

Statement on the FY-1989 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 Patricia M. Battin, President, Commission on Preservation and Access, Speaking on behalf of the Association of Research Libraries, the Commission on Preservation and Access, and the National Humanities Alliance

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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

1. INTRODUCTION

My name is Patricia Battin, and I am President of the Commission on Preservation and Access. Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of the National Endowment for the Humanities' FY-89 appropriation, on behalf of the Commission on Preservation and Access, the National Humanities Alliance (NHA) and the Association of Research Libraries (ARL).

The National Endowment for the Humanities has long been known to me; during my ten years as Vice President for Information Services and University Librarian of Columbia University in the City of New York, I had the opportunity to serve on several NEH review panels. The Columbia Libraries are also included among the many university libraries receiving grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities to preserve distinctive research resources and make them more accessible to more scholars.

In my present role as head of the Commission on Preservation and Access, I hope to take my previous experience and concern with the humanities in general, and preservation of our nation's recorded heritage in particular, to a wider national audience -- including the Endowment, with which the Commission has had an ongoing and salutary relationship -- to develop, in partnership with the Endowment, NHA, ARL and other concerned organizations, a coordinated, cost-effective national program to save our written heritage.

2. THE IMPORTANCE AND USEFULNESS OF THE ENDOWMENT

I strongly believe that the importance of the National Endowment in maintaining and assuring the quality of our cultural life cannot be overstated. In a nation of the size and complexity of ours, the Endowment stands out as an example of our society's special and unique ability to address important cultural and social issues in productive ways, not the least of which is its flexibility of response. The talent of the Endowment's staff, and their knowledge of academic and scholarly concerns and values, means that the Endowment, by definition, is especially qualified to work quickly, competently and effectively with leaders in higher education, cultural institutions and the humanities. This flexibility is of critical importance in circumstances of crisis. We now face such an unprecedented crisis -- the deterioration of our recorded heritage. It is a crisis of alarming proportions, and one for which until now no national infrastructure has ever existed. It is just such a structure, as I will relate later, that the Endowment and its national partners are already at work creating and strengthening. We must act quickly to enhance this effective and productive partnership of public and private resources to save our nation's intellectual heritage -- our cultural memory is at stake.

Both the National Humanities Alliance and the Association of Research Libraries, along with the members of the Commission I represent, strongly support Dr. Cheney's comments on the importance of our heritage as stated recently in an article in The Washington Post: "Our society, like all societies, depends for its cohesiveness on common knowledge -- a 'symbolic code,' Alfred North Whitehead called it. While that knowledge must reflect the experience of each new generation, it must also be linked to the tradition that has formed the society....Without this link to the past, we are unmoored, lacking the awareness of where we are and who we are, which is essential to determining what we, as an American community, shall be. As Whitehead put it, 'Those societies which cannot combine reverence to their symbols with freedom of revision must ultimately decay.'"

3. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The concern I bring to you today is, quite simply, that it is the record of our shared symbolic code itself that is decaying and endangered. We cannot expect the societal cohesiveness that comes from a symbolic code if the record that comprises it is lost to us.

And that is the immediate danger we face. As you know from testimony last year before this Subcommittee -- and before the Subcommittee on Postsecondary Education -- the acid paper on which we have recorded our words and images for the past 150 years is deteriorating at an alarming rate. We face a problem of monumental dimensions. In the area of books alone (the first among several priorities we hope to address in years to come), all indications are that as much as one-fourth of the collections of the nation's major libraries -- including the Library of Congress and the major research and university libraries -- is in a state of serious embrittlement due to the acid paper on which nearly all books have been printed since the mid-nineteenth century. In gross numbers we are talking about 75 million volumes. As Vartan Gregorian says in the documentary film, **Slow Fires**, if George Orwell were writing futuristic fiction today, he would not call for the burning of books, but merely for their being printed on poor paper that would soon self-destruct.

And, as you can imagine, the crisis is worldwide. While other nations are mobilizing to address the brittle books issue, it is no secret that it is the United States and a few other nations of the developed world that will need to take the lead in saving materials from and for the whole world. In a global society, we are as dependent on the knowledge that is published in foreign literatures as we are on our own. The work we accomplish in preservation will have international as well as national implications and benefits.

A key part of understanding what is at stake in the brittle book issue is to recognize the enormous contribution both public and private universities have made over the decades to our nation's well-being by developing and supporting distinctive research collections. That contribution has not been to scholarship alone, but to the American people at large. Brittle books and the papers and manuscripts decaying in our archives represent a major social problem of concern to all of us. The brittle paper problem is indeed a problem of societal, and not just library-world, dimensions. Therefore, the brittle book problem represents a serious threat to a fundamental national asset -- an asset that undergirds our common knowledge, our symbolic code, perhaps as no other does. For within this national asset are the parts of our common knowledge that cannot be related to us except through books and documents in our libraries and archives -- because the narrators and speakers and players are long dead.

The operating budgets of our libraries and universities can no longer support this national asset alone. We believe that it is in your best interests as representatives of a nation critically dependent on this asset to form a new partnership both to protect our heritage and to extend at the same time

far broader access to it, an expanded access that is crucial to our survival in a global society. The new technologies available to us -- products of a strong research establishment which has long depended upon recorded literature -- can be utilized not only to preserve a significant portion of our printed heritage, but also to make it far more widely available for use than it is in its present condition.

4. RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

During the past year, the Commission on Preservation and Access, established by the Council on Library Resources and funded by nine universities and several foundations, has been working to coordinate the national infrastructure that is needed to work in partnership with Congress, through the National Endowment for the Humanities, to address the problem of brittle books in a responsible and coordinated way.

I should note here that the Commission was established in 1986 following the recommendation of a study group organized by the Council on Library Resources. As you may know, the Council on Library Resources was itself established in 1956 and has been funded since its inception by major private foundations in this country. Preservation has been a key area of the Council's endeavors for more than 20 years, and studies funded by the Council resulted in much of what we now know about the causes of paper deterioration. The Commission on Preservation and Access, in its turn, is funded by a group of major universities and private foundations, including the Council, and counts among its members the Deputy Librarian of Congress, the directors of several major university and research libraries, and university officers. Its creation and work was endorsed by the Association of Research Libraries in a resolution passed at its 1984 meeting.

Because of these initiatives, much has been learned and accomplished in the past 20 years. In addition to the seminal research commissioned by the Council on Library Resources, we can note the following activities:

- The three national libraries -- the Library of Congress, the National Library of Medicine, and the National Agricultural Library -- have initiated preservation programs in a variety of areas. The Library of Congress has long had a National Preservation Program Office; it also is addressing, through its mass deacidification program, an issue that will be with us as long as acid paper continues to be used for printing books. It should be noted, however, that the brittle books of which I speak today are those "beyond help" by deacidification, as deacidification is helpful only to books that have not reached the embrittled state. The National Library of Medicine has a comprehensive preservation program underway, and is already filming millions of pages of deteriorated medical materials. The National Agricultural Library is doing important research into the uses of optical disc technologies for storage and retrieval of complex scientific information.
- In the research library world, increased emphasis on preservation in both the graduate library schools and in continuing education programs for library professionals has resulted in a vastly increased pool of talent to manage and direct preservation programs. This educational initiative has been matched by the increased recognition of the preservation issue on the part of university officers who have responded with expanded financial support to establish sophisticated preservation operations in many of our premier research libraries.
- The Association of Research Libraries created a Preservation Planning Program that assists libraries in analyzing the current status of their collections and allows systematic

assessment of preservation needs. Through participation in the program, research libraries have a clearer picture than ever before of the extent of their local preservation, and a long term plan for addressing their needs.

- With significant support from NEH, the ARL libraries and the Library of Congress have undertaken a major project to create machine readable records of the book titles listed in the National Register of Microfilm Masters, a comprehensive inventory of titles already converted to microform. Inclusion of these records in nationally available computer databases will enhance access to the material, and support future preservation microfilming projects by minimizing duplication of effort among libraries.
- A large-scale regional microfilming center, the Mid-Atlantic Preservation Service at Lehigh University in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, has been established as the result of a far-sighted coalition of foundations and universities, stimulated in large part by the Council on Library Resources. This center is destined to become a major, cost-effective resource for libraries, a testbed for scientific research, and a prototype for other regional, mass-production facilities.
- Research is being both conducted and planned in areas involving faster and higher-quality microfilming, special problems affecting materials with nonprint contents, and the newer technologies, such as optical disc and CD-ROM, which, though holding significant promise for the future, do not yet have the archival qualities of archival-level microfilming.
- Studies are also underway by the Commission to develop a cost-effective, rapid retrieval central distribution center of master microfilms, thus making available to all citizens the intellectual contents of preserved materials heretofore available only in specific university locations. The necessary network capabilities and bibliographic retrieval mechanisms are already in place.

5. PROPOSED APPROACH

I offer this background as evidence that awareness of this critical reality in our national life has been steadily growing and maturing in the last 20 years. And in the last five years, that awareness has begun to take specific shape. Without digressing into details developed by the Commission that are attached to this testimony (although I will be glad to address them if you like), I would simply say that we envision a joint venture between the higher education and research communities and the federal government over a twenty-year period to preserve and make available to the nation a significant portion -- nearly 4 million -- of the most important volumes in our collective heritage, at the same time institutionalizing the preservation process in our libraries and archives. This effort could be largely accomplished, again in simplified terms, by a group of institutions, with the assistance of the federal government through the unique capabilities of the National Endowment for the Humanities. Each library would preserve the contents of 7,500 volumes a year, over 20 years, resulting in an institutional total of 150,000 volumes, and a national total of 3 million. The remaining million volumes would be preserved by the Library of Congress, which has announced its intention to preserve 750,000 of its most important deteriorated items over that time span; by the National Library of Medicine, which (as mentioned before) is also embarked on an important preservation enterprise, and by institutions housing smaller, distinctive collections at various locations throughout the nation.

6. PROPOSED PARTNERSHIP WITH NEH

NHA, ARL and the Commission believe this proposed partnership of the higher education and research communities and the Endowment to be a realistic, responsible and attainable goal -- and were even more funding available, we would be prepared to accomplish even more.

To accomplish this goal requires at least a five-fold increase in our current level of effort. We are well aware of the need for controlled, incremental expansion of the necessary operations into a flourishing infrastructure. Our analysis indicates that NEH is now spending between \$2 and \$3 million a year on preservation (in addition to its support for the newspaper project). This year saw an auspicious beginning with NEH matching grants in preservation of \$1 million to two outstanding research collections. Several more applications are in preparation for the coming year.

We propose that federal funding for preservation microfilming be increased by a minimum of \$2 million a year until an annual level of \$10 million is reached. (Please note that we are proposing new funding, and not transfers from other budgets within NEH.) Additional university proposals, at the rate of two to four a year, can be expected to parallel the increasing amount of funding planned, until a level of 150,000 volumes a year is reached. Coordination of selection and recording of volumes filmed to avoid duplication and insure broad bibliographic access would be monitored at the national level, and within a very short time -- perhaps four to five years -- a significant number of endangered items would be both preserved and made nationally accessible.

I want to emphasize that NHA, ARL and the Commission are proposing a true partnership: funding through NEH would not provide the entire costs of such filming. Universities and other participating research libraries would be contributing both professional time and funds to the work. The Commission plans to seek the participation of state and local legislatures, private foundations, and the corporate sector in this crucial venture. It is a challenge that must concern us all, and we believe the National Endowment for the Humanities provides an unparalleled resource to solve an unparalleled crisis.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today to our affirmation of the work that has been and continues to be accomplished by the National Endowment for the Humanities, which represents a unique part of the American federal structure. Others have spoken and will speak to other significant Endowment programs; for those whom I represent, we believe that major participation by the Endowment in the preservation of and access to those documents that comprise our common heritage is essential to the success of the broader program objectives. If we are to take seriously Whitehead's injunction to have reverence for our symbols, there is little better way than to contribute to their continued existence. For as we preserve our heritage, we guarantee our future. Many years ago, the founders of the Virginia Historical Society observed that "We cannot be indifferent to our past if we would stand with credit in the future." We owe to those who follow us the knowledge of their past.