

**Statement submitted to the
Information Policy, Census, and National Archives Subcommittee
Oversight and Government Reform Committee
House of Representatives
16 December 2009**

The undersigned groups represent researchers who frequently use National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) facilities and records. It is welcome news that the Information Policy, Census, and National Archives Subcommittee of the Oversight and Government Reform Committee will be holding a hearing to look into NARA's fulfillment of its core mission. The hearing entitled "History Museum or Records Access Agency? Defining and Fulfilling the Mission of the National Archives and Records Administration," will address, we hope, researchers' concerns about proposed changes at the downtown (A-1) facility.

Since its founding in 1934, the National Archives has preserved and given access to U.S. federal government records. Through its Washington DC area facilities, regional branches, and presidential libraries, it serves multiple constituencies—scholars, journalists, scientists, historians, archivists, novelists, artists, family historians, filmmakers, and other researchers seeking access to those records.

As research needs and technology have evolved, NARA has been challenged to keep pace with demand for services. An upcoming renovation (required to address post-9/11 building needs) gives NARA the opportunity to comprehensively review user services delivered on both the public and the researcher sides of the building. We hope the appropriate balance can be struck, so enhancements on the public side neither diminish nor outweigh improved services for researchers.

In recent years programs like the Archives Experience and the Public Vaults have been introduced to enrich tourist visits. Now vastly aggrandized plans are underway to install an archives "museum" filled with exhibits that will cost millions of dollars. Regrettably, this installation is planned in space now used for research. Reportedly, the exhibits would be aimed at further familiarizing the public with NARA's records. Though we have received only limited information about the planned installations, what we have heard does not inspire confidence in their enduring educational value. If, for example, tourists are shown how to access digitized NARA records on Ancestry.com or Footnote.com (the digitized records are not on the NARA Web site), they would need to subscribe to those services to accomplish similar searches at home. Realistically, very few will do that. The amount of money that would be spent to "inspire" tourists in that manner to begin using NARA records is vastly out of line, given the few casual visitors who would likely pay to continue such research.

We do not believe this is the best use of limited dollars in NARA's budget or of the private money raised by the Foundation for the National Archives. NARA'S core mission is to serve American democracy "by safeguarding and preserving the records of our Government, ensuring that the people can discover, use, and learn from this documentary heritage." It is geared to research, not tourism. Its mission is to "ensure continuing access to the essential documentation of the rights of American citizens and the actions of their government." Research, not museum

exhibits, is the focus. The mission is best fulfilled, we believe, by strengthening and building research services. We urge Congress to guide NARA toward that end.

Specifically, we would like to see NARA:

- Reconsider decisions apparently already in place (for the Constitution Avenue side of the building) so that a comprehensive redesign at the downtown facility results in optimum services for the public and for researchers, without compromising the latter.
- Acquire the (public and/or private) funds necessary to make the NARA Web site the primary portal where researchers will be able to access NARA's digitized records at no cost. The initial contracts with partners who are digitizing the records gave NARA legal right to put the digitized records online after five years. Take whatever steps need to be taken, including raising the necessary funds, so that NARA will host those records on its Web site as soon as the contracts allow. If / when Nara Web site becomes the portal, correct whatever problems (poor quality, gaps, record order, series titles, etc.) exist in the digitized records created by partners.
- Acquire the necessary funds to create online exhibits with sample collections of the documents located at the National Archives (similar to the Library of Congress's "American Memory" collections). These would enable millions of visitors, teachers, and students access to sample records of the National Archives, encouraging them to visit the facilities in Washington, D.C. to further research these historic records. The NARA Web site is a representation of this government agency. Documents should be represented in their original format, just as they would in a physical exhibit.
- Hire and train more archivists who specialize in specific record groups or types and who know those records in-depth. For several years NARA has been losing archivists and not training specialists. We would like to see that trend reversed.
- Update hardware:
 - Upgrade and increase hardware throughout the research areas: microfilm readers (ideally, combined reader-printer-scanners, preferably with Internet connectivity); public access terminals; photocopiers.
 - Provide Wi-fi service throughout the research area so researchers can access the Internet on personal computers.
 - Increase (at least double) the number of photocopiers in the Main Reading Room (203) and other research areas on the 2nd floor.
 - Introduce electronic record requests, allowing submissions from public access terminals or by Wi-fi.
 - Introduce a program whereby "registered researchers" could request records online and in advance of a research trip.

- In the Main Reading Room (203), improve lighting and expand AV connectivity for personal computers, scanners, digital camera chargers, and other devices.
- Restore pull times that were lost a couple of years ago and add Saturday pulls to enable weekend research. (The Library of Congress does Saturday pulls.)
- Create an on-site bookstore where all NARA finding aids, guides, and other publications related to research can be purchased.
- Focus education and outreach programs for researchers and the public not on "fun" interactive videos in an "exhibit area," but on more in-depth educational initiatives:
 - Increase training to teach educators to use documentary sources in classrooms.
 - Conduct on-site "hands-on" workshops to teach students how to conduct archival research using finding aids and digitized, textual, and non-textual records.
 - Introduce distance-learning programs via Webinars, podcasts, etc., in which archivists discuss records. Sessions could be available from home. This would be a way to educate the public about records and explain how to access and use them.

We hope the subcommittee, in its oversight role, will ensure that the National Archives maintains as its top priority serving the needs of the research community.

[Signed by the following representatives of research constituencies. Each has supplied a cover letter on letterhead.]

Marie V. Melchiori, CG, CGL; Archives-1 Users' Group; Society of Professional Historical Researchers
 Patricia Shawker, CG; Director, National Institute on Genealogical Research
 Jake Gehring; President, Association of Professional Genealogists (APG)
 Angela McGhie; President, National Capital Chapter, Association of Professional Genealogists;
 Professional Genealogist Study Group
 Patricia A. Oxley; President, Federation of Genealogical Societies
 Willis White, CG; President, National Institute on Genealogical Research Alumni Association
 Laura DeGrazia, CG; President, Board for Certification of Genealogy
 Shirley Wilcox, CG; President, Virginia Genealogical Society
 Alice Cox Phillips, CG; President, Tidewater Genealogical Society
 Lee James Irwin; President, Fairfax Genealogical Society
 Drusilla Null; President, Maryland Genealogical Society
 Linda MacLachlan; President, Mt. Vernon Genealogical Society
 Debora Kerr; President, GRIVA (Genealogical Research Institute of Virginia)
 Paul Traunero; Director, *Il Circolo Filippo Mazzei* (Washington D.C. Metropolitan Area Italian
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 Lorraine Minor; President, Genealogy Club of the Montgomery County Historical Society

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