



NATIONAL GENEALOGICAL SOCIETY

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Statement
of the
National Genealogical Society

Before the
Oversight and Government Reform Committee
Information Policy, Census and National Archives Subcommittee

History Museum or Records Access Agency?
Defining and Fulfilling the Mission of the
National Archives and Records Administration

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The National Genealogical Society (NGS), founded in 1903, includes a broad spectrum of family history researchers from those who have just begun to research their family history to those who may have been researching their family for decades. Membership in the society also includes professional genealogists, many of whom write articles for our publications and provide lectures at our national conferences. We also have more than 650 organizational subscribers including libraries, archives and genealogical societies, who purchase our publications for their repositories. In addition more than 100 exhibitors participate each year at our national conference including other non-profit societies and for-profit providers of genealogical databases, software, books, and maps. The National Genealogical Society reaches several hundred thousand individuals each year with its genealogical publications, conferences and educational courses.

The mission of the National Genealogical Society is to serve and grow the genealogical community by providing education and training, fostering increased quality and standards, and promoting access to and preservation of genealogical records.

The genealogical community works together through The Records Preservation and Access Committee (RPAC), which today includes The National Genealogical Society (NGS), the Federation of Genealogical Societies (FGS) and the International Association of Jewish Genealogical Societies (IAJGS) as voting members. The Association of Professional Genealogists (APG), the Board for Certification of Genealogists (BCG), the American Society of Genealogists (ASG) and Ancestry.com serve as participating members. RPAC meets monthly, and more often if needed, to advise the genealogical and historical communities, as well as other interested parties, on ensuring proper access to vital records, on means to effect legislation, and on supporting strong records preservation policies and practices.

The National Genealogical Society supports the mission of the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), which is a very important source of original records for the genealogical community. We greatly appreciate the opportunity to present our written statement of support to the Information Policy, Census, and National Archives Subcommittee of the Oversight and Government Reform Committee and to David S. Ferriero, Archivist of the United States.

NARA's Mission Statement

The National Archives and Records Administration serves American democracy by safeguarding and preserving the records of our Government, ensuring that the people can discover, use and learn from this documentary heritage. We ensure continuing access to the essential documentation of the rights of American citizens and the actions of their government. We support democracy, promote civic education, and facilitate historical understanding of our national experience.

Safeguard and preserve the records

We concur that the primary mission of NARA is to **safeguard and preserve the records** of the United States government. The National Archives has done an exceptional job in preserving documents for over seventy-five years despite fires, floods and vermin. Every time I have held an original document at the National Archives I have been awed at NARA's ability to not only preserve the document but to have it cataloged and available for retrieval in a few hours.

However, we are concerned about the backlog of documents in the possession of NARA that have not been processed, as well as the many additional records that will be sent to NARA over the next few years. We believe the current dialog about expanding the exhibit and museum space is ignoring NARA's highest priority of records preservation. Strategic plans need to provide adequate space and staff for processing and safeguarding new records.

Discover, use and learn

NARA's mission also ensures "that the people can **discover, use and learn** from this documentary heritage." NARA's finding aids and publications greatly facilitate the discovery and use of the documents and it is important that these research tools continue to be produced and supported by NARA. Equally important are the experienced staff who are available to help researchers find the records they need. Because the National Archives contains so many different record groups it is impossible for the average researcher to navigate the records without assistance. These same NARA experts have also been lecturers at

genealogy workshops at the National Archives in Washington, DC, the Regional Archives, the National Institute on Genealogical Research (NIGR), and the annual conferences of the National Genealogical Society and the Federation of Genealogical Societies. It is important that the National Archives continue to support these educational programs that help the more serious researchers expand their understanding and use of the NARA records. We are also concerned that with budget cutbacks, staff reductions, and retirements, the skill level of the staff is diminishing. NARA needs to continue to invest in the future by hiring and training in-depth specialists who can guide researchers through the intricacies of key record groups.

Access to essential documentation

To genealogists the next part of NARA's mission is our area of greatest concern and opportunity. NARA ensures "continuing **access to the essential documentation** of the rights of American citizens and the actions of their government." The National Archives contains many unique documents about our ancestors that are available nowhere else because they have not been microfilmed or digitized. It is important that the National Archives and the Regional Archives continue to be open in the evening and on Saturday so people who work full time have access to the records. Although I am retired now, the first twenty-five years of my research were done visiting the National Archives on Saturdays. Researchers need the ability to have records pulled on Saturday morning for use on Saturday afternoon. To genealogists access also means user access to the microfilm, a sufficient number of microfilm readers and expert archival assistance to the many documents not available on microfilm.

The location of "Archives-I" in downtown Washington, D.C. is also important to the genealogical community. Many group research trips are planned each year to Washington, D.C., which usually include stops at the National Archives, Library of Congress and Daughters of the American Revolution Library, all conveniently located in the capital area. If the records were moved to the College Park "Archives-II" facility, researchers would not be able to accomplish as much research during their stay. Genealogists who are able to research different collections over a short period of time, can often make breakthroughs in a family history not otherwise possible.

The vision of the National Archives is also an important statement because it reveals the future possibilities.

NARA's Vision Statement

As the nation's record keeper, it is our vision that all Americans will understand the vital role records play in a democracy, and their own personal stake in the National Archives. Our holdings and diverse programs will be available to more people than ever before through modern technology and dynamic partnerships. The stories of our nation and our people are told in the records and artifacts cared for in NARA facilities around the country. We want all Americans to be inspired to explore the records of their country.

Modern technology and dynamic partnerships

The genealogical community fully supports plans for increased **technology and dynamic partnerships**. We support the partnerships because they make it possible for more records at the National Archives to be digitized. However, the NARA records that have been digitized by the partners, are currently accessible for free at the National Archives facilities. At the end of five years, which is fast approaching, the digitized records would be available for NARA to post on its website. We believe the best way to increase access to the National Archives' records is to make the digitized records available on the NARA website after the initial five years so researchers can access them without having to pay a subscription fee. In the long term the Internet will enable the National Archives to reach many more people each day than will personally visit its facilities.

The National Genealogical Society also supports the Electronic Records Archives (ERA) effort by NARA. We believe it offers a hope for future family historians to be able to have broad access to the massive amounts of digital records currently being created by various government agencies. We are also pleased that a representative of the genealogical community is included on the Advisory Committee (ACERA) and hope that the new archivist, Mr. David S. Ferriero will continue the long-standing relationship with leaders in the genealogical community in regard to records preservation and access.

History Museum or Records Access Agency?

We understand that the National Archives has plans under consideration to increase the museum exhibits on the Constitution Avenue side of the facility. Although we support the role of bringing awareness of available government records to the attention of a greater number of people, we do not think NARA should duplicate records already available at Ellis Island or its website www.ellisland.org or online from Ancestry.com at many of the local public libraries. There is already a false public perception that all one has to do is go online and in a few minutes someone can discover his or her ancestry. We support exhibits that display examples of the records available in the National Archives collection and convey the excitement of holding an original document that tells part of the story of an ancestor's life. The exhibits should say that although one can begin the search on the Internet, a family history is built over many years, one fact at a time.

The NARA website has done an excellent job in presenting examples of documents which are available for review and further study. We think the best way to reach student groups are through hands on workshops using textual records both at the National Archives and the Regional Archives. Also teachers need more training on using documentary sources in their classrooms, which would be possible if the digitized documents were available over the NARA website. Some of the real treasures are the many affidavits filed by soldiers, their widows and their acquaintances when they applied for military pensions or bounty land. History comes alive when a student can read a document about an ancestor's military service.

Washington, D.C. already has many outstanding museums along the capital Mall, while there is only one National Archives with its unique military, land, immigration and naturalization records. **Our vision for the National Archives is a world-class research facility and a model for the emerging democracies around the world.**

If you have additional questions, I can be reached by mail, email or phone:

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Janet A. Alpert

Janet A. Alpert, is president of the National Genealogical Society, a non-profit membership organization founded in 1903 and located in Arlington, Virginia. Ms. Alpert has served as president since October 2006 and will complete her term in September 2010. Prior to being president she served a two year term as secretary. Ms. Alpert is an amateur genealogist who has been researching her family for almost 30 years.

In 2004 Ms. Alpert retired from a 35 year career in the title insurance industry. She graduated from the University of California at Santa Barbara with a B.A. degree in political science and later earned an M.B.A. from the University of Connecticut.