

Advocacy Roundup (August 2014)
Humanities Funding, Educational Priorities,
and the National Museum for Women's History

Lee White

Since my last column in May, the National Coalition for History has been involved in numerous public policy issues both inside and outside of the Beltway. So much has happened that we are abandoning our usual format of a single-themed column to provide an update on these initiatives.

NCH has added a major new constituency to the organization. The Records Preservation and Access Committee (RPAC) is made up of the National Genealogical Society (NGS), the Federation of Genealogical Societies (FGS) and the International Association of Jewish Genealogical Societies (IAJGS). FGS represents the members of hundreds of genealogical societies and NGS and IAJGS represents over 9,000 thousand genealogists. The National Archives estimates that genealogists use the records more than any other constituency, so NCH is welcoming a whole new cadre of politically active members.

Federal Funding

The fiscal year 2015 appropriations process in Congress is in its usual state of chaos. The House of Representatives was on something of a roll, having passed 7 of the 12 fiscal year 2015 appropriations going into the August recess. However, the US Senate has passed none of its appropriations bills, with few even getting passed by the Appropriations Committee. As a result, it's become obvious Congress will revert to its usual tactic of passing a continuing resolution to keep the federal government operating beyond the start of the new fiscal year on October 1. In fact, there is general consensus that Congress will likely punt the budget until after the November elections, leaving it to a lame duck session.

Despite the uncertainty over the FY '15 budget, there are a few bright spots. For many years, the History Coalition has successfully led the fight to prevent elimination of the National Historical Publications and Records Commission and to ensure that it receives adequate funding to meet its mission. Unfortunately, this small but vital program remains a perennial target for budget cutters in Congress and at the Office of Management and Budget. However, this year, both the Financial Services and General Government (FS&GG) Appropriations bill passed by the House and the one considered by the FS&GG appropriations subcommittee in the Senate include a modest \$500,000 increase for the NHPRC up to a level of \$5 million. If ultimately included in the FY '15 CR, this would represent the first increase in the NHPRC's budget in six fiscal years.

On July 15, the House Appropriations Committee adopted the Interior, Environment and Related Agencies FY 15 funding bill. The Appropriations Committee included \$146 million for the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH). The Committee added \$8 million in funding for the NEH, up from the \$138 million level recommended by the Interior appropriations subcommittee. NCH and our colleagues at the National Humanities Alliance issued an advocacy alert urging support of increased funding for the NEH.

Restoration of Federal Funding for History, Civics, and Social Studies Education

On July 18, the National Coalition for History (NCH) submitted a letter to the US Department of Education requesting that History and Civic Education be included as priorities in determining where to focus Federal financial assistance through the agency's discretionary grant programs. In addition, numerous NCH member organizations submitted comments to the Department of Education in support of history and civics funding. As of the July 24 comment deadline the Department of Education had received over 1,600 comments on its proposal, the vast majority from history and civics organizations and activists.

In 2010, the US Department of Education published a list of supplemental priorities and definitions to be used in awarding discretionary (competitive) grants made by the department. The department is now proposing to repeal the 2010 priorities and definitions and replace them with new priorities. Not surprisingly, given recent statements by the president denigrating the value of a humanities degree, science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) education is listed as a priority area for funding. However, history and civic education are nowhere mentioned in the list of the Department of Education's priorities.

And they haven't been in the government's priorities for some time. In fiscal year 2002, Congress authorized nearly \$1 billion for the "Teaching American History" (TAH) grants program, but Congress terminated funding for TAH in fiscal year 2012. At the same time, appropriations earmarked for civics education were defunded. In addition, National History Day, authorized under the History and Civics Act of 2004, received an appropriation of \$500,000 in 2010 and 2011, but Congress terminated funding in 2012. As a result, since FY '11 there has been no federal funding provided for K-12 history or civics education.

National Women's History Museum Commission

On May 16, the National Coalition for History (NCH) sent a letter to Senator Susan Collins (R-ME) concerning a bill (S. 398) she introduced to establish a commission to study the creation of a National Women's History Museum. NCH strongly supports forming the commission, as well as the ultimate goal of building the museum. Nevertheless, NCH expressed concerns, that the legislation in its current form leaves out expert historians and the public from the deliberations of the commission, and endorses a problematic fundraising plan. NCH sent a similar letter to the cosponsors of S. 398.

While the creation of a commission to merely study the concept of building a women's history museum would seem noncontroversial, legislation to do so has been stalled in Congress for nearly a decade. Efforts have faltered for a number of reasons: debates over whether the museum should be located on the National Mall or elsewhere in Washington, DC; whether it should be part of the Smithsonian Institution; and whether the federal government should be involved in funding the museum and to what extent.

In addition, there are questions about the group formed in 1996 to promote the project. National Women's History Museum, Inc. (NWHM) is a nonprofit organization. The legislation calls for the commission to consider the role the NWHM should have in raising funds for the construction

of the museum. Yet, since its formation, the NWHM has raised only \$14 million. The museum itself is estimated to cost at least \$400 million.

The NWHM has also been criticized for many years for the quality of the women's history exhibits on its website. In 2011, the NWHM created a Scholarly Advisory Council made up of experts in women's history, museum professionals, and others to review the museum's exhibits and programs. Since its inception, the advisory panel has had an uneasy relationship with the NWHM's president and CEO Joan Wages. A major complaint of the historians was that Wages did not understand women's history and that she was dismissive of the advice she received from the historians and others on the Scholarly Advisory Council.

Just before the women's history museum commission bill was considered by the House, Wages dissolved abolished the Scholarly Advisory Council, which caused uproar in the historical community. Sonya Michel, a professor of history at the University of Maryland who was among those dismissed by Wages, wrote an article in the *New Republic* harshly critical of the NHWM and its practices.

In May, a companion bill (H.R. 863) passed the House by a vote of 383-33. S. 398 has not yet been scheduled for markup or consideration in the Senate.

Boston Public Schools History and Social Studies Education

In May, rumors surfaced on the Internet that the Boston Public School (BPS) system was eliminating its history and social studies department. A petition was posted online that went viral throughout the historical community. On May 23, BPS issued a statement to the effect that an upcoming reorganization had been misinterpreted, and that the history department was in fact not being eliminated or folded into English language arts. On May 28, 2014, the National Coalition for History sent a letter to the superintendent of BPS seeking assurances that this was indeed the case.

On May 30, the National Coalition for History (NCH) received a response from Boston Public Schools Interim Superintendent John McDonough. In confirming the department was not being eliminated, Mr. McDonough stated, "We are glad you reached out to us, and we are even happier that there is an organization such as yours to advocate for the preservation and expansion of History instruction."

For more updates on these and other initiatives, visit our website (historycoalition.org) or follow us on Facebook and Twitter at @HistCoalition.

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