

Testimony

Subcommittee on Information Policy, Census, and National Archives of the Committee on Oversight and Government Reform

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Good afternoon Chairman Clay, Ranking Member McHenry, and members of the subcommittee. My name is Kaye Lanning Minchew. I have been director of the Troup County Archives in LaGrange, Georgia, since 1985. I am representing the National Association of Government Archivists and Records Administrators (NAGARA). I also co-chaired the Council of State Archivists "Closest to Home Project" about local government records. I want to thank you for the opportunity to speak in support of reauthorization for the National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC).

The National Association of Government Archivists and Records Administrators is a professional organization dedicated to the effective management of government information and its continued availability at all levels of government. Our constituents include archivists and records managers for over 21,000 local, state, tribal, and federal governmental entities in the United States responsible for the records in their care; the records that document the actions of government and the lives of citizens. Government agencies at the local levels are inundated with large collections of records that document the community and its people and are begging for assistance with maintaining and providing access to these resources. Large sums of money go into creating public knowledge and sharing this knowledge yet very limited funds goes toward the long-term care and access to these records. NHPRC, the National Historical

Publications and Records Commission, is a valuable partner and key to the continued availability of the records legacy of these entities.

The records we house in local repositories include a wide variety of materials. The majority of our holdings are paper documents, photographs, maps, and the like but a growing amount is available in electronic format. Records include birth and death records, obituaries, voter registration records, building plans, census forms, divorce proceedings, newspapers, coroner's inquests, criminal records, and much more. Our records can assist you in reaching back and "touching" your grand-grandparents. Our materials include land records which deeded a slave woman and her young son to a family leaving Georgia for Texas. A nasty divorce from 1835 gave wonderful details for a family researcher in 2009. Other items helped bring to justice a cold case murder that had been dormant for over thirty years. We also have files that show environmental and cultural changes over the years. Finally, after 9/11, many of us suddenly realized that among our accessible records were building plans for bridges over interstates. Access policies to these records have been reevaluated. Some of those records are no longer open to the public! Genealogy, national security, and law enforcement plus much more are all part of our daily job. Our heritage is at risk every day. An archives or courthouse burns and unique collections are lost. Electronic records can't be opened. On the personal level, perhaps a recording your father made about his World War II service has been damaged over time and your children and grandchildren will not be able to hear his voice or his story. Records at the local level touch the lives of our citizens every day and in a very direct way.

NHPRC provides grant funding that is essential to ensuring the preservation of the American historical record through supporting documentary editions of the papers of important persons in our history and for projects to ensure the preservation of archival records that provide the foundation for historical research in this country. Funding also assists local governments and archives in providing access to public records and information. Since 1976, NHPRC has awarded over 4800 grants; 250 to local government or programs of locals records. Grants have played important roles in archives and government agencies across the country and in both large and small institutions. Two of the NHPRC awards were made to the Troup County Archives. We received one grant in 1985-87 to organize loose court files from the 19th century that had been saved from a courthouse fire in 1936 but left in a very disorganized form. We received a second NHPRC grant in 2006-2008 to digitize these 19th century records. They are now available to the public through the Digital Library of Georgia's website. Both grants have been extremely important in our existence, especially the first one which sent the message that we were a fairly new archives but we were here to stay.

One additional note about the grants: these grants almost always result in JOBS. Archival work is very people-heavy and labor intensive. Grants normally pay for some supplies or computer hardware and then the bulk of the money, at least 70% by our estimation, goes to pay people. At a time of high unemployment, NHPRC grants and pass-through grants to the states would stimulate jobs. In addition, these jobs very often result in permanent employment for workers after grants end. A lot of archives use grants to start a program or test a program and then commit their own money at the end to continue that program. Many of us in the profession, including myself and the

State Archivist in Georgia, plus several others here in this room today got our start in archival work this way.

Based on research conducted during the Heritage Health Index Project in 2004/2005, over 4.8 billion records and artifacts are held in public trust by more than 30,000 entities. Without the grant support of NHPRC, the archival community has few other options for support in caring for the historically valuable records. The federal government spends hundreds of millions of dollars to support history programs in general, but NHPRC receives only a small amount--\$10 million-- to support records programs that in turn support historical research. We have seen the positive impact that NHPRC grants have made in thousands of organizations and communities, both large and small, throughout our country. The current authorized level of NHPRC funding is woefully inadequate, so in addition to being reauthorized, NHPRC should be appropriated at a significantly higher level.

In addition to more funding, NHPRC should be expanded to include a pass-through grant program with resources directed to states and localities to ensure that documents and archival records in many forms can be readily used for a host of purposes by the people of this nation.

Much of the American record—evidence of births, education, marriage (and divorce), property held, obligations satisfied and criminal conduct, evidence of the lives of individuals, families, groups and businesses—is held at the state and local level. Our state and local governments and history organizations preserve the records that protect

our rights and document our democratic society. This evidence is essential to documenting the wide range of stories of the American experience.

Only by reauthorizing the NHPRC and expanding its programs to include pass-through grants to states will we be able to ensure that this important component of the American historical record survives. Thank you.