

Testimony of Barbara Franco

**Executive Director
Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission**

**On behalf of
The American Association for State and Local History**

On

“Strengthening the National Historical Publications and Records Commission”

Before the

Information Policy, Census, and National Archives Subcommittee

Of the

Oversight and Government Reform Committee

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Chairman Clay, Ranking Member McHenry and members of the Information Policy, Census and National Archives Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today about the value and importance of the National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC), the grant making affiliate of the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA). My name is Barbara Franco and I am the executive director of the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission. I am here today on behalf of a national organization, the American Association for State and Local History whose institutional and individual members represent the many historical museums, societies, libraries and archives around the country who together preserve the history of America in every county and corner of the country. The mission of AASLH is to provide leadership and support for its members who preserve and interpret state and local history in order to make the past more meaningful to all Americans. The members include large

institutions with state or national scope as well as small local organizations and archives with limited or all-volunteer staff. Together they hold and preserve billions of documents. These collections touch the lives of young and old, support tourism and economic development and employ thousands of people. They include the irreplaceable founding documents of our country alongside the records of small communities that define the experiences of the ordinary people whose lives they represent.

The NHPRC helps these non-Federal institutions preserve records of historical value through grants that help locate, preserve, and provide public access to documents, photographs, maps, and other historical materials. NHPRC grants preserve collections and also help preserve and create jobs by training staff and supporting the positions that provide these services.

This support is important because preservation and use of America's documentary heritage is essential to understanding our democracy, history, and culture. In an era when accountability of government is under greater than ever scrutiny, preserving the documentary heritage of national, state and local governments also means preserving the rights of American citizens and insuring an informed and engaged citizenry.

As Charles F. Bryan, Jr., a past chairman of AASLH and director emeritus of the Virginia Historical Society has elegantly put it, "Free and open societies...value history and turn to it for instruction, regardless of what the evidence reveals. They devote significant resources to saving the evidence of the past and making it accessible to the public. I don't think it is a coincidence that since our nation's founding, the number of historical societies and museums has grown to an estimated 15,000, more per capita than any country in the world."

By preserving our documentary heritage and promoting its distribution and use, Americans seek to guarantee the protection of the rights of all, hold government accountable and increase understanding of our history and culture for generations to come. Historical documents are sometimes a matter of life and death. During the 2002

Quecreek Mine rescue in Somerset, Pennsylvania, archival maps were key in locating the trapped miners and saving their lives. Historical plats and deeds are continually referenced to establish legal ownership and property rights. Military service records are used to establish pension and other benefits.

NHPRC is the agency that provides institutions like the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission (PHMC) and other state and local institutions with the funding to preserve these historical documents and make them accessible. Since its inception, 237 public and private Pennsylvania institutions have received more than \$5 million directly from NHPRC or indirectly through the Pennsylvania SHRAB (State Historical Records Advisory Board) or the PHMC. Grants have supported inventory and arrangement of church archives. A processing grant arranged and described collections that document the social impact of mental health care at Pennsylvania Hospital, the nation's first hospital. Microfilming of county and municipal government records improved preservation and access. All of these projects have preserved documents, trained or employed archivists, and made it possible for filmmakers, lawyers, teachers, biographers, authors, journalists and teachers to do their work. A recent grant to the Pennsylvania Heritage Society has supported an Itinerant Archivist Program that funds a professional archivist to work with the staff of local governments to do assessments, recommendations and train staff to better care for records. This program not only creates work for the archivists, but helps train local government employees to more effectively handle their own records programs.

Across the country, examples abound of how NHPRC is making a difference at the state and local level to preserve documents that the public needs and uses. In Ohio, the Ohio Electronic Records committee offered three free seminars on "Guidelines for Managing Electronic Mail" and "Digital Imaging Guidelines in the spring of 2010. These seminars presented the requirements, guidelines and best practices for managing and preserving email and digitizing documents. More than 300 state and local government officials and employees of private organizations attended the seminars held in Columbus, Dayton and Elyria.

The Arizona State Museum has been a recipient of NHPRC grants for over 30 years. They use the funds to train students in the transcription, translation and annotation of Spanish colonial documents that deal with the history of Arizona's tribes. The State Museum team collaborates with tribal scholars and elders to read, discuss and contribute their commentary on the historical events described by the Spanish missionaries and military. Ultimately this work results in publications that are made widely available to scholars and the general public. It has created employment opportunities and training for university students and in the most recent project, Tohono O'odham Community College students. The tribal elders are provided honoraria as compensation for their time and expertise. The project also works extensively with the Hopi Tribe in northern Arizona and with the Tohono O'odham Nation in southern Arizona.

In Virginia, the National Association of Alcoholism and Drug Abuse Counselors Education and Research Foundation received funding to develop an archives and records management program to document its work.

In South Dakota, the State Historical Records Advisory Board received funding to support a regrant program that goes to local historical societies and county level offices. Future plans to establish a circuit rider archivist program will be more likely to happen if NHPRC receives increased funds.

The federal-state partnerships with State Historical Records Advisory Boards have been key to the success of the grants program and these and other examples of how states are working with many diverse collections is testimony to the strength of the program. In addition, NHPRC has supported national initiatives through organizations like AASLH. Since 1981, AASLH has received grants that support continuing education for archivists, training formative American archivists in partnership with the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of the American Indian as well as assistance in the development of local public records programs. Some grants have fostered regional cooperation or addressed major national issues like electronic records management.

NHPRC has been authorized at \$10 million for nearly twenty years since 1991. Now more than ever, with the need for trained staff, the importance of digital collections, the need to share information with the public and the demand for access to collections, increased NHPRC support is sorely needed. We are asking that funding for NHPRC be reauthorized at \$20 million to help members of the public, archivists, documentary editors, and historians by preserving and making available non-federal records that are essential to our national story and to the daily functioning of our democracy and our economy.

Thank you.