

*Statement  
Of  
Chairman Wm. Lacy Clay, Chairman  
Information Policy, Census, and National Archives Subcommittee  
Oversight and Government Reform Committee  
Wednesday, June 9, 2010  
2154 Rayburn HOB  
2:00 p.m.*

***“Strengthening the National Historical Publications and Records Commission”***

Welcome to today’s hearing on strengthening the National Historical Publications and Records Commission, or NHPRC.

The National Historical Publications and Records Commission is the nation’s oldest grant-making body for the preservation, publication and use of documentary sources relating to the history of the United States. This prestigious Commission was established in 1934, in the same legislation that created the National Archives, and began making grants to non-federal recipients in 1964. It is composed of representatives of the three branches of federal government, as well as professional associations of archivists, historians, documentary editors and records administrators.

In its most recent authorizing legislation, in 2004, Congress endorsed appropriations for the Commission not to exceed ten million dollars – an amount which has not been increased since 1988. In that time, there have been sweeping changes to archives, records and historical research. These include a significant increase in the creation and use of electronic records and severe cutbacks from state and local governments for preservation and access. In addition there has been an explosion in citizens’ requests for records that document their individual rights: evidence of birth, education, marriage, divorce, property owned, obligations satisfied, and criminal conduct, that are held at the state and local level.

Despite these major changes, the Commission’s authorization amount has not been raised. In fact, for most of the past decade, attempts were made to zero out funding for the Commission. These attempts failed, and Congressional supporters were able to restore funding. However, the fight to maintain the very existence of the Commission has obscured the real need to increase authorized funding to a level commensurate with its mission, history, and significance, as well as the new and ongoing requirements facing archives and historical research.

The need to increase funding and expand the programs of the Commission is clear. The Commission is able to make grants to less than half of those applicants who meet or exceed the requirements each year. Just over fifty percent of those who apply and who are judged qualified and worthy to receive grants are turned down by the Commission due to lack of funds. In addition to worthy grants being denied within existing programs, the major changes to archives and historical research – by professionals and by citizens – over the last few decades have increased the need for additional grant programs. The National

Historical Publications and Records Commission has a long history not only of helping institutions preserve and make records of historical value broadly available, but of adapting to changing needs. The Commission has evolved at times to expand its mandate when necessary. This is one of those times.

We will hear today from the Archivist of the United States, distinguished Members of Congress, historians, records managers and archivists about the critical preservation efforts that the Commission supports through its grants program. We will review the success of the grant programs over the last 45 years; examine the major changes to archives, records and historical research since the Commission's current authorized funding level was set, in 1988; and discuss expanding the funding and scope of its grants programs in order to bring the Commission in line with current and future needs.

One hundred years ago, in 1910, Congress held the first hearings on the creation of a permanent national historical publications commission. Seventy five years ago, in 1935, that Commission finally met for the first time. Sixty years ago, in 1950, the National Historical Publications Commission's membership was enlarged and for the first time was authorized to appoint an executive director and staff. Forty-six years ago, in 1964, the Commission awarded its first grants. Ten years later, in 1974 the Commission, now the National Historical Publications and Records Commission, or NHPRC, began funding state and local archival projects. Twenty years ago, the NHPRC was authorized at ten million dollars – the same level it received in its most recent authorization. In those twenty years, more has changed about archives, document creation and preservation, historical records and research than in the eighty years before. We have to do better. We must recognize the changes that have occurred, we must recognize the critical importance of records, and we must update and strengthen this important and valuable federal program.

It has been more than twenty years since the NHPRC's authorization was set at ten million dollars. In the past, there have been attempts to eliminate it by those who claimed the Commission was wasteful or redundant. These previous efforts, I believe, reflected a fundamental misunderstanding of what the NHPRC is and what it does. I am confident that this confusion is, like the records the Commission's grants preserve, part of our past.

I introduced HR 1556 last year to authorize the NHPRC at twenty million dollars a year for the next five years. Judging from the wide range of witnesses, the great interest shown by those here in attendance, and the letters and statements we have received in support of this bill, I hope it will enjoy the broad and bipartisan support here in the House that it clearly does across the country.

And speaking of letters of support for the Commission, I would like to quote from one of them, sent to the Administrator of General Services:

“Documents are the primary sources of history: they are the means by which later generations draw close to historical events and enter into the thoughts, fears, and hopes of the past...the Commission has done the most valuable work...this work...must not be allowed to falter...Compared with the funds required for other programs for the national

good, those requested by this Commission for this program are modest indeed...I wish you continued success in this great effort to enable the American people to repossess its historical heritage.” The letter is dated January 19, 1963, and is signed “John F. Kennedy, President of the United States.”

I wholeheartedly support the NHPRC. It is a vital, successful, and efficient program. I strongly encourage my colleagues to support increasing the authorized funding to a level commensurate with the Commission’s goals, and one that recognizes its importance in helping to preserve and make available our nation’s documentary heritage.