



April 17, 2009

Adrienne C. Thomas
Acting Archivist of the United States
National Archives and Records Administration
700 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20408

Dear Ms. Thomas:

On behalf of the Society of American Archivists (SAA), thank you for your March 24 invitation to provide input into NARA's development of alternative models for presidential libraries.

I preface the Society's comments by noting the appropriateness of this inquiry. The creation of the first presidential library by Franklin D. Roosevelt engendered many questions and considerable debate. This debate remains unresolved and deserves serious attention from archivists, researchers, and the public.

SAA believes that whatever model for presidential libraries is eventually adopted, that model should maximize researcher access to records, minimize costs to the agency, and acknowledge the importance and symbolism that the public places on independent presidential libraries and museums. These three goals may, of course, conflict – and reasonable compromises among them will likely need to be struck. But we believe that the model selected for presidential libraries must maximize researcher access to presidential records within a budgetary framework that will not prove detrimental to NARA's other record-based responsibilities and without regard to the impact of the decision on the presidential libraries' museum function(s).

It has become a common assumption that there will be a separate library for each succeeding president. Although SAA accepts the possibility that this assumption may no longer be valid, we believe that there is insufficient information to determine if change is required and, if so, how that change could best be shaped. Rather than endorsing the current structure of presidential libraries or suggesting alternative models, we believe that NARA should – in the near future – collect and share with the broader community data in the following five areas in order to inform a richer conversation:

1. What do researchers tell us about the advantages and disadvantages of centralization and decentralization?

NARA should survey users of presidential libraries to determine their perceptions about housing presidential records in various locations around the country. Specifically, does placing presidential records in a local setting (e.g., in the president's birthplace, in the university that he attended, or in a large city in the president's home state) provide more context for the researcher or more convenient access to other resources that support the research project? Conversely, what obstacles or challenges are presented to researchers by this decentralization?

2. What are the implications of reorganization for researcher access?

Noting particularly the Public Interest Declassification Board's recommendation that processing of presidential records be centralized in order to speed access to classified material, and drawing from that recommendation the possibility that all processing of presidential records might be made more timely through a centralized staff, NARA should study seriously the implications of any reorganization on overall access to the records.

3. What are the costs involved?

NARA should determine the total costs of maintaining a separate physical building and dedicated staff for each presidential archives (and museum) and compare these to possible cost efficiencies gained by housing the records of all or several presidential administrations in larger physical facilities with a pooled staff. As part of this analysis, NARA should consider the increasingly electronic nature of presidential records and compare the cost of decentralized care for such documentation with the cost of developing a single entity to deal with all presidential records in electronic format.

4. How much of these costs can be met through non-governmental funding?

NARA should determine through a financial analysis whether the private funding raised for new presidential libraries and their endowments has been sufficient to offset the costs of operating the separate facilities in the near term, and should also undertake longitudinal studies to determine if more established presidential libraries have demonstrated the long-term ability to raise private funds to support the presidential library and museum costs.

5. Is digitization of entire collections a cost-effective option?

Noting that the Request for Information mentions the possibility of digitizing the paper-based portions of collections, NARA should study the overlap in current

presidential records to determine the amount of duplication that exists between paper and electronic documentation; should undertake an assessment of the costs involved to convert non-duplicate paper records into electronic format; and should compare those costs, over time, to retaining and storing paper records as well as the traditional reference activity associated with the use of these records. In addition, NARA should assess whether digitizing unique records in paper format will be responsive to research needs.

Finally, we believe that NARA must address a question that is largely one of law and philosophy: Is the creation and management of presidential museums consistent with the legal mandate and core mission of the National Archives? A case can certainly be made that it would be more appropriate for agencies such as the Smithsonian or the National Park Service to staff and manage presidential museums.

We hope that NARA will use the occasion of the congressionally mandated report not as an end in itself, but rather as an opportunity to gather and share data that can inform a fuller public debate. NARA might benefit in this endeavor by creating an advisory panel that represents various viewpoints regarding the most appropriate model for presidential libraries.

Thank you for soliciting our input. We would welcome the opportunity to discuss our comments with you.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'F. Boles', written in a cursive style.

Frank Boles
President, 2008-2009