

TESTIMONY OF DAVID S. FERRIERO
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BEFORE THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON
INFORMATION POLICY, CENSUS AND NATIONAL ARCHIVES
OF THE
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND GOVERNMENT REFORM
ON
“STRENGTHENING THE NATIONAL HISTORICAL PUBLICATIONS AND
RECORDS COMMISSION”

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Chairman Clay and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting me to participate in this hearing on the National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC). I would also like to thank you, Mr. Chairman, for introducing the National Historical Publications and Records Commission reauthorization bill. While the National Archives is the steward for Federal records, the National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC) augments that work by awarding competitive, matching grants that help preserve and make accessible a much wider variety of important historical records that tell our American story. Together the National Archives and the Commission make an investment in the health of the nation’s records vital to our common understanding of our rights, history, and culture. Your bill will ensure the authorization of this program through 2014.

As this Subcommittee knows, the Commission was created in 1934 in the same bill that established the National Archives, and it shows the prescience of the Congress at that time to

bind the Commission and the Archives together. For the Commission provides the National Archives with a unique way to reach out to the nation's archives—in communities in every state, with governments at all levels, and with historical societies, colleges and universities, and other organizations. We are not alone here in Washington. We are a part of a network of archivists, records managers, historians, and others dedicated to preserving the primary sources of our nation's history.

As Archivist of the United States, I serve as the chair of the Commission. It is a responsibility that I am honored to have and one that I take very seriously. I say this as one who, for the past three decades in the library profession, has witnessed firsthand the power of these modest grants to encourage and leverage archival projects that become lasting foundations for a deeper understanding of our shared American experience. The Commission's membership is drawn from the executive, judicial, and legislative branches of the Federal government and from professional associations of historians, editors, and archivists. It rigorously reviews and competitively selects projects each year that preserve historical documents and make them available to all Americans. I would like to offer a few examples of some recent NHPRC grants:

Prior to receiving a grant from the NHPRC, the city of Seattle had no municipal archives. NHPRC support established an archive that now includes over 6,000 cubic feet of textual records; 3,000 maps and drawings, 3,000 audiotapes; hundreds of hours of motion picture film; and over 1.5 million photographic images. Among the archives are records documenting the anti-Chinese riots of the 1880s, the gold rush pioneers of 1897, the labor movement, two World's Fairs (1909 and 1962), and urban renewal projects such as the Pike Place Market, the largest public market in the country. A 2009 NHPRC grant will help the Seattle Municipal Archives

process an additional 1,858 linear feet of hidden collections that require basic attention to make them known and available for use. Raymond Mohl, author of several books on urban history, says, "The Seattle Municipal Archives is among the best such facilities in the United States."

In Maine, over 150 organizations from the Bangor Museum and Center for History to the York County Registry of Probate have been able to preserve local records that might otherwise be lost. For example, NHPRC funding made possible the description and preservation of 20,000 ship plans originating from the Bath Iron Works, Maine's first steel shipyard, dating back to the 19th century.

In South Carolina, NHPRC has provided nearly \$1.5 million to historical records projects. Combined with more than \$2.5 million in South Carolina cost sharing, including in-kind and cash matching funds, a total investment of approximately \$4 million has been made to ensure a future for South Carolina's past. Some of these funds helped to re-house the manuscript collections at the Charleston Library, helping to preserve nationally significant collections including letters from George Washington, Nathaniel Green, and Alexander Hamilton, the original manuscript of *Porgy*--which later became the American musical "Porgy and Bess," and the log of the Confederate raider ship *CSS Shenandoah*.

The grants described above were not awarded just because of the importance of the funding to people in Seattle, Maine or South Carolina. They were made to preserve, make accessible and enrich our nation's historical record. More importantly, however, they were made with an understanding that the ultimate grant beneficiaries are future generations of Americans who will continue to learn from history's lessons.

NHPRC grants, however, can also make records accessible in ways that have a dramatic impact on the lives of ordinary citizens today. The Families of Vietnamese Political Prisoners Association (FVPPA) was founded in 1977 to assist citizens of Vietnam in applying through the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees' Orderly Departure Program to immigrate to the United States. A grant from the NHPRC to Texas Tech established the Vietnam Archive's Families of Vietnamese Political Prisoner's Association (FVPPA) Collection which continues to help Vietnamese refugees immigrate to the U.S. In June 2009, a former Vietnamese reeducation camp prisoner was able to obtain political asylum in the U.S. by using the documents found in the FVPPA Collection to prove his case.

Another area where NHPRC support is making a difference is in helping states and localities expand access to digitized records on the Web. Virtually every museum and library and archives is struggling to meet the challenges of so many records, so much public demand, and so few resources to make them easily accessible. And electronic records—those created as digital files—increase the scale, cost, and complexity of the problem. It is a challenge we are acutely aware of with federal records at the National Archives, and it is a challenge we share with every state, city, county and town across the nation. I will be the first to admit that we do not have all of the answers here in Washington, DC. Through the NHPRC, however, we are able to fund innovative projects that contribute to a shared base of knowledge on best practices for creating, preserving and providing access to electronic records.

All of us in the federal government are very aware of the constrained budget environment. I would only add that the equally difficult budget situations in most states are having a very troubling impact on state and local archival programs. I would argue that the preservation of our

historical records across the nation is as important in tough economic times as it is in prosperous times. At times like this, support from the NHPRC is particularly crucial in leveraging resources from states and the private sector—since NHRPC award amounts are usually matched one-to-one—and also in originating and sustaining jobs for archivists and researchers.

Over its entire history, the NHPRC has stretched the dollars appropriated by Congress to meet a broad array of programming. It supports essential archival projects with an emphasis on revealing hidden collections; publishing historical records in print editions and online; educating archivists and documentary editors; furthering electronic records research and development; and supporting the national network of state archives.

Through its grants program, the NHPRC fulfills Congress's vision for national leadership to preserve and make accessible our nation's rich documentary heritage. Schoolchildren use these documents in their study of history; citizens use these documents to discover their own heritage and to affirm their basic rights; and storytellers use these documents to write new chapters in the American story—from the award-winning historical biography of John Adams to the PBS series on the Civil War and America's National Parks—all are made possible through our support of the original documents in our nation's archives.

I support the reauthorization of the Commission and look forward to vigorously carrying forth its mission.

Thank you again for the opportunity to appear today and I look forward to answering your questions.