

## ***NHA Statement - Hearing on "Strengthening the National Historical Publications & Records Commission"***

### **Statement of the National Humanities Alliance**

U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Oversight and Government Reform Subcommittee on Information Policy, Census, and National Archives Honorable William Lacy Clay, Chairman

Hearing on: **"Strengthening the National Historical Publications and Records Commission"**

June 9, 2010

The National Humanities Alliance, on behalf of its more than one hundred member organizations and institutions, strongly supports Congressional approval of a five-year reauthorization of the National Historical Publications & Records Commission's (NHPRC) grants program at the \$20 million level, as recommended by H.R.1556, the House bill introduced last year to authorize appropriations for the NHPRC through fiscal year 2014. This doubling of funds would allow the NHPRC to accommodate growing demand and need for additional resources to support the preservation and use of America's documentary heritage. As a federal expenditure, it represents a cost-effective and responsible investment in the nation's information infrastructure.

The NHPRC provides critical support to state and local institutions across the country for the preservation, documentation and public use of our nation's most vital historical records. As the only funding agency whose sole focus is the documentary heritage of the United States, the NHPRC plays an important role in the humanities enterprise. Many of the Alliance's member organizations and institutions have hosted or worked directly on NHPRC supported projects – from documentary editions, to professional development workshops, to digitization and electronic publications initiatives. Moreover, our members and the thousands of faculty, teachers, researchers, and humanities professionals they represent, rely on the availability of primary source materials – including publications and documents made accessible through NHPRC support – to strengthen teaching, learning, and scholarship throughout the United States.

In many ways, our nation's libraries and archives are for humanities scholars what laboratories are for scientists. Historical documents and source materials are vital research resources for a broad range of academic disciplines, including history, literature, political science, cultural anthropology, sociology, jurisprudence, and more. In addition, journalists, filmmakers, policymakers, writers, and many others have drawn on NHPRC-supported resources to inform works broadly disseminated outside of formal educational settings. Collectively, these materials represent an extraordinary resource for the American people, as well as nations around the world who seek to understand or emulate aspects of United States history, government and society.

### **Program Impact**

Although the NHPRC was established in 1934 along with the National Archives and Records Administration, most impact measures date from the creation of its grants program in 1964. Since then, the NHPRC has funded some 4,600 projects. With a relatively modest amount of funding, literally hundreds of documentary editions have been published, and millions of papers, photographs, sound recordings, and other documents have been saved for future public use. NHPRC grants have funded or supported projects to make accessible original documents of the Founding Era of the Republic, including the papers of George Washington, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, Benjamin Franklin, the First Federal Congress, the early Supreme Court, and the Ratification of the U.S. Constitution. The NHPRC has also funded publication of some or all of the works of 16 U.S. Presidents, the records of U.S. territories before

statehood, the history of Emancipation, Women's Suffrage and the works of our greatest scientists, inventors and explorers. Over the years, NHPRC grants have also stimulated significant matching investment from non-federal funds – funds that would often not have been available without the stamp of approval and incentive provided by the Commission. And as the outreach arm of the National Archives, NHPRC also uses its national leadership position to promote state, regional and national coordination and cooperation on archival issues. Critical grant programs include:

- Publishing Historical Records Projects - NHPRC-supported documentary editing projects make important materials from all periods of American history more accessible and understandable today and for the future. Publications are produced under modern, rigorous documentary editing standards, and cover a wide range of topics. In the course of its history, the Commission has funded or endorsed 296 publications projects, 229 of which have been completed; affiliated projects have produced nearly 900 volumes and over 9,000 reels of microfilm. Many of these projects, which bring papers and documents together in annotated editions, have provided the backbone of research for many well-known works by popular historians and biographers.
- Archives and Records Projects - The NHPRC also awards grant money to preserve historical records held by archives and other repositories, as well as facilitate their use. This may include identifying, collecting, describing, reformatting (including microfilming and other means of reproduction and migration), and preserving documentary sources of significance to the U.S. Grants have been awarded to local government archives, colleges and universities, and other nonprofit institutions. Since 1979, this program has helped preserve and make accessible literally millions of cubic feet of documents and archives. Examples of support include the: establishment or modernization of public records programs in communities across the country; preservation and accessibility of oral histories and tribal records of American Indian tribes; support of nonprofits as they enhance public access to historical documents; and enabling the creation of "cyber archives."
- Electronic Records Projects - The NHPRC has acknowledged the importance of keeping pace with recordkeeping in the digital age and supports efforts to address the many challenges associated with this transition. NHPRC accepts proposals that study: how software-dependent data objects can be retained for future use; what barriers have prevented archivists from developing and implementing archival electronic records programs; what archivists need to know about electronic records; and other questions that make up its electronic records research agenda.
- Professional Development - A valuable component of NHPRC support is the promotion of continuing development of professional skills for archivists, records managers, and historical editors. Programs include: Institute for the Editing of Historical Documents; Historical Editing Fellowships; and the Archives Leadership Institute. Since 1972, more than 650 people have attended the Institute for the Editing of Historical Documents.
- Digitization Projects - In step with changes to technology and public need, the NHPRC initiated a program to fund digitization projects in 2006, with the primary goal of accelerating public access to primary historical records via the internet. Project examples include: Civil War military service records; collections on the exploration, development, and conservation of the Everglades; the records of environmentalist Aldo Leopold, politician Henry Wallace, and physicist Samuel Goudsmit; and the Founders Early Access project, a pilot project conducted by the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities to transcribe, encode,

and place thousands of pages of letters and other documents from the nation's founders online in conjunction with the University of Virginia's digital publishing platform, Rotunda.

### **Funding Needs**

The Commission's current authorization level, set at \$10 million, has not been increased or even adjusted for inflation since 1991. If adjusted for inflation, that level would equal more than \$16 million in 2010 dollars. An increased authorization level to \$20 million is both necessary and appropriate to: maintain current programs; continue support for the electronic publication of the Founding Fathers Papers (and the papers of additional American leaders) and to make those publications widely accessible; document the lives of significant minority and key 20th century figures; continue and expand the cooperative state and regional activities related to planning and implementing archival programs; and continue to address the pressing and continually evolving issue of electronic records.

The current authorization level also does not take into account the increasingly complex nature of archival, publishing, and editing work, especially when considering rapid changes in technology and the growing demand for broadly-accessible, digital materials and related, content-rich web sites. Making publishing projects more accessible (and sustainable for the long-run), for example, often entails significant costs, such as those associated with web site design, development and maintenance, platform migration, software licensing, and training of staff. Increased R&D funding for new preservation technologies and protocols, as well as the publication and preservation of digital materials, is also essential.

### **Workforce Impact**

In the context of the current economic crisis, it is also important to note that NHPRC grants play an important role in supporting literally hundreds of jobs for historians, editors, librarians, archivists, and conservators across the United States each year. NHPRC grants leverage significant non-federal funding in the form of contributions and in-kind institutional support. As the impact of the economic recession deepens for higher education institutions and non-profit organizations around the country, evidence is mounting that humanities departments and programs have been especially hard hit. For example, major scholarly societies are reporting dramatic drops in job listings for faculty teaching positions, with devastating implications for younger scholars entering today's job market. NHPRC grant money can be used to fund the hiring and training of scholars and humanities professionals working at a broad range of institutions, from colleges and universities, to libraries, museums, archives and special collections. As such, the NHPRC represents a vital and increasingly scarce source of funding for sponsored research in the humanities, as well as an equally rare source of support and stimulus for non-academic career paths.

While millions of federal dollars are (rightly) invested in training and recruiting talented students for math, science, and engineering careers, parallel opportunities do not exist for the humanities, despite repeated calls by higher education and business leaders (as well as scientists) for cultivation of a broadly-educated workforce, to ensure America's competitiveness in the knowledge-based economy of the 21st century. It is also worth noting that many NHPRC projects support paid and unpaid internships for undergraduates, providing these students with an opportunity to engage in a range of early professional activities, from collaborative research and writing projects, to preservation and archival work, to new information technologies. In addition to historical resources made available for educational use, many of these same NHPRC-supported projects and institutions also have formal outreach programs to K-12 schools, providing another point of engagement with

subject matter and role models for young people who might not otherwise be exposed to the full range of academic pursuits and career paths possible for them.

**Economic Stimulus** – In December, 2009, French President Nicolas Sarkozy, pledged \$1.1 billion toward digitization of French literary works, audiovisual archives and historical documents as part of a \$51 billion stimulus package. We are not asking for that amount here, but we do believe that the NHPRC, along with the National Archives and Records Administration at large and other federal research and cultural agencies, needs to be seen as a central part of U.S. efforts to stimulate economic recovery and competitiveness for the long-term. The United States is rapidly falling behind its counterparts around the world in making necessary investments to preserve and provide access to the history of its people and institutions; to enrich content flowing through its information and education infrastructures; and to support research and innovation in a broad range of fields.

**Summary** - Increasing the authorization level of the National Historical Publications & Records Commission will expand the reach and scope of the important program areas mentioned above. The humanities community needs the leadership and resources of the NHPRC to document, research, and develop a deeper understanding of our nation's democracy, history, and culture. As the longest-surviving democracy in the world, the United States has a duty to document and preserve its history for future generations. This is not only a matter of national responsibility, but national self-interest. And the work remaining to be done far exceeds the considerable accomplishments already achieved. We thank the Chairman and other Members of the Subcommittee for your attention and leadership in support of this important program.