

**Testimony before the Information Policy, Census, and
National Archives Sub-Committee of the Committee on Oversight
and Government Reform of the House of Representatives of the U. S.
Congress, 9 June 2010 by Ira Berlin**

Chairman Clay, Ranking Member McHenry, and Members of the Subcommittee. My name is Ira Berlin and I teach history at the University of Maryland, where I am Professor of History and Distinguished University Professor. Today, I am presenting on behalf of the American Historical Association, the oldest the largest organization of American Historians. I am most pleased to have the opportunity to testify in support of the reauthorization of the NHPRC with a budget of \$20 million and urge an increase funding for an agency that I believe is critical to the American people's understanding of their past.

The National Historical Publication and Records Commission is the seedbed of contemporary understandings of American history. During the last sixty years, the NHPRC, more than any other single entity--governmental or private--has preserved and published the essential records that have made it possible for the American people to know their history. This history speaks to the entirety of the American experience, workers as well as bosses, slaves as

well as slaveholders, women as well as men--in short, the people who built, protected, and defended our great Republic.

You have already heard accountings the extraordinary record of the NHPRC in creating archival collections in every state and territory of the United States and magnificent documentary volumes, microfilms, and CDs these collections have spawned. Rather than repeat that accounting, I would like to speak to my own experience as the founding director of the Freedmen and Southern Society Project, a collaborative study of the transit of black people from slavery to freedom between the beginning of the Civil War in 1861 and the beginning of Radical Reconstruction in 1867, which has published the multi-volume documentary history of emancipation under the title Freedom.

Transforming our understanding of emancipation by putting slaves themselves at the center of the story freedom's arrival, the Freedom volumes have won numerous plaudits. The New York Times called it "this generations most significant encounter with the American past" and the Washington Post declared "one of the great monuments of contemporary Civil War scholarship. As you can imagine, I

am rightly proud of that praise, but I am even more pleased with the FSSP's other accomplishments.

First among these, the FSSP has served as a school for historians of the Civil War. Young scholars fresh from graduate school, who now occupy a dominate place in the major history departments across the nation--among them University of Chicago, Columbia University, University of Pennsylvania, Northwestern, Duke, Howard, Penn State universities--received their start on the Project. In addition to editing the Freedom volumes, their own work--which draws upon the collections created by the FSSP--has won them every major prize for historical studies, including the Pulitzer, Bancroft, Lincoln and Douglass prizes, as well as all of the major awards given by the American Historical Association and the Organization of American History. Some of these alums of the FSSP now have students of their own, who have also written prize-winning books, and assumed positions in major universities. The FSSP has been a fount of scholarship and at the base of that fount in the NHPRC.

More than founding the careers of young scholars, those same scholars have taught tens, perhaps hundreds of thousands of students, providing those with new understanding of Civil War history. Since the FSSP stresses

documents those documents--especially the letters by slaves--become a means of teaching students how to read documents, a skill which of courses reaches beyond the study of the past. Speaking about his own students, a teacher in Mississippi Community College, put the case like this: "Whether one needs the intensive documentation of a professional historian, a point of reference for future research, or merely a small quotation to illustrate a point in a lecture, this volume will prove useful. Most importantly, it provides what the average reader will find most insightful: the voice of the participants themselves."

And more, the volumes of Freedom have been cited by sixty-five college-level texts, several hundred monographs, over three hundred websites and been the basis of museum exhibits, videos, and theatrical productions. Among those who drew upon them was a young documentarian, Ken Burns, whose famous Civil War series reached an audience greater than any college text could.

What the FSSP has done for slaves and former slaves--given them a voice in American history, other NHPRC projects have done for other people unrepresented in American history: women, Native Americans, working people of all sorts, and immigrants old and new.

These projects, like the FSSP project--which would not have been possible without the support of the NHPRC--have given the American people a new more inclusive understanding of their history. But even that is too modest a claim, because the world of the FSSP project as reached beyond the boundaries of the United States. Foreigners, who are deeply interested in the American people and the American past, and who also write our history, employed the volumes of Freedom, along with other NHPRC documentary collections--in print, in microfilm, and online--write American history.

Quantifying the influence of the FSSP is one thing, comprehending how it influenced our understanding of the American experience is another. I believe the evidence shows that reading the Freedom documents--especially the letters of former slave--has affirmed the American people's sense that they make their own history and that those people--ordinary people like themselves--who have shaped the past by extension can shape the future. In short, the Project's work--and that of history the NHPRC has sponsored for some sixty years is doing the work of history in a democracy: arming the people to take charge of the society which has been bequeathed to them.