



26 July 2013

David Ferriero
Archivist of the United States
The National Archives and Records Administration
8601 Adelphi Road
College Park, MD 20740-6001

Dear Mr. Ferriero:

Thank you for the invitation to respond to the draft of the National Archives and Records Administration's Strategic Plan. The Executive Board of the Organization of American Historians (OAH) which represents a membership of over 7,800 scholars and teachers of the history of the United States congratulates NARA on embracing the challenge of addressing the many complicated issues it faces in this age of digitization, government economy, and competing demands on NARA's resources.

NARA is critical to the enterprise of doing historical research, especially in the history of the United States. Many American historians still make the trek to the Washington, D.C. area each year to consult with archivists and spend precious hours in the reading rooms at NARA facilities while others depend on NARA to bring the voice of the past to the computers on their office desks. Some do both. Many millions of documents await digitization even while others already in that form must be made available to a vast public. Nor is NARA's job as custodian of the nation's records its only duty. We are very much aware that teachers of American history at all levels send their students to the NARA website offering education in United States history and civics.

While the OAH Executive Board cannot presume to posit solutions to the problems of conflicting demands and limited resources, we do wish to suggest some matters upon which NARA may wish to focus as it proceeds with the strategic planning process.

Access and Record Processing

The OAH applauds NARA's priority of making government documents accessible to the public. However, we note with some concern that there is a considerably large backlog of documents that have yet to be declassified, but which must be examined and processed by the end of 2013 to comply with the presidential executive order issued in 2009. Included in this backlog are many millions of pages which have been reviewed but not yet released as well as others that have yet to be considered for declassification.

While the OAH respects the need to digitize paper records already declassified and processed, we express our concern that the large number of documents that originated in digital form (born-digital records) be processed and made publicly available in a manner reflecting the urgency of the task.

The OAH believes it is critical to establish three-year performance projections and goals for each project, with yearly assessments made about success and failure in meeting the desired performance standards. Only by establishing realistic and specific performance standards can NARA assess the magnitude of its own tasks and measure its ability to make the nation's historical record publicly accessible.

Staffing

Many scholars who have done research in the National Archives during their careers recall with great fondness the expertise, cooperation, and generosity of NARA staff members. NARA specialists' rich knowledge of the record groups in their division facilitates access to the materials scholars know they need and often opens the door to the collection that scholars did not plan on seeing but which holds rich rewards for their projects. Experienced staff members often open the doors to serendipity. Well-trained staff with schedules that allow for adequate consultation time with visiting researchers is essential. So, too, is high staff morale.

These observations suggest two important priorities concerning staff.

First, at a time when more and more of the records being transferred to NARA from government agencies are digital, it is imperative that staff receive the required support to enable them to cultivate and maintain the same high degree of expertise in the digital collections for which they are responsible that they have traditionally maintained in paper collections. Staff training in this area must be a priority for the expenditure of precious funding. Second, information offered to researchers by staff has been enriched by the staff's understanding of the historical context in which the records were created and the history of record-keeping systems in particular agencies. Here, too, the value of NARA's holdings and service to patrons are enhanced by well-trained and experienced staff. The OAH encourages NARA to invest generously in such staff development.

Digitization's Challenges

The process of NARA's digitization raises a number of issues that are of great concern to historians who rely on NARA's holdings.

1) A perennial question is what will be the fate of paper documents as digitization proceeds? How can criteria be developed to decide which documents to retain and which to discard after digitization? All researchers know that discarding paper documents incurs a risk because documents as objects can play a role in scholarly interpretation. Also, there is the risk that digitization will fail to include a critical dimension of a document affecting its interpretive weight (e.g. the faintly visible penciled signature or marginal comment).

The OAH strongly urge inclusion of historians in the decision-making process. Convening panels including historians to exercise oversight in the process is one possible solution.

2) The OAH wishes to ensure the continuous accessibility of record collections even as the digitization process proceeds. Therefore, the OAH encourages NARA to create and publicly post a digitization schedule that will inform the public when and for how long particular record groups or parts of record groups will be inaccessible to patrons well in advance of their inaccessibility.

Educating the Public on the American Past

The OAH congratulates NARA on its vigorous program of education and public programming. We hope that the programs designed to serve teachers and students at all levels, but especially the K-12 group, will remain a NARA priority. Educational programs designed to serve adults, too, are a much valued part of the NARA agenda and often include OAH members as participants. The OAH sees NARA as a valued collaborator in bringing the past and its lessons to a public outside the walls of the academy as well as within.

The Next Step

The scholars and teachers of the Organization of American Historians applaud and encourage NARA as it proceeds in its process of self-examination, assessment, and strategic planning. We enthusiastically stand ready to support NARA as it seeks to navigate the external challenges of fiscal shortage and the internal challenge of technological change, especially digitization. We see our members, not as NARA's "customers," but as NARA's partners who encourage NARA's service to researchers, teachers, and students, standing ready to assist NARA in whatever way would be most constructive to set priorities and schedules in the weeks and months ahead as the strategic planning process continues.

Sincerely yours,

Alan M. Kraut
President

Katherine M. Finley
Executive Director