

Oral Testimony of
Janet A. Alpert, President
National Genealogical Society
Before the
Information Policy, Census and National Archives Subcommittee
Of the
Oversight and Government Reform Committee

Good afternoon, Chairman Clay, and members of the subcommittee. Thank you for the invitation to testify before the subcommittee today.

My name is Janet A. Alpert and I am the president of the National Genealogical Society. Our members range from family history researchers to professional genealogists. The genealogical community is well represented in this room today.

The following points are more fully described in my written statement which has been presented to the subcommittee. Additional statements of support and concern from other genealogy groups are available on our website www.ngsgenealogy.org/cs/nara_hearing.

The National Archives and Records Administration is a very important source of original records for the genealogical community. As a result, we are their largest research user group.

The National Genealogical Society supports the mission of NARA but we are concerned that the two most important priorities

1. To safeguard and preserve the records of our Government and
2. To ensure continuing access to the essential documentation

are becoming secondary to the third tenet of the mission

3. To promote civic education and historical understanding of our national experience.

Several examples support our position:

1. NARA has a backlog of documents which have not been processed and many more records which will be coming to NARA for processing and safeguarding over the next few years. We are not aware of any plans to accommodate the increasing volume of records.

It is important for the major collections to stay at the National Archives building in Washington, D.C. because people who travel here to do research need easy access to the other collections at the Library of Congress and D.A.R. Library.

2. The extensive record groups at NARA require skilled experts to assist researchers. Due to budget cutbacks, staff reductions and retirements, we believe the skill level of the staff is diminishing rather than increasing.
3. Plans are underway to reduce the research area so the museum and exhibit area can be expanded. Continued access to microfilm and adequate research space is necessary until more of the records are digitized and available online.
4. NARA has shown leadership in developing partnerships with third parties to digitize many records which are very valuable to genealogists.

However, we are not aware of plans to make these digitized records available to the public for free over the NARA website at the end of the five year contract period.

So, as to the question of "History Museum or Records Access Agency," from what we have heard, some of the planned exhibits will duplicate records already available online through local libraries and may misrepresent the complexity of the research process. We support civic education and we think it can best be accomplished at the National and Regional Archives through hands on workshops with student groups and teacher training on using documentary sources in the classroom.

We believe it would be more cost effective to spend the money building interactive learning and exhibits online which would reach the broader public, not just people who visit the National Archives in Washington, DC. There are already many wonderful museums along the capital mall, yet there is only one unique collection of original records at the National Archives.

In summary, we recommend that the new United States Archivist, David S. Ferriero, take both appropriate short term action and establish long term strategies that support the priorities of records preservation and access. We also hope he will include genealogists in the planning process. The genealogical community stands ready to support the Archivist in building a world-class research facility and model for emerging democracies around the world.