

# The NHPRC: Its Influence on Documentary Editing, 1964–1984

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**Abstract:** In addition to providing financial support for the publication of modern documentary editions in the field of American history, the National Historical Publications and Records Commission has been a leader in the training of documentary editors and in the development and application of new technology in the field. The commission established documentary projects for several American presidents and other governmental leaders and also initiated and supported projects to document the history of blacks, native Americans, and women. The commission has successfully secured funds from private foundations to augment its own funding for editorial projects. Through its work, the NHPRC provides a central organization for the publication of documents in American history.

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IN 1863 HANNAH JOHNSON, a black woman from Buffalo, New York, wrote to President Abraham Lincoln concerning her father, an escaped slave; her son, a soldier in the 54th regiment; and the fairness of the Emancipation Proclamation.

I am a colored woman and my son was strong and able as any to fight for his country and the colored people have as much to fight for as any. My father was a Slave and escaped from Louisiana before I was born morn forty years ago I have but poor edication but I never went schol, but I know just as well as any what is right between man and man. . . . They tell me some do you will take back Proclamation, don't do it. When you are dead and in Heaven, in a thousand years that action of yours will make the Angels sing your praises I know it.<sup>1</sup>

This is a voice of America's past, a document preserved and now available for study and reflection. It is permanently recorded for the future, in part because of the commitment of the National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC) to documentary editions in American history—from the papers of the founding fathers and other political leaders and thinkers to those of military figures, scientists, reformers, and artists.

Since its creation by Congress in 1934, the commission has played a major role in every aspect of documentary editing. In addition to distributing its own grant funds, the commission has raised private funds to support editing, led in the training of documentary editors, established microform and book publication standards, provided funds for editors' conferences in order to share the knowledge of the field, introduced modern technology to help expedite editorial

work, and generally been a major promoter and protector of the publication of this nation's documents.

Commission book series are the diadems of its publications program. Among others, the papers of Jefferson, Washington, Gompers, Douglass, Adams, Franklin, and Stanton-Anthony are being edited. The first of the founding fathers projects, the Papers of Alexander Hamilton, has been published. Within the next ten years, the projected sixty-volume edition of the Woodrow Wilson project will be completed.

Documentary publications such as the commission's sponsored editions require detailed planning, constant and scrupulous supervision, and the pursuit of historical fact practically unequalled in the archival and historical professions. In order to contribute to this research effort, the commission has long offered guidance, funds, and a manuscript and archival research service. This service provided by the research staff helps assure the comprehensiveness of a project, enabling editors to complete massive searches for documents at the National Archives, the Library of Congress, and other repositories.

Subvention for publication costs is another means by which the commission promotes documentary editing. The Wilson Papers is one of a number of commission-supported projects receiving such support. With increased costs affecting the ability of presses to continue existing series and to begin new ones, the commission launched its subvention program in 1975. The commission provides up to \$10,000 per volume to help defray the publishing costs of NHPRC-sponsored documentary publications. Since its beginning the program has provided more than \$1.2 million to publish

<sup>1</sup>Ira Berlin, et al., eds., *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation, 1861–1867; Series II: The Black Military Experience* (Cambridge, Mass.: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 582.

these volumes.

After the establishment of editorial projects for the papers of America's founding fathers and other prominent men, the commission sought to expand its programs. Abigail Adams's admonition to her husband, John, to "Remember the Ladies," has echoed through the decades and was heard by the commission.<sup>2</sup> In its 1954 report to President Dwight D. Eisenhower entitled "A National Program for the Publication of Historical Documents," the names of Jane Addams, Susan B. Anthony, Clara Barton, and Emma Hart Willard were included in a list of 112 prominent Americans in this country's history whose papers might be published.<sup>3</sup> Another list of notable persons included the names of Alice Freeman Palmer, Anne Newport Royall, Louisa May Alcott, Margaret Fuller, and Elizabeth Blackwell.<sup>4</sup> In 1974 the commission appointed a special Advisory Committee on Women's Papers. In its recommendations for future documentary editing projects on American women, this committee suggested the papers of ninety women and women's organizations to be edited and published.<sup>5</sup>

The commission has acted on these recommendations. Currently it is supporting the editing of the papers of Jane Addams, Emma Goldman, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Susan B. Anthony. The Isabella Beecher Hooker Papers, the Correspondence of Lydia Maria Child, the Papers of the Women's Trade Union

League and Its Principal Leaders, and the Mary Boykin Chestnut Diary are completed projects in the field. In order to provide substantial outside support for the women's projects, the commission used the consortium approach to fundraising, whereby similar projects joined forces to apply to various private foundations for support. Other consortia have been established, most notably for the founding fathers projects and the Afro-American history projects. During the past four years, the commission has helped raise over \$1 million in private monies for its sponsored editions.

Another area of commission interest is the papers of black Americans. On 1 April 1966, commission Executive Director Oliver W. Holmes wrote to Louis R. Harlan: "Your article in the January *American Historical Review* on 'Booker T. Washington and the White Man's Burden' was not only interesting but impressive as a thorough job of research. If you have been over Booker T. Washington's papers to this extent. . . I would like very much to have an opportunity to meet and talk with you . . . about . . . the editing and publication of his papers."<sup>6</sup> So the birth of a project is recorded. It would be different from others that had come before, for only white men had been the subject of book editions. This had not been the commission's intent, however. Holmes continued: "The Commission has felt for a number of years that we must try to get started with a project covering the papers of an outstand-

<sup>2</sup>L.H. Butterfield, Marc Friedlaender, and Mary-Jo Kline, eds., *The Book of Abigail and John: Selected Letters of the Adams Family, 1762-1784* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1975), 120.

<sup>3</sup>"A National Program for the Publication of Historical Documents: A Report to the President by the National Historical Publications Commission," (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1954), 37-79.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, 79-83.

<sup>5</sup>Members of the committee were Elizabeth Hamer Kegan (chairperson), Lyman H. Butterfield, Jeanette B. Cheek, Janet W. James, Eloise Lewis, Mary Lynn McCree, Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., and Anne F. Scott. For a comprehensive list of the recommended projects see, "The Women's Advisory Committee Submits Recommendations," *Annotation*, Spring 1974.

<sup>6</sup>Oliver W. Holmes to Louis R. Harlan, 1 April 1966. Copy in MAG Research File, NHPRC Office.

ing Negro leader. Booker T. Washington . . . ranks far higher than any other Negro leader in the results of one recent survey . . . as to priority needs in documentary publications.”<sup>7</sup>

The book edition of the Booker T. Washington Papers is now complete, and a comprehensive index volume is forthcoming, culminating the work of Harlan and his staff. Other projects treating the papers of black Americans followed the Washington edition, including the publication of the papers of Frederick Douglass, Marcus Garvey, and the Black Abolitionists. The commission also established the Freedmen and Southern Society project. Credit for this endeavor goes collectively to the commission and individually to former commission member Herbert Gutman.<sup>8</sup> Drawing exclusively from the records of the National Archives, the Freedom Project explores black life in Civil War and reconstruction America. “Rather than a collection of letters relating to one person or event, the goal of the project is to compile a documentary study of freedom.”<sup>9</sup> The volumes bring together a vast assortment of unknown documents, written by blacks and whites, slaves and masters, soldiers and citizens; they provide “the richest known record of any subordinate class at its moment of liberation.”<sup>10</sup> Most recently, the commission has voted funding to support the editing of the papers of Martin Luther King, Jr. From slavery, to freedom, to civil rights, the commission has supported Afro-American projects spanning over one hundred years of history of black Americans.

Another area of documentary publications explored by the commission is

native American records. Projects include the Indian Language Collections of the Society of Jesus at the Oregon Province Archives, Alaska Native Languages and Pacific Northwest Tribes, the Papers of Carlos Montezuma, and the Papers of the Society of American Indians, a national native American lobby organization. There is a new interest in the preservation and publication of native American records, in part attributable to myriad law cases of Indian claims and the increased numbers of native American archivists and historians. During the past year commission staff members have made contacts and held discussions regarding the publication of additional materials.

Although once criticized for only supporting the publication of writings of “great white men,” the commission’s record of publication includes the papers and records of women and minorities, the rich and the poor, social outcasts and social leaders. Its expanding program has been as varied as the American experience.

The editing of historical documents takes time; just how much time is appropriate is a question that continues to haunt the field. Like a wizened editorial clockmaker, the NHPRC sees in its shop many different models of projects: handsome grandfather clocks, their works almost still, silent sentinels to unfulfilled promise; efficient little stopwatches, their progress marked by precise intervals; fairly reliable Timexes, some falling a few seconds behind, a few running a mite fast. As scholars, funding agencies, and other interested readers look anxiously for the next volumes in a series, the ques-

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup>Herbert Gutman, representing the American Historical Association, served on the commission from 1973 to 1978.

<sup>9</sup>“A Different Kind of Project: A Documentary History of Freedmen in Southern Society, 1861–67,” *Annotation*, July 1978, 1.

<sup>10</sup>Berlin, *Freedom*, xvii.

tions persist. Could the documents be published without all of the annotation? Why not just publish a microform edition with a detailed index?

The commission addressed some of these issues in a 13 September 1976 basic policy statement on documentary editing. Two areas of primary concern were identified: "the lack of selectivity exercised by some editors whose projects profess to be selective and the excessive annotation by some series under the Commission aegis." The policy statement declared that the commission was "skeptical whether the publication of most formal and routine documents such as lists, commissions, land certificates, muster rolls, vouchers, receipts, oaths of office, powers of attorneys, and bills of sale should be included in letterpress editions except when in their context such documents have unusual research value." It enjoined editors to consider seriously the use of more calendaring techniques and the greater use of microform publication.<sup>11</sup>

The second area of commission concern noted in the 1976 policy statement was excessive annotation. There is perhaps no area of greater debate among editors than how much annotation is adequate for printed editions. For example, one editor published an eight-page extract of proceedings of and a speech given at a political convention, which was followed by approximately forty-two pages of footnotes.<sup>12</sup> In contrast, another editor has advised that "footnotes rarely endure and may serve an editor's vanity more than a scholar's need. Thus we

would do well to check our impulses, annotate sparingly, and leave the [other] scholars to make [their] own interpretation of Clio's wonderings."<sup>13</sup> The commission's position is that "annotation must be primarily a vehicle for providing clarification, information and explanation, not a forum for offering supportive commentary or irrelevant detail." The commission, however, has "no intention of setting arbitrary limitations or quotas. ... It is determined to offer positive advice and critical evaluation on significant matters affecting the direction of its documentary program."<sup>14</sup>

As the debate over length of projects and editorial techniques continues, word processors, computers, and editing and indexing programs are revolutionizing documentary editing. The change-over from the typewriter to the word processor and computer is having a greater impact than the change from the quill pen to the typewriter. Some documentary editing projects have estimated a forty percent savings of time with the use of word processors. Their use allows the text and editorial matter to be quickly handled and easily deleted, moved, corrected, and inserted, without introducing new errors in the rest of the material. It eliminates several proofreading steps. Another advantage is that word processing equipment can be used to create machine-readable text with printing commands, enabling a project to submit either disks or magnetic tapes to the publisher and thus substantially reduce publishing costs.

Recognizing the advantages of word

<sup>11</sup>Commission Policy Statement On Documentary Editing, adopted 13 September 1976, Minutes of Commission Meetings, NHPRC Official Files. Copies of the complete statement are available from the commission.

<sup>12</sup>James T. McIntosh, ed., *The Papers of Jefferson Davis* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1974), 2:68-119.

<sup>13</sup>Robert Rutland, "The Editor's Role in Annotation: A Plan For The Light Touch," paper delivered at NHPRC's Washington Area Editors Conference, 12 March 1976, 13.

<sup>14</sup>Policy Statement On Documentary Editing.

processors, the commission provided funding to a number of projects for the initial use of the new technology. At a 1981 conference in Philadelphia, editors discussed the use of word processors and computer-assisted indexing. The majority of commission-sponsored projects currently use word processing equipment, and a significant number use computers in the editing process. While automation does not answer all of the questions of time regarding documentary editions, it undoubtedly hastens the completion of some of the projects.

In microform publications, the NHPRC has played an important role. Its microform guidelines have standardized the methodology and procedures of projects and have helped to assure that microform products are of a high technical quality.<sup>15</sup> Current microform editions exhibit a finer approach in methodology and procedures than earlier ones. The guides for microform editions are much more useful to the researcher and include detailed indexes. Microfiche has been selected for at least two projects, the Papers of Benjamin H. Latrobe and the Papers of Charles Willson Peale and His Family.

An important area of commission endeavor is the training of documentary editors and the promotion of documentary editing as an integral part of the historical profession. In the summer of 1964, Executive Director Oliver W. Holmes prepared a report entitled, "Proposals for a Training Program for Editors." One of the elements of this program, a "Plan for [the] Institute in Documentary Editing and Publications," was discussed at the 9 April 1965 commission meeting. The proposed institute

would include "lecture[s], discussions, visits to documentary editing projects of different types located in Washington, and projects involving theory, practice, and problems in historical editing."<sup>16</sup> In August 1972 the commission's first Institute for the Editing of Historical Documents convened at the University of Virginia. Funded by private foundations, the institute offered future editors, archivists, librarians, and other interested persons a two-week immersion in the subject of documentary editing. After four years, the institute moved to the University of South Carolina and, since 1978, has been held at the University of Wisconsin. It is now cosponsored by the commission, the University of Wisconsin, and the State Historical Society of Wisconsin. Some 260 individuals have participated in the institute as interns. Many have later headed or served on editorial projects and/or have published documents as part of journal articles.<sup>17</sup>

The education of historians and archivists does not end with the editing institute. The commission also offers fellowships in documentary editing. Selected fellows are placed with established projects for one year. They receive instruction in the methodology of documentary editing and are responsible for historical research, the editing of documents, and the host of other duties performed at the projects. Many of these persons have been hired as permanent project staff members; others have established projects of their own. During the first ten years of the fellowship program, which began in 1967 with a grant from the Ford Foundation, fifty scholars received training.<sup>18</sup> As of 1984, seventy-nine fellowships had been awarded.

<sup>15</sup>Copies of microfilm guidelines are available from the commission.

<sup>16</sup>Oliver W. Holmes, "Proposal for a Training Program for Editors," NHPRC Official Files.

<sup>17</sup>Richard N. Sheldon, "The NHPRC Historical Editing Institute," *Documentary Editing* 6, no. 3 (September 1984), 17.

<sup>18</sup>"Commission Names Four Fellowship Winners," *Annotation*, August 1977, 1.



Fellowships also have been funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

The Commission also sponsors editors' conferences, bringing editors together to share the knowledge of the documentary editing profession, promote formal and informal discussion of the problems of documentary editing, and "increase the general feeling of belonging to a recognized professional group of some standing and of being engaged in a common endeavor of importance in the world of scholarship."<sup>19</sup> Topics discussed include annotation, funding, institutional support, and editorial methodology as well as project subjects. During the editors' conference held at the Roosevelt Presidential Library in April 1978, the commission prepared the groundwork for the establishment of a national professional association for documentary editors. Twelve editors attended, representing such projects as the Jefferson, Madison and Adams papers. At the first session of the conference, entitled "A National Organization of Editors," John Y. Simon, editor of the Ulysses S. Grant Papers, chaired an enthusiastic discussion revealing divergent opinions. Some editors believed such an organization could publicize the impressive accomplishments of documentary editors, lead to greater cooperation among projects, and explore editorial philosophy and techniques. One of the major concerns of the participants, particularly of Julian P. Boyd, editor of the Papers of Thomas Jefferson, was that a separate organization of editors would reinforce the perception of the second-class status editors seemingly had within the historical world. The following November sixty-three historical and literary editors met at the Southern Historical Association's an-

nual meeting in St. Louis to adopt a constitution for the new association. The first annual meeting of the Association for Documentary Editing was held at Princeton, New Jersey, in November 1979. The association now has a membership of approximately four hundred.

The commission's commitment to the education of aspiring editors is longstanding. There has been a concomitant growth in the number of academic departments offering documentary editing courses conducted by various editors and/or members of their staff. Library science classes also have touched upon the subject. There is now a clearer picture of training in documentary editing outside of the commission's program. The Committee on Public History of the Organization of American Historians has recently published a guide to historical editing for departments of history, which includes "A Survey of Current Programs and Course Offerings." Schools offering training in the field include the history departments of the University of Maryland, the College of William and Mary in cooperation with the Institute of Early American History and Culture, New York University, and Arizona State University.<sup>20</sup> Inherent in the establishment of formal classes in documentary editing is the recognition that documentary editing is an integral part of the history profession.

In 1909, a quarter of a century before the creation of the National Archives and the commission, a group of historians, including Worthington C. Ford, Charles Francis Adams, Charles M. Andrews, Albert Bushnell Hart, Alfred T. Mahan, Frederick Jackson Turner, and J. Franklin Jameson, prepared a report to the president calling for the creation of a

<sup>19</sup>"Training Program for Editors."

<sup>20</sup>*Historical Editing: A Guide for Documents in History* (Bloomington, Ind.: Organization of American Historians, 1984).

National Historical Publications Commission. Such a commission, they argued, could "secure a steady output of creditable historical work . . . answering the needs of the present and future."<sup>21</sup> Since the commission's reemergence in the early 1950s, it has supported the publication of approximately 350 volumes of historical documents and 140 microform publications with modest amounts of federal and private funds.<sup>22</sup>

Reviews of commission-sponsored projects, with few exceptions, praised the exceptionally fine scholarly work. Publications continue to meet the needs of the interested scholar and the general reader, and the country's need to document its heritage. As the commission's work continues, as the activity of historical editors and organizations reaches new significance, the commission's goals remain much as those men envisioned.

<sup>21</sup>"Documentary Historical Publications of the United States Government," *Report To The President — 1909*, 60th Cong., 2d sess., S. Doc. 714.

<sup>22</sup>Federal funding from the commission for the editorial projects has totaled more than \$21 million from 1965 to 1985. The commission staff has been directly involved in raising more than \$1 million in private funds to support its projects.