

STATEMENT OF

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BEFORE THE

INFORMATION POLICY, CENSUS, AND NATIONAL ARCHIVES

SUBCOMMITTEE

OVERSIGHT AND GOVERNMENT REFORM COMMITTEE

U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

HEARINGS ON

THE NATIONAL HISTORICAL RECORDS AND PUBLICATIONS COMMISSION

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RELEASE UPON DELIVERY

First, I would like to thank the Committee for the privilege of testifying in support of reauthorization of the National Historical Publications and Records Commission. My name is Pete Daniel, and, as a past president of the Organization of American Historians (OAH), I am representing its 9,000 members who include academic historians, K-12 teachers, public historians, and anyone interested in the history of the United States. The OAH holds an annual convention, publishes the *Journal of American History* and the *OAH Magazine of History*, and is vitally involved in the intellectual life of the country. Until I recently retired, I was a curator at the National Museum of American History. I have published six books, numerous articles, curated exhibits, collected objects, and conducted research throughout the country.

The National Historical Publications and Records Commission gave critical support to the Booker T. Washington Papers Project that began in 1967 under Professor Louis R. Harlan's guidance and that concluded in 1989 with a cumulative index of the thirteen volumes of documents. I was fortunate to be chosen as the University of Maryland graduate student to work on this project when it began in 1967, and when I graduated with a Ph.D. in 1970 and left the project, I was assistant editor.

The first volume of letters included this notation in the acknowledgments: "The National Historical Publications Commission [and Records was added later] for its part in initiating the Booker T. Washington Papers, its assignment of two fellows in advanced editing of documentary sources in U.S. history to the project, several grants-in-aid, and the friendly interest of Oliver W. Holmes, Handy Bruce Fant, Sara D. Jackson, and Fred Shelley." I vividly recall Louis Harlan introducing me to Dr. Holmes at the National

Archives and the assistance his office provided as I searched for Booker T. Washington letters in numerous Archives Record Groups. Louis Harlan also sent me to Tuskegee University, the Schomburg Library in New York, and Howard University searching for Washington material, and I consider these assignments a formative influence on my career. One of the fellows for advanced editing of documentary sources, the late Stuart Kaufman, went on to found and edit the Samuel Gompers Papers project, now in the process of publishing its final volume. These projects have not only made available important documentation on two outstanding leaders but also trained dozens of graduate students to evaluate documents, identify sometimes obscure people and events, and learn the craft of documentary editing.

The Booker T. Washington project made available documents relating to African American farmers, businessmen, students, politicians, teachers, and philanthropists. Washington kept every scrap of paper that crossed his desk, so his papers open an invaluable window into the African American community, from George Washington Carver to the black farmer inquiring about Tuskegee enrollment for his son or daughter. Successful leaders in government, education, business and other fields usually understand the importance of preserving a record of their work, but many citizens work hard, mind their own business, and leave little behind to mark their lives. The NHPRC has been instrumental in preserving not only records such as those of Booker T. Washington and Samuel Gompers but also neglected but significant records in states, counties, and municipalities throughout the country that illuminate the lives of the less famous.

Without documentation, a historian is helpless. NHPRC projects that make available a wide range of sources have been crucial to historical scholarship.

In my career, I have traveled widely to find documentation. Without the diligent work of archivists from the large repositories to the small town libraries and from federal repositories to state and local archives, there would be fewer sources for historical research, and the historical record would be impoverished. The NHPRC has played an important role in giving assistance to projects of national significance in libraries and collections throughout the country.

The flourishing digital environment today is quite different from the card files used to track our documentation on the Booker T. Washington Papers in the late 1960s. The Washington Papers at the Library of Congress are second in volume only to those of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. These are paper records that, with proper care, will endure for centuries. In some instances what we call progress bites back with unintended consequences. The microfilm editions so popular in the 1960s through the 1980s, for example, are barely usable today because computers are replacing microfilm and microfiche readers. In addition, documents generated on early computer software are often unreadable as programs roll over and become obsolete with alarming frequency. While the National Archives and the Library of Congress have resources to attack this challenge, many state, county, and local institutions do not. There is a major opportunity to digitalize microfilm editions and make such collections widely available online. The NHPRC is taking the lead on making digital editions of the papers

of the founding fathers available. Amid all the web chatter, it is imperative that researchers find ample documentary sources on the web that provide a factual basis for scholarship.

The genius of this country lies in its diversity, and preserving the records that fully document all citizens should be an important priority. The NHPRC over the years has done a remarkable job in providing leadership in preserving documentation that allows a more complete understanding of our history. Members of the Organization of American Historians have played a significant role in NHPRC projects, for they understand the importance of preserving the documentary record of our past. The OAH enthusiastically supports the reauthorization of the National Historical and Publications and Records Commission, not only because it has helped to train editors and graduate students and make available documentation of important people and events, but also because it has through grants supported local records projects and, most important, helped preserve our documentary heritage.