

Joint Statement on the FY-2000 Appropriation for the National Endowment for the Humanities

Submitted to the U.S. Senate and the U.S. House of Representatives Subcommittees on Interior and Related Agencies, by: the Association of Research Libraries (ARL), the Council on Library and Information Resources (CLIR), and the National Humanities Alliance (NHA)

April 12, 1999

Introduction

The Association of Research Libraries, the Council on Library and Information Resources, and the National Humanities Alliance submit this statement for the record in support of the preservation and access activities of the National Endowment for the Humanities. We encourage members of the Interior and Related Agencies Subcommittee of the House Committee on Appropriations to approve the \$150 million budget requested by the National Endowment for the Humanities. This statement focuses on the Preservation and Access program of the NEH and the request for \$22,945,000 to support its activities.

The Brittle Books Program

Since 1987, Congress has taken a leadership role in addressing a national crisis confronting the humanities. Congress recognized that print resources at the heart of the humanities were crumbling on the shelves of literally all research libraries in the country. Estimates at the time indicated that over 12 million unique volumes were at risk of decay simply due to the fact that they were printed on an unstable medium--acidic paper, commonly used between 1840 and 1980. As a result, Congress allocated resources to the National Endowment for the Humanities to coordinate and support efforts of the library community to preserve these resources through microfilming. The Brittle Books Program, as it has come to be called, is a twenty-year effort to ensure that a significant portion of our cultural and intellectual record is not lost. Through the funding granted to the NEH, research libraries and selected institutions across the country have worked assiduously in a massive rescue effort with the goal to preserve 3 million unique titles.

To date, over 850,000 volumes have been microfilmed through NEH supported projects. In addition, Congress' leadership in this area has encouraged NEH to lead in the development of basic preservation guidelines ensuring that libraries choose materials to preserve based on national value rather than purely local interest and that filming does not duplicate work that has already been done elsewhere. Furthermore, preserved books are available for use throughout the nation through provisions made to loan microfilm to any library that needs it for a patron. Equally important, the federal government took the lead in developing standards for alkaline paper and promoting its use in government publications and scholarly works. The investment in this stable medium has virtually stopped the production of major works on acidic paper in developed countries. The importance of this national leadership and coordination to these successes cannot be overstated.

We note with concern that we are less than halfway to the goal of 3 million books saved, even though we are already halfway through the time frame of twenty years. Nevertheless, we urge this Subcommittee to fully fund the President's budget request for the National Endowment for the Humanities that includes \$22.945 million for preservation and access activities of which the new digital initiative is an important component.

Concerns about Audio-Visual Media

Of growing concern to all in the humanities is how to ensure the preservation of the fragile historical record of the twentieth century captured in film, video, television, recorded sound, and other audio or visual forms of information. These media have given us an unprecedented means by which we can capture the experience of a diverse American culture with a vividness and faithfulness that print often cannot match and give us a rich, multidimensional portrait of ourselves and our times. Regrettably, while widely accessible to Americans of all cultural, linguistic, and ethnic backgrounds, these media are hard to preserve. Yet without access to the rich heritage that audio and visual resources document, there are large segments of the American democratic experiment that will not survive to become part of the historical record. Without such audiovisual records, we would not be able to create documentary histories of baseball, slavery, the Civil War, or the immigrants' odyssey through Ellis Island. Institutions large and small across America are preserving these resources. NEH plays a vital role in funding many of these preservation projects.

Regional Preservation Needs

There are many partners and institutions concerned with preservation and access. NEH makes sure that the needs of various regional areas, as well as traditionally underserved populations, are met by supporting regional preservation centers across the country. The centers provide a variety of onsite services to those who do not have the capacity in-house to stabilize or repair endangered items. More importantly, in part through NEH-funded field services, these centers provide training, treatment programs, workshops, and information and resource sharing that reach into every corner of the nation, no matter how remote. Examples of collections that have benefited from such preservation field services are WPA murals at Erasmus High School in Brooklyn NY, photographs from the National Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown (many of which were used by Ken Burns in his documentary on the sport), a collection of Flannery O'Connor manuscripts in Georgia, and Pequot tribal records in Connecticut.

Libraries, archives, and citizens all can gain access to important advice and training from professionals through these regional centers. Topics of workshops sponsored in part with NEH funds include instruction on how to manage an outbreak of mold, how to recover after flood, fire or earthquake has damaged collections and the buildings that house them, how to improve storage conditions, disaster preparedness planning and staff training, emergency response services, training in fundraising for preservation and collections care, and how to procure appropriate insurance coverage. The regional centers supported by NEH provide information by telephone, fax, and e-mail to anyone who has an inquiry, be they an institution or an individual. Among the types of institutions that are served are performing arts organizations, religious and civic groups, hospitals, learned societies, social welfare agencies, sports clubs, historic preservation societies, and research libraries.

Building a Digital Future of Quality

All of our organizations that view preservation as key to our missions are concerned about identifying the most effective methods to preserve the greatest numbers of research materials. Until now, microfilming has been the method of choice when materials are already brittle. With newer, less embrittled printed works, mass deacidification has also proven effective. We recognize that these "old technologies" seem strange in a world that is dominated by digital technology. But the new technology is just that - new - and while it holds great promise for improving access to research materials, it has yet to meet any minimum standards for longevity. The experience of not being able to read a document created by an earlier version of a

word-processing system or not having the hardware to read a 5" floppy disk are just simple examples of the problems that affect our ability to ensure the preservation of digital documents. Digitization is still no substitute for microfilming and mass de-acidification of brittle materials. For that reason, we strongly support the collaboration of NEH with the National Science Foundation to encourage further research into the techniques of assuring long-term access to digital information.

Digitization is, however, a very important method for making the intellectual and cultural record of the United States readily accessible to educators, students, and scholars. We strongly support NEH's efforts to complement its mission to preserve these resources by the commitment to make special collections and published materials as accessible as possible. Digital technology gives us a new opportunity to extend the reach of the humanities into every classroom, every home, and every library. An ever-increasing body of knowledge is now available only in electronic form, and because so many more individuals can view materials on the screens of their personal computers, many repositories of specialized and rare materials are digitizing their precious holdings so others have access to them.

NEH is asking this year for special funds ear-marked to make these humanities resources available through digitization. With the same rigor and concern for quality that has characterized NEH's Brittle Books Program, the Endowment seeks to encourage consortial arrangements that lead to putting important resources online that will complement, not duplicate, the digitizing efforts of other agencies and libraries. In keeping with its emphasis on education, NEH plans to support more digitization projects so that school audiences will have access to primary resources through the World Wide Web. In this way the resources that have been collected in support of research and teaching by academic libraries can be greatly leveraged by making them available to wide, general audiences. This funding will complement the monies that will be distributed nationally by the White House's Digital Library for Education initiative through the Institute for Museum and Library Services, the National Park Service, and the National Archives. While the IMLS funds will focus on projects dealing with published literature, NEH's funds will go to putting special collections online—primary materials such as photographs, unpublished manuscripts, broadsides, posters, and other items that provide students an unequalled opportunity to investigate for themselves the raw materials of history. With such resources available online, teachers can craft curricular materials that offer each student the chance to engage directly with the men and women who have come before us and left us a record of their actions, achievements, and even failed efforts that hold valuable lessons. Educators have often pointed to these primary sources as being important for the development of critical thinking skills in the young.

In conclusion, with critical support from the Congress, a highly successful program focused on the preservation of our national heritage has been undertaken by the NEH. There is now access to unique resources that have been preserved in libraries throughout the United States. Complementing these efforts will be a new program focused on the digitization of special collections, published materials, newspapers, and books. We seek your support for NEH's Preservation and Access program, both ongoing activities in the Brittle Book Program as well as a new initiative for the digitization of materials to enhance access to unique resources.