

Launching the John F. Kennedy Library

DAN H. FENN, JR.

ON 20 OCTOBER, the Kennedy Library's new building on Boston Harbor was dedicated and turned over to the United States government. At long last, the story of the institution and the story of its physical home came together and became one. Most people, of course, do not realize that there *are* two stories. Now that the library's doors are opened, people will express genuine delight that "at last" there is a John F. Kennedy Library. They will view the completion of I. M. Pei's compelling structure on the water's edge as the beginning of a new national institution.

But as readers of this journal well know, this is not a new institution at all. Its roots go back to November 1961 when President Kennedy announced that he would follow the precedent established by Franklin Roosevelt and followed by every chief executive since Herbert Hoover, of donating his papers and memorabilia to the National Archives and asking his friends to build a building to house them. As President Kennedy did so, however, he added a new dimension to the planning for his library: it was to be closely associated with a university, namely Harvard. Members of his White House staff then began in earnest to discuss the imple-

mentation of that concept with officials of the university.

That was nearly twenty years ago. The history of the Kennedy Library since those harmonious and auspicious days has been not only long but often troubled and tragic. Nevertheless, during the two decades that followed the announcement, the library established an identity, began to build a tradition, set some goals, and recorded some achievements which will serve it well as it moves into this new and promising phase of its existence.

But let us start with the story of the building itself—what it is like, what it will contain, and why it has been built next door to the University of Massachusetts in Boston, instead of in Harvard Square in Cambridge.

On President Kennedy's last visit to Boston, in October 1963, he looked at several possible sites for the library that would bear his name. The one that appealed to him most was on the Charles River, across the street from Harvard's undergraduate houses, just outside Harvard Square itself. For over fifty years this twelve-acre piece of land had been occupied by the repair and storage yards of the Metropolitan Boston Transit Authority (MBTA). When university officials assured the Presi-

dent that the MBTA had no intention of abandoning the parcel, he settled on an area adjacent to the Harvard Business School, where the river bends as it heads toward Boston.

After his death it was decided that in addition to the library there should be an Institute of Politics which ultimately became a unit of Harvard's Kennedy School of Government. The institute was to bring together the world of practicing politics and the world of the thoughtful observer and teacher, in the hope that young people might catch a spark that would inspire them to devote at least part of their lives to elective public service.

As the talks continued, an even larger vision of the library began to emerge: the concept of a space where faculty and students and the public would come together, a piece of land to belong equally to all with something for everyone to share. It was to be a unique patch of common ground, dedicated to President Kennedy and to the celebration of the art of politics to which he devoted his life. It was to be to Cambridge what the Forum was to Rome and the agora was to Athens. As Richard Neustadt, the institute's first director, was to say later:

The idea was to bring "life" to the site within a Harvard context. Association with the Archive and Museum was to keep the Institute and School committed to Kennedy's spirit, conscious of community obligations, and—in my mind most important—part of a *public* enterprise. The school kids, outside college students, tourists, and their interests, *and their presence* would constantly remind us all that there was

a world to serve out there, *outside* of Harvard. If the area got crowded sometimes, all the better; so's the world.¹

Only the MBTA car-barn land could accommodate this new goal. Consequently, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts purchased the land from the transit authority and donated it to the federal government as its memorial to President Kennedy.

Meantime, the John F. Kennedy Library Corporation, a private body with Robert Kennedy as its president, was established to raise funds to build the library and to make decisions about the building and the site. Pennies from schoolchildren joined with corporate and foundation donations to build a total of \$18 million from an estimated thirty million people from all over the world. A relatively new architect, I. M. Pei of New York, was selected to design the building; the city of Cambridge and Harvard University enthusiastically and officially welcomed the plan, and everyone confidently expected that the dedication would be held within two or three years.

The first rumblings, omens of the storms to come, were heard when the MBTA tried to find an alternate site for its yards. Neighborhood after neighborhood said no, refusing to change zoning laws to admit the car-barn. Finally, in 1970, an alternate location was worked out through a series of very complex negotiations with the City of Boston.

At this point, the obstacles seemed to have been cleared. But the resulting euphoria was not to last for long. As the reality of the library came closer,

¹ Letter, 15 March 1979, Richard Neustadt to John Stewart, Assistant Director, Educational Projects, John F. Kennedy Library.

several people who lived fairly near the site began to oppose its construction. Gradually that opposition grew and became so strident that a major confrontation developed. The dynamics of the increasingly heated attacks, as in any such situation, are difficult even now to analyze and sort out. Robert Rosenthal, the *Boston Globe* reporter who covered the conflict in detail and with great care, characterize it this way:

Aside from the personal motivations of the two or three leaders which one can never unravel and which are probably irrelevant anyway, I think what we saw was a typical instance of people insisting on control over what happens in the area they define as their neighborhood. They claimed they were worried about traffic and parking, but I think the real source of their antagonism lay in a sense of turf and in a deeply held though often unarticulated conviction that the area should be preserved for academic use rather than for the general public.²

At any rate, by 1974 the whispers had become a roar, with the Cambridge opponents (who never represented more than 25 percent of the community, according to polls taken at the time) calling for the splitting of the institution. Their scheme would have kept the archives in Cambridge and moved the museum off to an existing building at the Charlestown Navy Yard.

The library staff and the leadership of the National Archives strongly resisted this plan, feeling that it would destroy the integrity of this particular institution and make impossible the kind of program which had been planned for it.

In February 1975, after the release of a controversial environmental im-

pact statement prepared for the General Services Administration, with protracted and serious litigation in the offing and inflation eating rapidly into the available funds, the Library Corporation announced that it would no longer attempt to build both the library's museum and archives in Cambridge. Within four days, President Robert C. Wood, of the University of Massachusetts, had issued an invitation to come to the University of Massachusetts at either its Boston or its Amherst campus. That opened a floodgate of invitations—175 in all—and the corporation began carefully weighing each one of them, as well as exploring a number of other possible areas in and around Boston.

By November 1975 the corporation had narrowed the choice down to two possibilities: the Cambridge-Charlestown split or the Columbia Point campus of the University of Massachusetts in Boston. It was exceedingly difficult and painful to abandon the long-cherished Harvard location, but the Library Corporation determined that the disadvantages of dividing the archives from the museum were too great and announced that they would leave Cambridge in favor of Columbia Point. The commonwealth took back the Cambridge land and donated twelve acres next to the University of Massachusetts-Boston, on Dorchester Bay. I. M. Pei went back to the drawing board for the fifth time and produced a concept and a model that was finally to be transformed into the dramatic sculptured building of pre-formed concrete and glass which is the Kennedy Library today.

The structure, which rises 110 feet in the air within a few yards of the

² Comment to author, 27 March 1979.

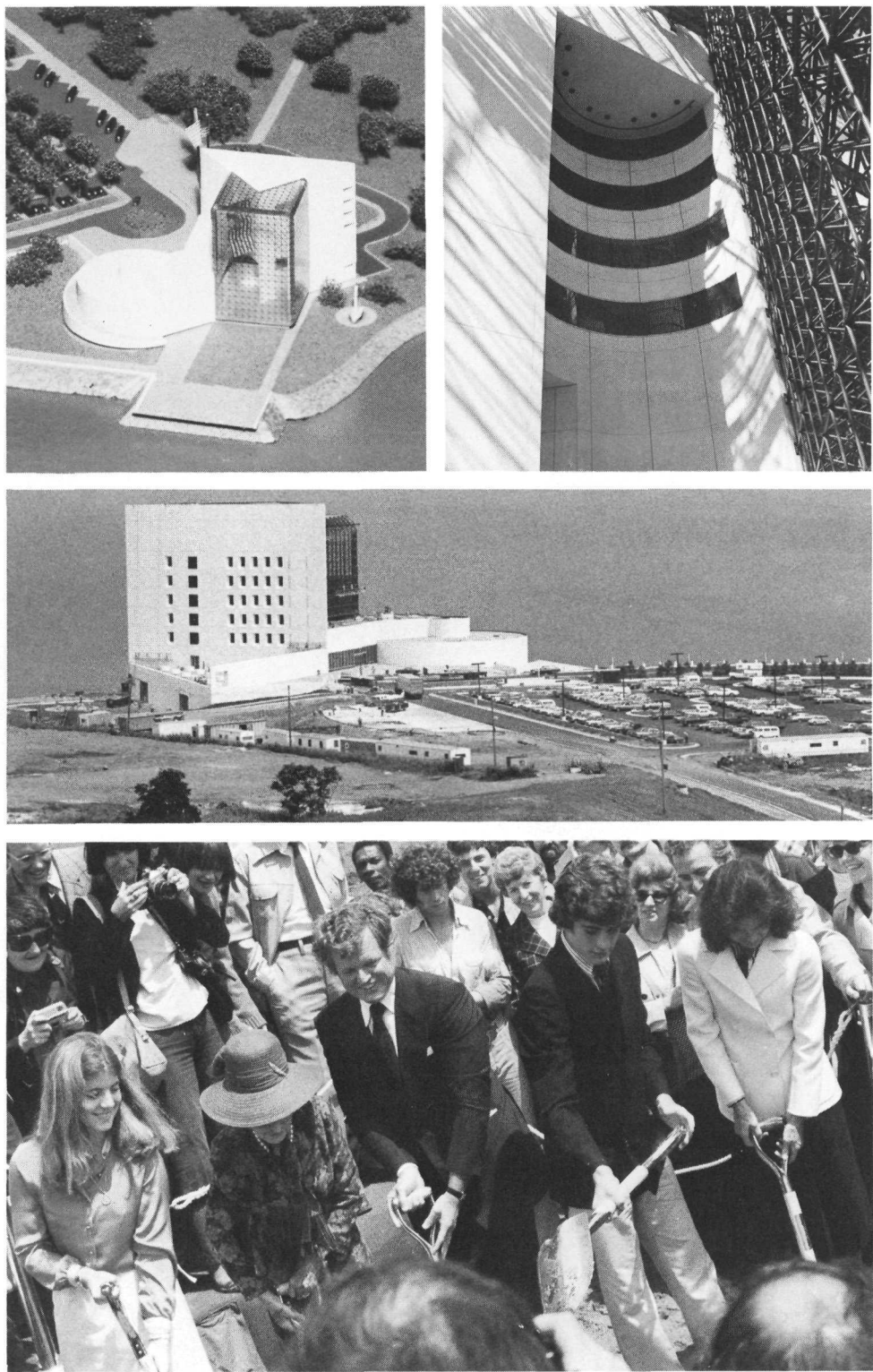


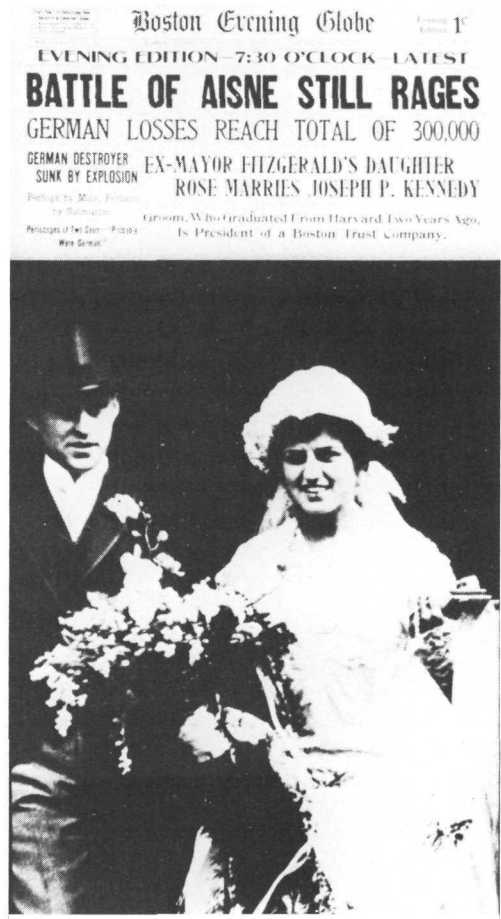
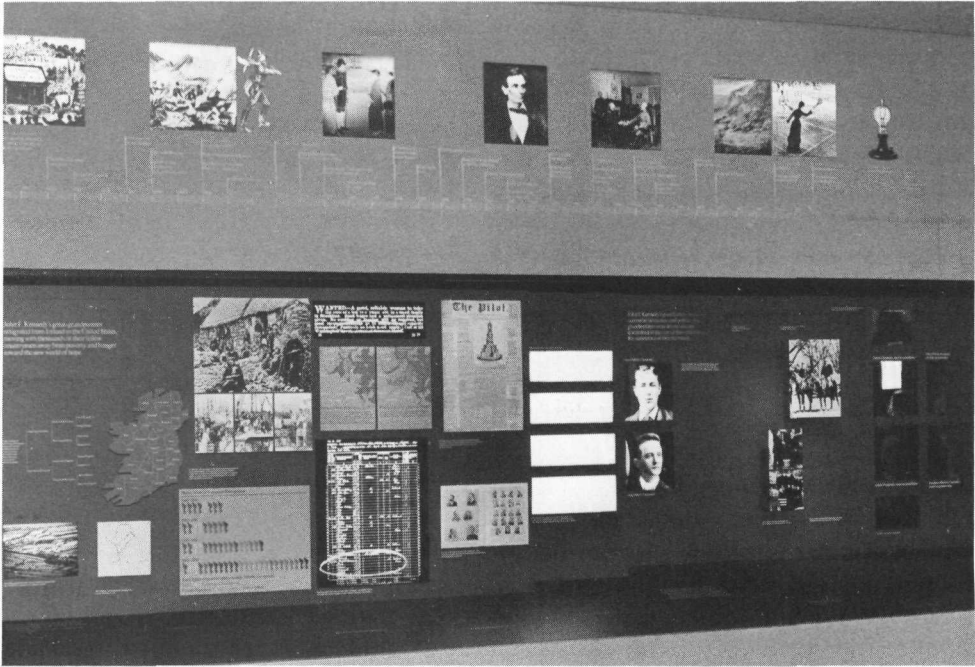
Above: Two early sites in Cambridge for the Kennedy Library, first at the bend of the road on the left bank of the Charles River, and later across the river where the bridge crosses it.

Opposite page: Upper left, I. M. Pei's final model for the Columbia Point site. Upper right, detail of the building showing the "scoop" in the archives tower, with research room, archives and educational projects staff offices, and reception and special events areas behind the glass walls. Center, the library seen from the University of Massachusetts, showing the archives tower, the pavilion wall, the reception lobby, and the circular theaters. Bottom, members of the Kennedy family at the groundbreaking; left to right, Caroline Kennedy, Mrs. Joseph P. Kennedy, Sen. Edward M. Kennedy, John F. Kennedy, Jr., and Mrs. Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis.

Below: I. M. Pei's first architectural model for the Cambridge site.







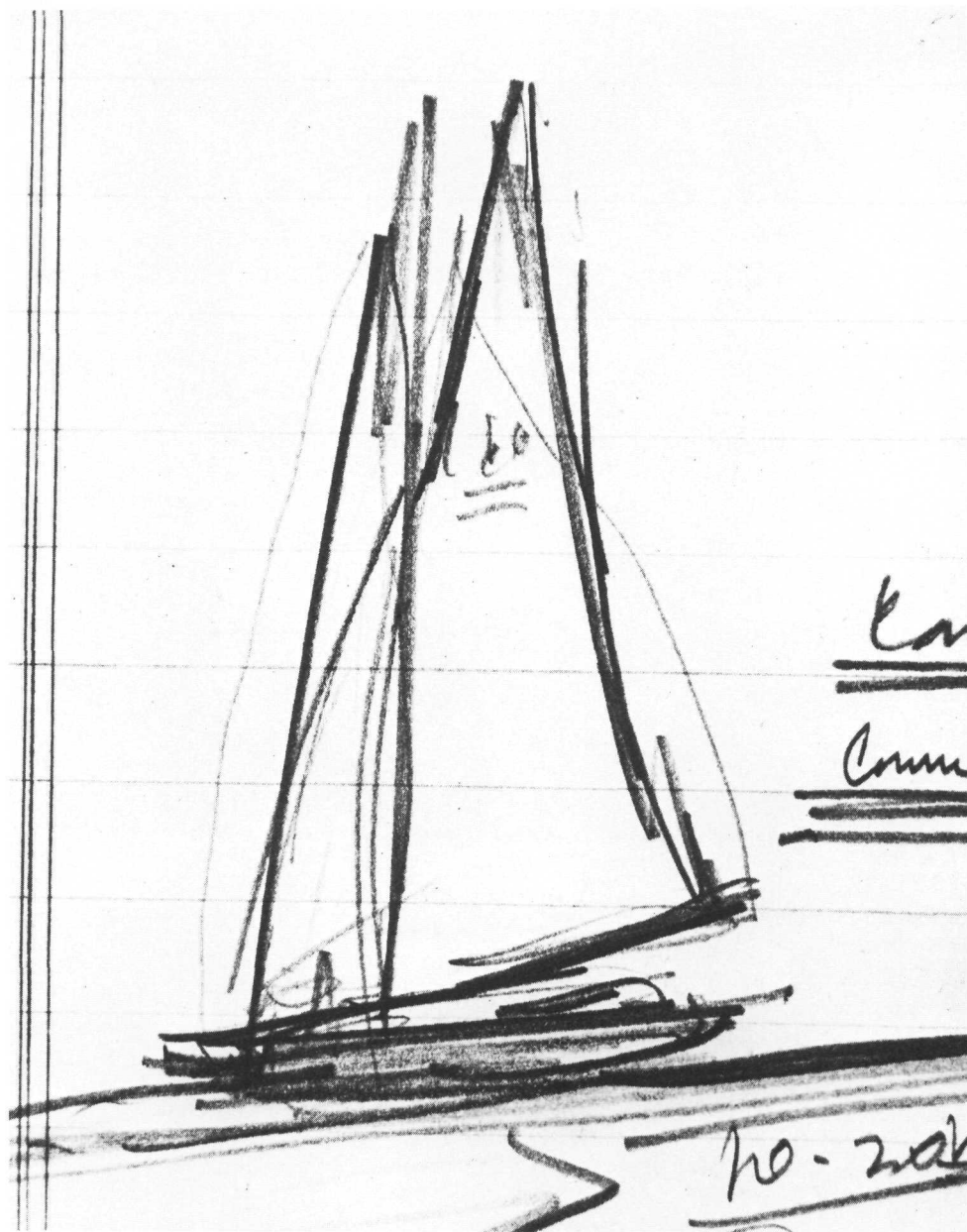
Above: A section of the museum exhibit depicting John F. Kennedy's early years in politics. The photographs are duplicates of original prints in the library's collection. Left: From the library's holdings, photograph and clipping that have been made into transparencies for exhibition in the museum.



Above: The Kennedy family at the U. S. Embassy, London. Left to right: Eunice; John; Rosemary; Jean; Ambassador Joseph P. Kennedy, Sr.; Mrs. Kennedy; Joseph P., Jr.; Patricia; Robert; and Kathleen. This picture by Dorothy Wilding has a central place in the museum exhibits.

Below: The young John F. Kennedy and an admiring sister, Naples Road, Brookline, Massachusetts, ca. 1932, from a nitrate negative recently received by the library.





Above: Sailboat sketched by President Kennedy, from the library's collection of presidential doodles.

Opposite page: Documents that are displayed in museum exhibits. From the top, left to right: John F. Kennedy's notes for a campaign speech, 1946; a list of campaign workers, 1946; a loose-leaf binder of notes written by John F. Kennedy when he was researching Profiles in Courage; a 1692 document from the President's personal collection of historical autographs; a draft letter to Mamie Eisenhower, with corrections by Kennedy; a page of an unpublished Hemingway novel, read by Frederic March at a White House dinner in honor of Nobel Prize winners, April 1962; a map drawn by President Kennedy during a state dinner in honor of the Grand Duchess of Luxembourg; presidential notes on a White House menu.

water's edge, is a combination of several geometric shapes. The building is some 115,000 square feet in total area, with the exhibits on the ground floor and the entrance on the second level. Visitors will arrive on a road that circles the university, driving along the seaside, until they reach a large plaza. The ticketing and information operation is just inside the entrance, although on pleasant summer days it can be conducted outside as well. Moving through the lobby, the ticket-holder goes into a theater waiting room where he can see, on the walls, quotations and pictures of President Kennedy and, through the window, a view of his sailboat, the *Victura*, set on the shore heading out to sea.

After seeing a film, produced by Charles Guggenheim, visitors will leave the theater on the floor below and look at a series of exhibits which start with the Irish immigration in 1840 and go through the 1968 presidential campaign. Designed by Chermayeff and Geismar Associates, of New York City, the museum is arranged in such a way that visitors can pass through a central, circular space containing the presidential desk and a series of exhibits devoted to the different presidential functions, into a variety of special areas. One, for example, presents a slide show depicting a presidential day; another offers a series of excerpts from presidential press conferences. Leaving the exhibits, a visitor enters the pavilion which looks out to the open ocean. Behind is the archives tower, with a great semi-circular window cut into the upper floors giving some view of work areas and the search room, reminding viewers that the archival resources are as much the domain of people who find them interesting and useful as are the exhibits. (It is the library's hope that the museum will serve, for some

visitors, as a vestibule to the library's other resources.) Outside are the harbor islands, the ship channel, Deer Island Light, the open sea; to the left, there is a view of South Boston and the skyscrapers of the city.

The exhibits are specifically designed to enable the library staff to develop special tours for students and for other groups which will concentrate on particular aspects of American government and politics: campaigning, the role of the President, the President and the press, the responsibilities of a member of Congress or a cabinet officer, the development of a legislative or executive initiative. (One case, for example, traces the history of the Kennedy program for the mentally retarded; another chronicles the struggle for civil rights). A seminar room off the exhibit area will be used for supplemental programs using audiovisual materials, artifacts, and documents to enrich the museum experience for organized groups.

The building is set in a park richly landscaped with a variety of trees and shrubs. A walkway with bollards and benches follows the shoreline of the nine-acre property with a spectacular view of the ocean and of the building. The on-site parking lot is dotted with trees, and Cape Cod rosebushes adorn the banks along the waterfront.

So much for the building. Meanwhile, in the Federal Records Center in Waltham, Massachusetts, the story of the library itself was unfolding over the long years.

Like all the institutions in the presidential library system, the Kennedy Library is administered by the National Archives and Records Service of the General Services Administration. Consequently the responsibility for organizing President Kennedy's papers and memorabilia was assumed by the Na-

tional Archives immediately after his death. In August 1966 the documents and artifacts were moved to the new Federal Records Center in Waltham, awaiting what everyone assumed would be the imminent construction of the new building. Arrangement and description of papers and records and the cataloging of the objects got underway, interspersed with regular reference service to a variety of individuals and institutions.

Simultaneously, an oral history program was being conducted. Launched with a Carnegie Corporation grant in 1964, the effort was initially a volunteer endeavor. Increasingly, a group of professionals took it over. Gradually the operation in Waltham grew, as the Washington group moved to Boston and new staff was hired. The first papers and oral histories were opened in September 1970.

The library's staff is divided into four sections: administrative and support, archives, museum, and educational programs. Most of its staff are federal employees. In addition, volunteers, well over a hundred in all, have donated thousands of hours to the library since the volunteer program began six years ago. In the spring of 1979 at its annual awards ceremony the library presented nineteen persons with certificates recognizing nearly 20,000 hours of service. One man alone worked over 2,500 hours in the audiovisual section of the archives.

As the library moves into its new quarters, each staff section is building on at least a decade of experience. The archives branch has been working on personal papers and textual records, printed materials, audiovisual holdings, and oral history interviews. The papers of President Kennedy were transferred to the Library in 1965 by the executors of the President's estate.

The collection also includes a number of books and a good deal of other printed material, as well as audiovisual materials. Among the papers are personal and pre-presidential materials, presidential papers including the White House central files and White House staff files, and papers of the post-assassination period, reflecting the worldwide reaction to President Kennedy's death.

In addition, the library has sought the papers of persons associated with Kennedy and his administration, particularly those of cabinet officers, principal figures in the military and diplomatic service, and White House aides. Acquisition efforts have garnered more than 150 collections of personal papers, ranging in size from mere fragments of less than one cubic foot to lifetime accumulations of papers totaling hundreds of cubic feet.

The library has also acquired more than 115,000 still photographs, more than 6 million feet of motion picture film, and nearly 1,000 audiotapes and discs. The oral history collection has received special attention, containing interviews with more than 1,000 people narrating their recollections and reflections about John F. Kennedy, his times, and the historical events of his years in public life. In addition, the library has developed a special collection of over 20,000 books on government and politics in mid-twentieth century United States, in the expectation that users of the library's holdings will benefit substantially from the availability of those published materials at the library.

Processing is understandably slow, particularly because special emphasis has been placed on preservation and because materials have had to be carefully screened since many of the key figures connected with the Kennedy

administration have continued to be active in public life. Processing has been further retarded by the enormously labor-intensive process of mandatory review of material classified for reasons of national security.* Nevertheless, most of the substantive papers of John F. Kennedy have been processed and have been opened to research, barring those that remain national security classified, or closed on the grounds of privacy of living persons. The processing and opening of the Robert Kennedy papers through 1963 (again excluding the classified material) has been completed, and the collections of a number of others, such as Theodore C. Sorensen, Burke Marshall, Arthur Schlesinger (in part), and Theodore White, have also been opened. In addition, the significant collection of Ernest Hemingway manuscripts and correspondence has been very carefully processed and is substantially open to research, except that Mrs. Hemingway retains some discretionary control over access to portions of it. Registers, modelled on the pattern of those produced by the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress, have been produced for those collections that are open, and in the case of the Kennedy papers there is a separate register for each major segment. The still-photograph collections and the audiotape collections have been processed for preservation and cataloged, while

much work remains to be done on the very expensive and time-consuming process of preservation duplication of film footage. All but a handful of the oral history interview tapes have been transcribed. More than 600 of them have been opened to research (some with portions restricted), and there is a name/subject index on 3 x 5 cards in the research room to all the open interviews.

During the past ten years, more than 1,500 researchers have registered. Most of them are post-graduate scholars, but an increasing number of undergraduate seminars are taking advantage of the resources. A rough estimate indicates that the library has responded to perhaps 5,000 written requests for information requiring, for a response, searches of the holdings, and perhaps as many again requiring only general information or a photograph of John Kennedy, or some similar response. This does not include, of course, the thousands of memorandums and notices generated by mandatory review requests.

Among recently published monographs based on Kennedy Library holdings are *Robert Kennedy and His Time*, by Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1978); and *John F. Kennedy and the Second Reconstruction*, by Carl M. Brauer (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977).

*Editor's note: In the presidential libraries, access to documents which were security-classified by a President, a member of his staff, or anyone acting in his behalf ("White House-classified documents") is regulated by executive order (E.O.). Under E.O. 12065, promulgated by President Carter in December 1978, it is mandatory for the Archivist of the United States to review for possible declassification any White House-classified document ten years old or older which has been requested by a federal agency, a government employee, or a private citizen. The Archivist has the authority to downgrade or declassify such a document, but he may do so only after he has obtained the advice of any federal agencies that have a significant interest in the subject matter of the document.

The museum staff is charged with the care of the three-dimensional objects, the maintenance of exhibits, and the use of objects on special or continuing exhibits outside the library. The museum division has completed the accessioning and cataloging of nearly 15,000 objects, all but the most recent acquisitions. In addition, it has managed a continuing changing exhibition at the John F. Kennedy Federal Office Building in Boston, and has contributed to, participated in, or initiated a large number of special exhibits at local schools and colleges, Boston's Museum of Science, the Charlestown Historical Society, the New Bedford Whaling Museum, Boston City Hall, the Freedom Train, and a wide variety of other organizations.

One of the most noteworthy exhibits was entitled "The Art of Diplomacy," a title first used for a National Archives exhibit of several years before. Mounted in cooperation with the Danforth Museum, outside Boston, this show put on display for a period of several months in 1976 nearly fifty gifts from heads of state.

The library's educational programs range from conferences and seminars to activities for teachers and community groups. In the early 1970s it became apparent to those planning the future of the Kennedy Library that a significant educational effort should be undertaken, aimed at learners at all levels from the 5th grade through graduate school and on to the interested general public. This effort has focused on the topics of concern to the library: government, politics, recent American history, the presidency, and the career and administration of John Kennedy. It has taken many forms and employs many formats, depending on the audience and particular subjects of

the individual programs and projects. It has utilized the resources of the library to the greatest extent possible and effectively broadens the number and types of people being served by the organization.

In recent years the library has gained considerable experience through the conduct or sponsorship of a variety of projects, such as:

- a curriculum development workshop, financed by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, for community college teachers from four states;
- a teaching film on presidential decision-making;
- a major traveling exhibit, using document facsimiles and photographs, on recent presidential elections;
- a number of conferences, held at Boston universities, focusing on various historical and contemporary problems and issues;
- a "community visitor" project bringing speakers of national prominence to spend a full day meeting with school and civic groups in a single community;
- a program of film festivals and panel discussions at colleges throughout the country;
- an annual summer workshop, conducted with the University of Massachusetts-Boston, designed to help teachers in the Boston school system improve their teaching of politics and government;
- a week-long American presidency "festival" which attracted over 10,000 people, featuring films, lectures, exhibits, and discussions;
- an experimental cooperative program, in conjunction with the University of Massachusetts-Boston, to determine how Kennedy Library resources could be used in an elementary and junior high school to help youngsters understand politics, government, and the presidency.

As the two parts of the library come together, it has become a complex institution with a variety of responsibilities and purposes. It preserves the pa-

pers of John F. Kennedy and his associates and makes them available to many publics. As the custodian of rich source materials, it serves scholars in many fields. The drama of the building and its setting, the symbolism of the white tower by the sea, and the awareness of two political assassinations that hundreds of thousands of visitors will bring with them will keep alive the memory of the thirty-fifth President.

But like any archives and any museum, the library is also in a larger sense an educational center. It is an institution with a wide range of resources, from presidential doodles to oral histories, from children's paintings to documents of state. These resources are made available to a disparate variety of people, from elementary school students and casual visitors to those who spend hours in the exhibit areas. This interface of people and resources gives the library an opportunity to do more than simply convey a sense of the past. The library's programs use these resources to illumine the very process of American government and of politics itself. The resources can be and are being used to give to visitors a better sense of how our system of politics and government functions. The library's rich store of case materials can help people under-

stand the process of compromise among competing interests, the process of judicious sacrifice for common goals that enables the public business to be accomplished with a certain degree of responsiveness to public needs and a certain degree of predictable continuity.

With increased understanding may come increasing participation. Time after time, President Kennedy tried to impress upon people, especially young people, the potential for effective accomplishments in the public interest offered them by the political process. He saw politics as a noble profession and sought to roll back the widely held and mindless cynicism about those who practiced the art and about the process itself.

Using the exhibits as a teaching museum, working with teachers and students in a variety of environments, bringing programs and exhibits out to communities, building traveling exhibits and holding conferences, stimulating the creation of curriculum materials, capitalizing on the research resources in a number of ways—through these and other methods that will unfold as we move ahead, the Kennedy Library hopes to make some contribution to the fulfillment of that purpose.

DAN H. FENN, JR., is director of the John F. Kennedy Library.