

**Reauthorization of the
National Historical Publications and Records Commission**

**House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform
Information Policy, Census, and National Archives Subcommittee**

**Testimony of Peter Gottlieb, Ph.D.
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Chairman Clay, Ranking Member McHenry, and Members of the Subcommittee:

My name is Peter Gottlieb. I am the State Archivist of Wisconsin and director of the Library–Archives Division of the Wisconsin Historical Society. The Library–Archives supports the mission of the Wisconsin Historical Society by acquiring, preserving, and providing access to a large and distinguished collection of published and unpublished documents on Wisconsin and North American history.

I am here today representing the Society of American Archivists, which I currently serve as its elected president. Founded in 1936, SAA is North America’s oldest and largest organization of professional archivists, representing 5,700 members across the United States and in more than 20 countries. Archivists are the professionals who are entrusted by society to ensure access to the records of the people’s government at all levels, to ensure the authenticity and integrity of those records, and to preserve and make accessible a credible and reasonably complete historical account of government and other aspects of society.

On behalf of SAA and the wider archives community in the United States, thank you for convening this hearing. I offer my testimony in favor of increasing the authorization for the National Historical Publications and Records Commission’s competitive grants program to \$20 million and creating a new program for pass-through grants to states that is also authorized at \$20 million.

In the speech that he delivered on the evening of his election, President-elect Obama spoke eloquently of the true strength of our nation: “... the enduring power of our ideals: democracy, liberty, opportunity, and unyielding hope.” He added that, “Our stories are singular, but our destiny is shared.”

From community institutions like public libraries and local historical societies throughout America to the National Archives’ main facilities here in Washington, archives keep our stories as a public trust and make them available to all. Just as we protect our country’s natural resources to sustain our way of life, we must also safeguard this nation’s archives in order to

strengthen democratic government and to ensure that we pass from one generation to the next our record of progress and the values that we as a society uphold.

The National Historical Publications and Records Commission is the only federal program whose specific purpose is to help archivists and other professionals meet this national obligation. The Commission has awarded more than \$175 million in competitive grants to more than 4,600 state and local government archives, historical and genealogical societies, colleges and universities, and other institutions and non-profit groups in all states and territories. Funds are used for various purposes – preserving historical records, digitizing collections, producing oral histories, publishing documentary editions, establishing new archives programs – to preserve and provide access to records of national impact and importance. These grants make accessible records and documentary editions for use by classroom teachers, students, biographers, local historians, lawyers, genealogists, journalists, documentary filmmakers, and many others. In the majority of cases, NHPRC funding supports new jobs for skilled professionals who do the preservation, digitizing, organizing, cataloging, or editorial work.

Notwithstanding the fact that NHPRC's funding authorization has remained at \$10 million since 1991, the agency's competitive grants have a distinguished record of supporting innovation at the state and local level that has a major impact on federal records. These grants, which support new jobs at institutions throughout the country, have made substantial contributions to preserving and providing access to our nation's documentary heritage in the following areas:

- ***Improving the accessibility of the historical record.*** NHPRC research fellowship and archival processing funds supported the development of a method to reduce significantly the un-cataloged backlogs of collections in historical repositories around the country, thus helping those repositories to make important primary sources more quickly and easily available to students, scholars, and other researchers.
- ***Addressing the growing challenge of electronic records.*** NHPRC provides funding to help records programs address the explosion of computer-generated records. The work accomplished by the admittedly modest funding available has been essential in creating scalable solutions that can be applied in towns, counties, states, and organizations across the U.S. Without such work, the nation faces historical amnesia as its documentary heritage exists increasingly in transitory and highly perishable electronic formats.
- ***Making community connections to national history.*** On a competitive basis, NHPRC provides re-grants to states that make it possible for smaller, grassroots organizations scattered throughout the country to receive grants of even a few hundred dollars that can make a significant difference. These organizations, including historical societies, local public libraries, ethnic organizations, and local governments, are key to preserving the diversity of the record that makes up the American experience. These re-grants also ensure that it is not just the history of the great cities, but also of small communities in every corner of the country, that is preserved for future generations.

NHPRC's competitive grants for archives are essential and should be funded at a higher level of \$20 million. But these grants alone cannot meet the range of needs to preserve and ensure access to all the historical records kept in American archives. Many local government and community repositories whose records constitute a vital part of our documentary heritage cannot qualify for competitive grants and do not benefit from any type of NHPRC funding. The dollars within their own budgets are insufficient to match NHPRC funds, their current facilities often fall below qualifying standards, and they have a critical need for additional employees to manage the records entrusted to them.

These archives, which are also preserving our nation's stories, need help from NHPRC that could come through a new program of pass-through grants to every state and U.S. territory. These grants would reach many more archives, would strengthen their access and preservation capabilities, would more broadly protect our national archival resources, and would bring the history recorded in many more documents to people throughout the country.

Given the importance of the competitive grants administered by NHPRC, the remarkable return on investment that this agency has realized, and the unmet need for a pass-through grants program, the Society of American Archivists strongly endorses reauthorization of the NHPRC competitive grants program at an annual level of \$20 million and creation of a new program for pass-through grants to states that is authorized at an annual level of \$20 million. This modest amount for archives and records would complement other national initiative grants, such as \$250 million for libraries through the Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA), \$50 million for museums through the Institute for Museum and Library Services (IMLS), and \$35 million for historic buildings.

NHPRC is the *only* federal program that focuses on records programs and projects. It is the *only* federal program that links federal archives with those held by states, counties, municipalities, universities, and nongovernmental organizations. And thus it is the *only* federal program that specifically supports Americans' right and need to know both their heritage and the workings of their public offices.

In order to write our school textbooks and design our instructional websites, in order to produce our documentary and feature films about America, in order to engage all citizens of our country in the continuing experiment of democratic government, and in order to inspire people around the world with the standards of human rights and opportunity that the United States at its best represents, we must have well-preserved and accessible archives. NHPRC grants have provided essential support for this national goal, but its current authorization falls short of today's need.

In support of the proposal for NHPRC's initial grant-making authorization, President John F. Kennedy said, "If the Commission is to plan a balanced national program...it must have resources on which it can depend. Compared with funds required for other programs for the national good, those requested by this Commission are modest indeed."

His words remain true today. In the last four and a half decades, NHPRC grants have proven the value of a federal investment in our documentary record. A reauthorization of \$20 million for competitive grants and addition of \$20 million for pass-through grants to the states is still,

comparatively, “modest indeed” – but it promises to make NHPRC even more effective in preserving our documentary heritage and ensuring its accessibility.

Thank you.

Respectfully Submitted By:

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