

SPECIAL SECTION



Insights from the Outside: The NHPRC Records Program at Twenty-Five

Paul McCarthy

Abstract

The three articles on the National Historical Publications and Records Commission by Frank Burke, Richard Cameron, and Ann Newhall present different views of the history and activities of the NHPRC. Taken together, however, they provide a detailed look at the history of the Commission's records program and the challenges and opportunities it faces in the new millennium. Much has been achieved with relatively little funding in the past twenty-five years, and this is attributable to the talents and energies of the key players during this time. This record of accomplishment should give the archival profession hope that greater things can be achieved in the next quarter century and beyond.

The preceding articles provide three significantly different views of the history of the National Historical Publications and Records Commission and its operational effectiveness. While each author has been intimately involved in the NHPRC's work, the perspectives and approaches taken are widely divergent. This divergence results from the authors' different roles in the NHPRC, the varying periods within which they have been associated with the agency, and the particular focus of their papers. These approaches might be termed that of the historian (Burke), the evaluator (Cameron) and the advocate (Newhall). While not definitive in toto, the essays capture a large part of the history and promise of the NHPRC.

Burke, who served as Executive Director of the NHPRC for thirteen years, offers a detailed view of the NHPRC's history from the founding of the NHPC,

contemporaneously with the National Archives, in 1934 through the early 1980s. The lens Cameron uses to examine the NHPRC is the National Records Program Elements adopted by the Commission in 1988, and he considers how effectively they were used to carry out the Commission's business. The Newhall piece also provides a quick overview of the NHPRC, but most of her essay focuses on the challenges the agency faces in a "New Records Age." As one reflects on each of the articles individually and all three collectively it becomes evident that while the essays answer many questions they also leave many to be answered by future writers.

The Beginnings of the NHPRC Program

Burke's article is replete with extensive detail on the history of the NHPRC from its genesis as the National Historical Publications Commission through a 1974 law authorizing the addition of the records program and re-designating the Commission as the National Historical Publications and Records Commission. As Burke maintains, the legislation provided "the NHPRC and the entire archival community with an opportunity to redefine themselves through the tasks that lay ahead." The 1974 legislation came several years after funding had been achieved to support the publications program. In fact, the earlier legislation broadened the Commission's role to that of one of support of archival activities, although that was not clearly recognized by the Commission's members at the time.

Burke explores at some depth the development of the records program in several key areas. First, the concern among many Commission members that the additional mandate for records would, in some way, work to the detriment of the already marginally funded publications program. Second, the careful political dance between the National Archives, as represented by Archivist of the United States James B. Rhoads, which sought to minimize any impression of a federal power play, and the archival community, which needed the National Archives but was, at times, distrustful of its influence. Third, the development of an effective grant review process for records proposals that needed a far different review apparatus than that which had served the Commission so well for publications proposals. It is this last issue which ultimately had a dramatic impact on the national archival perspective if not the national archival landscape.

Unlike libraries, and organizations involved in the arts and the humanities which had all been instrumental in establishing federal grant programs supporting their efforts, the archival profession was a Johnny-come-lately to the national grant scene. In reviewing the options available, Rhoads quickly recognized that the grant review process would have to balance several values and influences. Burke carefully notes these influences and the critical role played by retired Deputy Archivist Herbert Angel and NHPRC Executive Director E. Berkeley Thompkins in devising both a review process and the concept of

the State Historical Records Advisory Board (SHRAB). In addition to providing a state-based review process, the SHRAB concept provided the basis for a professional and political archival infrastructure to states whose archival and historical communities could leverage NHPRC's mandate and influence (and ultimately its funding) to create a state-based planning and advocacy board. This board could promote statewide planning efforts and secure federal and other funding to support its efforts. The Commission also provided other avenues for regional or national organizations to approach the Commission for funding. However, Burke notes that fully 84 percent of all proposals to the Commission in its first years were state projects that came through the SHRABs.

The implementation of the SHRABs has also provided an otherwise unparalleled platform for archivists in their respective states to influence state archival approaches in a way not thought of earlier. Thus empowered, they could then collectively bring to the attention of a national agency, state priorities and other priorities that bridged state jurisdictions especially in the standards area. The NHPRC's ability to coordinate its national program—grant review, award, and oversight—with that of an archival issue facilitator is underplayed by Burke. The fact that the NHPRC could serve as a bully pulpit for archival issues, in both word and works, is a fact that may not be appreciated by newer members to the profession who take standards and recognized processes “for granted.” It is important to acknowledge that many of these developments came only as the result of a professional struggle in which the NHPRC played a significant role. The varying effectiveness of the SHRABs, as partially noted by Burke, was most probably determined by a complex mix of the local capabilities of archival leaders, the degree to which state governors could be influenced by the NHPRC mandate, the resistance, generally nationwide, to new programmatic demands on the states and the limited funding available to the NHPRC to influence this whole process.

Burke notes the complex administrative arrangement of the Commission, which he terms a tripartite Commission, where the Executive Director is an excepted employee (appointed by and responsible to a board drawn from the institutions they represent), supervising a staff made up of federal employees, and reporting to a Chairman (the Archivist) for operational purposes—a complex arrangement, even for the federal government. He also notes the tremendous contribution of Larry Hackman, William Fraley, Edie Hedlin, and Timothy Walch. Personally, as a firm believer in “people drive program and program drives budget” I appreciate the fact that the NHPRC has had as much influence as it has, despite its limited funding. This surely is a tribute to the professionals driving the process. As Burke so aptly notes Hackman's philosophy: “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 grants.” In this essay one of the necessarily unsung heroes is Burke himself who was certainly a strong contributor to the whole process.

The Concept of a National Records Program and its Relevance for a New Century

As noted earlier, Cameron uses a group of Program Elements adopted in 1988 as his lens to evaluate the NHPRC's participation in, and its efforts to adapt and apply the concept of, a national records program. Drawn from discussions among state coordinators and leavened by discussions with archivists and a large number of related professionals, the Program Elements represent, as Cameron puts it, "a high level of what a national records program should achieve."

To draw the sharpest lesson from Cameron's essay, one might well read the third part, about the continued relevance of a national records program, and his conclusions first. His remarks and conclusions help the reader better understand his comments as he works through each of the Program Elements. The need for a national collaborative effort, agreement on broadest outcomes, an understanding of basic performance measures, and the ability to clearly articulate the value of archives and records are, as Cameron sees it, the basic lessons learned from his detailed review of the Program Elements and the NHPRC's record in attempting to pursue this agenda.

In our decentralized archival environment, one should have a rather sober view of what is possible and what is probable in an agenda-setting device such as the National Records Program. The success one can have on the development and execution of any plan or agenda is directly dependent on the resources one brings to the table. An agenda as complex as the National Records Program must be carried out by a large multitude of professional players at various levels of organization and political jurisdiction requiring continuing collaborative efforts on a variety of projects over time. Any agency or organization that sees itself in a leadership and coordinative role must bring at least three of the following four resources to the table: vision of a desirable future state, experienced expert staff, funding, and a material stake in the operational outcome of the process. Without at least three of these resources, an agency will not have the credibility and leadership to advance its agenda in such a diverse marketplace. Fortunately for the archival profession, as noted by Cameron, the NHPRC was and is able to deploy its resources successfully in many cases.

As Cameron carefully reviews the NHPRC's activities related to each Program Element with comments, where appropriate, on what went well and what not so well, one can begin to ascertain which initiatives were clearly successful. One can also conclude which were less so ("communicating [archival] needs . . . to the general public"), or where the impact of activity, however useful (e.g. "coordination of existing Federal grant and advisory programs . . . wider use of primary historical documents"), is difficult to measure or to relate to NHPRC's efforts.

It should be no great surprise that the elements that encompassed the state assessment projects (Element 1), the ongoing planning process (Element 2),

the development of standards and good practice - education (Element 7), research and exchange of information - especially in electronic records (Element 8), the development of a strong partnership between the NHPRC and the states (the SHRABs and the Council of State Historical Records Coordinators [COSHRC]) (Element 10), and the documentary editions seemed to generate the most positive activities and results. The success of these elements is due to the fact that the NHPRC was able to deploy its resources—vision, staff, and funding—in an adroit and focused manner. The success of the NHPRC's efforts in developing and sustaining strong partnerships within a state framework also set the stage for success in several of the other elements. In an ironic twist, Cameron notes that progress on each of these elements was the result of either the implementation of the NHPRC records program or the activities of the myriad of others in this vast decentralized archival scene rather than efforts to specifically address the elements. In other words, the elements may have been the yardstick or benchmarks measuring progress toward a national records program but not specifically the vehicle that would get the archival world further down the path.

Cameron sees the Program Elements as a critical planning and program development tool that reflects significant points of consensus within the archival and related communities but reminds us not to mistake these elements for NHPRC's focus as clearly articulated in its strategic plan. NHPRC is a critical part of the archival community, with a position of considerable influence with a carefully targeted mission—"electronic technologies, collaboration with states, and documentary editions of the founding era." However, the program of the NHPRC and a National Records Program are not coextensive! Cameron sees focusing on agreement, developing a coherent message, and collective action on a handful of goals as the most effective strategy to move us and the profession toward a meaningful National Records Program.

The NHPRC in the New Records Age

Newhall takes a different tack, that of advocate and marketer, an approach reflecting her position as Executive Director of the Commission. To some degree her paper incorporates the hopes and dreams of the Commission as well as its current status. While she also briefly recaps the early history of the NHPRC, more of her emphasis is placed on the role of the NHPRC in a "New Records Age." NHPRC's current strategic plan, adopted at the beginning of fiscal year 1999, carefully focuses the program and targets staff effort primarily to the three priority initiatives noted above and allocates funding proportionally to those projects in a 60/40 split with other eligible projects.

Obviously, electronic records and electronic technologies — one of the three priority areas — are a monumental challenge to the profession and to the

historical record. In the early 1990s, the most progressive archivists realized that the manner in which archivists responded to this challenge would determine whether the profession would be condemned to be composed of antiquarians comfortable only with traditional formats or if it would continue to consist of archivists conversant with the latest technologies. As noted by both Cameron and Newhall, the NHPRC took a lead role in a partnership with many others, such as the Minnesota Historical Society, to examine the issues and suggest strategies to explore the problem.

NHPRC support has ranged from the initial discussions later incorporated into *Research Issues in Electronic Records* to a partnership to support the San Diego Supercomputer Center's research on preservation and access to software-dependent data objects. Despite the investment in grant funds so far, Newhall raises a number of legitimate questions regarding the skills and changes required to keep archival institutions technologically current, the cost of electronic records research, the need for partners in this enterprise, the educational challenges, and the need to involve other stakeholders. For those of us concerned about the dizzying pace of technological change, NHPRC's commitment to dedicate a substantial part of its grant funds to electronic technology over the next three years is a hopeful sign.

In her section on the SHRAB program, Newhall describes in some depth the mechanics of the process and the types of activities supported by the NHPRC at the state level. The problems at the state level also identified by Burke and Cameron: geographic size, the lack of a critical mass of institutions and archivists, the lack of political support, limited funding, and the lack of leadership skills, continue to plague some states and make participation at the state and federal level problematic for many archivists. Some of these factors, the NHPRC can address directly, others not—the obvious limits in a decentralized archival landscape.

Finally, the NHPRC has deployed grants to support an array of educational programs to support basic, continuing, and post-appointment education, an effort detailed by Newhall. The NHPRC has also made a major effort to continue support of the efforts of individual institutions especially in the areas of planning, preservation, and the collection of materials reflecting the nation's diverse cultural mix.

Concluding Observations

Each of these papers offer a significant but different view of the history and activities of the NHPRC, given their authors' unique viewpoints. The early history is well covered in the first-person account of Frank Burke, with rich details on the personalities and the rationale for organizational structure as it occurred. Cameron provides extensive detail of the progress toward a National

Historical Records Program, element by element noting the contributions of the NHPRC and its allied partners all made apparently independently from the elements themselves. Newhall focuses on the challenges, problems, and opportunities facing the NHPRC as it moves into the new millennium.

However, as substantial as these are, there are still some areas yet to be explored. To borrow from a fable, I sense that we have heard reports from only three of the blind men touching the elephant: we know the length, width, and texture of the elephant. However, metaphorically speaking, yet to be revealed are some of the finer points, such as the tusk, ears, and tail.

It would be interesting to continue the first-person narrative of the NHPRC's history with subsequent Executive Directors. It might also be quite useful to reverse or mirror the technique used by Cameron with the primary focus on the NHPRC's grant program and its current priorities and see how it and the efforts of the grantees involved moved us closer to a National Historical Records Program.¹ One sometimes has to realize that current strategic directions are often the result of intuitive priorities only later expressed as strategic direction.

While we lament the size and funding of the NHPRC, we need to emphasize the opportunity of working with an agency totally dedicated to the archival environment. Drawn largely from the archival scene, the staff brought an understanding of the problems and possible solutions to an agency at a time when archives were challenged to change rapidly. This expertise, coupled with the professional relationships they brought with them, may well have allowed the NHPRC to identify issues and work toward solutions in a far more collaborative atmosphere than might ever have been possible with larger grant agencies. Staff and program officers at the NHPRC may be relatively more accessible than program officers in much larger agencies and may have been able to assist others in establishing, in a collaborative manner, a strategic agenda for the profession which could attract grant funding.

Many challenges remain. The complexity of the issues surrounding electronic records, the effectiveness of the State Historical Records Advisory Boards, and the continued need to promote documentary editions are all identified as the most important priorities for the NHPRC. Funding continues to be a problem because of the size of the profession and our seeming reluctance to employ political means to achieve scholarly ends.

A favorite Quaker theologian of mine, Richard J. Foster, spoke of planning in his *The Celebration of Discipline*: "Our tendency is highly to overestimate what we can accomplish in one year and highly underestimate what we can accomplish in ten years." As we reflect on what the NHPRC and we as a profession have accomplished in the last twenty-five years, we ought to be buoyed as well by a similar hope of what is possible in the next twenty-five and beyond.

¹ For an assessment of NHPRC grants for local government archives and records management programs, see David M. Weinberg, "The Impact of Grantsmaking: An Evaluation of Archival and Records Management Programs at the Local Level," *American Archivist* 62 (Fall 1999): 247-70.—Ed.