

## ***Statement on the FY-1992 Appropriation for the National Endowment for the Humanities***

**Before the U.S. House of Representatives, Subcommittee on Interior and Related Agencies (Committee on Appropriations), by James M. McPherson, Edwards Professor of American History, Princeton University, Speaking on behalf of the Association of Research Libraries, the Commission on Preservation and Access, and the National Humanities Alliance**

**April 18, 1991**

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee,

My name is James M. McPherson. I am Edwards Professor of American History at Princeton University, where I have taught for twenty-eight years. I am the author of a half dozen books and numerous articles and essays on the Civil War and post-Civil War eras of American history. One of my books, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, won the Pulitzer Prize for History in 1989. It is both an honor and a welcome opportunity for me to testify before you today on behalf of the Commission on Preservation and Access, the Association of Research Libraries, and the National Humanities Alliance. My testimony as an historian who uses fragile and brittle books, pamphlets, and newspapers in research is offered in support of continuing and, if possible, increasing the appropriation for the Office of Preservation of the National Endowment for the Humanities to enable that office to carry forward its admirable and essential work to preserve these valuable materials from permanent loss.

My own experience with research in these materials goes back thirty years or more to my days as a graduate student at the Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore. One of the reasons I chose Johns Hopkins for graduate study was its proximity to Washington and to one of the great research libraries of the world, the Library of Congress. Nor was I disappointed in the wealth of sources in that marvelous institution just up the street. I remember with fondness my many trips from Baltimore on the old Pennsylvania Railroad or the B & O or by car-pooling with other graduate students in an ancient Volkswagen beetle or Chevrolet gas guzzler. I spent many hundreds of happy hours poring over books, pamphlets, and newspapers as well as manuscript collections for my doctoral dissertation, which also became my first book, a study of the continuing activities of abolitionists on behalf of civil rights and education for freed slaves after the abolition of slavery. The challenges and excitement of discovery in this research really launched my career as an historian.

But at the same time, the shock of seeing some of these irreplaceable sources literally fall apart as I read them almost spoiled the pleasures of research. My years in graduate school came at the dawn of the microfilm age. Very few of the sources I used had been microfilmed. I read them in the original, just as they had come from the printer nearly a century earlier. This hands-on contact with materials that had been handled by the people I was studying was thrilling, but it was also potentially disastrous. Many of these pamphlets, books, and newspapers had been printed on paper made by the then-new wood pulp process. As I turned these precious but highly acidic pages, some of them tore and crumbled in my hands no matter how carefully and delicately I handled them. I was horrified by the experience of damaging, perhaps destroying the very sources that nurtured my knowledge. Here I was, in one of the world's greatest libraries, defacing its rare and valuable resources! What if I got caught? They would throw me out and ban me forever from the library. My budding career would be ruined. Intellectually I knew why these pages were crumbling, knew that it was not my fault. But emotionally I could not escape the feelings of guilt and shame.

Over the thirty years since that experience, things have changed and improved a good deal. Nearly all of the newspapers and many of the pamphlets I used then have subsequently been microfilmed. So have some of the books, while others have been reprinted in modern editions. In the field of Civil War military history this has often been done by commercial publishers, because the market for this material is huge and apparently insatiable. Here is one area where the profit motive has proved a boon to scholarship. Research libraries like the Firestone Library at my own university have been able to replace their crumbling two hundred-plus volumes of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate armies and navies, to mention just one important example. This has been a great benefit not only to me but to many students whose graduate and undergraduate research I have directed. By the late 1980's it was becoming almost impossible to do research in many of these original volumes of the Official Records, which were published between 1880 and 1920. The pages had already fallen apart and disappeared. But now our worries about this are over; nice, new volumes of the Official Records stand on the library shelves for everyone to use. My students and I also can do research in the hundreds of newspapers from that era now preserved on microfilm.

I could cite other examples. But all of them together constitute merely a beginning of what must be done. Millions of volumes continue to deteriorate on the shelves of research libraries. If their content is not preserved, by microfilming or by some other means, it will disappear, much of it sooner rather than later.

My own third book dealt with the activities of white liberals and their black allies in support of civil rights and higher education for blacks from the 1870's to the founding of the NAACP in 1910. Much of the research for that book, which I did twenty years ago, utilized the periodicals, annual reports, pamphlets, books, college catalogs, and the like from that era. Some of this material crumbled in my hands as I used it, reviving my earlier guilt feelings. This material has great scholarly value, but little if any commercial value. It will not be rescued by the profit motive. If it disappears, our ability to understand the evolution of race relations, the rise of black education, the development of the African-American community during that crucial half-century after emancipation will tragically diminish.

I could make the same point about scores of other important kinds of historical development during the century and a half since the introduction of wood pulp acidic paper. We confront the danger of historical amnesia. As the sources for understanding our national past deteriorate and vanish, we will gradually lose our sense of identity, our capacity to understand who and what we are, how we got that way, and why. We will be unable to grapple with the problems that confront us today and in the future in an intelligent way because we will not be able to analyze the origins and development of these problems.

We cannot afford to lose our cultural heritage as it is preserved in print. And the strategy of the NEH Office of Preservation is the best way to go about saving that heritage.

I want to take this opportunity to thank you, Mr. Chairman, and your colleagues in Congress for recognizing the challenge of deteriorating paper and for the thoughtful response that was formulated and put in place in 1988. For it was the NEH capability statement prepared under the direction of Mrs. Cheney at the request of you and your colleagues that produced the solid formula for saving at least three million of the endangered materials. The strategy, in short, is to provide continuing, long-term, stable support for phased preservation of the nation's irreplaceable historical and cultural records. While support for this activity must come from many sources -- and does -- the NEH support is critical to the success of the plan. It is the NEH support that enables hundreds of libraries and allied organizations to focus their attention and programs on preservation needs.

As a scholar who has mourned the loss of valued, embrittled materials, but who also has rejoiced when such materials have been rescued and protected, I can personally attest to the positive difference that NEH has made to the progress of historical research in this country. The momentum of the 20-year brittle books initiative and other NEH preservation programs must continue. I urge this committee to persevere in its foresighted support and funding for these efforts at the highest possible level for 1992 and succeeding years.