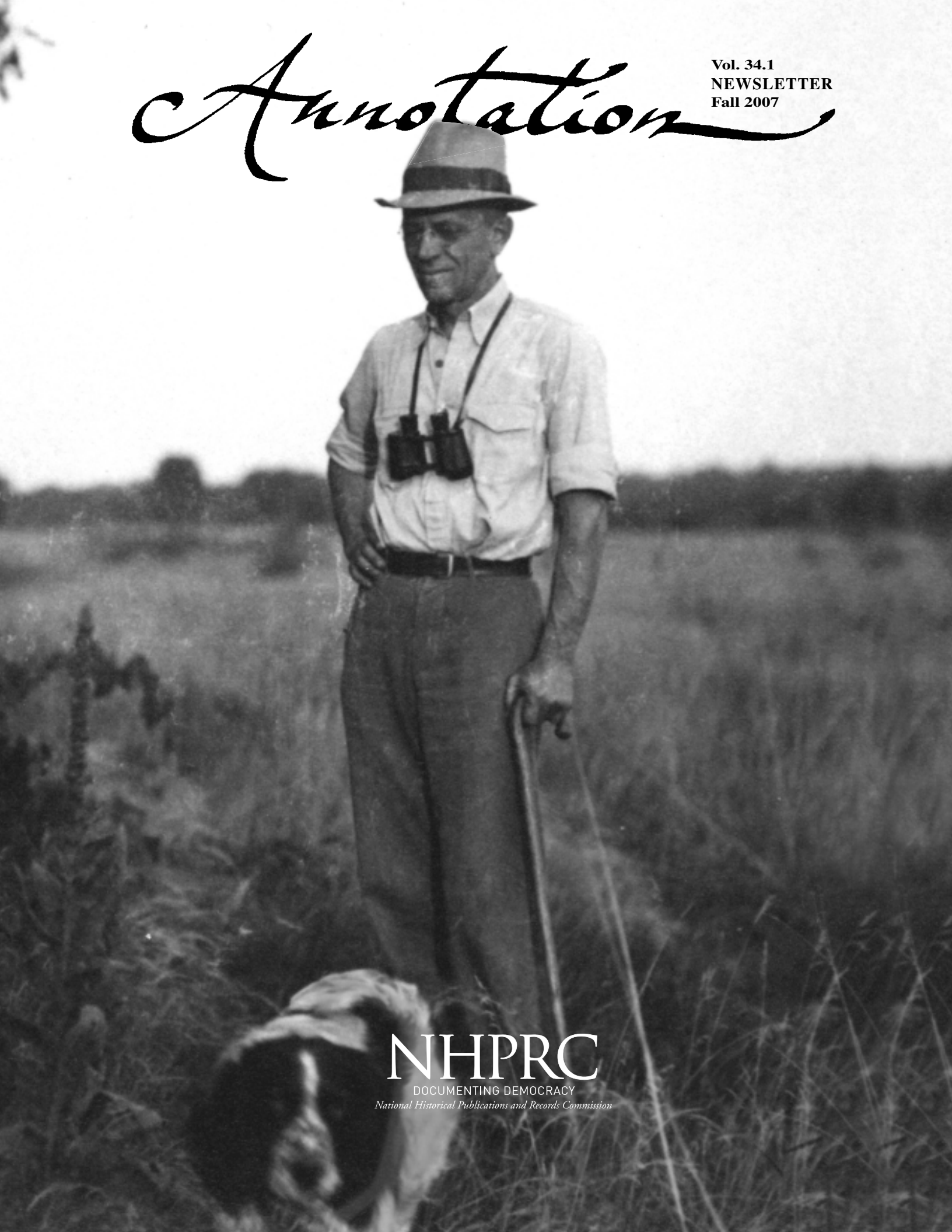


Annotation

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NHPRC

DOCUMENTING DEMOCRACY

National Historical Publications and Records Commission

THE INFORMATION ECOLOGIES AND THE NHPRC

The art of history is always provisional. Drawing on a range of primary sources and tertiary commentary and observation, even the most comprehensive history relies upon sifting for detail, analysis, and selection to create a story, an edited and arranged narrative filtered through the web of an individual mind. The more stories that are preserved, the more complex and provisional our understanding becomes. Rather than establishing a single grand history, the work of preservationists encourages more questions, challenges to authority, and debate—the democratic and egalitarian clash of ideas.

The rise of new technologies in the late 20th and early 21st centuries has made creating, preserving, and disseminating these ideas, paradoxically, both easier and more difficult. On the one hand, digitization and the Internet have created a whole world of publishers from traditional multimedia organizations to the daily bloggers—at least 100 million—who have created between 15 and 30 billion pages and an exponential number of documents.

Writing in the November 5, 2007, issue of *The New Yorker*, Anthony Grafton provides a healthy tonic against the utopian vision of “a universal archive that will contain not only all books and articles but all documents anywhere—the basis for a total history of the human race.” While his essay focuses primarily on efforts to digitize and publish books, Grafton argues:

The rush to digitize the written record is one of a number of critical moments in the long saga of our drive to accumulate, store, and retrieve information efficiently. It will result not in the infotopia that the prophets conjure up but in one in a long series of new information ecologies, all of them challenging, in which readers, writers, and producers of texts have learned to survive.

“A long series of new information ecologies” encompasses as well those who care for the records, both the librarian and archivist. In their 1999 book, *Information Ecologies: Using Technology with Heart*, Bonnie Nardi and Vicky O’Day analyzed the role of librarians—and by extension all records caretakers—as “keynote species” a term borrowed from biology that identifies those species “central to the robust functioning of the ecosystems” (90). This metaphor was pushed further by Jessica George, Lisa Stillwell, and Marjorie Warmkessel in their report “The Essential Librarian? An Exploration of Academic Librarians as a Keystone Species” for the 2003 Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) National Conference.

perhaps not surprisingly, point to the value of librarians: “from their complex character blend of the *human zeitgeist*. . . . The librarian essence is *interpretive of knowledge*, a quality that enables librarians ‘to help clients air their own needs’ and to ‘lead clients to more than they know how to ask for.’”

Librarians, archivists, and records managers will continue to serve as keystone species within the information ecologies, particularly in helping researchers understand what they are looking for as well as leading to what’s hidden within collections, and the long-term task of shaping, managing, and preserving collections. At the same time, however, the Internet is reshaping the relationship between the record keepers and those seeking information. Online self-retrieval of information is a step toward disintermediation—I’ll find it myself—and in the anonymity of the Web, it is hard to help lead people “to more than they know how to ask for.” Or, put another way, the archivist cannot show the way to hidden collections if the researchers themselves are hidden on the other side of a monitor.

Libraries and archives have been struggling to find their role in the new digital, online world. If, as Grafton argues, most research begins by Googling, then many students, historians, and patrons of archives and libraries have already developed and revised their expectations of access to records and information. *Perceptions of Libraries and Information Resources*, a 2005 study by the Online Computer Library Center (OCLC), substantiates the trend, pointing to the need for libraries to rejuvenate the “Library” brand. And the parallels for archives are self-evident.

Rejuvenating the brand depends on reconstructing the experience of using the library. While the need for localized points of distribution for content that is no longer available in just physical form is likely to become less relevant, the need for libraries to be gathering places within the community or university has not decreased. The data is clear. When prompted, information consumers see libraries’ role in the community as *a place to learn, as a place to read, as a place to make information freely available, as a place to support literacy, as a place to provide research support, as a place to provide free computer/Internet access* and more. These library services are relevant and differentiated. Libraries will continue to share an expanding infosphere with an increasing number of content producers, providers and consumers. Information consumers will continue to self-serve from a growing information smorgasbord. The challenge for libraries is to clearly define and market their relevant place in that infosphere—their services and collections both physical and virtual.

The keystone species of the information ecologies—librarians, archivists, documentary editors, and others—provide stewardship for records and public service for historians and researchers. How they respond to the latest ongoing phase to digitization and online access will determine the

future of delivery systems—archives, libraries, books, and other forms of preserving, retrieving, and publishing information.

The Role of Government

While no government can direct the evolution of the information ecologies or create an infotopia, it is apt and fitting that the Federal Government of the United States should play a catalytic role in ensuring that the common good is served. Along with the National Archives, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Institute of Library and Information Services, and the Library of Congress, the National Historical Publications and Records Commission has at the core of its mission the preservation of, and access to, the records and information systems that promote public understanding of our democracy, history, and culture.

In 1964 when the NHPRC first began awarding funds, the strategy was simple and straightforward. Grants were directed to documentary editing projects that sifted through papers of distinguished Americans to *preserve by publishing* segments of the historical record. The editors of these projects add value to the record through transcription—particularly important in late 18th- and early 19th-century documents—annotation, and indexing. Publishing in printed editions continues to be a major focus of the Commission, but it is not the only means of providing preservation and access (see the sidebar: “Four Modes of Preservation”). By the mid-1970s, when the mission expanded to include direct funding of archives and records, a structure of programming developed to include support for a broad range of projects, some aimed at addressing particular preservation needs, and others directed to the infrastructure of state and local archives and the education and training of archivists and documentary editors.

Over the past decade, the programs of the NHPRC have evolved in line with the changing nature of the information ecologies, particularly the explosion of electronic records, both those born digital and those preserved and made accessible in digital formats, and with the tremendous changes in the infrastructure of

state and local archives. Spurred by developments in the documentary editing and archival fields, the NHPRC also has responded to efforts at the Federal Government level to adopt new ways of interacting with the public, most importantly over the Web and through the growth of *Grants.gov*—an online resource designed to centralize Federal grant opportunities. Early in 2004, it became clear that *Grants.gov* would become mandatory for all Federal agencies, and this directive empowered the agency to recast its annual grant guidelines into a more nimble and flexible series of grant opportunities that better reflect and serve the needs of the field and the public. Simultaneously, it provided the Commission with the opportunity to rethink and discuss the purposes behind its grant award programs.

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The National Historical Publications and Records Commission now offers grants for publishing historical records; basic and detailed processing projects that aim to help archives deal with hidden collections and backlogs; digitizing historical records collections; implementing electronic records management programs; providing professional development opportunities for editors and archivists; creating fieldwide strategies and tools; and partnering with state archives. Grant opportunities in each of these areas are published on the Commission’s web site—*www.archives.gov/nhprc*—and through announcements made on *Grants.gov*, which users can browse, search, and use to set up automatic e-mail notification of new opportunities.

Publishing Historical Records

Changes in the information ecologies have been profound in the field of book publishing, particularly academic publishing, and historical documentary editions are no exception. Because of their nature and value, documentary editions—particularly multivolume sets—are sold mainly to research libraries at colleges, universities, and historical societies, as well as to individual scholars and through retailers. Invaluable to researchers, the editions have led to the publication of several prize-winning historical biographies and have been the foundation for classroom materials, scholarship, and new works on stage and film. In addition to grants to support the ongoing work of the editions, the NHPRC also provides publication subventions to nonprofit presses to cover losses in print editions.

University presses, the bulk of the publishers for documentary editions, have wrestled with the changes in the information ecologies, particularly over the issue of open access. The Association of American University Presses issued a *Statement on Open Access* in February 2007 that cogently summarizes the tension between the mission of scholarly exchange and its costs:

[W]hile proud of their achievements, university presses and scholarly societies have never been averse to change. Rather, being embedded in the culture of higher education that values experimentation and advances in knowledge, presses have themselves been open to new ways of facilitating scholarly communication and have been active participants in the process. Prominent examples from the last decade include Project MUSE, the History E-Book Project, the History Cooperative, California’s Anthro Source and eScholarship Editions, Cambridge Companions Online, Chicago’s online edition of *The Founders’ Constitution*, Columbia’s International Affairs Online (CIAO) and Guten-

berge, *The New Georgia Encyclopedia*, MIT CogNet, Oxford Scholarship Online and Oxford's recent experiments with open access journals, Virginia's Rotunda, and Michigan's new press and library collaboration, *digitalculturebooks*.

field regarding the long-standing challenge of backlogs. A task force organized by the American Research Libraries' investigation for exposing hidden collections and "More Product, Less Process: Pragmatically Revamping Traditional Processing Approaches to Deal with Late 20th-Century Collections,"

hidden collections by concentrating on expeditious processing. At the same time, the category is expansive enough to include collections cataloging, phased preservation, and/or collections development, and institutions seeking to establish archives. The first of these backlog grants will be awarded for projects beginning in 2008.

Several of the NHPRC-sponsored documentary editions have led the way in this experiment (see *Annotation*, Volume 33, Issue 2), and the Commission continues to seek a path that will accommodate the needs of preservation of primary source materials, annotation, and editing, with the desire for public access. The system that emerges from this complex problem is the key challenge for the future of historical documentary editions.

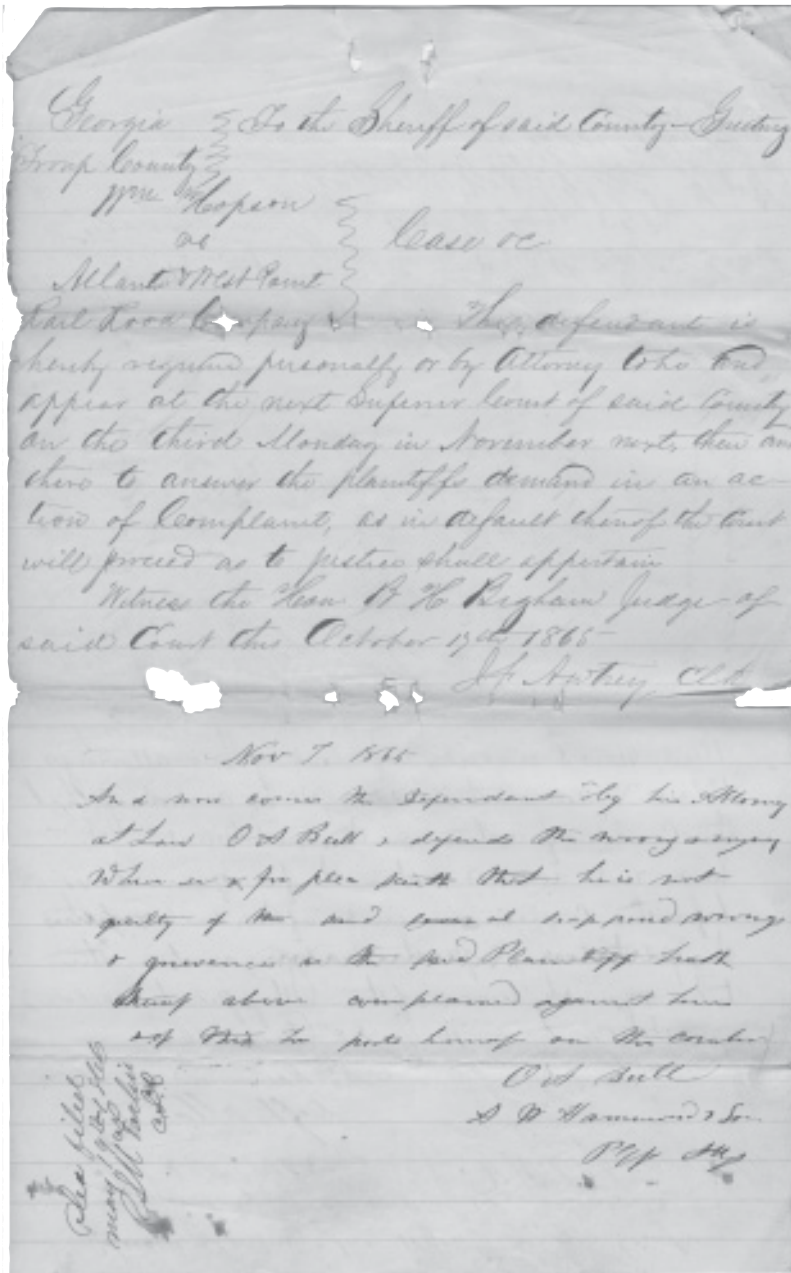
Basic and Detailed Processing

Since the mid-1970s, when the NHPRC began awarding grants for archives and records projects, the program was deliberately wide-open to encourage and stimulate the arrangement, description, and conservation of collections across the country. The category "Archives and Records" encompassed just about every kind of project that wasn't directly tied to publishing historical documentary editions or funding state historical records advisory boards. In 2006, the Commission approved new grant opportunities that channeled projects into more specific and targeted areas of support.

The Basic Processing category stems from research and discussion in the archives

research by Mark Greene and Dennis Meissner, was instrumental in prompting the Commission to undertake a special grant opportunity to encourage repositories to reveal

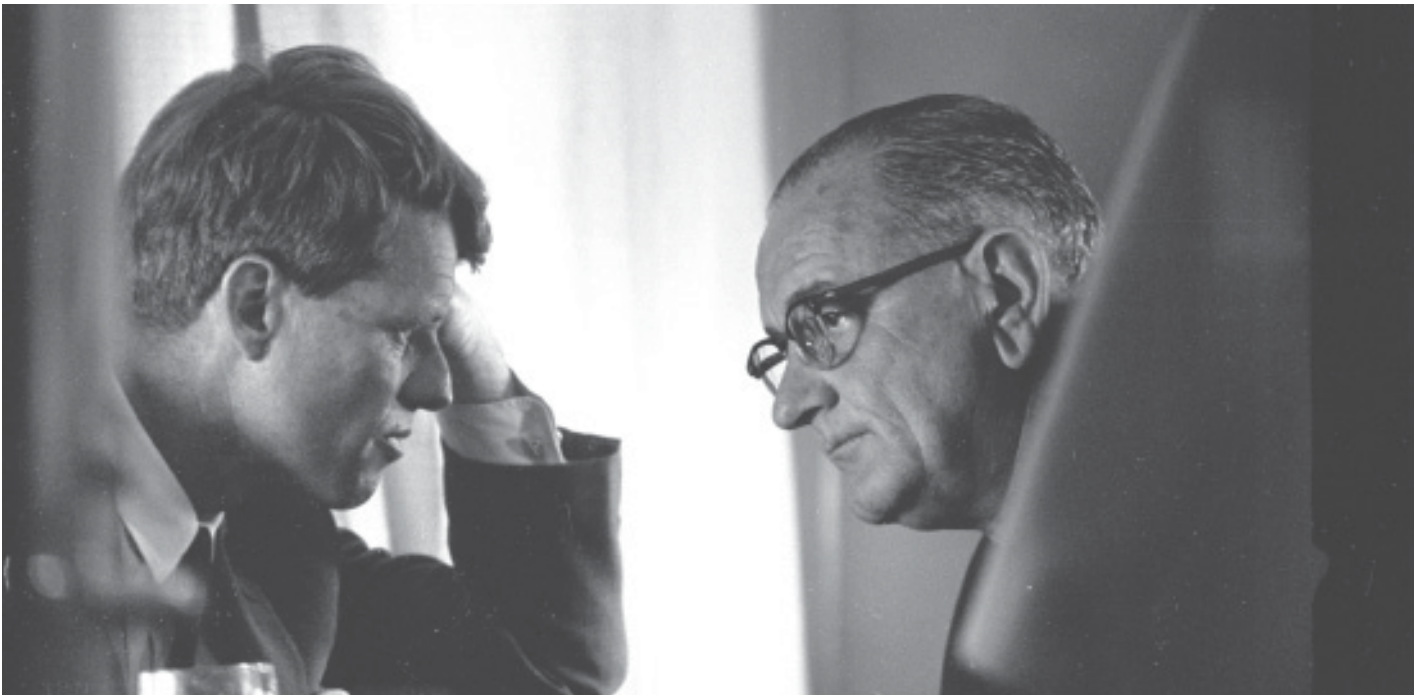
For collections of national significance with high research demand or substantial preservation challenges, the Commission created a second category, Detailed Processing, for applicants who have virtually all of their collections processed and procedures in place to prevent the creation of new backlogs that delay access to their holdings. Detailed Processing Projects may include reformatting records onto microfilm or other media in order to ensure their permanence in the face of high demand. Applicants may process and create detailed descriptions at the series or file level. Such descriptions will improve user access to historical records and help preserve collections. If parts of collections deserve processing to the item level, applicants must provide specific justifications for this detailed degree of work and provide estimates of the percentage of collections to be processed to the item level. The first of these detailed processing grants are to be awarded in 2008.



An 1865 court summons from Troup County, Georgia, part of a \$75,000 NHPRC grant to the county's historical society to support a 17-month project for digitizing County Court and Government Records.

Digitizing Historical Records

An important policy shift happened in May 2006 when the Commission announced its decision to fund projects to digitize records.



Attorney General Robert Kennedy and President Lyndon Johnson confer at an October 1964 meeting. The Presidential Recording Project at the Miller Center, University of Virginia, is preserving audiotapes through print transcriptions and audiofiles on their web site <http://www.millercenter.virginia.edu/academic/presidentialrecordings/>. Photo by Yoichi R. Okamoto, courtesy LBJ Library.

Preservation through copying into another medium had been a long-accepted and funded process, as early as the 1960s when microfilm publishing projects were funded, but because of the rapid expansion and associated costs of

digitization, the NHPRC was reluctant to spread already thin resources for these purposes. A pilot program was announced in 2006, and three grants were awarded to the Troup County (Georgia) Historical Society, the

Archives of Michigan, and the Aldo Leopold Foundation (see “Digitizing Aldo”). The singular advantage of digitization over microfilm is that the NHPRC guidelines call for the collections to be freely available on the Internet.

THE FOUR MODES OF PRESERVATION

At the heart of the mission of the National Historical Publications and Records Commission is the preservation of, and access to, America’s historical records. The NHPRC funds projects along four principal modes of preservation: fixing, maintaining, copying, and educating.

Preservation by Fixing

Perhaps the idea most often associated with preservation is that of “fixing” a physical object, that is, preventing it from changing, or freezing it in time. The original etymological sense of preservation stems from the processes for treating food to prevent decay. Meat and fish were salted; fruits were cooked

Microfilm—such as this edition of the Papers of Benjamin Henry Latrobe—preserves originals by copying into a different medium.

in sugar and water syrups to keep their shape and flavor. Vinegar pickled everything from cucumbers to hard-boiled eggs. An interesting paradox, however, is that efforts to “fix” an object always add new ingredients and that fixed objects continue to change, relentlessly albeit more solely.

For archivists, preservation by fixing is most often thought of as conservation. From the Declaration of Independence to nitrate films, National Archives conservation efforts are replicated throughout the country through state and local governments and other archives. The National



Electronic Records

One of the first Federal agencies to take up the challenges presented by the preservation of electronic records, the Commission adopted a research agenda in 1990, and over the next 15 years, it devoted considerable resources to research and development. Landmark projects such as the San Diego Supercomputer Center's Persistent Archival Testbed and the InterPARES project laid the groundwork for preservation services. A shift in policy occurred two years ago when the NHPRC moved toward assisting archives and other organizations in implementing programs. Four types of projects were supported to

1. Assess institutional capacity through program evaluation and planning
2. Create institutional capacity with program start-up support
3. Expand the scope of existing programs; and
4. Develop cooperative institutions that provide electronic records preservation services to repositories.

The first grants under these new guidelines will be awarded in 2008. Projects designed

to develop new tools for the field have now been shifted into the Strategies and Tools category (see below).

Professional Development

Since 1972, the Commission has funded the Institute for the Editing of Historical Documents, known fondly as "Camp Edit," and in three dozen years, some 500 scholars have taken part in this weeklong program. At least 70 graduates have led important documentary projects, and many others have worked as full-time editors. Institute graduates include history faculty, editors, archivists, manuscript librarians, and government historians. In the summer of 2008 at the University of Wisconsin's training, a new group of archivists and records managers will be among the first class of the Archives Leadership Institute, run by the School of Library and Information Sciences. If archivists are a keystone species in the information ecologies, they deserve a place to hone their leadership skills.

This new grant category, expected to run annually, continues the NHPRC tradition of awarding grants for professional development purposes, which in addition to the Editing Institute, have included the

Society of American Archivists National Forum on Archival Continuing Education; an institute on electronic records for archives managers; and Archival Research Fellowships Programs.

Strategies and Tools

Another new category for the NHPRC, Strategies and Tools is designed to look across issues to develop new strategies and tools that can improve the preservation, public discovery, or use of historical records. Projects may also focus on techniques and tools that will improve the professional performance and effectiveness of those who work with such records, such as archivists, documentary editors, and records managers. The first grants in this category will be awarded in 2008.

State and National Archives Partnership

Legislation passed in 1974 fundamentally changed the mandate of the Commission to include in its scope records and archives projects in the states, and as part of the evolving information ecologies, the state archives have grown into a keystone of the national archival network. In the early years, funds went to the development of

Historical Publications and Records Commission has funded scores of conservation efforts since it first began to fund records projects in the mid-1970s. By stabilizing records—whether 18th-century paper to photographs to microfilm—preservations then move to the next form, maintaining records, usually by creating suitable environmental conditions.

Preservation by Maintaining

A second form of preservation, related to the first, is the central focus for the majority of records held in archives. Ideal storage conditions and media-specific standards are the hallmarks of good programs, and ancillary to preservation by maintaining is records recovery from disaster. The National Archives promulgates best practices, and the latest information on maintaining records can be found at <http://www.archives.gov/records-mgmt/initiatives/>

[index.html](#) and through the Society of American Archivists.

Preservation by Copying

The third mode of preservation is copying the content to be preserved onto a new medium. Here the focus is not on preservation of the physical object, but rather on preserving the informational or cultural content of the original by making a surrogate from the original. Since ancient times, scribes have preserved documents by copying them, and copies also provide a mechanism for dissemination of content. Publishing is thought of today as a tool of dissemination, but it is equally appropriate to think of it as a radical means of preservation.

In the past century, techniques were developed to preserve the content of paper documents more scrupulously than by scribal copying. Some of these techniques are photographic: the printed page is photocopied onto another medium. Microfilm is a 20th-century form of preservation that strives to mimic the shape and content of the original printed page. Among the very first grants awarded by the NHPRC were for projects to microfilm historical documents.

Perhaps the most significant preservation effort has been through the publication of historical documentary editions. These

Documentary Editions—the collected papers of key figures or movements in American history—preserved through transcription and annotation in print publications.



state historical records advisory boards, and over the past decade, the main conduit for Federal funding has been a regrant program that has enabled a number of states to build and support statewide services. In the past five years, the Council of State Archivists, representing the network, has seen its influence grow, particularly through its support of a national program of disaster preparedness for state archives. Reflecting the changing nature of its relationship with the network, the NHPRC has recently adopted a new program: the State and National Archives Partnership.

For the first time, the Commission will award grants to all qualified state boards to

- Provide statewide archival services, including professional education, public information about records and archival programs, and other activities to implement state plans.

- Operate grant programs for eligible archives, manuscript repositories, and other organizations within a state.

- Collaborate on projects with other

organizations to address common problems or shared opportunities within a state or among a consortium of state archives.

- Assess the health of archival and records programs, the conditions of records, and the challenges and opportunities facing historical records keepers and users; and to implement strategies and programs to address pressing archival issues.

- Hold meetings and public forums on statewide or national archival issues.

- Participate in national archival organizations.

The first grants for this new partnership will be awarded in 2008.

In the ongoing and ever-shifting information ecologies, the National Historical Publications and Records Commission will continue to play a small, catalytic role in developing new strategies for the keystone species—the archivist, the documentary editor, and government archives

leadership. Public policy must evolve along with the field and in service to our citizenry to the new tools that communications technologies create nearly every day. These are exciting times for the profession, fraught with a certain anxiety over the pace of change, but eager to create a new brand for archives and documentary editions, and willing to meet the challenges set by users of records for faster, better, and more comprehensive access to the very stuff that makes possible the many tellings of history.

Works Noted

George, Jessica, Lisa Stillwell, and Marjorie Warmkessel, "The Essential Librarian? An Exploration of Academic Librarians as a Keystone Species," paper presented at the Association for College and Research Libraries 11th National Conference, April 2003. <http://www.ala.org/ala/acrl/acrlvents/jgeorge.pdf>—accessed November 2007.

Grafton, Anthony, "Future Reading," *The New Yorker*, November 5, 2007, 50-54.



The originals of the Lewis & Clark journals from the Voyage of Discovery needed conservation treatment before preservation in a documentary edition.

volumes, which gather, copy, and transcribe the papers of major figures in American history, are essentially preservation projects.

Similarly digitizing and publishing to the Web or on other media is a preservation technique. The multiplying tools for copying have become part of a common information ecology, but the tools, paradoxically, have also created multiple preservation problems.

Copying is always more compelling if it seems that a one-time action will provide

permanent preservation, as indeed, it has seemed in bygone centuries. Medieval vellum parchment is among the hardiest of preservation media; non-acid paper can be wonderfully long-lived; and aluminum disc recordings are inordinately stable once they form a thin surface of aluminum dioxide. But all media eventually decay, and contemporary digital tools have uncertain futures. Many specialists have quietly concluded that we should start getting used to

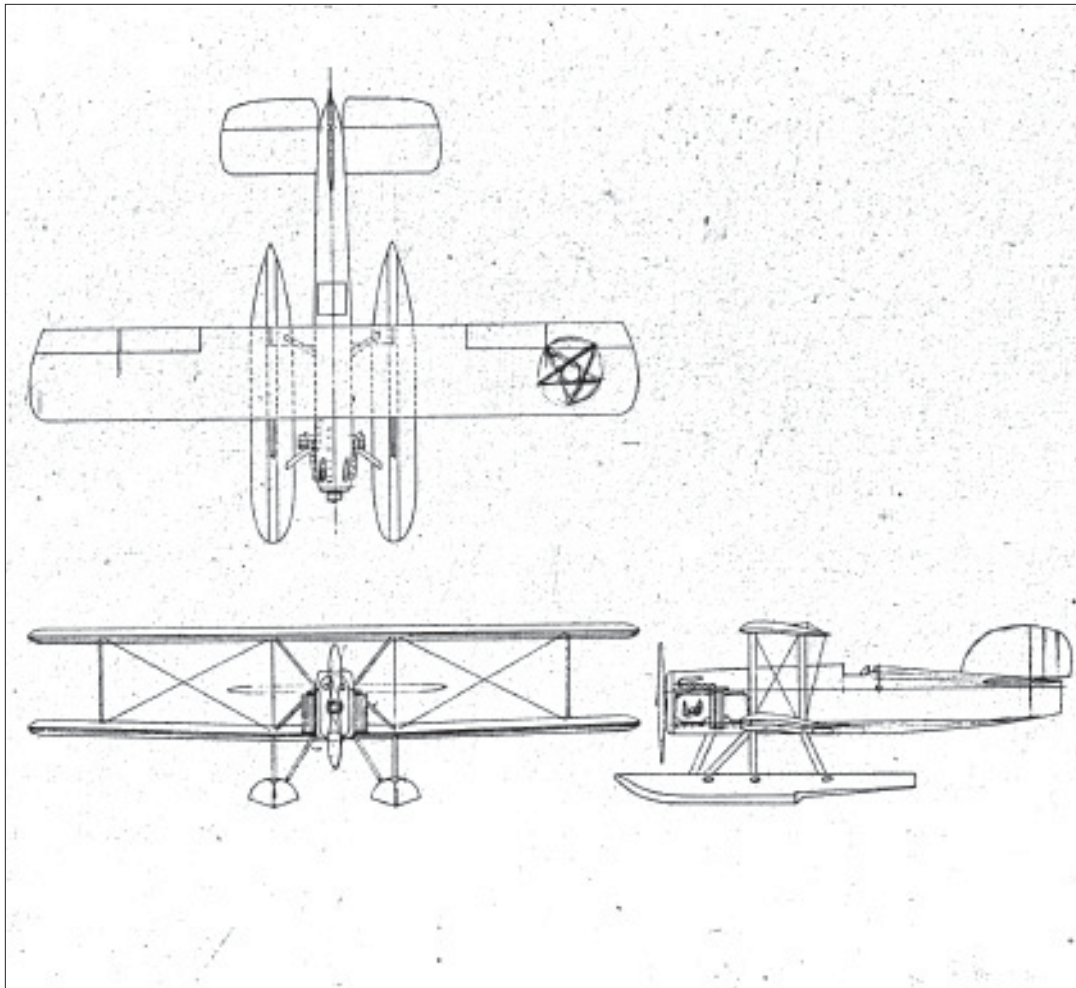
the idea of preserving information by copying it to a new format every generation or so.

Preservation by Educating

Finally, preservation occurs through the age-old processes of education and training.

All education is essentially a form of preservation of knowledge, but in speaking of preservation by educating, we refer to the more specific ways by which specific knowledge is passed along.

Preservation work is exacting and intricate and requires a reservoir of technical know-how and experience. Many advocates of historic preservation have come to realize that the idea of preservation is an empty dream without a cadre of



Greene, Mark, and Dennis Meissner, "More Product, Less Process: Pragmatically Revamping Traditional Processing Approaches to Deal with Late 20th-Century Collections," *American Archivist*, 68:2, Fall/Winter 2005.

Nardi, Bonnie and Vicky O'Day, *Information Ecologies: Using Technology with Heart*, MIT Press, 1999.

Perceptions of Libraries and Information Resources, Online Computer Library Center, 2005.

"Statement on Open Access," Association of American University Presses, February 2007. <http://aaupnet.org/aboutup/issues/oa/statement.pdf>—accessed November 2007.

From the Museum of Flight's Douglas Aircraft Company Collection Project, one of 717 engineering drawings digitized and preserved on CD. *Courtesy Museum of Flight.*

people with the requisite skills. Thus research, systematic dissemination of knowledge, and formal training and apprenticeship have been incorporated into preservation work. Public-sector institutions have sprung up, both as independent entities and within larger institutions, and private-sector companies have become specialists in various facets of preservation.

But at a broader level, preservation by educating merges into the general process of cultural maintenance. Programs such as the Institute for Historical Documentary Editing and the new Archives Leadership Institute are joined by archives and information management divisions at major universities, apprenticeships at state and local government archives, and many programs designed to pass on the skills—and discover new skills for preservation in the 21st cen-

tury—necessary to continuity of the preservation profession.

At the broadest level, preservation by educating also includes reaching out to the general public, guiding them to the vitality of archives and records, assisting with research large and small, and revealing the gems in hidden collections. Here the true purpose of Federal funding becomes clear, for it is only

The ravages of time. This early 20th-century image of the Crystal Ice Company shows the fragility of works on paper. *Courtesy American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming.*

by providing both preservation *and* access that the National Historical Publications and Records Commission demonstrates government's role in bringing together citizens and their records.

