

Statement on the FY-1991 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 Govan, University Librarian, University of North Carolina (Chapel Hill), Speaking on behalf of the Association of Research Libraries, the Commission on Preservation and Access, and the National Humanities Alliance

May 3, 1990

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee,

My name is James Govan, and I am University Librarian at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today in support of the National Endowment for the Humanities' Fiscal Year 1991 appropriations, on behalf of the Association of Research Libraries, the Commission on Preservation and Access, and the National Humanities Alliance. As a past president of the Association of Research Libraries, a former member of its Preservation Committee, and currently a member of the board of the Commission on Preservation and Access, I have been actively involved in the preservation effort for many years.

Role of the National Endowment for the Humanities

NEH's leadership in establishing an Office of Preservation in 1985 and the substantial expansion of that program with the support of the Appropriations Subcommittee in 1988 has generated a momentum in this country that has stimulated similar activities around the world. The past several years of accomplishment under the superb leadership of the Chairman, Lynne Cheney, and the Director of the Office of Preservation, George Farr, have demonstrated the singular capacity of the NEH to administer an effective national program crucial to the health and vitality of the humanities in our society.

In this regard, the NEH has done far more than provide funds for preserving brittle books. It has served as a forum for discussing, developing, and evaluating strategies and collaborative mechanisms for a decentralized program activity; it has stimulated the creation of new education and training programs; it has encouraged the formulation and maintenance of standards; and it has provided the necessary impetus for institutionalizing preservation operations in local institutions.

Accomplishments to Date

The deterioration of printed materials is one of the most serious crises confronting research libraries. The NEH initiative to preserve embrittled books has forged a new and dynamic partnership between the nation's major research libraries, the federal government, and the scholars and others who use them. The projects funded during the past two years illustrate the rich diversity and broad subject scope of the collections that have been targeted for preservation microfilming:

- 9,000 volumes of pre-Soviet law at Harvard University
- 4,350 volumes of the history of technology at the University of Chicago
- 4,300 volumes of Western Americana at the University of California, Berkeley
- 25,400 volumes of American history at the New York Public Library
- 18,000 volumes of European history at Yale University
- 1,800 volumes of Chinese history at Columbia University

NEH funding has enhanced efforts to define processes for selecting materials for preservation. As institutions prepare grant proposals, priorities must be established based on collection strengths. Participating libraries report that the availability of NEH funding has stimulated the systematic assessment of preservation needs, aided in establishing a university-wide process for identifying materials with national intellectual significance and at highest risk, and resulted in the development of new and more sophisticated long-range plans for comprehensive preservation activity. In addition, because of resulting coverage by local and national news media, the NEH grant funding has enabled the library community to attract the attention of university administrators, scholars, and the general public to the severity of the preservation issues.

Libraries participating in the NEH program report that the availability of NEH funds on a regular, sustained basis has significantly improved their capacity to strengthen and operate comprehensive in-house preservation programs. They cite the new emphasis on production, adherence to national standards, staff training, the upgrading and expansion of facilities, and timely cataloging of microforms -- activities all stimulated by NEH funding. According to statistics assembled by the Association of Research Libraries, ARL member libraries in the United States and Canada spent more than \$62 million on preservation activities in fiscal year 1989. Under the NEH grants, microfilming projects are swift-paced and complex, and meeting goals and deadlines is a challenge. More efficient approaches to microfilming operations have had a beneficial effect on the management of related preservation activities. On a fundamental level, the NEH program has had a substantial multiplier effect.

Libraries' collective experiences highlight substantial accomplishments to date. Both public and private institutions have made enormous contributions to the preservation effort through coordinated action. Momentum is building. We therefore urge the restoration of the proposed \$800,000 cut in federal funding for the National Endowment for the Humanities' Office of Preservation. The Congress has funded the first two phases of a carefully developed plan to ensure that the information contained in 3 million books is not lost to both contemporary and future researchers and scholars. That plan is at risk. If the task is to be accomplished, support must be consistent. We are at a critical juncture in the development of a broad-based national preservation effort. In tooling up our research libraries to meet projected production levels, based on anticipated NEH and local funding, research institutions have made major investments in staff, space, and equipment. The economic benefits of that expansion, accomplished at the expense of other pressing priorities in our universities today, will be lost if the partnership falters.

We believe that the original NEH capability plan, which projected budget requirements for five years beginning FY-1989, was carefully estimated to sustain and strengthen the nation's burgeoning preservation program, a program which today serves as an international model and holds enormous promise for protecting our cultural and historical heritage. In urging support for the NEH Office of Preservation at proposed levels, the research library community pledges, for their part, to maintain their efforts in this essential partnership.

Our primary priority must be the continuing support of the Brittle Books initiative. I say that as the director of a library which does not possess one of the comprehensive collections of the nation and thus does not participate in NEH's program for preservation microfilming. I should hasten to say, however, that we benefit greatly from the program both as citizens vitally interested in the protection of the national heritage and as professionals equally interested in the acquisition on film of collections previously unavailable. We are indebted to the Congress for the existence of the program, as are our peer institutions, and to the libraries that are incurring the costs and other burdens of direct participation in the program. One of the program's effects is the significant enrichment of research collections across the country.

Proposed Addition to the Budget

In earlier testimony, we indicated our estimates were as well documented as possible pending actual experience. As we have entered into this massive coordinated program, we have discovered that the financial burden on participating institutions is greater than anticipated. At the same time that libraries are seeking significant local support to absorb new costs, universities are beleaguered by competing demands including the need to increase support for student aid, faculty salary competitiveness, reinstrumentation of scientific laboratories, and scientific and technological research.

As a consequence of large microfilming projects, the small repair budgets of the participating institutions are being diverted to cover instances of unanticipated damage in the filming process to materials seriously embrittled but not yet crumbling. These volumes, considered of important intellectual value to the local instructional and research programs, can, with inexpensive minor repairs, survive for a limited number of local uses. Scarce local funds are being diverted from routine repairs of the heavily used instructional collection. As a result, those institutions making a contribution to the national effort are, in effect, being forced to skew their local priorities in favor of the national effort.

As a means of balancing the priorities of local and national needs and of contemporary and future scholarship, and to provide an incentive to participating institutions to increase their microfilming operations for the benefit of the nation, we propose a 10% addition to the microfilming budget, which is projected for \$9 million. These additional funds would be administered by NEH as a pro-rated percentage of up to 10% of actual microfilming costs for use in repairing materials damaged in the filming process or for stabilizing illustrated texts pending the availability of appropriate technologies. This small additional investment would serve not only as an incentive to expand our microfilming efforts but would ensure the balanced development of repair programs that both meet institutional needs and the demands created by participation in the national effort. A large proportion of preservation costs are consumed by labor-intensive handling of artifacts. In the course of a massive microfilming project, as books are handled and problems identified, local funds can be used to make appropriate repairs for the institutional collection while unanticipated costs incurred by participating in the national effort can be supported with federal funds.

To summarize our key points, Mr. Chairman, we urge first and foremost that the \$800,000 cut in the NEH budget be restored to reflect NEH's original five-year plan, and second, that funds for NEH's preservation filming initiatives be increased by \$900,000 for a total of \$1.7 million in new funding for FY-1991. We also support the continued development of the National Heritage Preservation Program.

Future Challenges

The reformatting of brittle books is but one, if the most urgent, segment of a comprehensive preservation program. The emerging effectiveness of the NEH brittle books program now enables us to move on to developing a companion strategy for addressing the overwhelming preservation problems faced by the nation's archives. Although there are many similarities in preservation policies and practices for library and archival collections, the enormous impact of the use of acidic paper on our literary, historical and governmental archives must be confronted. In addition to the sheer volume and continuing rapid growth of public and private records, the increasing use of digital technology by government agencies is forcing a reassessment of policies developed for the storage and dissemination of printed materials. New approaches to issues of appraisal, retention, access mechanisms, and the archival properties of non-paper formats must be developed in a coordinated

context, linking government, corporate, religious, manuscript and academic repositories. Perhaps the most striking difference between book collections and archival collections of textual materials is that a large proportion of archival documents, other than duplicative government records, are unique and not amenable to cooperative selection and microfilming projects in the same manner as brittle books. A nationally standardized bibliographic control system has only recently been developed for archival materials, and since most archival collections include photographs, artifacts, maps, and other cultural records in addition to paper documents, the box has served as the primary means of access and retrieval. Consequently, the process of reformatting must be accompanied by new access mechanisms and retrieval systems at additional cost.

While NEH has provided essential support for preservation planning and education for archivists, the greater challenge is on the horizon. The archival community is in the process of developing strategies for stimulating and coordinating local, state, and federal funding to support a coordinated and affordable preservation program in the national interest.

Concurrent Activities

There has been considerable progress on the paper front. Because of the conversion of major paper mills to the alkaline process, a wide range of alkaline papers are readily available at comparable cost to the acid stock traditionally used for books. The combined efforts of librarians, authors, and the United States Congress to persuade major American publishers to use alkaline paper for publications of enduring value have achieved notable success. The development of environmentally safe, reliable mass de acidification processes continues to promise a potential remedy for the millions of acidic, but not yet brittle, volumes in libraries around the world. The library community is also exploring, in partnership with technology corporations, the promising potential of digital storage media for archival purposes as well as strategies for the preservation of knowledge on magnetic tape, video and audio disks, photographs, computer tape, and other non-book media.

Conclusion

The National Endowment for the Humanities has led the initiative to preserve knowledge on an international scale. The concerned action of the American government to insure unimpeded access to our intellectual heritage has stimulated a remarkable range of activities and renewed interest in cooperative efforts in countries around the world. In a recent letter to the Commission on Preservation and Access, a librarian at the Deutsche Bucherei in Leipzig, East Germany, asked for a copy of the film, **SLOW FIRES**, produced in 1986 with the support of the National Endowment for the Humanities. The librarian wrote that "the destruction of our national heritage was a tabu topic within the last 40 years... This ought to change now and we want to do something to make the state of our library materials known to everybody. Hoping for your help." Unfettered access to information, and particularly to the history of our civilization, is a hallmark of the free society. On behalf of the Association of Research Libraries, the Commission on Preservation and Access, and the National Humanities Alliance, I urge your support for the proposed appropriations to strengthen and sustain the vital preservation program of the National Endowment for the Humanities.