

TESTIMONY OF SUSAN H. PERDUE
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BEFORE THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON
INFORMATION POLICY, CENSUS, AND NATIONAL ARCHIVES
OF THE
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND GOVERNMENT REFORM
ON
“REAUTHORIZATION OF THE NATIONAL HISTORICAL PUBLICATIONS AND RECORDS
COMMISSION”

JUNE 9, 1010

Chairman Clay, ranking Member McHenry, and Members of the Subcommittee, I am Susan Holbrook Perdue, president-elect of the Association for Documentary Editing. I am very grateful for this opportunity to speak on behalf of my professional organization in support of reauthorization of the National Historical Publications and Records Commission and an increase in its funding. I look forward to the insights provided by my fellow panelists.

My purpose here today is twofold. First, I want to describe what it is that documentary editors do and the manner in which the profession preserves, establishes, explains, and makes accessible our nation’s historical and literary documents. Second, I will make the case that what we do as documentary editors is not possible without the ongoing support of the NHPRC. The strongest message I want to impart is exactly how essential the work we do is to every American. As a society, we need the sort of expertise that editors provide in order to clearly understand and look at the historical record so that we might have informed and reasoned debates as part of a true democracy. This is not a partisan endeavor but a mission to establish the definitive works of our historical legacy. This is especially important when it comes to the texts of our Founding Fathers. These documents are at the core of our nation’s history and they continue to be the substance of significant debate. Many Americans want to lay claim to them, and they should. These documents are part of everyone’s story. For this reason, they deserve the time and attention that they receive from the scholars who are now editing them.

The Association for Documentary Editing, or ADE, is the professional organization for documentary editors. It was founded in 1978, three years after the establishment of the NHPRC, by a group of editors with the mission to promote documentary editing through the cooperation and exchange of ideas among the community of editors. The ADE was also created to build on our shared commitment to the highest professional standards of accuracy of transcription, editorial method, and intellectual access to our nation’s documentary heritage.

The ADE now has more than 350 members who work with a wide range of historical and literary figures, representing a broad swath of our country's history.

For example, there is an editorial project called Documentary Relations of the Southwest working on the first written accounts of contact with indigenous peoples in the 16th century representing the states of Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and California, and northern Mexico.¹ The Race and Slavery Petitions Project located at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro has a free web-based searchable collection of nearly 3,000 legislative and almost 15,000 county court petitions from sixteen southern states including the District of Columbia. These petitions, written on behalf of, or by slaves and free blacks, date from the period of the American Revolution to the Civil War.² The Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project located at George Washington University is working with a variety of media that showcase Roosevelt's writings as well as her television, and radio recordings. The project provides an electronic edition of Roosevelt's 8,000 "My Day" columns free to anyone with Internet access. The Papers of George Catlett Marshall has been publishing the records of that significant military leader and architect of the Marshall Plan since 1977. When Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates received the Marshall Foundation Award in the fall of 2009, he acknowledged the importance of the written legacy in quoting from Marshall's speeches and he pointed to the lessons he had learned from Marshall in making political and military decisions. Volumes one through five are available for free online.³

These are a few examples of the variety of documentary editions represented within ADE. As our profession has expanded, so have the subjects, which now encompass the sciences, medicine, philosophy, religion, and the arts as well. There are projects devoted to the writings of Albert Einstein, George Santayana, Joseph Smith, and Emily Dickinson, among others. ADE's members publish documents in print volumes, on microfilm, and increasingly on the web. From its inception, the ADE has worked with the NHPRC as a collaborator and partner in supporting our shared and often overlapping interests as archivists, editors, and scholars. We have worked together for over three decades to preserve and to our present our documentary heritage.

¹To read more about the Documentary Relations of the Southwest, go to:
<http://www.statemuseum.arizona.edu/oer/>

² To read more about the Race and Slavery Petitions project, go to:
http://library.uncg.edu/slavery_petitions/history.aspx

³ For the George C. Marshall Foundation and a note on Gates's acceptance speech, see
<http://www.marshallfoundation.org/RGates101609.htm>

The members of ADE quickly recognized that, in a profession that is heavily dependent upon public funding from the NHPRC and other federal agencies, state historical societies and archives, we needed a concerted advocacy effort. In February 1981, not long after ADE's founding, our membership faced a federal funding crisis of monumental proportions for the profession: the first proposed zeroing out of the NHPRC's grants program and the proposal to let the authorization for that grant program expire. ADE mounted a full scale advocacy effort. In response to this emergency, the ADE became one of the two founding organizations behind the Coalition to Save Our Documentary Heritage, which eventually became an advocacy group that spoke for 55 member organizations on NHPRC and National Archives (NARA) issues. In the absence of any historical or archival advocacy network, the ADE took a leadership role in the effort to save NHPRC and its grants program, and in restoring the National Archives' status as an independent agency.

The ADE has continued to play a greater advocacy role than its size would indicate in the National Coalition for History and the National Humanities Alliance. We have provided leadership in both coalitions and we make significant financial contributions to them despite our relatively small size. ADE is also a financial sponsor of Humanities Advocacy Day. Its members travel to Washington each year to participate in this day of meetings with members of Congress and committee staffers. Our membership responds to calls from both of these advocacy organizations to send action alerts and to contact members in Congress directly.

Over the decades the funding of the NHRPC has repeatedly been threatened and we have worked to beat back those threats through concerted actions. I am here today as part of my organization's now thirty-year effort to focus attention on the central role that the NHRPC has played in the professional life of nearly every documentary editor now working. ADE believes that reauthorization for the NHPRC at an increased level of \$20 million annually is vital to the ongoing work of nearly every person who describes him or herself as a documentary editor. It is equally important to those who are poised to begin exciting new projects; the young scholars who are waiting in the wings and applying for first time funding to launch those projects. They are looking for a foothold into the profession. For many would-be editors, grants from NHPRC will be make that happen.

Although I have yet to take on the role as president of the Association for Documentary Editing, I have been a documentary editor my entire working life since 1987 when I began as a research assistant at the Papers of James Madison at the University of Virginia. The Madison Papers has received support from NHPRC for over four decades, helping its staff to publish 32 print volumes some of which I was proud to put my name to. Like many of my colleagues, I attended the Institute for the Editing of Historical Documents sponsored by NHPRC. From 1996 to 2000, I worked as an editor on the Papers of John Marshall, a project that is now complete. Consisting of twelve volumes, the Marshall Papers includes the correspondence and legal writings of Chief Justice Marshall. The Marshall Papers project was supported, in part, with funds from the NHPRC. More recently, in my role as Director of Documents Compass, a division of the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities, I managed a grant from the NHPRC to provide access to over 5,000 Founding Fathers documents that are now freely available on the web.

Who are Documentary Editors?

The majority of my fellow documentary editors who work on ADE-associated projects are university-based editors, researchers, and faculty members. Many of them teach classes in History and English departments across the country; many are involved with library and archival programs, some work at historical societies; they all promote the profession of documentary editing. Documentary editing projects range in size from staffs of a solo editor to projects of five to ten full time staff members. Some projects have editors living miles apart but working collaboratively via phone and email, and relying on more modern methods such as Skype and web-based databases. All of the projects, whether they are large or small, are highly collaborative enterprises. Each staff member is critical to the process of publishing documents. Even those projects run by a single person rely on the cooperation and support of funders, presses, and archivists to get their work done. Documentary editing projects are most successful when they can maintain a constant staffing level so that they keep up a steady rate of publication, and more importantly, so that each staff member continues to build up his or her expertise and knowledge of the subject of their edition. The sustainability of a project's staff relies on steady funding from agencies such as NHPRC.

Documentary Editors Preserve the Documentary Record

Documentary editors preserve the documentary record in a unique way. Each project amasses a comprehensive facsimile (or photocopy) collection of the writings of an individual, including his or her incoming and outgoing correspondence, diaries, and account books. Drawn from multiple institutions, these copies of original manuscripts provide the basis for the transcription work as well as the annotations included with each document published. The project creates a catalog that accounts for all of these documents. Whether that catalog is paper or in the form of a sophisticated database, it is a unique and valuable resource because it is a comprehensive description of all of the known writings of the key figures in American history. The only place in this country where there is a complete listing of all of the known writings of Martin Luther King, for example, is at the King Research and Education Institute at Stanford University and home to the Martin Luther King, Jr. Papers.⁴ No one archive or repository in the country or world will take on this task, or is even charged with this responsibility. No single archive owns all of the originals.

When documentary editors publish their documents, they account for all of the documents that they know about. Usually they print them in full but sometimes they make the decision to mention rather than print a document. Projects collect all sorts of documents, ranging from the mundane to the seminal documents of our history. In the course of time, even the most innocent documents can take on new meaning and find a new importance with future audiences or in certain hands. A list of book titles or household items in the Papers of James

⁴ For the King Research and Education Institute, see <http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php>

Madison may seem of marginal interest to the political historian, but for the curatorial staff at Montpelier, Madison's Virginia home, the list is a goldmine of information. Thomas Edison's experiments with ink on a slip of paper using his electric pen may be of little use to social historians but a historian of science could use it to study the evolution of Edison's inventions.⁵ Documentary editors perform a valuable service in creating these comprehensive collections because we cannot anticipate today what future generations of Americans will be interested in. They will want us to provide them the means for gaining access to all types of documents so that they can make their own informed decisions about our documentary record.

Documentary Editors Establish the Documentary Record

Documentary editors play a beneficial role in establishing the documentary record. In addition to their creation of a catalog of writings as described above, editors establish the historical record of the subjects they work with. They authenticate, validate, and provide authoritative versions of the letters and documents produced by their subject. When a recent claim was made by the Susan B. Anthony List that Anthony was opposed to abortion rights, the editor of Anthony's papers, Ann Gordon, and an Anthony biographer weighed in: "We have read every single word that this very voluble—and endlessly political—woman left behind. Our conclusion: Anthony spent no time on the politics of abortion."⁶

Documentary editing is a very specialized field. Its practitioners become experts on their subject matter. They develop an unparalleled familiarity with the handwriting, the habits, and the habitats of the person they edit. They can usually recognize fakes and forgeries and can be counted on to set the record straight when it comes to establishing the documentary record. This will be increasingly vital in the years to come as we are likely to see a younger generation of Americans who access all of their primary documents on the World Wide Web. They may not be able to distinguish the real documents from the fake ones.

The documentary editions of the Founding Fathers editions—the papers of John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and George Washington—all have a long and integral history with the National Archives itself, as do the documents associated with the ratification of the United States Constitution, the first Federal Congress, and the early Supreme Court. The scholarly effort to compile a complete and reliable version of the Founding Fathers writings began with the publication of the first volume of the Jefferson Papers in 1950. A crucial part of the development of these projects was the federal support for documentary-based work through the National Historical Publications Commission (NHPC), created in 1934 and precursor

⁵ The Papers of Thomas Edison account for 66 different types of documents. For the 1867 ink sample by Edison, go to the Papers of Thomas Edison at [<.>](http://edison.rutgers.edu/NamesSearch/DocDetImage.php3)

⁶ "Sarah Palin is no Susan B. Anthony," in the *Washington Post*, 18 May 2010, accessed at http://newsweek.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/guestvoices/2010/05/sarah_palin_is_no_susan_b_anthony.html

to the NHPRC which came forty years later. The Founding Fathers projects have become a benchmark for what scholars have come to expect: access to the thoughts and events of this period in the development of the American nation. They have all been made possible through ongoing support from NHPRC.

The Founding Fathers projects and many other documentary editions are publishing the records of the federal government which is in keeping with the mission of the National Archives. In fact, many of the editorial projects work extensively with documents held by the National Archives: pension records, war and state department records, territorial papers, and legislative records, are just a few of the records groups held at the National Archives that are published in documentary editions.

As we speak, a team of editors from the Papers of Abraham Lincoln based in Springfield, Illinois, is combing through the National Archives holdings in search of known and unknown Lincoln documents. By the time their search is complete, they will have searched through eighty different record groups in Archives I and II, including: the War and Navy Department records, military records, records of the United States Congress and Supreme Court, and the government of the District of Columbia.⁷ Editors are constantly searching for new documents in the collections of the National Archives and in archives across the nation and around the world. Even though many major collections of documents have been cataloged by the National Archives and other repositories large and small, there are hundreds if not thousands of documents that haven't yet been discovered. Much work remains to be done.

Documentary Editors make the Documentary Record Understandable

One of the most time consuming tasks we perform as editors is ensuring that each document make sense to our users. Every document has a context; a story. Who wrote it? What were they doing at the time? What were they thinking? What were they reading at the time? These are the types of questions that an editor tries to answer when editing and annotating a document. The answers can oftentimes illuminate the intention of a phrase or reference in a letter that would make no sense to a casual reader. Editors crack open each document to reveal its hidden meaning. This kind of work takes time. A document may defy the editor's own ability to understand it. Editors must dig through other sources such as newspapers, manuscripts, literary works, and speeches. They develop expertise in a wide range of topics such as diplomatic and military history, politics, geography, agriculture, finances, and science, to name a few.

The knowledge and understanding of a document do not come with it automatically. It is knowledge that is passed on through history with that document. It is in part the document's provenance or chain of ownership: Who owned it first? Second? Which family member ended

⁷ For the Lincoln Papers newsletter on this see <http://www.papersofabrahamlincoln.org/NewsletterPDFs/EDITOR30.pdf>

up with it one hundred years later? How did it come to be in the repository that owns it today? Editors are a little like forensic scientists. No detail is too small for consideration as editors investigate handwriting, stray marks, address covers, ink, and all of the visual clues embedded in the documents.

Editors decode letters written in cipher that would be incomprehensible to any users without their having cracked the code. Editors translate the hundreds of foreign language documents that show up in the collections of the Founding Fathers such as Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, and John Adams. Without the translations the documents would be difficult if not impossible for most Americans to use or understand, especially as many of these historical documents are not just in French or Italian, but they have Greek, Latin, Anglo-Saxon, or symbols that are unrecognizable to us today. Without the editor's work, these seminal Founding Era documents would be just so much gibberish.

We need to educate our nation's school children whose sole experience with primary documents will be through the use of the World Wide Web. How will they know that they are looking at "real documents"? Who will provide them with an understanding of where this document came from other than documentary editors?

Documentary Editors Make the Record Accessible

Historical documentary editions and records are used by an ever-widening audience including: scholars, students and teachers at every educational level, documentary filmmakers, museum curators, genealogists, jurists and the general public. The Internet has opened up a new world for the dissemination of the products of NHPRC-funded projects, but that dissemination and truly democratic access to reliable historical sources will come at a substantial cost. Projects assisted by NHPRC grants ensure that these Internet resources are reliable, accessible, and durable for the long term.

NHPRC supported editorial projects have cooperated with educators to create online resources for teachers and students. The Eleanor Roosevelt Papers produces lesson plans and they work tirelessly to get documents out to teachers at all levels. The project website has a section called "Teaching Eleanor Roosevelt" including lesson plans for ages K through 12, as well as a section entitled "Teaching Human Rights."⁸

Documentary editions have user communities that look to us as information centers on their subjects. Our editions feed directly into publications in the scholarly realm but they also have a reach that extends far beyond academic audiences. Many editorial projects have acted as advisors to programs on PBS—from the recent American Experience feature on Dolley Madison

⁸ For the Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project's section for teachers, see <http://www.gwu.edu/~erpapers/teaching/lesson-plans/>

which reached 5 million viewers and included interviews with editors from the Dolley Madison and James Madison projects—to the show History Detectives which visited the editorial staff of the Adams Papers in August 2009 to help confirm a signature in a book as John Adams's. The recent documentary film "The National Parks: America's Best Idea," by Ken Burns incorporated forty-seven images from the John Muir Papers, a project funded by NHPRC. The editors at the First Federal Congress Project regularly answer questions from Congressional staff, the Congressional Research Service, and federal agency historical offices. It is clear that our documentary editions are a rich resource for all Americans.

NHPRC Sponsored Editions Enrich Human Understanding

My fellow documentary editor, Beverly Wilson Palmer, is an example of one whose career has been affected by the NHPRC. An editor at Pomona College and longtime member of ADE, Palmer states that "Over the past 25 years, NHPRC grants have made a significant difference in my professional life and, I trust, in the scholarly world as well."⁹ She received her first NHPRC grant in 1984 from which she published an 85 reel microfilm edition of the letters of Charles Sumner, an anti-slavery senator from Massachusetts. This material provides a wealth of material for students of the nineteenth century featuring letters from Frederick Douglass, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and John Greenleaf Whittier, to name a few. From 1991 to 1997, Palmer completed a 12-reel microfilm edition of the Papers of Thaddeus Stevens, another anti-slavery advocate who was Sumner's counterpart in the House of Representatives. In both projects, print editions were published as well as microfilm.

Palmer then went on to publish the Selected Letters of Lucretia Coffin Mott with the help of an NHPRC grant from 1997-2002. Mott was a Quaker and an anti-slavery activist and a champion of women's rights. Finally, NHPRC funded from 2004 to 2006 an edition of the letters of progressive reformer Florence Kelley, who fought for better working conditions for women and children.¹⁰ Palmer's prolific career as an editor was made possible through the support of NHPRC grant money that enabled this dedicated scholar to complete not one, but four different editorial projects. These projects together have produced abundant primary material related to periods of tumultuous change in our nation's history. The topics of anti-slavery, women's rights, and progressive reform represented here provide valuable insights for us. We are all much richer for it.

⁹ NHPRC News, May 2009 Enewsletter, pp. 4-5.

¹⁰ Kathryn Kish Sklar and Beverly Wilson Palmer participated in a book discussion of their recently-published volume, *The Selected Letters of Florence Kelley*, held at the Woodrow Wilson Center in Washington, D.C. on April 7. On April 9, Sklar and Palmer joined Mary Lynn McCree Bryan, editor of the Jane Addams Papers and Ann Gordon, editor of the Stanton/Anthony Papers in a panel discussion, "What New Insights About Women in Public Life Can We Find in Recent Scholarly Editions of Women's Letters and Papers, 1870-1919?" at the Organization of American Historians Meeting in Washington, D.C.

A grant from the NHPRC made it possible for the Walt Whitman Archive to publish online for the first time ever, the Civil War Correspondence of Whitman. Some of the letters had appeared in print but some have never appeared in print before. The six hundred letters reveal what Whitman described as “the volcanic upheaval of the nation.” They cover the dawning of the Civil War, the treatment of wounded soldiers, and the election of Abraham Lincoln. These are subjects that resonate with modern readers as wounded soldiers return from Iraq and Afghanistan. They allow us to see historical parallels between the Civil War and our current engagements, through the eyes of America’s national poet. Whitman’s words are powerful and poignant, as in the following example from a letter he wrote to the mother of a soldier who died in the hospital.

I can say that he behaved so brave, so composed, and so sweet and affectionate, it could not be surpass’d. And now like many other noble and good men, after serving his country as a soldier, he has yielded up his young life at the very outset in her service. Such things are gloomy—yet there is text, “God doeth all things well”—the meaning of which, after due time, appears to the soul.¹¹

NHPRC Helps to Sustain the Profession

NHPRC has been responsive to the needs of scholars and the changing interests in scholarship from its beginning. Members of the NHPRC encouraged the creation of ADE. They have shepherded the organization as it has expanded. NHPRC has worked with editors to deal with the demands and costs incurred by print publication, frequently through grants made to the university presses that publish the documents. The NHPRC has been in the forefront of providing education to neophyte editors through its summer Institute for the Editing of Historical Documents, which for the past forty years has introduced hundreds of documentary editors to the best practices of the profession, including myself almost twenty years ago. The NHPRC is the linchpin that holds our projects together. Many documentary editions would cease to exist without funding. New projects will never see the light of day without increased funding to get them off the ground.

A Digital Generation: Reaching New Audiences

Many editors are now retooling in order to meet the demands of both print and digital publication. In order to respond to this new digital world, editors look to organizations such as the NHPRC to provide guidelines, insights, technology, and the critically important funding to enable this to happen. NHPRC has been a longtime and enthusiastic supporter of the notion that editors should aim to digitize their documents, beginning with their efforts in the 1990s to support a pilot project of digital editions called the Model Editions Partnership. But that was

¹¹ Walt Whitman to Mrs. Irwin, 1 May 1865. To see more, go to the Walt Whitman Archive at <http://whitmanarchive.org>

just a beginning. NHRPC could not support the project as the underlying technology evolved and they did not have the funds to sustain the effort. New efforts will need new support. An increase in its funding will enable NHRPC to lead the way in cutting edge technology and work with editors to establish new standards and assist them with adopting new methods. There is substantial work to be done on digitizing and providing additional editorial work to make the thousands of rolls of microfilm from projects done in the 1960s and 1970s available on the Internet.

In a recent poll of our membership, over 80 percent of the members expressed a desire for advanced training and seminars that will provide them the needed skills for digital publishing. Because the ADE is a volunteer organization with a Council that meets only once a year, we do not have the resources to respond to this expressed need from our membership. We will look to the NHRPC to help us address the increased demands of publishing in both print and digital form, and to help us reach our growing audience via digital publication.

Nonetheless, our mission has changed little over time even with the added challenge of publishing documents on the World Wide Web. Members of the ADE believe that documents that reflect our heritage should be accessible to those who need and want them and that some documents require the fuller treatment and contextualization provided by documentary editors. True accessibility requires that those documents be accurately transcribed, with full transparency of method; that the selection and annotation should reflect sound scholarship and intellectual integrity; that some documents are so significant that they require contextualization in the form of annotation; and that methods of presenting documents, whether in print or electronically, should provide sound methods of intellectual access to the documents.

In its strategic plan formed in the summer of 2008, ADE described itself as being at an “important crossroads.” Our plan goes on to say that “much has changed in the documentary editing profession in the past three decades. New methods of publication have emerged; the era of large projects is diminishing; and the number of users of published historical documents has exploded as a result of the web. Many more people are engaged in the practices that we call documentary editing ... Scholars use new and changing tools to produce their work in ways that weren’t imaginable when the Association was formed in St. Louis in 1978. ... This is an opportune time to look ahead.”

Now is not the moment to cut or reduce the financial support to the NHRPC. We are indeed at a crossroads; this is true not only for the profession of documentary editing, but for archives and repositories world-wide. As we read about the perceived negative impact of the Internet on people as they are increasingly gathering their knowledge through multitasking and sound bites, all of which threaten to shorten our attention spans and shrink our brains, we recognize the urgent need for reliable and rich content on the World Wide Web. Now, more than ever, we want the good to drive out the bad, not the other way around. If we cut off support for the editors and projects that have produced superlative editions for over half a century, we cut off their ability to reach the brand new global audiences via the web in ways we could never have

imagined twenty years ago and are just now beginning to address. Please help us to continue this incredibly important work as we build on the efforts of our predecessors, bringing old and new material to light, for us in the present and for future generations of Americans.