

Some new roles and directions for the NHPRC

The National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC), NARA's grant-making arm, has some new missions.

Under legislation signed October 13 by President Bush, the NHPRC will be able to expand NARA's reach to the records of Presidents who do not now have Federally operated Presidential libraries. Up until now, NHPRC grants have funded the preservation and accessibility of non-Federal records important to our nation's history.

The Presidential Historical Records Act of 2008 establishes a grants program for Presidential Centers of Historical Excellence, provides online access to the published volumes of the papers of the Founding Fathers, and establishes a national database and grants program for records of servitude, emancipation, and post-Civil War reconstruction.

Since it began making grants in 1964, the Commission has awarded \$175 million to 4,500 projects involving records held by various institutions across the country, including state and local governments, colleges and universities, and nonprofit groups. NHPRC grants often act as catalysts, providing seed money for projects that increase the number and availability of sources of American history, and are used for preserving records, publishing them, making them accessible to the public, and establishing archives.

Grants have supported 300 publishing projects involving more than 900 individual volumes of original documents and 9,100 reels of microfilm. NHPRC-funded archival projects are of great assistance to scholars, family and local historians, journalists and authors, documentary filmmakers, lawyers, and many others.

The NHPRC's reach now extends to all 50 states and the District of Columbia, into all types of records repositories, classrooms, the media, and scholarship at all levels. Grants have underwritten the publication of papers of historical figures and have also spawned spin-offs, such as curriculum guides for teachers and documentaries for television. Grants have also been awarded to establish or modernize public records programs throughout the country.

NHPRC grants often have an impact that goes well beyond the immediate needs of the recipient organization or agency—a ripple effect increasing the value of each grant immeasurably. For example, NHPRC grants



David McCullough's *John Adams* and Ron Chernow's *Alexander Hamilton*.

Important changes may be in store for the NHPRC and the National Archives if funds to support the new legislation are appropriated.

The Presidential Centers of Historical Excellence program would provide competitive grants to eligible organizations to promote the preservation of, and public access to, historical records relating to any former President who does not have a library within the NARA system of Presidential libraries. This would apply to all Presidents before Herbert Hoover.

The second new program, stemming from the Commission's work on the Founding Era Online report issued to Congress this past spring, would allow the Archivist to enter into a cooperative agreement to provide Internet access to the published papers of the Founding Fathers. This would involve the published volumes of documentary editions of the papers of George Washington, Alexander Hamilton, Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, James Madison, and other figures from the years during which the United States was founded.

A special advisory committee would be created to review progress of these Founding Fathers projects and provide an annual report to Congress.

The third new program involves the records of servitude, emancipation, and post-Civil War reconstruction, and other records to assist African Americans and others in conducting genealogical and historical research. These records include those of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, Southern Claims Commission records, records of the Freedmen's Bank, slave impressment records, slave payroll records, slave manifests, and others. The bill requires the Archives to set

up a national database of information about these records and authorizes the NHPRC to make grants to states, colleges and universities, and other nonprofit organizations to preserve such records and establish online databases.

The legislation also establishes term limits for serving on the Commission and requires the Archivist to provide a capital improvement plan for NARA's Presidential libraries. This plan is to be included with the fiscal year 2010 budget. The Archivist is also directed to submit to Congress a report on alternative models for Presidential archival depositories that cost the government less, improve the preservation of records, and make the records more readily accessible to the public.

Unfortunately, the new legislation contains no funding for these new programs. Some of the reforms included in the bill, particularly the new grant programs, will require additional appropriations, while others will require staff to redouble efforts to improve the work at the NHPRC and suggest alternatives for operating Presidential libraries.

Sponsored by Senators John Warner and Jim Webb of Virginia, the new legislation will help NARA achieve the goals of preserving important Federal records and of joining with other archives across the country to achieve a national archival network.

Allen Weinstein

ALLEN WEINSTEIN
Archivist of the United States

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