

TESTIMONY DELIVERED AT “STRENGTHENING
THE NATIONAL HISTORICAL PUBLICATIONS AND
RECORDS COMMISSION”
INFORMATION POLICY, CENSUS, AND NATIONAL ARCHIVES SUBCOMMITTEE
COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND GOVERNMENT REFORM
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
CONGRESS OF THE UNITED STATES

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Chairman Clay, Ranking Member McHenry, and Members of the Subcommittee. My name is Steven Hahn, the Roy F. and Jeannette P. Nichols Professor of History at the University of Pennsylvania, and I am very pleased to have the opportunity of coming before this committee to speak in support of the reauthorization of, and increased funding for, the NHPRC. I have been a direct beneficiary of the resources that the NHPRC has made available, and I have seen the many ways in which the projects the Commission supports benefit historical learning and understanding in the United States.

Early in my career, I worked as an associate editor at the Freedom History Project (FHP) at the University of Maryland. At the time, I was a newly minted Ph.D. from Yale University, a

scholar of Southern and African-American history, and was very excited about the work that the FHP was doing: assembling a multi-volume documentary history of slave emancipation in the United States using the records deposited at the National Archives. Most editorial projects, then and since, have focused on very well-known, nationally significant, and powerful figures and institutions. They published the papers of presidents, senators, cabinet members, military leaders, and business magnates. The FHP, by contrast, was uncovering the experiences of both the powerful and powerless, of policy-makers and bureaucrats, of ordinary soldiers and slaves who were bringing about the destruction of slavery and the construction of a free society in the largest emancipation the world has ever seen (not to mention the best documented one). Project editors read over two million documents organized in several different record groups in order to distill several large, highly selective, volumes covering the Civil War and early Reconstruction years. Five of those volumes have now been published.

The work of the FHP has been recognized not only for its scholarly excellence and imagination but also for transforming our perspectives on the Civil War era. Project volumes have won numerous awards, have been read by almost every scholar who has a serious interest in the period, and are widely cited in the scholarly literature. Equally impressive, many of the historians who have worked on the project have gone on to make major scholarly contributions of their own. Owing to the documents I had an opportunity to read, compile, and annotate during my year as an associate editor on the project, I became increasingly interested in African American politics in the rural South. The material raised intriguing questions both about what former slaves were doing in their first years of freedom and about where their sensibilities and practices came from. When I left the project to take up a post in the History Department at the University of California, San Diego, I decided to pursue some of these questions and to write a

book about what I found. That book, *A Nation under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration*, which I began to formulate while working on the FHP, was eventually published by Harvard University Press and awarded the 2004 Pulitzer Prize in History.

Over the years that the NHPRC has supported the FHP, numerous historians like myself have had the opportunity to find work in this rich intellectual environment, to develop our skills as researchers and writers, and subsequently, in no small measure due to our experience at the FHP, have been hired into full time positions at a range of colleges and universities and have produced scholarship of genuine importance. Former editors now have endowed chairs, full professorships, associate professorships, and assistant professorships at fifteen (15) different institutions across the United States including: Columbia University, the University of Maryland, the University of Pennsylvania, Northwestern University, the University of Iowa, the University of Chicago, Duke University, Catholic University, and Penn State University (see Appendix). They have also won Pulitzer Prizes, Bancroft Prizes, and other major prizes for their work; have become MacArthur Foundation Fellows, have served on state humanities councils, and have been elected president of the Organization of American Historians. Which is to say that over the past several decades, when the academic job market has generally been anemic and discouraging to young scholars, the NHPRC has not only helped to provide employment for talented historians who otherwise might have been left without it (the great bulk of NHPRC grant money is spent on salaries), but has also helped launch the distinguished careers of historians who were just starting out.

But the impact of NHPRC goes well beyond academic employment and published scholarship. It nourishes the educations and intellectual appetites of students and other learners

at all levels of American society. In the time since I worked at the FHP, I have used the project documents and essays in a variety of classroom settings. I have assigned project volumes – some of which have been published in abbreviated form – to my lecture courses and seminars at the University of Pennsylvania (as well as at other institutions of higher education at which I have taught). I have brought project documents and essays into public school teacher workshops that I have been involved with for the past twenty-five years in San Diego (CA), Los Angeles (CA), Rockford (IL), Orlando (FL), Louisville (Ky), and Dunlap (TN); the teachers, in turn, have brought the documents and other related materials into their junior and senior high school classes and have stimulated interest in our past and an exciting sense of discovery among their students. And I used project materials extensively when I taught college-level courses for economically disadvantaged adults in north Chicago, in what is known as the Odyssey Program, earlier in the past decade.

The reach of the NHPRC has been enormous and the benefits that have been derived from its resources are greater still. The FHP is only one indication of the pathbreaking directions that may be taken – and could not possibly be taken without, at least, the level of support that the NHPRC can provide. At a time when the connections between past and present are very much a part of the public consciousness and the political discourse, we need to promote the type of work that can make the past – and our many pasts – come alive for all Americans. The NHPRC has already made an invaluable contribution toward that end, and I would urge you to authorize the level of funding that will allow the Commission not only to continue, but also to expand its important undertakings.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I would be happy to answer your questions.

Appendix

Numbers and Careers of Former Freedom History

Project Editors and NHPRC Fellows

Freedom History Project Former Editors

Ira Berlin, Professor of History, University of Maryland, Past President of the Organization of American Historians, Bancroft Prize

Francine C. Cary, President of Washington D.C. Humanities Council and Florida Humanities Council

Wayne K. Durrill, Professor of History, University of Cincinnati

Barbara Jeanne Fields, Professor of History, Columbia University, MacArthur Foundation Fellow

Thavolia Glymph, Associate Professor of African and African-American Studies and History, Duke University

Steven Hahn, Roy F. and Jeannette P. Nichols Professor of History, University of Pennsylvania, Pulitzer Prize in History, Bancroft Prize

Rene Hayden, Independent Scholar

Anthony E. Kaye, Associate Professor of History, Pennsylvania State University

Lawrence T. McDonnell, Lecturer, Iowa State University

Kate Masur, Assistant Professor of History, Northwestern University

Susan E. O'Donovan, Assistant Professor of History, University of Memphis

Joseph P. Reidy, Professor of History and Associate Provost, Howard University

John C. Rodrigue, Lawrence and Theresa Salameo Professor of History, Stone Hill College

Julie Saville, Associate Professor of History, University of Chicago

Freedom History Project Former NHPRC Fellows

Michael Honey, Fred T. and Dorothy G. Haley Professor of the Humanities, University
of Washington, President of the Labor and Working-Class History Association

Leslie Schwalm, Professor of History, University of Iowa

Stephen A. West, Associate Professor of History, Catholic University