



The Monuments Men

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Louis Bancel LaFarge (1900-1989)

Accomplished architect Louis Bancel LaFarge was born in Boston, Massachusetts on May 17, 1900. Descended from a long line of architects and painters, his relatives included the noted muralist John LaFarge and the art collector Edward W. Hooper. When he was eight years old, his artist parents moved the family to Paris. There, he regularly came into contact with Gertrude Stein and other avant garde artists who defined the modern style. During the family's extensive travels throughout Europe, a visit to Mont St. Michel at the young age of eleven inspired him to become an architect. Returning to the United States for his education, he attended The Choate School, an elite boarding school in Connecticut, before studying architecture at both Harvard and Yale. In the years before the start of World War II, he was a practicing architect with multiple firms in New York City, including his own, LaFarge & Knox.

In May 1942 LaFarge enlisted in the U.S. Army Air Force and was assigned to an Air Corps camouflage unit. He served in North Africa and Algiers alongside his friend from Connecticut, Monuments Man Maj. Theodore Sizer. LaFarge first became involved with the MFAA through Sizer, who arranged for his transfer to SHAEF headquarters in London. There, using a map of France and a list of historic monuments, LaFarge created the so-called "French Handbook," an overview of the country's rich cultural heritage. This pamphlet proved to be a valuable resource to soldiers in the field.

Because of his extensive knowledge of France's cultural objects and monuments, LaFarge was the first Monuments Officer to reach France, arriving in Normandy just one week after the D-Day landings. As Monuments Officer for British 2nd Army, he undertook inspections of cultural monuments and investigated



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looted works of art in the damaged cities of Bayeux and Caen. One of his first investigations concerned the location of the *Bayeux Tapestry*, the famed 11th-century embroidery depicting the Norman conquest of England. LaFarge discovered that the cloth had been secretly removed from its hiding place in the basement of Château de Sourches, near Le Mans, France, to the basement of the Louvre in Paris. Gestapo officers had removed the *Bayeux Tapestry* in early July 1944 on direct orders from Nazi Reichsführer Heinrich Himmler.

LaFarge served in a number of prominent leadership positions within the MFAA. He headed the SHAEF Mission to the Netherlands toward the end of 1944 until his promotion to Chief of the MFAA Branch at SHAEF Headquarters in early 1945. Following the end of hostilities, he was named Chief of the MFAA for the Office of Military Government, U.S. Zone (OMGUS) in Frankfurt, Germany. In this position, he supervised the work of the Monuments Men in the field and was an integral part of early plans for the postwar restitution effort. One of his first challenges involved finding storage for the tens of thousands of works of art and other cultural objects the Monuments Men were discovering in salt mines, castles, and repositories across the U.S. Zone of Occupation. He recommended to SHAEF that collecting points be established to store, sort, catalog, rehabilitate, and eventually return these objects to the countries from which they had been stolen. Along with Monuments Man Lt. Cdr. George Stout, he devised plans for the first and largest of these, the Munich Central Collecting Point. LaFarge went on to open other collecting points including the Wiesbaden Central Collecting Point in Wiesbaden, Germany.

In November 1945, controversy gripped the Monuments operation and its officers. In protest of an order to transport 202 German-owned paintings to the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. for "safe-keeping," 32 Monuments Officers signed or supported a document known as the Wiesbaden Manifesto. While his high-ranking position prevented him from actually signing the document, LaFarge agreed with the sentiments of his colleagues. Concerned that his friends and colleagues' actions would result in court martial, LaFarge hid the signed document in his desk rather than submitting it to his superiors. Determined to find a solution, LaFarge persuaded Monuments Man Lt. Lamont Moore to assist the National Gallery's representative, Col. Henry McBride, with the painting selection, supervise the packing, and then accompany them on their long journey to Washington.

For his role in the recovery and return of Europe's cultural patrimony, LaFarge was awarded the Legion of Merit, the Bronze Star, the Croix de Guerre (France), Order of Merit First Class (Czechoslovakia), and named a Chevalier of the Legion of Honor (France), Officier of the Ordre de la Couronne

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(Belgium), and Officer of the Order of Orange-Nassau (the Netherlands).

Upon his return to the United States, LaFarge resumed his career as a practicing architect. He was a partner in two successful New York City architectural firms, LaFarge, Knox & Murphy, and LaFarge & Morey. Most famous for his residential designs, he created houses in the Beaux Arts style as well as modified contemporary and English manor styles. His work can be seen in homes in the Hamptons, Hudson Valley, New Haven, Charleston, and the Caneel Bay resort in St. John, U.S. Virgin Islands.

An influential member of the architecture community, LaFarge was Fellow, Secretary Director, and President of the New York chapter of the American Institute of Architects, member and trustee of the Beaux-Arts Institute of Design, President and Director of the Municipal Art Society, and a member of the advisory committee for the Cooper Union School of Art and Architecture. He was Director of the executive committee of the American Arbitration Association, a founding member of the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission, Chairman of the Historic Districts Commission for Nantucket, Massachusetts, and a member of the Century Association in New York City.

Bancel LaFarge died in Newtown, Pennsylvania on July 2, 1989. He is buried in Newport, Rhode Island.