

The Last Word: The National Archives Has Lost its Archival Way

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Last spring, I published an essay in the journal *The Public Historian* (May 2018 issue) that sounded the alarm on the decision made by the Obama Foundation and the National Archives and Records Administration to forego the building and staffing of an official, NARA-administered Barack Obama Presidential Library. As a former longtime NARA and presidential libraries staffer with nearly 25 years in the archival profession, I felt it was important to raise public awareness of that decision and its implications for the Obama legacy and for our informed democracy.

The SHAFR community was outspoken and supportive in its response to the concerns raised in my article. The issues were shared, talked about at conferences and in classrooms, and apparently even leveraged in discussions with NARA officials. I believe the keen interest in the Obama Library decision is rooted in the fact that historians of foreign relations often come into regular contact with the presidential libraries' records and archivists (foreign affairs, after all, is a major part of a president's portfolio), and as a result, intersect with any number of NARA's policies and procedures that help or hinder historical research. So, I am grateful that the editor of *Passport* offered me this opportunity to expand my observations on the Obama situation and to offer my own perspectives on the challenges facing the National Archives today.

To begin, let's recap the Obama Library situation, which requires a brief primer on presidential library history. Begun in 1941 by Franklin D. Roosevelt, the thirteen presidential libraries that are part of the NARA system cover the administrations from Herbert Hoover to George W. Bush. By law, the libraries are built to NARA specifications with private funds raised by a private entity (typically, a foundation), and then the library is turned over to NARA to be maintained by the government and staffed by impartial government archivists, museum professionals, and administrators. Originally, a president's White House papers and records legally were his to do with as he saw fit. Following FDR's example, later presidents (and his predecessor Hoover) transferred legal title to their papers to the National Archives, i.e., to the American people. These libraries (Hoover through Carter, with Nixon a special case as always) are referred to in NARA-speak as Deed of Gift libraries.

It was not until Richard Nixon resigned and a fight ensued over his papers and tapes that steps were taken in Congress to change the legal status of the presidential records housed in the libraries. The Presidential Records Act of 1978 stated that beginning with the president taking office on January 20, 1981, presidential records were the

property of the people of the United States with NARA having ultimate custodial responsibility. Presidential records could be housed in a presidential library if the money was raised and a library was built to house them, but the records remained NARA's responsibility to preserve and make accessible to the public regardless. Presidential libraries built in the wake of the Presidential Records Act (Reagan to Bush 43) are known as PRA libraries.

Understanding that new buildings eventually become old ones, a 1986 law established an endowment requirement in the amount of 20% of library construction costs to be raised by the foundations to cover the government's long-term library maintenance expenses. During the Bush 43 administration this endowment requirement was increased twice: in 2003 to 40% and then in October 2008—just before

the presidential election—to a whopping 60% effective, of course, with the next president, not George W. Bush. It is unclear why this last endowment increase was seen as necessary, unless the intent was to create a poison-pill that no fiscally responsible foundation would swallow, thus indirectly killing future presidential libraries. It's a topic worthy of further research and discussion.

Originally, the private fundraising entities served their purpose—building the building—and then dissolved or fell into desuetude. But as the modern presidency has become more imperial, so the presidential foundations associated with the presidential libraries have become more imperious. They expanded their roles beyond constructing buildings and moved into the business of building legacies, including funding (and in some cases leading) the public facing side of presidential library operations such as museum exhibits, public programming, gift shops, and educational offerings. More dollars meant a desire for more influence over the outcome. In some cases, legal title to portions of the building and real estate were retained by the foundations so that events and activities happening there could be freed from government ethics rules and optics constrictions. There is always a simmering tension between public agency and private foundation just below the surface at the libraries, but all of these institutions are founded on the bedrock of a NARA government-led repository dedicated to providing access and transparency to the records and history of a president, his administration, and his era.

The initial stages of development for an Obama Library appeared to be on track with previous libraries. A foundation was established, a site was selected, Obama presidential records in NARA's custody were moved to a storage facility in the Chicagoland area, NARA staff was hired and relocated, and a job posting was issued for a NARA library director (albeit for the first time separate

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from a foundation-funded museum director). Then, in May 2017, it was revealed without warning or public discussion, and with little fanfare, that the Obama Foundation and NARA had agreed to pursue a “new model” for presidential libraries. Essentially, the foundation will fund and support an Obama life and legacy museum to be located on the site of the Presidential Center in Chicago, as well as pay for and manage a project to digitize thirty million pages of analog Obama presidential records and thirty thousand artifacts, digital copies of which will eventually be given to the foundation by NARA. A Memorandum of Understanding that came out after the publication of my *Public Historian* essay indicates, among other things, that the digitization project is to be completed in three years and that the Foundation is also currently paying for the relocation of the Obama records away from Chicago and to another unspecified NARA location.

No NARA records, no NARA artifacts, no NARA staff. One can only conclude that the “new model” for presidential libraries is that there is no library at all. But what does failure to build and staff an Obama Library tell us about the National Archives today? In my opinion, the Obama decision is symptomatic of a larger problem: the National Archives has lost its archival way, meaning that NARA has abandoned some of the core principles and values that have guided the archival profession for more than two centuries.

At the outset, it should be noted that the United States is unique in that its National Archives does not speak for the broader archival profession in our country. There is a voluntary professional organization, the Society of American Archivists, that rallies its members to collaborate on setting basic standards and best practice guidelines (including articulating a Core Values Statement and Code of Ethics for Archivists), establishing a content standard for archival description (the finding aids you use in your research), and creating guidelines for ensuring researchers equitable access to original materials. When NARA officials and SAA leaders attend international professional conferences, there is often confusion about who speaks for the United States. Simply put, NARA does not set standards for the profession; it sets standards only for itself. And because SAA is a voluntary organization with no accreditation authority over archival institutions (like the American Alliance of Museums has over museums), SAA has no leverage to bring NARA in line with profession-wide descriptive standards and other accepted practices and has little ability to influence decision-making by the agency.

The first core archival value that the Obama decision violates is that of *accountability*. As defined by the SAA Core Values statement, accountability means, in relevant part:

By documenting institutional functions, activities, and decision-making, archivists provide an important means of ensuring accountability. In a republic such accountability and transparency constitute an essential hallmark of democracy. Public leaders must be held accountable both to the judgment of history and future generations as well as to citizens in the ongoing governance of society. Access to the records of public officials and agencies provides a means of holding them accountable both to public citizens and to the judgment of future generations...

The discussions and process by which the Obama Foundation and NARA decided to dispense with building a traditional presidential library are completely opaque. As previously mentioned, the Obama Library had been on track for nearly two years, and public resources had already been expended to advertise for and hire staff and to transport Obama records to Chicago. What, then, caused the project to take a complete left turn and to forever change the role of presidential libraries in documenting our nation’s history? With no public hearing, there was no opportunity for interested stakeholders to articulate the value of traditional presidential libraries and to perhaps influence the decision. There was no chance for the citizens of Chicago to weigh in on a fundamental shift in how the public land dedicated to the Obama Presidential Center would be used.

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Without transparency, we must rely on logic and pattern to discern the motivation behind the Obama decision. As I articulated in my *Public Historian* essay, over the years NARA has transformed itself into an agency driven by business metrics. The result is decision-making that is based on the concept of Return on Investment (ROI): how much a NARA facility costs per square foot in terms of construction, maintenance, and staff salaries and benefits versus how many people are served or reached by that facility.

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and records related to its indigenous peoples to another NARA facility in Seattle. This action created a 2,000-mile long geographic barrier preventing ready access to those materials despite the Anchorage facility’s history of being visited by hundreds of researchers per year, and, no doubt, hundreds more assisted by NARA personnel via email and phone. Apparently, the cost per square foot calculation just didn’t work in Alaska’s favor.

NARA reportedly told stakeholders, including Alaska’s congressional delegation, that it would make the records being moved fully accessible to their constituencies by digitizing all the records and making them available online. I believe they’re still waiting. While NARA’s website indicates that some groups of important Alaska records now located in Seattle have been digitized, the total volume of records digitized and made available online over the last three years appears to be only a small fraction (by my calculation, some 375 cubic feet) of the nearly 12,000 cubic feet of records moved from Anchorage. These past promises of fully digitized access to millions of records as a substitute for an actual archival facility seem to track closely with those promises being made today about the Obama Library. At best, the promise is naïve; at worst, deception. Without a fully transparent decision-making and information gathering process, we’ll never know for certain which it is.

Let’s examine a little more closely, and in the context of archival values, this notion that digitizing everything is a viable, cost-effective, and adequate substitute for a bricks-and-mortar archive staffed by knowledgeable archivists. I’ve been able to trace this idea back at least to 2013 when David Ferriero, the current Archivist of the United States, announced a new goal: the complete digitization of NARA’s entire analog holdings, or some twelve *billion* records. This goal has been characterized by the Archivist at different times as NARA’s “moon shot” and as a “Big Hairy Audacious Goal”, and it has since been officially incorporated into NARA’s Strategic Plan to “Make Access

Happen.”

Don't get me wrong. I think that the digitization and display of digitized archival materials online is a key part of making the historical record available to a broad audience. But this Big Hairy Audacious Goal of digitizing everything is a shibboleth to satisfy artificial metrics, and it is contrary to the core archival value of *selection*, described by the Society of American Archivists as:

Archivists make choices about which materials to select for preservation based on a wide range of criteria, including the needs of potential users. Understanding that because of the cost of long-term retention and the challenges of accessibility most of the documents and records created in modern society cannot be kept, archivists recognize the wisdom of seeking advice of other stakeholders in making such selections. They acknowledge and accept the responsibility of serving as active agents in shaping and interpreting the documentation of the past.

The value of selection is manifested through the archival practice of appraisal: not appraisal in the monetary sense, but the appraisal of a record for informational and long-term evidentiary value. Not every record has informational value worth saving; in fact, it's a relatively small percentage of the total number of records created by humans. And just as every record shouldn't be saved, not every record saved has such a high level of informational value that resources should be devoted to digitizing it.

Digitization projects are extraordinarily costly. First, there is the simple physical act of doing the digitization. Care must be taken to preserve the integrity of fragile or unique historical materials. You can't (or shouldn't) just run them through an automatic feeder. Someone has to remove staples, handle the item, lay it on an overhead scanner, quality control the scans, and rescan any missed or blurry pages. The scans (both high resolution masters and lower resolution web-friendly access copies) have to be managed and connected to descriptive information (metadata). The digital files then have to be saved on a server and maintained for the long-term, which means the continuous use of digital preservation tools and techniques, the constant demand for additional server space, and an ever increasing energy usage with significant environmental impacts. The initial and then ongoing costs of all these steps, the human labor, the infrastructure, the processes and procedures, and the long-term maintenance, have to be factored into digitization selection decisions.

Every archival repository has collections of materials that are saved because of their informational value, but which have a narrow potential audience. A collection might get used once a year, or once a decade, but can still have informational value worth saving. Is that collection worthy of the same digitization priority as a collection requested or accessed every day, or several times a day? No. Choosing everything is no choice at all. It's a lazy way to avoid making a selection, and thus violates a core archival value.

Finally, I see the Obama Library decision as contrary to the most core archival value of all, *access and use*, articulated by SAA as:

Archivists promote and provide the widest possible accessibility of materials, consistent with any mandatory access restrictions, such as public statute, donor contract, business/institutional privacy, or personal privacy. Although access

may be limited in some instances, archivists seek to promote open access and use when possible. Access to records is essential in personal, academic, business, and government settings, and use of records should be both welcomed and actively promoted. Even individuals who do not directly use archival materials benefit indirectly from research, public programs, and other forms of archival use, including the symbolic value of knowing that such records exist and can be accessed when needed.

NARA has only recently made what can charitably be called a half-hearted commitment to making the physical Obama records available to researchers and to having a staff of archivists who will be doing anything other than the short-term execution of a digitization project the Obama Foundation is funding and directing. I suspect and fear that the current business metric and financial bottom-line thinking within NARA means that, post-digitization, the physical records will go into deep storage with no rights of access to them.

Digitizing and posting archival materials online as an alternative to making them physically available in-person or through reference assistance gives only the illusion of equitable access to the historical record. It is wrong and misguided to presume that everyone has access to the internet. Studies have shown that access to broadband internet is often dependent on your age, race, education, income level, and geographic location, and whether you live in an urban or rural setting. And by giving the impression that everything is online and only allowing the viewing of individual digital surrogates in a display system that you have designed, you have curated the archival experience. You have steered the research process. You have removed the serendipity of archival research, the productive collaboration with well-informed archivists, the browsability of whole boxes and files of materials, the joy of finding a document you didn't know existed and didn't know you needed or that changes the meaning and context of the documents you already had.

The loss of a dedicated archival staff at an Obama Library also means a loss of subject matter knowledge which is critical to the research process, to the development of historically contextualized and primary resource grounded museum exhibits, public programming, and educational offerings, and to the efficient declassification of classified records. And the failure to create a repository for the Obama presidency means that NARA's only holdings of that period will be the presidential and other government records required to be kept by law. As any user of presidential libraries will tell you, though, it's often not the official government records that are the most important or the most informationally valuable to a researcher. Rather, it's the related and complementary personal papers and other historical materials that are donated by individuals associated with the president. These additional collections of the papers of cabinet officials, administrators, political advisers, close confidants, friends, and family are the materials that lend texture and details to deliberations, shine light on controversial actions and decisions, and sometimes contradict or reveal gaps in the official record. They lend three-dimensionality and humanity to the people at the center of events. They complete the historical record.

Franklin D. Roosevelt, who created the National Archives in 1934 and opened the first presidential library (his own) in 1941, understood the importance and role of

these additional historical papers in documenting the story of his time. In fact, he purposely built his library large enough to accommodate the donation of additional archival materials, and he wasn't shy about encouraging his associates to do so. In February 1939, Roosevelt publicly peer-pressured his colleagues by saying, "...they all know that at Hyde Park there exists a place where they can send [their papers] for the permanent care for the benefit of the public and under the control of the Government itself...". By the time I left the Roosevelt Library in 2015, there were some 385 different collections available to researchers. Failing to build a NARA-run Obama Library has robbed the American people of possession and access to critical historical materials. Without a dedicated repository for those additional archives to go, they will be scattered around the country or lost forever.

I do not write this commentary lightly. I have great affection and respect for the many professionals working in NARA who desire to stay true to their archival training and the values our profession embraces. But as with the Obama Library, many of NARA's recent decisions can and should be closely examined and weighed against the accepted archival values of transparency, selection, access, and use. That will require diligence, activism, and advocacy by the Society of American Archivists, the broader archival profession, researchers, the public, and Congress.

As FDR said when he dedicated his presidential library on June 30, 1941, I "believe that people ought to work out for themselves, and through their own study, the determination of their best interest rather than accept such so-called information as may be handed out to them by certain types of self-constituted leaders who decide what is best for them." The National Archives and Records Administration has lost its way. Let's work together to set it back on the right path.