

# The Presidential Library System

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Uniquely American institutions, the presidential libraries are toured by an estimated 1.5 million visitors or more annually. Before being turned over to the federal government, they are privately planned, funded, and constructed. Each contains the official records, films, photographs, and personal papers of a past president and his associates. Each has a museum dedicated to its namesake.

## One Man's Vision

Franklin D. Roosevelt could rightly be called the father of the presidential library. Concerned about the volume of papers and other documents being generated by his second term in office, he had a vision that led to the establishment of the first presidential library to be administered by the National Archives.

Presidential papers are now regarded as historical documents, and since 1978 they have been preserved by law. Prior to Roosevelt, however, many presidential collections, by tradition considered the private property of their originators, met ignoble fates. Collections were often poorly treated by the retired presidents or by their descendants. Some were mutilated by autograph collectors or claimed by souvenir hunters. Others were destroyed by widows or ravaged by fire. Most of John Tyler's papers were consumed in the burning of Richmond in 1865. Zachary Taylor's disappeared during the Civil War, carted off by federal troops.<sup>2</sup>

When destruction did not take place, dispersal frequently did. And although efforts to reconstitute past presidents' personal papers have been undertaken, the results have been laborious and expensive. For example, the federal government purchased the major part of George Washington's papers in 1834 for a total sum of \$45,000. Similar amounts were raised to obtain the papers of Thomas Jefferson and James Madison.<sup>3</sup> In 1903, several collections held in government custody were transferred to the Library of Congress, and by the late 1930s, the Library held the principal collections of twenty-two presidents. Yet all that could be offered was shelf space, and the collections were fragmented and exceptionally large.

In Franklin Roosevelt's day, there was only one institution that contained the complete body of a specific president's archival materials, the Rutherford B. Hayes Memorial Museum and Library, built in Fremont, Ohio, and dedicated in 1916. In 1982 the expanded facility was renamed the Rutherford B. Hayes Presidential Center. Although not a part of the presidential library system administered by the National Archives, the Center is a valuable resource for presidential scholars and the general public.

Apparently convinced that his own papers held the greatest historical value if they remained intact, Roosevelt had the Hayes model investigated. He asked his representatives—among them the man named as the first archivist of the United States, R. D. W. Connor—to examine this facility and to report their findings.

According to all accounts, Roosevelt was impressed with what he heard. On October 21, 1937, he wrote the following to Webb Hayes II, the grandson of President Hayes: "I think it is particularly fitting that this comprehensive collection [at the Hayes Library] should include, besides President Hayes' own library, his correspondence and other papers associated with his public life—a veritable gold mine for historical scholars."<sup>4</sup>

This was not Roosevelt's only involvement, however. A very hands-on individual, he drew a sketch, dated April 12, 1937, that shows his proposed library building placed on his Hyde Park estate very close to the site ultimately chosen. He also sought the opinions of leaders in business and education, including Helen Taft Manning, dean of Bryn Mawr College. She was an outstanding historian and the daughter of our twenty-seventh president, William Howard Taft.

Having completed his investigation, Roosevelt made a decision. On December 10, 1938, he called a White House press conference and announced his intention to create a library:

For the past two years I have been considering more and more the final disposal of what amounts to probably the largest collection of original source material of almost anybody over the last quarter of a century and it is very voluminous. It includes all of my papers when I was in the State Senate, all of my personal papers when I was in the Navy Department, including the war period. It includes the Vice Presidential Campaign of 1920 and the Convention of 1924, the Convention of 1928, the four years as Governor and I have, up in Albany, sixty packing cases full of those papers of the Governorship. It includes the Campaigns of 1928 and 1930, the Presidential Campaigns of 1932 and 1936, plus all the Presidential papers and the file I operate.

The amount of material that I have is so infinitely larger than that of any previous President that it creates a new problem. As I remember it, when we came in here we were told that President Hoover, his mail averaged about four hundred letters a day. My mail has averaged, as you know, about four thousand letters a day. Well, there is all the difference in the world.<sup>5</sup>

After fully describing the problem as he saw it, Roosevelt also delivered the solution. He would give his collections to the federal government, but place them at Hyde Park where he could have a hand in cataloging them. Private funds would be raised for a separate, fireproof building on the Roosevelt

family estate. This building would eventually be deeded over to and be maintained by the federal government. Operated for the benefit of the American public, the facility would become the responsibility of the archivist of the United States.

Roosevelt explained in the speech that the purpose was to keep his papers "whole and intact in their original condition, available to the scholars of the future in one definite locality."<sup>6</sup> He envisioned his library as a manuscript repository as well as a historical museum—two parts of the whole that represented his career, his presidency and the era in which he lived. The papers and other historical materials in the Library reflect Roosevelt's image of himself as a man as well as the president of the United States.

Without the actions of Presidents Truman and Eisenhower, the Roosevelt Presidential Library might have become, like the Hayes Museum and Library, a stand alone institution. Both men decided to follow the Roosevelt model. Because of them, Congress passed the Presidential Libraries Act of 1955. Under its terms, the National Archives has the authority to accept papers, artifacts, lands, and buildings in connection with the establishment of presidential libraries. The Harry S. Truman Library was formally dedicated and opened to the public in 1957. The Dwight D. Eisenhower and the Herbert Hoover libraries followed in 1962. Since that time a library has been opened for each succeeding president.

### Library Administration

Presidential papers normally became government property through gift of deed until 1978. Then, as a result of the Watergate scandal and former president Nixon's refusal to turn certain presidential papers over to the government, Congress passed the Presidential Records Act of 1978. This gave ownership of the presidential records of Ronald Reagan and his successors to the United States. Although there are some narrowly defined exceptions related to personal and political activities, a document filed in the White House now remains in the custody of the National Archives.

The National Archives and Records Administration has been an independent agency since 1984. It was preceded by the National Archives Establishment, founded in 1934, and the National Archives and Records Service (NARS), part of the General Services Administration from 1949 to 1984. The Office of Presidential Libraries was created within NARS in 1964, and twenty years later became part of the National Archives and Records Administration. The Office of the Presidential Libraries is now headed by the assistant archivist for the presidential libraries. Before 1964 all such duties were attended to by the archivist of the United States.<sup>7</sup>

The Office of the Presidential Libraries oversees the acquisition, preservation, and use of historical materials appropriate for deposit in presidential libraries. It also serves as a liaison with the incumbent administration and with the officials of former administrations concerning the organization and storage of presidential papers and other historical materials.<sup>8</sup>

This system preserves presidential records and makes them available for research, generally six to seven years after a president's term of office ends. Researchers and scholars request permission to work with presidential collections as they become available.

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