

FDR Visits The National Archives¹

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PRESIDENT Roosevelt's visit to the National Archives Building took place on June 16, 1937.² The first step that led up to it occurred three years earlier at the White House. On September 30, 1934, I received a letter from Marvin H. McIntyre, the President's Assistant Secretary in charge of his engagements, in which he wrote: "The President would like to have a talk with you, and if it suits your convenience, I have arranged a definite appointment at the White House on Wednesday, October third, at 11:15 A.M."

At the time designated, I turned up at the White House, was ushered into a crowded waiting room, and told to take a seat. Washington was putting on one of its famous sizzling, humid, heat waves, to everybody's discomfort. To make the situation worse for me, in accordance with instructions carefully impressed on me before leaving the cool breezes of Chapel Hill, I had discarded my old summer clothes for a new fall weight suit and was dressed up in my best "bib-and-tucker," which added considerably to my self-consciousness but nothing to my comfort. I was about to have my first personal conference with a President of the United States and I would be guilty of some digression from the truth were I to say that I was not the least bit nervous. While waiting for my summons, I noted that as each of the others present was called for his interview, he would arise from his seat, clear his throat, straighten his cravat, adjust his coat to his shoulders, run his hand gently over his hair — if he had any — and otherwise show that he had not forgotten his wife's final instructions about his appearance when entering the Presence!

My turn finally came. "Mac" beckoned to me. I got up and, preening myself as I had seen the others do, nervously followed him

¹ The incidents, even the conversations, reported in this article are based on notes made by the author immediately after the occurrence.

² On October 5, 1943, President Roosevelt visited the National Archives Exhibition Hall to view the documents on display there from the collections of the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library in Hyde Park, but no tour of the building was made at that time.

into the President's office. "Mac" announced "Professor Connor," and then withdrew. The President sat behind a large flat-topped desk so that the only part of his body that was visible was from his waist up and that was dominated by his magnificent head. His greeting was cordial, his smile captivating, his hand clasp firm and encouraging; and my nervousness evaporated. "I am glad to see you," he said, as he waved me to a chair close to his desk, "sit there and let's get acquainted." I envied him his light weight summer suit, his wrinkled coat which he wore without a vest, his loose tie flapping uncontrollably in the cool breezes generated by his electric fan. His eyes swept me from head to foot, sizing up the country pedagogue.

After a few simple questions about North Carolina, to put me at ease, he amazed me by saying: "Mr. Connor, you once did me a great service." I looked dumb, but perhaps not as dumb as I felt. What on earth was he talking about! He must have noticed my dilemma, for he hastened to my rescue, saying: "As you know, I have long been interested in our military and naval history, especially the latter. When I was Assistant Secretary of the Navy, largely through my efforts, Congress appropriated \$50,000 to be used by the Secretary of War and the Secretary of the Navy in collecting from the several states their military and naval records of the American Revolution. Because of my special interest in the project, the job of supervising it for both departments was turned over to me. The appropriation was not large enough for us to cover all of the thirteen states, so I decided to begin with Massachusetts, Virginia, and North Carolina. I couldn't locate in the archives of the Navy Department any North Carolina naval records of the Revolution, but you found them in Raleigh and had photostats of a large number made for me."

Now I knew what he was talking about! At that time I was Secretary of the North Carolina Historical Commission, now the State Department of Archives and History, and those records were in my official custody. My dealings in the matter, however, were entirely with Leet Brothers, a firm of photographers in Washington, who had been given the contract for the job. They sent to Raleigh what was undoubtedly the first photostat machine ever used in North Carolina. In the quarters of the Commission, I assigned them the necessary space for their work and in the course of about three months they made photostats of some 5,000 documents. I knew nothing of Mr. Roosevelt's connection with the project and

was amazed, not that he remembered it but that he knew of my connection with it.

By this time, having put me completely at ease, the President suddenly changed the subject, saying: "Mr. Connor, as you know, I am required by an act of Congress to appoint an Archivist of the United States — is that the correct pronunciation?" — he had pronounced it as *är' kī vīst*, but without pausing for an answer, continued, "and the man I am going to appoint must have two qualifications — he must be a good Democrat and he must have the endorsement of the historians of the country." He paused, as if expecting me to say something. "I can meet the first requirement, Mr. President," I replied, "but I don't know about the second." "Well," he said, "I do, and I'm going to appoint you."

The President then proceeded to deliver a dissertation on the importance of the National Archives, both to the Government and to scholars, pointed out some of its problems that required immediate attention, and assured me that I could rely on his continued interest in its development. "You know," he added, "it's my baby!" I didn't know it, nor did I know then on what he based his claim to paternity, but it was not up to me to question it. At any rate, whatever his claim to natural parentage, certainly the care with which he watched over its birth and the concern he always showed in its welfare, gave him a fair claim to parenthood by adoption.

Perhaps the most conspicuous display of his interest was the visit he later made to the Archives Building. As I was leaving his office at the close of that first conference, he said: "When you get well under way, I'm going to pay a visit to the Archives Building to see what you are doing." I felt sure that he would never think of it again, but I did not then know the tenacity with which he seized and held on to things that interested him. It was nearly three years later, as another conference in his office was drawing to a close, that he said: "By the way, I promised you some time ago to visit the Archives Building." I hastened to assure him that I had not forgotten that promise. "All right," he replied, "I'll come some day soon." "Mr. President, why not set a specific date now?" "Good," he laughed. "Let's see," looking at his calendar, "how about next Wednesday — say at 5 o'clock?" That, I hastened to reply, would suit me fine. He rang for a secretary, told her to enter that engagement on his calendar, and to tell "Mac" about it.

The President was as good as his word. On Tuesday, June 15th, Colonel Edward Starling, chief of the White House Secret Service,

came to the Archives Building to investigate the arrangements we had made for the President's visit. He was taken on a tour of the building, following the route laid out for the President, and approved our plans. Wednesday afternoon, at about 3:00 o'clock, a White House car arrived with the President's wheel chair; a little later, Colonel Starling appeared, with two or three members of his staff, stationed guards at the necessary points about the building, and gave us our final instructions.

The President arrived at 5:30 o'clock, accompanied by his son, Colonel James Roosevelt, and some half-dozen guards. From Seventh Street, his car entered the receiving room in the basement of the building, where the facilities for his leaving and re-entering his car were better than elsewhere. On the tour of the building, he was accompanied by Colonel Starling, Colonel Roosevelt, and four members of the National Archives staff. From the receiving room, the tour took the President to the Division of Repair and Preservation, a Stack Section, the Division of Photographic Reproduction, the Division of Motion Pictures and Sound Recordings, the Central Search Room, and, finally, the Exhibition Hall.

In the Division of Repair and Preservation, the President displayed a lively interest in our methods of fumigating, cleaning, flattening, and laminating documents, about which he fired a perfect barrage of questions at the staff members present. Next came the Division of Photographic Reproduction. Here his chief interest was in microfilming. He lingered so long, inspecting equipment and asking searching questions about processes, and the possibilities of microfilming as a means of conserving storage space and of reproducing documentary material at small cost, that I finally suggested *sotto voce* to James Roosevelt that we'd better move on before the President got tired. "No," James replied, "let him alone; he's having the time of his life."

That FDR's interest in these archival problems was not a mere passing fad with him is shown in his letter of February 13, 1942, accepting election as an honorary member of the Society of American Archivists. Among other things, he wrote:

I need not tell you of my lifetime interest in the building up of archives throughout the nation. . . .

At this time, and because of the condition of modern war against which none of us can guess the future, it is my hope that the Society of American Archivists will do all that is possible to build up an American public opinion in favor of what might be called the only form of insurance that will stand the test of time.

I am referring to the duplication of records by modern processes like the microfilm so that if in any part of the country original archives are destroyed, a record of them will exist in some other place.³

From the Division of Photographic Reproduction, the party moved on to the Division of Motion Pictures and Sound Recordings. The preservation of these modern media recording important events had long been one of FDR's hobbies and, as I afterwards learned, he was responsible for the insertion in the National Archives Act of the provision authorizing the Archivist to accept, store, preserve, and exhibit motion pictures and sound recordings illustrative of American history. Soon after the division which was concerned with these types of records was organized, I asked its chief to prepare a report on the problems of preservation, storage, and equipment, and sent a copy to the President. It brought from him the following comments:

THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON

October 30, 1935

MEMORANDUM FOR

DR. R. D. W. CONNOR

This is an extremely interesting report of Mr. Bradley's in regard to preservation of motion picture films in the Archives Building. I am thoroughly and unequivocally in favor of the preservation of these definitely historic records.

Nevertheless, I want to be wholly on the safe side in regard to fire and until we know more about the subject, I hesitate to have films under the same roof with the manuscript, typewritten and printed records.

Will you give consideration to just one other alternative: To build a series of fireproof vaults under Constitution Avenue, directly in front of the Archives Building, in such a way that they could be kept at an even temperature, even atmospheric conditions, and yet so planned that in case of a fire or explosion they could be separately flooded, i.e., only those vaults actually burning. Incidentally, the Navy and also the Army could give you much information in regard to the protective storage of explosives and inflammables.

In any event you would need additional appropriations and safety devices for this kind of storage, and I do not think it would be much more expensive to put it underground instead of in the Building.

FDR

Nothing came of this somewhat fantastic suggestion. During the President's visit to the Archives Building, two years later, we showed him the equipment designed by members of our staff, and approved by the United States Bureau of Standards, for preserv-

³ This letter was printed in full in *American Archivist*, 6:17 (Jan., 1943).

ing, filing, and servicing films. Reassured, he dropped his own plan. Perhaps it was well enough that no hint of his suggestion that *Constitution Avenue* be used as an experiment in the "protective storage of explosives and inflammables" ever reached the public. How Washington would have buzzed and shuddered. "Just another illustration of Roosevelt's contempt for the Constitution!"

The Central Search Room was the President's next stop. As he was wheeled through the doors into the Search Room, he almost gasped at its beauty and simple dignity. He said nothing until every important detail designed for the convenience of the student—comfortable chairs and desks, an excellent reference library, facilities for quickly supplying documents wanted—were all strongly impressed upon his mind; then, as if speaking to himself only, he said: "When my term is up, I'm coming here to work."

The tour ended in the Exhibition Hall, where many of the Nation's most valuable historical documents were on display. Among them were engrossed copies of amendments to the Constitution of the United States proposed by the Congress. One of them in particular, the Thirteenth, always aroused the interest of visitors. Franklin Roosevelt was no exception. But his interest was stimulated by a curious point, the significance of which not one person out of a hundred understood. That was the fact that Abraham Lincoln, as President, had inscribed on it over his signature the word "Approved." As soon as he observed this endorsement, FDR looked up and said: "But the President is not supposed to certify his approval of proposed constitutional amendments." As a matter of fact, this is the only instance in our history in which a President has done so. Did Lincoln sign it under a misapprehension of his duty, or because he wanted his name associated in this way with the crowning achievement of his life?

After examining these engrossed copies of amendments, FDR remarked, "No amendment has been submitted by Congress since I became President," and a sheepish expression flashed across his face at this slip of memory when son James reminded him of the role he had played as funeral director upon the demise of the late lamented Eighteenth Amendment.

The documents that made the strongest appeal to the interest of our Navy-minded visitor were numerous log books of famous American naval vessels. Chief among these were two logs of the U. S. S. *Constitution*. After a close scrutiny of them, accompanied by comments on the history of the famous old fighter, he turned

to me and said: "There's a third log of the *Constitution* in existence; do you know where it is, Mr. Archivist?" Upon the Archivist's confession of ignorance, the President said with some gusto: "I do, because I have it;" quickly adding, "But I didn't 'snitch' it from Government files. I bought it many years ago from a New York dealer." I suggested that it would be a fine thing for him to give it to the National Archives, but he was too cagey a collector to be caught in that trap.

It was now 6:30, and James Roosevelt reminded his father of a dinner engagement he had at the White House at 7:00 o'clock, and so brought his visit to a close.

One of the sequels of FDR's visit was the following correspondence:

THE WHITE HOUSE

WASHINGTON

August 24, 1937.

DEAR DR. CONNOR:

I have made a terrible discovery. Fifteen years ago, I had a number of my more valuable manuscripts placed, on the recommendation of some New York experts, in sheets of some transparent material. On unpacking them the other day, I find that these manuscripts have become damp and brittle and many of them have faded. Evidently, some chemical action is taking place.

The only thing I can do is to turn them over to your tender care with the request that your experts save the lives of these precious papers. The papers smell of camphor and I suppose that whatever chemical is now working on them ought to have its reaction stopped. Perhaps after that the best thing to do would be to place the manuscripts under those new transparent sheets which you showed me.

I must, of course, pay for the work as these are my personal property.

I enclose twenty-nine sheets.

Very sincerely yours,

FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT

THE WHITE HOUSE

WASHINGTON

August 24, 1937.

DEAR DR. CONNOR:

Among my manuscripts which I am now unpacking, I find the enclosed marked "Wheeler—Journal of Voyage to North Carolina 1809." I have only had a chance to glance at it hurriedly and I think it will interest you.⁴

⁴Probably Dr. John Wheeler, a native of New Jersey, who in early life was in business with his cousin, David Longworth, as a publisher and bookseller in New York City. He later studied medicine and moved to Murfreesboro, N. C., where he practiced his profession until his death there in 1814.

Would you be good enough to have someone, if it seems of enough importance, have it bound and perhaps put between transparent sheets for permanent preservation?

This, also, is part of my personal collection so let me know what it costs and I will reimburse the government.

Very sincerely yours,

FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT

Following the advice of his "New York experts" the President had placed his "precious papers" in cellophane envelopes, inserted them in loose-leaf binders, and carefully laid them away in the comfortable assurance that he had taken the necessary measures to preserve them. The result was his "terrible discovery" fifteen years later. Some of his manuscripts were so badly damaged by contact with the cellophane that the experts at the National Archives doubted whether anything could be done to save them. We reported the problems to the President and the possible results of the treatment recommended, and asked for specific instructions. He replied as follows:

THE WHITE HOUSE

WASHINGTON

Hyde Park, New York,
August 30, 1937.

DEAR DR. CONNOR:

Thank you for the reports on the documents. Please go ahead and do all that is necessary.

When I return to Washington, I shall send you some further documents which are between celluloid sheets. They have been in a box for several years but I hope their condition is not as bad as that of those I have already sent you.

Very sincerely yours

FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT

While work on these papers was still in progress, the President sent to us a number of fine Japanese prints which he wished treated for preservation. These prints presented problems somewhat new to us; we thought it wise, therefore, to seek the advice of experts at the Freer Gallery of Art in Washington and at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. The former replied that the "only feasible method of treating the Japanese prints is . . . to place them between sheets of glass to be tightly fastened together

by means of a suitable gummed tape." The Metropolitan recommended pasting them down upon another sheet of good paper of the same general quality as the prints or, better still, upon *mousseline de soie*. We submitted both proposals to the President with the request that he indicate his choice, and at the same time sent a statement of the progress we had made in the lamination of his manuscripts. He replied as follows:

THE WHITE HOUSE

WASHINGTON

January 6, 1938.

DEAR DR. CONNOR:

Thank you for your report on the manuscripts and Japanese prints. I am glad that practically everything in Volumes 1 and 2 [of the manuscripts] can be preserved, and I hope you will find that most of the material in Volume 3 will work out.

I am happy to say that I have no other celluloid books.

In regard to the Japanese prints, I much prefer the method suggested by the Metropolitan Museum of Art — laying them down on mousseline de soie.

Will you be good enough to go ahead with it?

Very sincerely yours,

FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT

The experts at the National Archives improved somewhat on the technique recommended by the Metropolitan Museum, with results that brought from the President the following note:

THE WHITE HOUSE

WASHINGTON

March 15, 1938.

DEAR DR. CONNOR:

I am so delighted with the way the National Archives treated the Japanese prints that I must write to you to express it. I have never seen such a fine piece of work.

Always sincerely,

FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT

To round out this story, one other incident remains to be told. Not long after the President's visit, the House Appropriations Committee had under consideration the National Archives budget for 1937-38. Clifton A. Woodrum, Congressman from Virginia, was presiding. At an appropriate point in the discussion, Congress-

man Woodrum, interrupted the proceedings to say, "off the record," that the President had recently told him about his visit to the National Archives Building. "He said," reported Mr. Woodrum, "that he was astonished at what he had seen. He had had no adequate conception of the magnitude of the operations of the Archives and was highly pleased at the way they were being carried on."