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A Public Voice for Archives

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A Public Voice for Archivists

I have personal ties to recent advocacy issues. Funding for my first job as an archivist came from the National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC). The person who hired me, Dr. Robert M. Warner, was later appointed Archivist of the United States. When I assumed my first management position, I turned to NHPRC for grant funds to develop a records management and archives program. My predecessor in my current position was former Archivist of the U.S. Dr. James B. Rhoads.

Given these experiences, I have taken a personal as well as a professional interest in the two most important public advocacy initiatives led by SAA this year. As I write this column (February 25, 2005), SAA's concern about the nomination of the new Archivist of the United States is reaching a conclusion. Meanwhile

the threat to eliminate NHPRC is becoming an unprecedented crisis. SAA has worked closely with allied professional groups at the national, state, and local levels to raise a united public voice on behalf of archivists. Here, briefly, are two stories of archival advocacy.

Since the National Archives gained its independence from the General Services Administration in 1985, archivists and historians have sought to protect it from partisan influences. Since the April 2004 White House announcement that Dr. Allen Weinstein would replace

John Carlin as Archivist of the U.S., SAA has worked to ensure the independent and non-partisan nature of the position of Archivist of the U.S. Twenty-five professional organizations of archivists, historians, and librarians joined with SAA in issuing a public statement calling for an explanation for Carlin's removal.

The Senate held a hearing on the Weinstein nomination in July 2004. At that time several senators questioned the White House's failure to explain the circumstances under which John Carlin had been asked to step aside. No historians, archivists, or other citizens concerned about this nomination were invited to present testimony. SAA publicly stated that we would not endorse the nomination, nor would we oppose it, because the process by which it was brought forward did not comply with legal requirements.

After considerable delays, on February 10, 2005, the Senate confirmed Dr. Weinstein as Archivist of the United States. He has met with the leaders of SAA,

NAGARA, COSHRC, and other groups and has pledged collaboration with us and his support for reforming the nomination process. SAA looks forward to developing close working relations with Dr. Weinstein, and we remain committed to the nonpartisan political independence of NARA and of the Archivist of the U.S.

Why should we care about who serves as Archivist of the United States? How does it affect us? Efforts to limit access to public records, particularly presidential records, significantly affect our ability to hold government leaders accountable and to know the truth about public events. The Archivist of the U.S. bears responsibility for upholding the law, for ensuring public access to government records, and for preserving an essential part of our nation's heritage.

One of the most frequent concerns of archival advocacy relates to funding for archives. This ranges from cutbacks in state and local support for public archives to national issues such as threatened budget cutbacks for NARA and the grant programs of NHPRC. A year ago SAA mobilized the support of many other historical and regional archival associations to oppose proposed funding cuts for NARA and NHPRC. This year the very survival of NHPRC is at stake. The Bush Administration has proposed a FY2006 budget that would eliminate not only all grant funding from NHPRC, but also all staff positions and overhead support.

Advocacy requires collaboration. In February 2005, SAA joined with NAGARA and COSHRC to form a Joint Task Force on Advocacy, which has begun its work with the campaign to save NHPRC and which will address other concerns as they arise. These three national archival groups joined forces with the Association for Documentary Editing, which represents staff of many of the publication projects funded by NHPRC. We are busy mobilizing support and preparing information to help Congress and public citizens understand the vital importance of public grant funding for historical documents and archives.

If federal, state, and local governments—and privately supported foundations and organizations—provided adequate support for history, archives, and museums, such advocacy efforts would not be necessary. From sad experience, however, we know that this is not the case. Archivists need to increase their engagement in public policy discussions and to assert the need for an archival perspective on public policy. As the largest and oldest association of archivists in the United States, SAA has a responsibility to speak out on behalf of archival concerns. SAA will continue to offer a public voice for archivists. Please join us. Together we *can* make a difference! ❖

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