

SPECIAL SECTION



The Beginnings of the NHPRC Records Program

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Abstract

In 1974, federal legislation enlarged the scope and function of the National Historical Publications Commission (NHPC) by providing authority for the Commission to support archival projects in public and private institutions. The first six years of the newly formed National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC) were devoted to the development of state structures to assist in the program's implementation, and national priorities that could address questions of documentary preservation and enhanced researcher use. The debates within the Commission and among archivists nationwide during the start-up period centered on three questions: how much appropriated funding would be provided to the Commission for grants?; what role should the states play in shaping and implementing the program?; and what priorities should be established in order to advance the solution to national research needs? The staff, the Commission members, the Archivist of the United States, the state archivists, and the professional archival organizations all became important contributors to the initiation of the first national effort to improve archival processes and the condition of documentary resources in the United States.

The National Historical Publications Commission, 1934-1974

The National Historical Publications Commission (NHPC) was established in the same act that established the National Archives on June 19, 1934.¹ Both came into being as the result of the long efforts of J. Franklin Jameson, a giant in the growth of both the history profession in the United States and the development of a national archival program. The Commission was created as a separate entity, but with the Archivist of the United States as chairman

¹ *U.S. Statutes at Large*, 48:1112-24.

and staff supported through the Archives budget. The Commission's mandate was to "make plans, estimates, and recommendations for such historical works and collections of sources as seem appropriate for publication and/or recording at the public expense."² At the Commission's first meeting on January 29, 1935, the seven appointed members represented the National Archives; the cabinet departments for State, War, and Navy; the Library of Congress, for which the representative was the Chief of the Division of Manuscripts, Jameson himself; and two representatives appointed by the American Historical Association. One of the first orders of business of the new body was to adopt a resolution calling for a publication on the origins of the Constitution. The first Secretary (1946–51), and then Executive Director (1951–61) was Philip M. Hamer.

There were no funds specifically allocated to the Commission for its activities, and because of the successive trials of early National Archives growth, the difficulties of the Depression of the 1930s and then World War II, the Commission met infrequently and spent much of its time preparing lists of projects that it would like historical scholars to pursue.

In the immediate post-war years the future of the National Archives took a dramatic turn when, on June 30, 1949, it lost status as an independent agency and was melded into the newly formed General Services Administration (GSA), created by the Federal Property and Administrative Services Act. The Archives became the National Archives and Records Service of GSA (NARS).³ The change had little effect on the NHPC, which remained a quasi-autonomous body within the National Archives, still chaired by the Archivist.

In September 1950 Congress followed through on the changed status of the Archives and passed the Federal Records Act, which, among other things, increased the Commission's size to eleven members and shifted its emphasis to "cooperate with and encourage appropriate Federal, State, and local agencies and nongovernmental institutions, societies, and individuals in collecting and preserving and, when it deems such action to be desirable, in editing and publishing the papers of outstanding citizens of the United States and such other documents as may be important for an understanding and appreciation of the history of the United States."⁴ It was almost twenty-five years before the 1950 language had an impact on the Commission's programs, when they were expanded to include collecting and preserving archival materials at the federal, state, and local levels.

In 1943 Julian Boyd began the mammoth definitive publication of *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson* at Princeton University. When Princeton University Press presented a copy of the first volume to President Truman in May 1950, he was so impressed with it that he proposed a comprehensive program for the publication

² *U.S. Statutes at Large*, 48:1112–24.

³ 63 Stat. 377. Donald R. McCoy, *The National Archives: America's Ministry of Documents, 1934–1968* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1978), 229; H. G. Jones, *The Records of a Nation* (New York: Atheneum, 1969), 58–59.

⁴ 64 Stat. 583.

of the public and private writings of those who have contributed greatly to the development of the United States. And, in May 1951, the NHPC sent to President Truman a preliminary report proposing a national program for the publication of papers of national leaders.⁵ Although the Commission was able to lend its name and moral support to a number of publication projects that were starting up in many parts of the country, it had no funds of its own to assist in their work. In 1963 it turned again to the White House for help, and found sympathetic support from President John F. Kennedy. The Commission prepared a report to the President in which it asked for a total spending authority for grants of \$2 million annually, with half to be appropriated by Congress and the remainder provided through private sources.⁶ After Kennedy's death, President Johnson supported a national grants program and signed Public Law 88-383 on July 29, 1964.

The 1964 legislation contained a "sleeper clause" that became an important issue in the next significant step in the Commission's evolution. The original legislative language stating the mission of the Commission was modified and expanded to authorize the Administrator of General Services "within the limits of appropriated and donated funds available therefore, to make allocations to Federal agencies, and grants to State and local agencies and to non-profit organizations and institutions, for the collecting, describing, preserving and compiling and publishing (including microfilming and other forms of reproduction) of documentary sources significant to the history of the United States."⁷ Although this language provided the authority to support archival activities throughout the country, the Commission did not interpret that language as a new mandate and continued to consider only documentary editions or microfilm projects.

The Commission functioned through actions taken at its scheduled quarterly meetings. It compiled and edited lists of people in the sciences, arts, government and business, whose papers seemed worthy of publication, with emphasis on those whose contributions had national or even global impact. Commission members usually decided on proposals during the course of their meetings, and rarely had to turn to outside advisors. Before each meeting, staff prepared and distributed written reports which summarized the qualities of the proposed editor, the importance of the papers for an understanding of United States history, and the validity of the publishing plan. The assembled members brought considerable knowledge to the table and could normally provide an

⁵ The final version of the report: *A National Program for the Publication of Historical Documents*, was not completed until 1954, when it was sent to President Eisenhower and published by the Government Printing Office.

⁶ *Report to the President Containing a Proposal by the National Historical Publications Commission to Meet Existing and Anticipated Needs Over the Next Ten Years Under a National Program for the Collection, Preservation, and Publication, or Dissemination by Other Means of the Documentary Sources of American History* (Washington: G.P.O., 1963). One would think that a scholarly group of critical editors would have been able to compose a twentieth-century version of that eighteenth-century title style!

⁷ P.L. 88-383.

evaluation at the meeting, after general discussion. There might occasionally be a referral to outside reviewers. If there was no money available to support projects with a grant, the Commission often issued a statement of the worthiness of the project proposal and their recommendation for support by “all those in a position to do so.”

The Genesis of the Records Program

The Library Services Act of 1956 was the first in a series of acts that aimed to improve public library services in the country.⁸ The National Foundation on the Arts and the Humanities, with its sub-endowments on the humanities and the arts, had been established in 1965,⁹ the NHPC had been re-invigorated with the establishment of its grants program in 1964, and there was a national program for the preservation of historic buildings and sites. In light of these federal initiatives, state archivists began a campaign to create a federal program that would respond to their needs through a national historic records program that could provide grants and other assistance to the state archival programs.

During the winter of 1971–72 a number of archivists came together philosophically and geographically and drafted documents that would “promote a program for historic documents similar to the program for historic sites that was initiated by Congress in the National Historic Preservation Act of October 15, 1966.”¹⁰ In an article in the *American Archivist*, Charles Lee, Director of the South Carolina Department of Archives and History, recounts how the movement was advanced by an endorsement of the idea by the American Revolution Bicentennial Commission, which was looking for appropriate ways to celebrate the nation’s 200th birthday. Samuel Silsby, archivist of Maine and “an accomplished legislative draftsman from his days in the Maine legislature,” was asked to draft language that could form the basis for a bill to be introduced in the U.S. Congress.¹¹ (The text of the various Silsby drafts appears at the end of Lee’s article.) Listed among the supporters of the idea is Archivist of the United States James B. Rhoads, and a statement by Lee that Rhoads “made it clear from the beginning that he did not seek new authority for the National Archives and Records Service, but that the Archives would consider carefully any responsibilities with which their fellow archivists and historians would like to entrust them.” As if to placate archivists who might suspect a federal power play, Lee

⁸ P.L. 84–597.

⁹ P.L. 89–209.

¹⁰ Charles Lee, “The President’s Page: The Proposed National Historical Records Program,” *American Archivist* 35 (July/October 1972): 369.

¹¹ Lee, “The President’s Page,” 369.

added "the proposed program as it has developed has been one from the grass roots rather than from NARS."¹²

As early as January 1, 1973 there was a draft bill to create a records commission,¹³ and a growing movement of support led by Charles Lee, with considerable assistance from Silsby. Participants included members of the Society of American Archivists, leaders of the American Association for State and Local History, American Society for Legal History, American Historical Association, Organization of American Historians, and other groups and individuals. Senator Edward Brooke of Massachusetts was persuaded by Richard Hale, his state's archivist, to introduce legislation (S. 1293) in 1973 that would establish the NHRC, but the bill went nowhere. In the next Congress, Representative Jack Brooks (D-TX) introduced H.R. 15818, a bill first suggested by Representative Frank Horton (R-NY), to merge the NHRC concept with the already existing NHPC in order to avoid duplication of programs and also to take advantage of the 1964 language that gave the NHPC sufficient authority to make archival grants. The Brooks/Horton coalition was significant because Brooks was Chairman of the House Committee on Government Operations, which oversaw the National Archives, and Horton was ranking minority member of the committee. H.R. 15818 proposed to amend Title 44 of the United States Code to redesignate the Commission as the National Historical Publications and Records Commission, enlarge the Commission membership from thirteen to seventeen, and increase the authorization for its appropriations from \$2 million to \$4 million. At its regular meeting on February 5, 1974, the NHPC members discussed the records program legislation, expressed concern over the impact that the change would have on the publications program, and seemed to be worried about being overwhelmed with archivist representatives on the Commission. They passed a resolution in favor of "the great need to preserve the Historical manuscripts and archives of the nation, and strongly endorse[d] the idea of a national program in conjunction with the states to achieve that object."¹⁴

The members then passed a resolution "that a national commission to oversee such a program should not exceed 16 members plus the chairman, and should include representation from the academic community, and that no

¹² Lee, "The President's Page," 369. Rhoads held that position and restated it as the establishment of the new program loomed in 1974: "While I might have preferred that there be a separate commission, separate program, for this new program, it seems to me that it is not in the cards . . . I very strongly support the objectives of it." Record Group 64. Records of the National Archives. National Historical Publications and Records Commission. (hereafter RG64, NHPRC) Commission Meeting Files. NHPC. Meetings, Feb. 1972–May 1974. Meeting of Feb. 5, 1974. *Minutes*, 4. He repeated this statement in the September 20, 1974 meeting. *Minutes*, 2.

¹³ In the NHPRC files there is an unattributed draft bill for this purpose. NHPRC informal files (stack area 7W1, Archives I), Box 1704-1, not foldered. There is another draft of a bill calling for a twenty-four-person commission and \$2 million for publications, \$10 million for records among the loose papers in the Commission Meeting files. It is unnumbered and unattributed. RG 64, NHPRC. Meeting Files. Meeting of May 21, 1974.

¹⁴ RG 64, NHPRC. Meeting Files. Meeting of February 5, 1974. *Minutes*, 27.

national program for such preservation should be established at the expense of the long and valuable tradition of documentary publication.”¹⁵ Their ambivalence is evident in that there is no mention of merging the new program with the old.

Ten months later the Brooks/Horton bill was reported out favorably, passed by the House on December 3, 1974, by the Senate nine days later, and was approved by President Ford on December 22, 1974 as Public Law 93-536.¹⁶ The brief text of the bill (*see illus.*) left all details for the operation of the new program to the discretion of the Commission itself. Since the Brooks/Horton Committee was an oversight committee, there was no funding included, so the Commission would have to seek funds through the layers above it—GSA, OMB, and the White House, and the congressional appropriations committees. With legislation in place, the NHPRC and the entire archival community had an opportunity to redefine themselves through the tasks that lay ahead.

Development of the Records Program

Rhoads recognized that the new program permitting grants to states, counties, municipalities, universities, historical societies, archival organizations, and other entities would complicate the review and evaluation process, and consequently dictate new staffing requirements. The rather casual, scholarly review process of the publications program seemed inadequate for the new records component. Rhoads did not expect that the seventeen members assembled around a table in the National Archives, or a handful of program officers reviewing grant applications for presentation to the Commission members, could effectively evaluate broad-ranging archival proposals, so he called upon his recently retired deputy, Herbert Angel, to devise a process for administering the new program.

There were a number of institutions directing grants programs in the humanities and social sciences to use a models. The Council on Library Resources (CLR), an independent, non-government organization, depended on reviews from individuals, combined with staff site visits to applicants. CLR review committees then discussed the applications at the gatherings of review panels that had rotating memberships. The Archives had itself been the recipient of a CLR grant to develop an archival automation program in 1970. A recent entry in the field of grant-making at the federal level was the National

¹⁵ RG 64, NHPRC. Meeting Files. Meeting of Feb. 5, 1974. *Minutes*, p. 27.

¹⁶ This summary appears in Herbert E. Angel, Consultant, *National Program for the Preservation and Accessibility of the Nation's Documentary Resources as Authorized by Public Law 93-536. Report to the Chairman of the National Historical Publications and Records Commission*. February 20, 1975. Typescript. (Hereafter, Angel, *Report*). Introduction. Copies of the Angel *Report* show up in many NHPRC files. It is principally part of the record of the Commission meeting at which it was presented. RG 64, NHPRC. Meeting Files. Meeting of February 20, 1975.



Public Law 93-536
93rd Congress, H. R. 15818
December 22, 1974

An Act

To amend title 44, United States Code, to redesignate the National Historical Publications Commission as the National Historical Publications and Records Commission, to increase the membership of such Commission, and to increase the authorization of appropriations for such Commission.

Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled, That (a) chapter 25 of title 44, United States Code, is amended by inserting "**AND RECORDS**" immediately after "**PUBLICATIONS**" in the chapter heading.

(b) Section 2501 of such title is amended by inserting "two members of the Society of American Archivists to be appointed, for terms of four years, by the Society of American Archivists; two members of the American Association for State and Local History to be appointed, for terms of four years, by the American Association for State and Local History;" immediately after the last semicolon in such section.

(c) Section 2504(b) of such title is amended by—

(1) striking out "1973" and inserting in lieu thereof "1975"; and

(2) striking out "\$2,000,000" and inserting in lieu thereof "\$4,000,000".

SEC. 2. The chapter analysis at the beginning of title 44, United States Code, is amended by striking out

"25. National Historical Publications Commission"

and inserting in lieu thereof

"25. National Historical Publications and Records Commission".

Approved December 22, 1974.

National Historical Publications Commission.

Name change.
44 USC 2501.
Membership increase.

88 STAT. 1734
88 STAT. 1735

Appropriation.

LEGISLATIVE HISTORY:

HOUSE REPORT No. 93-1340 (Comm. on Government Operations).
SENATE REPORT No. 93-1331 (Comm. on Government Operations).
CONGRESSIONAL RECORD, Vol. 120 (1974):
Dec. 3, considered and passed House.
Dec. 12, considered and passed Senate.

Endowment for the Humanities, which, in 1971 was just starting up State Humanities Councils which functioned through locally elected and appointed boards, but they were not designed as reviewers for projects sent to Washington. Rather, the state boards received formulaic funding through the NEH appropriations and acted as independent non-profit bodies that received and reviewed applications from within the state. Although the national program provided advice and counsel to the states, it was in the area of processes and procedures for their programs rather than specific grant-related questions. However, for the national program the Chairman of the NEH had the authority to override panel recommendations and make a final award determination. The Chairman of the NHPRC did not have such authority over the Commission's decisions.

Herbert Angel let it be known to the archival community that he was soliciting suggestions for his report. He lists thirteen organizations and thirty-seven individuals with whom he held conferences or had discussions, from the American Historical Association to the Texas State Library. Among the many respondents to his request, Executive Director of the Commission E. Berkeley Tompkins contributed a significant proposal:

We agree that some sort of liaison operation in each state would be desirable. I am convinced that your feeling that we must be careful that the state archival agencies do not dominate the program, and that the state committees should not impede the flow of information and proposals to Washington is quite sound. What would you think of the following setup? Each state would have a committee or commission composed of the following people: The head of the state historical agency, the director of the leading private historical society in the state, the director of the library of one of the principal universities in the state, and two outstanding historians from that particular state. This committee could both initiate proposals and receive them from other entities in the state. It would forward the latter with commentary and recommendations to the staff of the NHPRC, which would further evaluate them, and then present them to the Commission for final decision. The state committee could forward both records and publishing proposals, although the latter could also come to us directly as at present. The grants would be made directly to the agency which initiated the proposal.¹⁷

The Angel report was submitted one month later, at a regularly scheduled Commission meeting on February 20, 1975, and contained essentially the procedure suggested by Tompkins.¹⁸ Angel merged into the new program some of the better elements that he found in the other suggestions sent to him. Public Law 93-536 divided Commission activities between two programs: publications and records. The process for proposal evaluations in the publications program would remain essentially as it had under the NHPC. Applications would go

¹⁷ E. Berkeley Tompkins to Herbert Angel, January 16, 1975. NHPRC, Executive Director files.

¹⁸ Angel, *Report*, 4.

directly to the Commission, where a staff of two would consult with the applicants, make site visits, discuss the proposals with outside specialists, evaluate the validity of the budget, place the proposals in the context of expressed Commission priorities, and then bring the proposals to the Commission meetings (mailing them to each member some six weeks in advance) with a recommendation. Commission members would spend a set portion of their meeting time discussing and voting on those proposals.

The records program proposed by Angel charted a whole new route for applications: the Commission invited the governor of each state to establish a State Historical Records Advisory Board (SHRAB), composed of archivists, historians, records managers, librarians, elected and appointed government officials, and other professionals, as suggested in the Tompkins memorandum with a few modifications by Angel. Board members served as unpaid volunteers to review records grant applications and coordinate the overall strategies for improving archival and recordkeeping functions within the state. Angel felt that the creation of the boards would assure the Commission of a federal/state partnership in the records program. Each governor was also asked to appoint as the head of the board a State Historical Records Coordinator, who should be either the state archivist or the director of the state historical society.

Any records grant initiated within a single state was to be reviewed by the State Historical Records Advisory Board and the board's recommendation would accompany the application to the Commission. The Commission's records staff then followed the same procedure of review and recommendation as that of the publications program staff. In order to speed up the process of SHRAB and Coordinator appointments, the Commission stated that it would not review applications from any institution in a state that had not appointed a board. When proposals came from national or regional professional organizations, or from coalition groups that crossed state lines, the SHRABs were bypassed and the records staff then became the instrument of initial review. Thus, a proposal from the Society of American Archivists, headquartered in Chicago, need not go through the Illinois SHRAB because SAA is a national association.

Commission Membership

The initial legislation establishing the Commission in 1934 only vaguely established the tie between the Commission and the National Archives. The Act passed on June 19, 1934, and signed by Franklin D. Roosevelt, is "An act to establish a National Archives of the United States Government, and for other purposes." One of the "other purposes" appears within the act, which states "There is hereby created also a National Historical Publications Commission" that has the power to "make plans, estimates, and recommendations for such historical works and collections of sources as it deems appropriate for printing or other-

wise recording at the public expense.” The act then goes on to list the sources of the membership, which originally included the Archivist of the United States, as chairman: “the historical adviser of the Department of State; the chief of the historical section of the War Department, General Staff; the superintendent of naval records in the Navy Department; the Chief of the Division of Manuscripts in the Library of Congress, and two members of the American Historical Association appointed by the president thereof from among those persons who are or have been members of the executive council of the said association.”¹⁹ The addition of the American Historical Association, and the authority for its president to *appoint* members set a precedent that had broad implications when other organizations were added to the membership in later years.

In 1950, when the National Archives was administratively placed under the new General Services Administration, the Commission membership was changed. First, in order to reflect the recent establishment of the Department of Defense and unification of the armed forces, the two representatives of the Navy and War Departments were replaced by one representative of the Department of Defense, while at the same time one member each was designated from the House of Representatives and the Senate. The judicial branch was to have a member, appointed by the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, and two presidential appointees were provided for. In 1972 two members representing the Organization of American Historians were authorized.

With the creation of the expanded NHPRC in 1975 there was an addition of two members from the Society of American Archivists and two from the American Association for State and Local History. In 1989 each of the professional organizations was reduced to one member and the Association for Documentary Editing and the National Association of Government Archives and Records Administrators were added to the membership with one appointment each. Thus, the membership has been as high as seventeen (from 1972 through 1989) and subsequently has been fifteen. Because no term limits are set for members, some appointing organizations have kept the same appointee for many years. At the end of 1999, one federal appointee had been on the Commission twenty-six years, and his predecessor served for twenty-three years. Some members have represented two different constituencies over the years: Whitfield Bell, Jr. represented the AHA from 1965 to 1969, and was a Presidential Appointee from 1970 to 1973. John Lorenz of the Library of Congress was a Presidential Appointee from 1978 to 1981, while John Broderick represented the Library during the same years (1978–82).

Commission members have a number of duties that go beyond the evaluation of grant applications. Members set the policies of the Commission, including how to allocate its grant funds, and the Act states that the *Commission* appoints

¹⁹ 48 Stat. 1122–1124. *An Act to establish a National Archives of the United States Government, and for other purposes*. June 19, 1934, sec. 5.

the Executive Director, who is an excepted employee, with a salary level set by the Commission. In this instance, “excepted” means that the person appointed is outside of the federal Civil Service but still may accrue many of its benefits. However, it limits the appointee’s appeal rights in the area of job security.

The law has thus set up a tripartite Commission. First, there are the members—appointed by the institutions they represent, with the authority to allocate funds, establish priorities, act on grant applications by vote, and appoint (which implies the authority to remove) the Executive Director. Second, there is the staff, overseen by the Executive Director to implement the policies set by the Commission, provide preliminary analysis and review of all grant applications, make a recommendation to the Commission on each application presented to it, and perform all of the secretarial, recordkeeping, and program implementation duties. Except for the Executive Director, the staff members of the Commission are all civil service employees. Finally, there is the chairman of the Commission, the Archivist of the United States, who plays a number of roles. When in session with the Commission he is *primus inter pares* and has one vote, which is traditionally not cast except to break a tie. Although the Chairman does not appoint the Executive Director he is his supervisor of record for administrative purposes. Although he does not control the allocation of grant funds, he does control the operating budget and allocation of positions for the staff. The Chairman takes the recommendations of the Commission and authorizes the expenditure of grant amounts. There is no instance on record of the Chairman independently overriding the Commission’s vote for grant disbursement.

Although the organization and responsibilities of the Commission are complicated, and perhaps even unorthodox compared to similar programs elsewhere in the federal system, it has functioned with very few disruptions since grant funds were first distributed in 1964.

Staffing Up for the Challenge of the New Records Program

The legislation that created the records program did not mention the staff increases necessary to run it. Whatever positions were to be added would have to come from the overall staff limitations of the National Archives. At the February 1975 Commission meeting, Alfred Goldberg commented that he saw the records program as a “very massive addition” to the Commission’s work, and that “the present resources in terms of people present here [at the meeting] and in terms of the staff are not adequate.” Rhoads commented that he might have to delegate to the staff some of the authority that was normally that of the members.²⁰

²⁰ RG64. NHPRC Meeting Files. Meeting of February 20, 1975. *Minutes*, 6.

To study the needs of the program and suggest a staffing pattern, Rhoads turned to his deputy, James O'Neill; his director of administration, John Landers; and his special assistant—a position that I had held since April 1974.²¹

In a memo to Rhoads, I worried about underestimating the burden of the new program:

It seems to me that we are getting into a big project that is going to take considerable administration. The bigness is not controlled by the budget, but by the scope and expectations of prospective grantees. We are setting up 55 units (maximum, and ideal) of seven members each that we will have to keep tabs on, especially if we are going to assume the responsibility for approving the names on the States lists (potential of 385 names), and since we are not requiring all applications to be funneled through the State Boards, or that they be monitored by the Boards, there is a potential for 6,000 separate repositories to apply for grants. Even if we have no money, and make no grants, we will have the possibility for a great amount of paperwork and administrative sifting.

The memo went on to outline the three major activities and staff needs of the records program: promotion of the program; receipt, analysis and evaluation of grants requests; and oversight responsibilities for the projects funded. The two-page memo suggested a staffing pattern needed to meet the new challenge.²²

One month after the April 11 memo, Executive Director E. Berkeley Tompkins left the position and Rhoads detailed me to the Commission as Acting Executive Director.²³ The former Deputy Director of the NHPC/NHPRC, Fred Shelley, became Deputy Executive Director of the Publications Program, with Roger Bruns (already on staff) named Assistant Executive Director for Publications.

The new records program was to be established with the addition of at least three staff members: a Deputy Executive Director of the Records Program, an Assistant, and a secretary. Because of the urgent needs of the new program driven by constituent expectations in the states, the Archivist decided to advertise

²¹ I joined the National Archives staff in 1967 as Information Retrieval Specialist, I was Assistant Archivist for Educational Programs from 1969 to 1974. The position of Special Assistant to the Archivist entailed special studies, drafting speeches and remarks, representing the Archivist when he could not attend external meetings of committees, boards, task forces, etc.

²² NS to N (e.g., Burke to Rhoads—internal memoranda normally used only office codes, not personal names. NS was the code for Special Assistant to the Archivist; N was the code for Archivist of the United States), April 11, 1975. 2p. [photocopy]. Box 1704-1, folder “Angel Regulations and Procedures, 1975.” NHPRC informal files in stack area 7W1. A maximum of fifty-five units were to be set up because, in addition to the fifty states, the Commission’s program included the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, Guam, the Trust Territory of the Pacific, and American Samoa. In 1978 the Commission voted to exempt the latter three from the Coordinator/Board system, permitting grant application submissions directly from the applicant. NHPRC Meeting Files. Meeting of November 18, 1978, *Minutes*, 19.

²³ The sixty-day detail was extended until I was appointed to the position of Executive Director on September 29, 1975.

and recruit staff initially from inside the National Archives system. As a matter of course, Rhoads solicited Commission advice on the process. He preferred hiring from within but would entertain discussion about soliciting outside the agency. The Commission members suggested that he should use his own judgment.²⁴

The job announcement was distributed and a number of staff members were urged to apply, one of whom was Larry J. Hackman. In 1975 Hackman was Chief Archivist and Director of Special Projects at the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library in Boston—a component of the National Archives system. He was noted for his administrative skills and program development experience, and he was a Littauer Fellow at Harvard University in 1970–71, from which he received the Master's in Public Administration. When he was appointed Deputy Executive Director for the Records Program in the summer of 1975, Hackman wasted no time in educating himself on the history and future needs of the program. In the first of what would become an on-going series of in-depth exchanges, Hackman and I traded ideas in August 1975. In an eight-page memo to me from Boston he posed thirty-one questions about the program and general staff matters, and immediately followed that with a postscript memo containing seven questions that occurred to him after he had dispatched the first one. The questions ranged from concerns about the appointment of support staff, to the need for a five-year plan, the distribution of the NHPRC newsletter *Annotation*, the staffing of the NARS booth at the next SAA meeting, and if there was room at it for material about the new records program.²⁵

With his penchant for methodical preparation, Hackman hit the ground running when he reported to Washington. It was his energy, perception, analytic skills, and managerial drive that created the records program as it is still known today. For most of his tenure, Larry Hackman was assisted by William Fraley as Assistant Executive Director. In time, the program added a grants analyst (Edie Hedlin, who was corporate archivist of Wells Fargo Bank in California and a member of the State Historical Records Advisory Board at the time of her recruitment) and a Program Analyst (Timothy Walch). The day-to-day efficiency of the program was in the competent hands of Sandra Anderson, as Program Assistant. The professionalism of this team is attested to by the advancement of most of them to high-level leadership positions in the archival world today.²⁶ Larry Hackman remained with the Commission until 1981 when an offer to become archivist of New York State provided him an opportunity to

²⁴ RG 64, NHPRC. Meeting Files. Meeting of February 20, 1975, *Minutes*, Item 9, p. 30 in one version. "Other business." There are various drafts of these minutes in the folder, but apparently no "official" copy that might have been distributed. Item 9 appears in some, but others are incomplete. Much of the material is loose and unorganized.

²⁵ Draft memorandum, Hackman to Burke, August 25, 1975, 8 p. Attached to memo titled "Odds and Ends", Hackman to Burke, August 28, 1975, 2 p. NHPRC files, 1704–1 Program Correspondence and Subject Files. "Records Program Development." NARA, Archives I, Rm. 7W1.

²⁶ At this writing Larry Hackman is Director of the Harry S. Truman Library, Timothy Walch is Director of the Herbert Hoover Library, and Edie Hedlin is Archivist of the Smithsonian Institution.

put into practice the state archival strategies that he had been promoting at the NHPRC, and he left Washington.

Process before Progress

The Commission spent the first six years of the records program, 1975–1980, debating the structure and thrust of this new entity. Three questions were paramount: how much funding could be expected; what should be the shape and functions of the state boards, and what should be the funding priorities for specific proposals. The members could do little about the appropriations question, except to urge support from both the Archivist/Chairman and the archival/editorial communities for appropriation increases to attain the authorization level. The presence of congressional representation at the Commission table could sometimes be helpful, but after the Johnson administration the White House representatives became less and less effective pipelines to top administration people. In order to prepare for state board activities as well as grant priorities, staff launched a number of studies to examine the program's mission, needs and priorities. There was a split between the members, as well as the staff, over how much structure, how many regulations, and how much bureaucracy should be imposed upon the state boards. The newly emerging boards themselves voiced the need for some federal funds to support their operation, and the Commission members worried that every dollar awarded for such support would be a dollar less for hands-on solutions to institutional records problems. Before the first grant was made, Alfred Goldberg, representing the Department of Defense on the Commission, wrote to the Executive Director: "It seems to me that much of the Commission's effectiveness to date derives from its flexibility, which it has maintained by avoiding establishment of prescriptive rules, regulations, and guidelines, while keeping to the letter and spirit of the legislative act. I hope we can continue to avoid locking ourselves into formalized and institutionalized procedures and commitments that tend to restrict freedom of action. We would do better to build a records program incrementally and empirically rather than establish one full-blown at the present time."²⁷

One month later, at the April 29, 1975 meeting, held at the University of Iowa in conjunction with a conference on documentary editions, the Commission had an animated discussion over a proposal that the SHRABs be allocated a total of \$70,000 as start-up money, which was to come from the "publications money" on hand. Some of the members thought that such a move was premature, since a records program staff had not even been appointed yet. Goldberg moved that at the outset of the program *no* federal

²⁷ Alfred Goldberg to E. Berkeley Tompkins, March 4, 1975. NHPRC, Executive Director Files.

funds should be allocated to support state boards. The motion passed, with the lone negative vote of member Merrill Peterson.²⁸ The debate was still going on five years later. In an exchange of informal memos in October 1980, Larry Hackman and I discussed whether or not we needed to seek advice from GSA legal council if the Commission wanted to force the state boards to establish a state plan in order to be considered for grants. I commented:

On the question of “requiring” State Plans before considering grant applications from the States, I don’t see that we have to clear that with anyone but the Commission [which] sets its own rules for operating, and has already enforced a moratorium on States where no State plan was prepared, therefore we have precedent for *requiring* State plans before releasing funds. . . .

My reading of the Commission last week was that it does not want to lock itself into a tangle of regulations and prescriptions, but would rather operate on the authority that it presently has and stay loose in the event of unusual circumstances. Mentally going around the table, I can’t think of a member who would go for more specific and tighter regulations. Certainly, the States don’t want any more government regulations than are necessary, and keep bitching about too many. Looseness, however is the price that they will pay for imprecision and lack of strong signals from us. But they can’t have it both ways. . . . The more we go to GSA lawyers for review (especially since Garfinkel left) the closer we get to operating like HEW and HUD.

Hackman replied:

I think you are right re the PRESENT views of Commission Members and in your instincts on keeping our regulations as few and simple as possible. I doubt, though, that we can continue to get by with so little in our regulations if we place more emphasis, funds, and demands at the State Board level. Also, in archival affairs if not others, the folks out there want MORE guidance—even regulations—from the national level.²⁹

The debate over control vs. laissez-faire flows through staff communications as well as minutes of the early Commission meetings.

Going Public

In 1975 the full Commission was in place and there were briefings from the staff and input from the members to the staff. The membership of the Commission that year was impressive, made up of the following:

²⁸ RG 64, NHPRC. Meeting Files. Meeting of April 29, 1975 *Minutes*, 32–33.

²⁹ Steven Garfinkel was a GSA lawyer assigned to deal with NARS legal questions. The Departments of Health, Education and Welfare (HEW) and Housing and Urban Development (HUD) were - at least anecdotally - the most egregiously bureaucratic in the federal system. Burke to Hackman, n.d., but responding to his memo of October 25, 1980; Hackman to Burke, October 30, 1980. NHPRC, file 1704-1, folder “Records Program Goals and Objectives.” 3 p. Archives I, stack area 7W1.

James B. Rhoads, Archivist of the United States, Chairman
 Supreme Court: Associate Justice Harry A. Blackmun
 Senator Claiborne Pell (D-RI)
 Representative John Brademas (D-IN)
 State Department: Frederick Aandahl, the Historical Office
 Defense Department: Alfred Goldberg, Historian of the Office of the
 Secretary of Defense
 Library of Congress: Assistant Librarian of Congress Elizabeth Hamer Kegan
 Presidential Appointees: Philip Crowl, Vermont Royster
 American Historical Association: Merrill Peterson, Herbert Gutman
 Organization of American Historians: Edgar Toppin, Janet Wilson James
 Society of American Archivists: Charles E. Lee, Mary Lynn McCree
 American Association for State and Local History: Thomas Vaughan,
 Richard A. Erney

Although Charles Lee and others had published information about the new NHPRC program in its early stages, it was 1976 when the first public statements about the Commission's priorities were provided to a broad audience. Together the Commission members and staff established basic priorities, which were then published in *Prologue: The Journal of the National Archives*, and the journal noted that it would carry a regular section devoted to the activities of the NHPRC.

The 1976 *Prologue* article reported on three areas that the Commission thought appropriate for priority consideration: 1) endangered records that are deteriorating because of poor storage facilities or that were about to be destroyed as an economy measure; 2) cooperative projects within and between states, organizations, and institutions for collecting, housing, describing, preserving, and copying documentary sources; and 3) the development of new or improved archival techniques, with emphasis on those that would result in a study, report, or publication which would provide information or assistance to archivists and curators nationally or internationally.³⁰

Gaining Support from the Constituency

From the beginning of the records program it was clear that the key to its future success lay in the hands of the SHRABs. But the Commission could fund cooperative or regional projects that were not confined geographically to one state. Indeed, the first records grant of the new program was to the Society of American Archivists in support of publication and distribution of a series of manuals on archival practices.³¹ The Commission anticipated, however, that the

³⁰ Frank G. Burke, "The National Historical Publications and Records Commission," *Prologue* 8 (Summer 1976): 108.

³¹ Records grant No. 1 came before the Commission at the October 10, 1975 meeting. The final amount awarded was \$20,000. Staff had solicited applications for grants from SAA, NASARA and AASLH. Only SAA applied. RG 64. NHPRC. Meeting Files. Meeting of October 10, 1975. *Minutes*.

bulk of its grant proposals would come from single institutions within a state, or would be for a statewide activity under the direction of the state archives, historical society, or other entity.³² These proposals would, by Commission regulations, be reviewed first by the SHRAB.

The problem facing the small records staff in Washington centered on communication with the SHRABs. Records staff had to establish some guidelines for SHRABs to consult, some procedures to follow in their deliberations and communications with the NHPRC, some explanation of and elaboration on policies established by the Commission, and communication between and among the SHRABs themselves. Telephone conversations with each coordinator were out of the question, and blanket distribution of bulletins or a newsletter to all coordinators was ineffective one-way communication. Staff felt that it would be imperative from time to time to bring the State Coordinators together, but the Commission's budget could not support a meeting of the anticipated fifty-five coordinators and could not make a grant to itself for such purposes. Initially, the solution came from the state archivists themselves.

In a burst of energy rivaling the amount he expended to establish the records program, Charles Lee was at the same time working to free the state archivists from what he saw as limitations of the Society of American Archivists to serve their interests. With many of the same colleagues whom he enlisted in the records program campaign, Lee organized the movement to form the state archivists into their own organization. The result during the period 1974–75 was the founding of the National Association of State Archives and Records Administrators (NASARA).

Although the organization was to change its name and mission at a later date (to National Association of Government Archives and Records Administrators, NAGARA, in 1984) initially it was structured to admit five members at an administrative level from each state archives or records management program. For the first annual meeting in July 1975, at St. Louis, Missouri, it seemed logical for the president, Robert Williams, to invite the Executive Director of the NHPRC to address the meeting with information about the new records program. In the letter of invitation Williams noted that the suggestion had come from Charles Lee. I was asked to speak on "National Historical Publications and Records Program—What Next?" and Williams commented that "it is one of the most important sessions of the conference."³³

Although Williams expressed the hope that there would be NASARA representatives from every state at the conference, the turnout was disappointing. I was on the platform with the two SAA representatives to the NHPRC—Charles

³² The prediction was correct. In a report compiled in November 1978, the proposals considered since the start of the records program numbered 316. Of these, 267—a phenomenal 84 percent—were "state projects" that came in through the SHRABs. RG 64. NHPRC. Minutes of NHPRC Meetings, June 1977–November 1978. Box 5. Information distributed at the meeting of Nov. 16–17, 1978.

³³ Robert Williams to Frank Burke, July 11, 1975. Burke Personal Records. Speeches and Writings file. NASARA - St. Louis. July 25, 1975.

Lee and Mary Lynn McCree. Matthew Hodgson of the University of North Carolina Press spoke on documentary publishing. The audience was a natural for my appearance, since it was clear that all of the state archivists present would be directly involved with the new records program when the SHRABs were established in their states. When I returned to Washington and discussed NASARA with Larry Hackman it was obvious that the program should be repeated at the next annual meeting of NASARA.

NASARA planned to duplicate its 1975 conference in 1976, meeting in the same hotel (the Bel Air Hilton) in St. Louis during the same week in July. In April 1976 Hackman sent an invitation to all State Historical Records Coordinators, suggesting that they meet with him and others from the NHPRC in St. Louis from 8 a.m. until noon on July 22, 1976. The NASARA meeting was scheduled to begin at 2 p.m. As an incentive, the NHPRC offered "to provide facilities including one night's lodging and two meals at the Bel Air Hilton for any Coordinator or appropriate alternate attending the State Coordinators' session during the St. Louis meeting."³⁴ There were 21 acceptances.

This rather extraordinary arrangement was based on two assumptions: the state archivists would have state support for attendance at the NASARA meeting, including transportation; and it would entail little expenditure for NHPRC to pay for their hotel bill for one night and two meals (breakfast and lunch) as the cost of a state coordinator's meeting.³⁵ Minimal as the offer was, it might attract some members to NASARA who might otherwise not attend. The staff saw NASARA as a perfect partner in the future activities of the records program, and any assistance that could be given to it for membership development would ultimately benefit the NHPRC program. Since the members were all representing state governments it seemed like a good fit for federal/state cooperation.³⁶

In the 1976 meeting there were four topical sessions: "The Role of the State Coordinator and Advisory Board," (Burke); "Identifying Problems and Setting Priorities," (Hackman and Martha Bigelow, Director of the Michigan Historical Commission); "The Rating and Evaluation Process: Fairness with Candor," (Assistant Executive Director Fraley and Thornton Mitchell, North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources); and "Preferred Project Approaches: The Right Proposal for the Right Project," (Hackman and Charles Lee). The discussion period during a group lunch convinced the NHPRC staff that regular

³⁴ Hackman to All State Historical Records Coordinators, April 13, 1976. Folder *SHRC Meeting, NASARA July 1976*, Records Program office file, Archives I.

³⁵ The hotel rate was \$21 single, \$24 double. Meeting registration was \$15; meals were \$5 for breakfast, \$6.50 for lunch.

³⁶ Scheduling the NHPRC group to complement the NASARA meeting seemed like a way to promote both new organizations, but not all coordinators were state archivists or candidates for NASARA membership. There was a little dust-up over which organization was trying to "capture" the other, but it soon faded with the realization that NHPRC and NASARA really did need each other's support.

meetings with the coordinators were productive and imperative to the success of the program.³⁷

We agreed that my opening remarks should look beyond the mechanics of the records program and envision a future scenario. My text suggested that: “the Advisory Board might become the chief lobbyist, so to speak, for all those in the States concerned about the preservation and use of historical records. This effort might be focused especially on the State government, but could also extend, as needed, to local governments, to key organizations and institutions, to sources of financial support, and to the regional and federal level.”³⁸ In a sense this was prophetic. Less than ten years later the state boards were to become very important in the movement to free the National Archives from GSA.³⁹

The meeting included discussion of states preparing a State Historical Records Plan, and also how the rating and evaluation process for applications should be used by the boards when reviewing proposals. After the staff returned to Washington, Hackman reported in an informal note to me: “I had so many comments about the need for that sort of meeting each year. We should already begin to think about how to do it again. I suppose we can cooperate with NASARA even if we can’t pay people next year. We can just talk to those who do come.”⁴⁰

For the third NASARA annual meeting in 1977 the Commission offered transportation to St. Louis for any coordinator who was *not* a member of NASARA, on the grounds of keeping the two entities—NHPRC and NASARA—distinct. The offer led one coordinator to suggest that she would be better off quitting NASARA and having the Commission pay her fare since she could not get her state to pay for her attendance. Hackman answered with an explanation of the policy, and took the opportunity to nudge the writer on an overdue report on a microfilming project.⁴¹

Significance of the SHRABs

The remaking of NASARA into NAGARA in 1984 significantly expanded its mission and membership base. NAGARA encompasses government archivists at all levels, from federal down to municipal. But the relationship of the state

³⁷ “Agenda” Meeting of State Historical Records Coordinators, July 22, 1976. Burke Personal Records, *Speeches and Writings* file.

³⁸ “Remarks,” p. 3, Meeting of State Historical Records Coordinators, July 22, 1976. Burke Personal Records, *Speeches and Writings* file.

³⁹ Robert M. Warner, *Diary of a Dream* (Metuchen, N.J. and London: Scarecrow Press, 1995), 156 and *passim*.

⁴⁰ Hackman to Burke, n.d. Folder; SHRC Meeting. NASARA July 1976. Records Program office file, Archives I.

⁴¹ Agnes Conrad (Coordinator, Hawaii) to A. K. Johnson, NASARA Executive Secretary. With copy to Larry Hackman, NHPRC. May 3, 1977. Larry Hackman to Agnes Conrad, May 23, 1977. Folder: SHRCs Meeting. NASARA-July 1977. Records Program office file, Archives I.

archivists to the Commission did not change—the records program coordinator in each state remained as defined in the Angel regulations of 1975. Not all state coordinators were also the state archivist, but a majority were. Therefore, when they attended a NAGARA meeting as state archivist they could break away and meet separately with all of the other coordinators who were present. As in the early days in St. Louis, the NHPRC staff found it convenient to attend the NAGARA meetings to meet with the coordinators, and as a bonus meet with other government archivists who either were engaged or wished to be engaged in a grant project.

But it did not take long for the SHRABs to take on lives of their own. The fact that the coordinator is appointed by the governor,⁴² chairs a board “consisting of at least seven members” and that board must have a majority of members who “have recognized experience in the administration of government records, historical records, or archives,” is significant in itself, but the archivist/coordinator is strengthened even more because the NHPRC regulation states that:

The board is the central advisory body for historical records planning and for Commission-funded projects developed and carried out within the State. The board serves as a coordinating body to facilitate cooperation among historical records repositories and other information agencies within the state and as a state-level review body for grant proposals as defined in the Commission’s guidelines. Specifically, the board may perform such duties as sponsoring and publishing surveys of the conditions and needs of historical records in the State; soliciting or developing proposals for projects to be carried out in the State with NHPRC grants; reviewing proposals by institutions in the State and making recommendations about these to the Commission; developing, revising, and submitting to the Commission State priorities for historical records projects . . . ; promoting an understanding of the role and value of historical records; acting in an advisory capacity to the state archives and other statewide archival or records agencies; and reviewing, through reports and otherwise, the operation and progress of projects in the State financed by NHPRC grants.⁴³

In the history of archival institutions in the United States, this is a revolutionary document. Never before had the federal government stepped in and endowed a state archival figure with such sweeping authorities. Although one could say that this empowerment relates only to NHPRC grants and the grant program, it still provides the rostrum from which the archivist *cum* coordinator can command attention, provide leadership, and influence state historical programs and projects beyond those related to the federal commission. It is fair to say that the NHPRC program has handed coordinators the opportunity to influence the course of cultural events in their states.

⁴² 36 C.F.R. §1206.36

⁴³ 36 C.F.R. §1206.38(a) and 36 C.F.R. §1206.38(b)

The Council of State Historical Records Coordinators (COSHRC)

The State Coordinators realized in later years that when they acted in the capacity dictated by the NHPRC mandate, they crossed organizational lines between the mission of NAGARA and that of SAA and AASLH. Their charge was to chair boards in each state and thereby work with archivists, historians, records managers, librarians, elected and appointed government officials, and other professionals. The charge to "review records grant applications and coordinate the overall strategies for improving archival and record keeping functions within the States"⁴⁴ extended their professional purview beyond the state archives and official records to include collections of manuscript and special repositories, and specifically confront researcher or access questions. In fulfilling their mission, therefore, they were no longer tied to one professional organization, be it NAGARA, SAA, or any other. For practical purposes, in 1989 the coordinators formed themselves into a group called the Council of State Historical Records Coordinators, or COSHRC. The cohesion of all of the coordinators into COSHRC, with cooperation, strategic planning, setting national priorities, and overseeing progress on all of these issues, implies a whole new layer of cultural leadership inserted into state and local affairs.

Not all coordinators seized the opportunities provided to them, and not all governors welcomed this new component of their governance. However, where there was an aggressive coordinator who demonstrated leadership and imagination there has been a discernable rise in the level of archival activity, and in some cases in the fiscal status of archival programs.

Regional and National Impact of the Records Program

The Commission does not conduct its records program only with the coordinators and SHRABs. It might be argued that the most valuable work of the Commission has been conducted outside of the context of the SHRABs, since it is in the arena of regional and national cooperative projects where most of the efforts are expended in addressing, with hopes of solving, the broader problems facing archivists and others who must deal with historical documentation. Even in the early years of the records program the Commission was providing what support it could muster for projects that were of regional or national importance. In 1977 support was given to the New England Document Conservation Center in Massachusetts for the Center's conservation training program and its regional conservation seminars in the New England states; Cornell University Libraries, for a technical and planning conference for representatives of

⁴⁴ "The Commission: A Brief Chronology. 1887-1974." Section "December 22, 1974." National Historical Publications and Records Commission, *Annual Report for 1983* [Washington, D.C.: The Commission, 1984]: 36.

institutions using the SPINDEX II automated program for archival and records projects; NASARA itself for a technical conference on automated state-based programs to produce guides to historical records; and to the Leadership Conference on Women Religious in Kansas, for regional workshops on basic archival techniques for archivists of religious orders.⁴⁵ But it is difficult to ignore the fact that 84 percent of all grants going to in-state projects went through the SHRAB review process.

At the beginning of the records program, Hackman and staff found very little interest, willingness, vision, and perhaps even little ability in the state mechanisms to confront difficult decisions about projects and programs in their states. Much of the work of the Commission staff was devoted to encouraging meaningful proposals, asking hard questions, and recommending rejection of some grants unless they were resubmitted with elements of planning and interinstitutional cooperation. The activities in the states and at the regional and national level as a result of the Commission initiative lends credence to an assessment of the Commission's role by Larry Hackman in 1980, when he wrote "the Commission is first of all a body to provide coordination, planning, evaluation, and recommendations, and is only secondarily a mechanism for the dispersal of funds."⁴⁶ His efforts towards these goals appear in the many articles that he wrote for publication in the professional journals of the time, and later when he was New York State Archivist and discussing the advantages of using the SHRAB, assessment and planning reports, and some NHPRC funding to accomplish major changes in a program.

The Hackman statement merely emphasizes the philosophy that the Commission's efforts to view the documentation landscape in the country and see where it needed some enhancing or trimming was more important than reviewing grant applications. The Commission spends a good part of every meeting looking at what its priorities should be for the near future, based on what the needs of records users—including but not limited to historians—should be. It then announces those priorities and encourages applications for support to undertake some action in the specified areas. With only a minimal funding level to work from, the staff and the Commission members have emphasized support for projects that promise a repeater effect. In other words, instead of funding only processing, descriptive, or preservation projects, there has been an effort from the beginning to support funding that would bring groups together in order to solve universal problems, or to experiment with new methods that could, if successful, be conveyed to the entire client community. It is in these areas that the Commission's combination of historians, archivists, and government administrators results in its best work with the

⁴⁵ NHPRC 1977 *Annual Report* [Washington, D.C.: The Commission, 1978], 10–11.

⁴⁶ Larry J. Hackman, "The Historical Records Program: The States and the Nation (Questions and Answers from the NHPRC)" *American Archivist* 43 (Winter 1980): 19.

broadest, most lasting results. However, the grant review process for individual projects remains a primary task and requires considerable staff work in order to clarify issues, processes, and procedures relating to the applicant's project. The first five years of the records program constituted a period of initiation, trial, error, and adjustment. Indeed, that process continues today, as archival methods change, technology advances, and the needs of archivists remain unmet from other sources.

Overview of Records Program Initiation

By 1980 all of the pieces for the records program—the Commission, staff, coordinators, most state boards, and the basic procedures and regulations—were in place and functioning. Yet, nothing was set, and circumstances dictated changes. Representation on the Commission changed both in member organizations and numbers of appointed members. Programs expanded or shrank based on the needs of the archival community or client groups. Leadership changed as long tenures for Chairman or Executive Director became less common.⁴⁷ Staff numbers rose and fell, but mostly fell, placing considerable strain on the review process and the detailed knowledge of the projects funded. Unfortunately, the one element that seemed almost constant was the budget.

The great federal budget stand-off in the early 1980s between the Reagan White House and the Democratic majority in Congress left many programs in the lurch, and reduced Commission staff by 54 percent. Every year, the uncertainty of a renewal of funding at any level wreaked havoc with the grant planning process. The NHPRC publications program grant recipients suffered most, however, because the editorial projects that were being supported had to depend on continuation money in order to proceed with multi-volume documentary editions. As a result, the editors, more than the archivists under the records program, became adept at raising consciousness in Congress and pressuring that body to continue support in the face of presidential abandonment of the program. The annual budget exercise with Congress was excellent training that was brought into play when the National Archives was engaged in an effort to free itself from GSA in the period 1980–84.

Thus, one of the primary difficulties that the Commission and its programs has faced over the past quarter century is the woefully inadequate funding available to it for grants. While inflation has eaten into the real funds available, the deplorable absence of increased appropriations has led to internal squabbling over the distribution of what is available between the programs. While

⁴⁷ Rhoads was Chairman for eleven years, I was Executive Director for thirteen, including almost three years as Acting Chairman. From 1989 to 1999 there have been three Chairmen and three Executive Directors.

other cultural grant programs of the federal government were receiving growing support—some actually doubling their funds annually during the Nixon administration—the NHPC and then the NHPRC remained mired in a set grant budget that discouraged new initiatives. Perhaps the positive outcome of the funding slump was the innovative devices conceived by the Commission to keep the programs going and encourage searches for outside support, fund-sharing, planning, and increases in operating efficiency. Although such measures are commendable, they are not a substitute for advances that depend on the expenditure of real dollars in order to implement new processes, procedures, and institutional liaisons.

The annual appropriation for the NHPRC is a line item in the budget of the National Archives and Records Administration. However, the NHPRC has a separate budget authorization that is time-specific, since it is a grant program. The budget authorization figure is a message from Congress to the agency that it cannot exceed a stated amount in its budget request. It is up to the agency to make the request to the Office of Management and Budget, which controls the President's total budget request figure. Therefore, an agency must pass through some preliminary approvals before having its request actually submitted to the appropriate Congressional committees. When the National Archives was under the General Services Administration from 1949 to 1985 as the National Archives and Records Service, the NHPRC requests had to go first through the Archivist, then GSA, then OMB. Although the Commission and its Executive Directors often suggested that the Archivist request a higher level of authorization and appropriation, successive Archivists were reluctant to add Commission increases against total budget ceilings, which would have meant less consideration for the needs of the National Archives itself. GSA exhibited a similar attitude, not wanting to go to OMB with a request that might affect considerations of other budget necessities. It seems certain that below the surface the parent agencies looked at the grant funds as something that was to be given away, not something to be used for the enhancement of internal programs or projects. The authorization level for the Commission therefore remained essentially frozen at \$4 million until the advent of National Archives independence from GSA effective in 1985. Authorization was allowed to creep up to \$6 million, even though OMB continued to zero-out the appropriation request annually. In 1987 the Acting Archivist, against the objections of his administrative and fiscal staff, inserted a progressive figure that would reach \$10 million in the authorization request for the NHPRC over three years, and Congress acceded to it. A significant part of the credit for the increased level was due to the efforts of NHPRC client groups who rallied key legislators to the cause.

In retrospect, the period 1975 to 1981—the “Hackman Years”—at the Commission were tumultuous in their own way. The tumult was the end product of growth, innovation, and hope for the future. New ideas were always on the agenda, whether at the Commission meetings or at the gatherings of staff

with archivists at SAA or NASARA/NAGARA. Most of the people involved were archivists who were working to advance the condition of records in this country, while the Commission tried to gather evidence on how to accomplish that goal. The spirit of the times was captured by Commission Member Harry A. Blackmun, Associate Justice of the Supreme Court, when, at the February 20, 1975 meeting where the Angel Report was presented and debated, Justice Blackmun closed the meeting with an encomium directed at his colleagues around the table:

This for me has been a very instructive and informative meeting. I sat on a lot of courts and, if it is any comfort to you, many of the same problems always come up that have surfaced here. I would hope that this group, despite some of the comments, wouldn't shy away from controversy. . . . I would think that some of the comments that were made here this morning about competition among states and between agencies in states are things that you won't shy away from. I am impressed at the way you went at it and the things you accomplished here and the dedication that I see evidenced. . . . I was particularly pleased to see [that] you adopted principles. I think you did that with what Mr. Angel has produced. I am not personally aware of course of the distinctions between some of these two-headed monsters that you have in some of the states. But I can sense the problem you have. I would think that this can be solvable. There is going to be some bloody noses, but that is part of the work of the Commission from here on in.⁴⁸

The future was to bear out Justice Blackmun's insight.

⁴⁸ RG 64. NHPRC. NHPRC Meetings. Meeting of February 20, 1975. *Minutes*. Afternoon session, 1.