



Records Preservation & Access Committee

Federation of Genealogical Societies, National Genealogical Society,
International Association of Jewish Genealogical Societies

Statement of the

**Records Preservation and Access Committee
David E. Rencher, Chair**

Before the

House Oversight and Government Reform Committee

Information Policy, Census and National Archives Subcommittee

**History Museum or Records Access Agency? Defining and Fulfilling the
Mission of the National Archives and Records Administration**

December 16, 2009

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**House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform
16 December 2009
David E. Rencher Statement –For the Record**

The genealogical community works together through The Records Preservation and Access Committee (RPAC), which today includes The National Genealogical Society (NGS), the Federation of Genealogical Societies (FGS) and the International Association of Jewish Genealogical Societies (IAJGS) as voting members. The Association of Professional Genealogists (APG), the Board for Certification of Genealogists (BCG), the American Society of Genealogists (ASG) and Ancestry.com serve as participating members. RPAC meets monthly, and more often if needed, to advise the genealogical and historical communities, as well as other interested parties, on ensuring proper access to vital records, on means to effect legislation, and on supporting strong records preservation policies and practices.

I currently serve as Chairman of the Records Preservation and Access Committee. As President of NGS, Jan Alpert is also a member of RPAC and has been expressly authorized to speak for her colleagues. We understand that she will appear and testify at this hearing on December 16, 2009

We are grateful for the privilege afforded us by the Information Policy, Census and National Archives Subcommittee of the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee to submit our written statement for the record on the critical issue of the mission of the United States National Archives. We have also made a copy of our statement available to David S. Ferriero, Archivist of the United States.

We welcome Mr. Ferriero as the tenth Archivist of the United States. On behalf of the genealogical community, we extend our best wishes for his success and in the remainder of this statement wish to suggest ways in which we might support his efforts.

The functions of the archivist and the researcher are inextricably linked. Without the information and documentation from these records, (and counterparts at the state and local level) our family histories become more legend than history. Whether historian, genealogist, educator, student, journalist, scientist, public health, public safety worker or Homeland Security, the validity of our work is a product of the quality of the records upon which they are based. Thus, we are all dependent upon how well the archivist collects, preserves and provides ready access to relevant information.

It is well understood in the archival community that genealogists and family historians are the most frequent users of the Archives. They may be motivated by a variety of considerations. One of the ways in which history becomes relevant flows

from examining how events impacted the lives of our ancestors. Our teenagers may benefit from the knowledge that they are not the first in the history of the Universe to have suffered so! Most genealogies contain both role models and horrible examples. May we learn the right lessons from both.

An article that appeared in the Wall Street Journal on June 11, 2009 entitled “The Life-Saving Secrets in Your Family Tree” reflected a growing awareness of the genetic component of many medical conditions. The Office of the Surgeon General has launched an initiative to support the development of medical family histories at familyhistory.hhs.gov. The utility of a medical family history is a direct product of its accuracy. Once again this serves as an example of the importance of ready access to the nation’s historical records.

Evolving technology has been an issue for archivists and librarians for thousands of years. Records have been sculpted in stone; handwritten on clay tablets, scrolls, animal skins, parchment, paper, or metal sheets; and machine formed movable type, typewriters, and word processors on a variety of storage media. The development of microforms in the early 20th Century addressed many of the issues of 19th Century records keeping but replaced them with a new set. Digitization and allied technologies are displacing other media and changing how we all keep records and use them. However, the most promise may be the opportunity to convert the nation’s historical record set to digital technology and unlock the massive amount of data now limited to only an isolated subset of researchers and historians.

If records are not captured at or near the time of their creation, they will not be preserved or available for access in the future. The new archivist’s greatest challenge may well be collecting modern forms of communication used in governmental decision-making and preserving both the data and migrating the technology to retrieve the information.

We fully support the Electronic Records Archives (ERA) effort by the NARA organization and believe that it offers a hope for future family historians to be able to have broad access to the massive amounts of digital records currently being created by various government agencies. We are pleased that a representative of the genealogical community is included on the Advisory Committee (ACERA) and hope that the new archivist, Mr. David S. Ferriero will continue the long-standing relationship with leaders in the genealogical community in regard to records preservation and access.

This project is illustrative of a long history of collaboration between NARA and entities within the genealogical community. The Federation of Genealogical Societies is the custodian of the Stern/NARA Gift fund where funds raised by genealogists are applied to the development of finding aids and other projects to make archive materials more accessible. The Ellis Island project and the Civil War Soldiers and Sailors System are additional examples of a broader community effort.

One current example of a work in progress involves the digitization of the Homestead Records. As I recently reported in the FGS magazine (FORUM):

After years of planning, the staff at the Homestead National Monument of America is realizing their dream – to have the homestead records digitized and indexed for everyone to use. Mark Engler, Park Superintendent for the National Park Service site and Todd Arrington, Park Ranger at the site have managed to form a consortium of key partners to turn the dream into a reality. A portion of the funding has come from the Stern NARA Gift Fund and as keepers of the fund, the Federation of Genealogical Societies wishes to report how those funds are being used to those who have contributed the money.

This consortium consists of familiar players to those who have followed other cooperative projects in the past. Building on the success of the Civil War Soldiers and Sailors System (CWSS), the consortium includes: the National Park Service as the project organizer and coordinator, the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) as keeper of the original records providing access, the Federation of Genealogical Societies, manager of the Stern NARA Gift Fund for funding two digital cameras, the Genealogical Society of Utah, now known as FamilySearch for digitizing the records, the University of Nebraska as reviewer and quality assurance for the accuracy of the indexes, Footnote.com, formerly iArchives for indexing the images and hosting the digitized content.

As with all Stern NARA Gift Fund projects, the content must be provided for free in the NARA branches and in Washington, D.C. The agreement with Footnote.com accommodates that provision and thereby gives access to genealogists through those outlets. In addition, the indexes will be made available for free on FamilySearch with the images hosted by Footnote.com. The Homestead National Monument will also have totally free access to the indexes and images at the Monument in Beatrice, Nebraska. All expenses, other than those for the purchase of the digital cameras will be born by the participating agencies. No additional funds from the Stern NARA Gift fund are anticipated to be used toward the project beyond the purchase of the two digital cameras. The cameras remain the property of the Stern NARA Gift Fund to be used on making other NARA records available after the completion of this project. FGS FORUM, Fall 2008 Volume 20, Number 3, page 5.

Other public-private partnerships with NARA by for-profit or non-profit entities also offer the promise of better and earlier access to valuable materials than might otherwise be possible. The terms of one such agreement as reflected in a press release issued by NARA on 10 Jan 2007 provides a useful model:

This non-exclusive agreement, beginning with the sizeable collection of materials currently on microfilm, will enable researchers and the general public to access millions of newly-digitized images of the National Archives historic records on a subscription basis from the Footnote website. By February 6, the digitized materials will also be available at no charge in

National Archives research rooms in Washington D.C. and regional facilities across the country. After an interval of five years, all images digitized through this agreement will be available at no charge through the National Archives website.

One bottleneck in getting digitized materials online is the creation of the index required to make the files computer searchable. In most cases this requires that an indexer with some skill in deciphering 17th and 18th Century handwriting reads and manually data enters relevant data into a database. The largest pool of people with that skill today resides in the genealogical community. We have repeatedly demonstrated a capability to mobilize that expertise and effort, frequently on a volunteer basis. Without these volunteers, commercial estimates for data entering the names for the Civil War Soldiers and Sailors system were one dollar per name, totaling 6.3 million dollars. Instead, the genealogical community partnered with the National Park Service and keyed the information for approximately \$250,000, roughly four percent of the commercial estimate.

I turn now to the proposal that may have prompted the title of these hearings, namely, the reallocation of space within the Archives building on the Mall which would convert existing research areas into museum exhibits and expand the gift shop.

The optimum use of facilities is a perennial challenge for the Archives and has been the subject of some rigorous studies over the past decade. Some change is inevitable as the result of changing technologies and how the patrons use the resources of the Archives. The genealogical community would be quick to support well constructed and thought-out changes. You can expect, however, expressions of anxiety from members of our community anytime there is the perception that proposed changes would adversely affect our access.

Other libraries and archives have observed reduced patronage of microfilm readers and have modernized by reducing the number of film readers while increasing the number of computer workstations. During the initial five year period of most of the digitization collaborations with commercial vendors and non-profits now in place, access on the partner's website (frequently by subscription) and in the archives is contemplated. This well-conceived arrangement becomes a nullity if not accompanied by adequate computer workstations onsite at the research facilities of the Archives.

Researchers have also come to appreciate not only the value of the records found in the archives but have benefited from the expertise of the NARA staff most familiar with them. Our comfort level about the merits of pending proposals would be enhanced if we were to see that staff and patron input was being sought and sympathetically considered.

In fact, we would be pleased to explore an advisory role for representatives of the genealogical community in addressing these issues. We would much prefer to be thought of as a resource, not merely a constituency to be placated.

We look forward to working with the new Archivist as he faces the challenges that lie ahead.