

# The Society of American Archivists

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## James E. O'Neill

James E. O'Neill, acting Archivist of the United States for a while and more recently head of the Presidential Libraries system, died at his desk on Friday afternoon, 6 March 1987. He was 58. He had been suffering from a deteriorating heart condition, but he had continued to work with his colleagues at the National Archives. On that day he had enjoyed the repartee of a farewell luncheon for a colleague and on the way back to work he had chatted with a friend about the masterpiece of the Verdi *Requiem*, soon to be performed at the Kennedy Center.

Born in the small town of Renovo, Pennsylvania, James O'Neill earned his A.B. and M.A. degrees in history at the University of Detroit in 1952 and 1954, and achieved his Ph.D. in history in 1961 at the University of Chicago. He also received an honorary degree (L.H.D.) in 1975 from St. Edwards University in Austin, Texas.

Dan Reed tells the story of how remarkably their career trails intertwined, with Dan leading the way. He taught O'Neill as an undergraduate in Detroit and, moving on to the University of Chicago, served as his mentor there. When Reed returned to the University of Detroit as Director of Libraries, he offered Jim his first job as reference librari-

an; and when Dan moved on to the Manuscripts Division of the Library of Congress, Jim followed to serve as his special assistant. They parted for a time as O'Neill honed his teaching skills at Notre Dame and then Loyola University in Chicago. But Dan Reed soon joined the National Archives as head of the Presidential Libraries and once again called upon O'Neill to join him in 1969, this time as Director of the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library in Hyde Park, New York.

Within two years, Archivist Bert Rhoads had come to appreciate the touch and talent of O'Neill and asked him to become his deputy in Washington. O'Neill served with distinction as Deputy Archivist from 1972 until 1979, when Rhoads left federal service. O'Neill then served as acting Archivist for nearly one year until Robert Warner was appointed to that position. Afterward, O'Neill headed the Presidential Libraries, with a brief sojourn in the Office of Public Programs, until the end of his career.

While his interests in history and archivy were quite broad and diverse, Jim O'Neill made consistent and enduring contributions to the profession in matters of access to records and other historical materials. Upon his arrival at the



Roosevelt Library in 1969, O'Neill as director found himself in the midst of an imbroglio arising from charges made by Francis Lowenheim that the Roosevelt Library had systematically withheld historical resources to enhance its own documentary publications project. O'Neill worked quickly with an *ad hoc* review committee of AHA-OAH to refute the charges where they were unfounded and to institute reforms where they were

needed at the library. He referred fondly to his tenure as director of the Roosevelt Library and to his colleagues there.

Upon his move to Washington, O'Neill undertook a review of reference practices in the National Archives and, when he assumed the duties of Deputy Archivist, he made access to records his special field of interest. During 1972–74 he labored with a friend and other colleagues on the reference and access committee of the Society

to produce the first set of standards for the profession on access to research materials in archival and manuscript repositories (published in *American Archivist* 37 [January 1974]: 153–54). Later, he served as chairman of the same committee and guided the effort for joint adoption of standards on access to original research materials by the American Library Association and the Society of American Archivists (*American Archivist* 42 [October 1979]: 536–38).

When an opportunity arose in 1972 to contribute ideas to presidential aides in a revision of the federal system for classification/declassification of national security materials, O'Neill with a friend grasped the chance, planted the authority of the Archivist to declassify in five different places in the Executive Order, and watched and worked as the role of the Archivist emerged to new prominence in the fragile relationship between national security concepts and the needs of an open society.

In a different arena, O'Neill battled with the Bureau of the Census over long-term public access to the census records. When NARS attempted to modify the archival statute to reduce the time period from 50 to 30 years after which agencies were required to transfer their non-current records to the Archives, the Census Bureau spread the word that Archives intended to abrogate the long-standing agreement to keep the census closed for 72 years and resisted the change. Their real interest lay in convincing the public that census data would remain confidential, without reference to time periods. Losing a skirmish at the OMB, O'Neill followed the battle to the floors of Congress where he helped to clarify the mock battle and won in law the issue of requiring agencies to turn over their 30-year-old records. In the aftermath, the 1910 census was duly made available in 1982 at archives facilities.

In recent years, a complicated legal challenge to the FBI's plans for disposal of its field records saw the court call into question the appraisal methodology of NARS. Recognizing the gravity of the threat to archival functions, Archivist Bob Warner asked O'Neill to manage the response. He organized a team of talented archivists, fanned them out to field offices across the nation, won the first-time cooperation of the FBI, and gave the courts the kind of intelligent and systematic response that led to settlement of the issues and improvement of archival performance. The case is now closed.

Perhaps it is indicative of the completion of his work that the past few months have seen the successful opening—at long last—of the Special Files from the Nixon presidential materials. From the early days of the seizure of those materials in late 1974, O'Neill oversaw the work of a team of archivists and lawyers in setting the pattern for systematically accomplishing archival tasks while carefully observing the court-imposed restraints upon public access to the record of Watergate. The pressure of litigation has been unceasing, but the archival impulse has won out.

For good measure, O'Neill accepted another challenge from Archivist Bob Warner when a time crisis occurred and he proved that he could conceive and manage installation of a complicated and dramatic exhibit in time for the celebration of the 50th anniversary of the founding of the National Archives. The exhibit on Recent America was cited as one of the finest, most highly visited exhibits ever mounted at the National Archives.

Jim O'Neill's entire career and his passing had a striking effect upon colleagues at the National Archives. Because he was a vigorous and forceful player, he had his share of critics and detractors. But because he was a warm, witty, and loyal friend, and a person of keen judgment

and not a little courage, Jim had a wide and appreciative circle of friends. Just a month after his passing, a memorial assembly was held in the National Archives Theater. Frank Burke opened and briefly summarized a remarkable string of archival successes attributable to O'Neill, not overlooking his irrepressible wit and impeccable English. Dan Reed recollected the intertwining of careers and expressed pride at having brought Jim O'Neill into the Archives fold. Adrienne Thomas traced the battles over access that O'Neill undertook and won. Bert Rhoads, in a letter, described his provident choice of O'Neill as his deputy and how he admired "his capacity for clarity in both written and spoken language, . . . his candor, his wit, and the healthy Irish cynicism with which he sometimes viewed people and events." Harry Middleton delivered a heartfelt reminiscence of O'Neill's warm influence on a presidential library. Even daring to match him, though not compare him, with Lyndon Johnson, Harry said, "Each of them made me want to do my best to satisfy him . . . to make a special effort not to let him down. And in the doing, each of them made me better than I might have been." Claudine Weiher recalled "his excellent mind, his unquestionable loyalty to the institution and to the profession, his wit, that he never wavered from his principles, especially on public access to records, and that he was capable, tenacious, and crafty."

And one friend a few days later sang out in remembrance the fateful music of the great Verdi *Requiem* in a magnificent choral performance from the concert stage of the Kennedy Center, as they had talked about on that Friday afternoon.

James O'Neill is survived by his wife, Dorothy Collings O'Neill of Annandale, Virginia; two daughters, Cathleen Millward of Durham, N.C., and Colleen Burroughs of Chantilly, Virginia; three sons, Michael of Burke, Virginia, Kevin of Durham, and Patrick of Annandale; and one grandson, Jason.

To do something of enduring value in his name, friends at the National Archives have established a memorial fund to be used to sponsor an annual James E. O'Neill Memorial Lecture. Each year a distinguished scholar or public figure will speak on a topic of his or her choice that relates to the study of history or the uses of archives. All are invited to join in honoring Jim O'Neill through a donation to the National Archives Gift Fund for deposit in a special account for the annual lecture. Checks should be made payable to NATF/O'Neill Fund and mailed to: National Archives Trust Fund Board (NAJC), James E. O'Neill Memorial, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, DC 20408.

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