possession of any mind of such capacity for the undertaking. But even if that event were less improbable, the materials for such another collection will not only soon cease to exist, but already they exist no longer. A curious illustration of this statement appears in the fact that the Mandans, one of the most remarkable of the native tribes, were swept from the face of the earth by the small pox the year after they were visited by Mr. Catlin. The advance of civilization, even so far as it does not immediately involve the disappearance and extinction of the Indian races, effaces the existence, and before long the memory, of all that was most distinctive in their character and habits; and our children's children will know nothing of those once numerous families of men except by means of what we of this age may rescue from the wreck and preserve for their instruction.

These memorials, in another generation, will be regarded with far more interest than now. They are now regarded with far more interest in foreign countries than by us, to whom they are more familiar. The intelligent American of fifty years hence will go in search of them wherever they may be found, but it will be a subject of grief and shame to him, if he must seek them in the galleries of some European capital. It is understood that advantageous proposals have been made to Mr. Catlin for their purchase abroad, but that, with a disinterested patriotism akin to the zeal with which his favorite investigations have been prosecuted, he prefers that, at some sacrifice to himself, his own country should possess their fruits.

The committee are not disposed to favor an extravagant expenditure, but they are of the opinion, that Americans of the present day owe it to their posterity to avail themselves of this opportunity to secure a property which hereafter cannot fail to be regarded as of altogether peculiar value, and which will be vainly coveted from any other nation into whose hands it may be suffered

to fall. They recommend the adoption of the following resolution:

Resolved by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled, That the joint Committee on the Library be authorized to contract with Mr. George Catlin, for the purchase, on the part of Congress, of his collection illustrative of the character and manners of the North American Indians: Provided, That the cost of the same do not exceed fifty thousand dollars, payable in ten annual instalments.

REPORT