

U.S. NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS ADMINISTRATION
Transcript of National Archives History Office Oral History Interview
Subject: Howard Lowell
Interviewer: Jennifer Johnson
Date: May 14, 2020

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Jennifer Johnson: Hi, good afternoon. My name is Jennifer Johnson, and I am conducting an oral history interview for the National Archives and Records Administration today with Howard Lowell. Howard Lowell worked for the Archives from 2000 to 2010, and we're going to get started here with the interview. Howard, can we start with you providing a brief overview of your career at the National Archives?

Howard Lowell: It basically was divided into two different parts. From 2000 to the end of 2007, I was the deputy assistant archivist for the Office of Record Services in Washington, which at that time was responsible for all the archives operations in Washington—the Center for Legislative Records, the National Archives exhibits program, the National Archives preservation program, the records management program in Washington, and the records center at Suitland. And all of those were my direct reports. The second half from late 2007 until I retired at the end of 2010, focused on being NARA's contact person on disaster response and recovery issues as it related to continuity of government at the federal level and also at the state and local levels. I was actually a full-time telecommuter and one of the first in NARA to have that experience.

Jennifer: Going back to even before NARA, I did see you have experience from several different jobs before joining NARA. What led you to the National Archives and how did that work help you?

Howard: Sure. I started actually in archives work at the Maine State Archives in the late 1960s in a program that had just been legislated. And so I was one of the first hires there, and many of our consultants actually worked for the National Archives. And so I, early on in my career, was exposed to people like Frank Evans and Frank Burke and Bert Rhodes.

Jennifer: Wow.

Howard: Later on, I spent about five years doing consultant work, mostly on funding from the NHPRC, including a project that looked at library and archives preservation needs in all the states west of the Mississippi. And from there, I spent about eight years as the state archivist

and records administrator in Oklahoma and another 11 years in the state archives and records administrator in Delaware. And that brings me up to roughly my time of starting it at NARA. I think the relevant experience was being a state archivist. That was kind of the key experience I went to. I'm an archivist that's really never processed the collection. All of my experience has been on the administrative side of government archives programs.

Jennifer: What were your impressions of the agency at the time that you started? You just mentioned some pretty significant names.

Howard: I think I always had a favorable impression of the National Archives. I think it was reinforced once I got there by the really thoughtful quality of the professionals who work there. This was where some of the cutting-edge technology was being discussed. I mean, back as late as the early 1970s in Maine, we were working with Frank Burke on SPINDEX issues, which was an early National Archives initiative in trying to control records using electronic means. And so I always had a pretty positive vision of the National Archives. And after my ten years there, that hasn't changed. The people there are exceptional.

Jennifer: What part of that job did you enjoy? What was the work? I mean, you mentioned being an archivist who didn't process collections. So what part of your days did you like?

Howard: Well, I think overall it was the variety of the job and the challenges that we faced on a number of different levels, some of them positive challenges, some of them having to react to negative situations. I think it was kind of going to work and not really knowing what might happen that day. Certainly there were days when the surprises were not very happy. But that was part of the challenge of the job. I really like the challenge of it and being around really smart people who knew a lot more about, especially, the technology part than I did.

I spent two years of that first seven years also running the National Records Management Program. In effect, I had two jobs for about two and a half years. I learned more about electronic records in that period because that was what we were trying to deal with.

It was also the period of time that the records management program across the country was really separated between people who work for the regions—that was a separate office, the Office of Regional Records at that time—and people who worked in records management with headquarters agencies here in Washington. And that didn't make any sense to me. And so one of the things working with Mike Kurtz and Tom Mills and Lew Bellardo and John Carlin, who was the Archivist at that point, was starting to move towards, what I think is now in place is a team

of record analysts across the country who work as a coordinated unit. That's the one of the accomplishments I'm actually proudest of.

Jennifer: Oh, wow. I think that's how it works today.

Howard: Yeah. You know, it was the same issue which never made any sense to me, and I wasn't able to move on this one. But all of the records centers were under the regional program except the one in Suitland.

Jennifer: I guess I did not even ever think about where Suitland fit in.

Howard: And basically we were one of the records centers in the system, except we that records center reported through a different chain of command. And David Weinberg, who still runs that program, I understand, you know, was very accommodating to that. But it didn't make any sense to me. And Suitland was always one of the problem areas. Maybe I would have been happy to give that to Mr. Weinberg.

Jennifer: Sure. Well, I would think it would not help with continuity and things like that.

Howard: Yeah. There were physical facility issues at Suitland. Early on, we had a serious fire at Suitland, which damaged a lot of records, which we investigated but were not able to substantiate. But there were indications that it was an inside job. A disgruntled employee.

Jennifer: Hmm.

Howard: Right. You mentioned it. One of your questions down here below about the flood in 2006 at Archives I.

Jennifer: Yes.

Howard: Well, about a week after that, we had a water incident at Suitland that damaged 15,000 cubic feet of records.

Jennifer: Oh, my goodness.

Howard: And it seemed like about once every six to eight months there was some kind of water leak. It was an old building then, and it was one of the challenging areas.

Jennifer: I see. Well, speaking of, I just realized I'm tangentially connected to it because some of the records got loaned for an exhibit that is now in storage. Did you have any role in it? I know there were archival records brought from Iraq in 2003. I mean, they were in a flooded basement. Correct me if I'm wrong, but could you speak a little bit to that?

Howard: Yes. We were contacted by the Department of Defense, about what ended up being called the Iraqi-Jewish Archives.

Jennifer: Yes. Okay.

Howard: They were in a flooded basement in Saddam Hussein's headquarters. And we detailed three people to go to Iraq. Actually, two of our conservatives went into Iraq, Mary Lynn Ritzenthaler and Doris Hamburg, to oversee the removal of those records from that basement and the shipping of the records back to the United States for conservation, treatment, and preservation. Luckily I found some volunteers. Probably not one of the things I look forward to doing is sending, you know, people who work for me into a war zone. But that's what they did and that's what we did.

Jennifer: Yeah, it's an amazing story, the records being saved and preserved. Are there any other events that you want to speak about before we move on to your duties in your second role as the Senior Advisor for Disaster Preparedness?

Howard: Well, I think the other role was working with a lot of other people at NARA, but being involved in the development of the Archives Research Catalog, the ARC catalog, being involved in development of ERA [Electronic Records Archives] and really moving NARA into the electronic records age both in how we dealt with our customer agencies and also how we dealt with our internal processes and procedures.

Jennifer: Huge shifts forward. Can you speak at all about your role during the ERA? I mean, what did it look like? Were you part of a huge team or was there only certain staff? Just explain a little bit how it worked.

Howard: NARA put together a staff of mostly senior officials, of which I was one, that spent about a year kind of scoping out what ERA would be, what it needed to do. Working with the contractor to do a concept of operations. It grew to be much more than just the preservation of electronic records. Some would say it had scope creep, a good Washington term, but it's also the way that we started to get a handle on controlling records scheduling as part of the system. If you think about records scheduling, you know, there's in the end, there's two dispositions.

The records are either destroyed or transferred to the National Archives. And so it made some sense to build that kind of functionality into ERA as well. And there were a lot of baby steps to that. There's a system called AAD [Access to Archival Databases], I think it is. And that's if you go in, I think still today, if you went in and looked at the Vietnam casualty records, that's what you would be using. We used it initially working with the State Department on State Department cables, which were structured, but not as a database. And so that was one of the challenges as well. So there's lots of steps along the way until you get to ERA. All that was pretty interesting. And again, having some of the best thinkers in the country working on those issues.

Jennifer: It's amazing. Did ARC kind of coincide or run parallel to that as well then I assume?

Howard: You know, they're in parallel. ARC was more of finding aid and collections control system. ERA was more a preservation system. But they were running in parallel silos, but had intersections at points. As we were the office of the National Archives that ran both the archives part of the program and the records management part of the program, we were involved in a lot of those intersections and trying to see where they were and how they relate to each other.

Jennifer: Okay. Would ERA have debuted before you switched to your different role around 2007?

Howard: Yes, I think early iterations of it.

Jennifer: Okay.

Howard: At that time, they had moved it to the off-site location out in West Virginia. And they moved ERA staff out there. And I'm unclear about the timing of that.

Jennifer: Can you kind of describe in your mind then, especially being part of such huge shifts in how records management was, how did the mission transform with electronic records being added on to it, or it still remains largely the same?

Howard: Mission has always been the same: to determine, you know, what records need to be preserved, for how long, to protect rights and obligations, to hold us accountable as public officials, and to document the history of the United States. Mission in the National Archives really hasn't changed, probably at that level from its inception in 1934. So how we accomplished the mission changed.

Jennifer: Oh, okay.

Howard: You know, back in the Carlin administration there was a brief statement of what the mission was that everybody was supposed to know and it was "access to essential evidence."

Jennifer: Yes, I remember that.

Howard: It's what the National Archives did. I actually like that because people could you know, you could have that tattooed.

Jennifer: I thought it was intuitive. And sometimes it's hard to describe what an archive does.

Howard: Yeah. And it was something everybody could remember, you know, from the guy who's pulling records out there in the records center to the Archivist. You could say that. But there were some people who didn't like that. So hey, I'm glad I didn't get it tattooed anywhere.

Jennifer: Yeah.

Howard: There was another employee down in Houston who had a tattoo of the NARA seal on his arm.

Jennifer: Oh my gosh.

Howard: I hope he's got his whole career in NARA because it would have been really tough to go to work for another agency.

Jennifer: Yes, maybe a little awkward. Is there anything else you want to add about the years you were the deputy? Or I would like to hear from you about really kind of what your relationship looked like with other agencies while you were advising on disaster preparedness.

Howard: Yeah. NARA was always disaster preparedness. I was there during 9/11. Probably one of the worst workdays any of us in the public sector have had. Not to mention the country. As we worried about whether our staff in New York and our staff at the Pentagon were safe. And not knowing what was going to happen potentially in Washington, where we at the National Archives weren't on the A-list of targets, but we were on the B-list of targets. There was a lot of thinking at the National Archives after that about the continuity of our operations, at least. And so as one of the primary offices and the one responsible for all the records from the Declaration of Independence on down, I spent a fair amount of time thinking about issues of disaster response. But it really hit us with Katrina and Rita and I think the other one was Wilma. There

were three hurricanes all at once, which, as you well know, devastated New Orleans and especially the Mississippi coast. All of a sudden, we were getting calls from people in Mississippi and New Orleans about whether we could help. And people were calling. My perception was the people in the impacted area down there, anybody they knew at the National Archives, they picked up the phone and called just to see, could we help? And we had no vehicles to do that.

Jennifer: Just to clarify, is this like other local archives or a records center?

Howard: The Archivist of the United States got a call from somebody who apparently he knew who was the chief coroner in New Orleans.

Jennifer: Oh, my gosh. Yeah.

Howard: Asking if we could help him recover his records. And in fact, the National Archives got a big mission assignment at the end, and we sent our preservation people to New Orleans to help pack out records from the morgue in New Orleans Parish. I have some photographs of what it looked like down there.

Jennifer: Oh, wow. And do you remember any of the staff who were there or who were sent down there?

Howard: Again, it was Mary Lynn Ritzenthaler who was the lead on that. And she was also one of the leads on the most interesting project that I was involved with, which was the conservation of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution.

Jennifer: Oh, yes.

Howard: I like to think I'm one of probably less than a hundred people who have ever seen both the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence up close and personal outside of their cases.

Jennifer: That's incredible.

Howard: They had been in for 50 years and the new encasement was supposed to last for another 50 years. And that was as close to a religious experience as one can have, I think.

Jennifer: I can only imagine. So were you there when NARA started having a conversation that there needed to be some "TLC" given to the Declaration and Constitution and better cases? Or had that been a conversation that had been happening for a while?

Howard: It's been happening, I think, since kind of the mid-1990s. They started to notice that things were starting to bubble in the glass, and so there were some concerns that there was changes being made in the encasements themselves. And so that suggested at some point that the documents needed to be taken out of their 1953 encasements and at least get re-encased. And while they were out of the encasements to have the conservators actually evaluate the documents and do what needed to be done from a preservation point of view and a conservation point of view. And if you haven't talked to Mary Lynn about these things, I think that would be a fascinating oral history. She was one of the few people to touch those documents in the past 50 years.

Jennifer: Yes, I agree. I just made a note to check. We have a master list of people who participated in the interviews, and so I made a note to check that because I think she would be someone, if we have not yet, that we should talk to.

Howard: And the other person who was kind of the early point person besides Mary Lynn was Hilary Kaplan, who is also on Doris Hamburg's preservation staff. We sent a number of the people to New Orleans, both from Washington and also from the Fort Worth Records Management Program.

Jennifer: Oh.

Howard: Since New Orleans was in the Fort Worth region. And we also sent our staff from Atlanta to Mississippi since Mississippi was in the Atlanta region. And so we had NARA staff on the ground including the Archivist of the United States, who was Allen Weinstein by that time. And he really wanted to go and look. And I talked to my colleague down in Mississippi, who was the head of the Mississippi program. Finally, we had to convince the Archivist that we don't want you to come to Mississippi right now. We can't accommodate you. We're in the middle of a disaster response. Please don't come.

Jennifer: Yeah.

Howard: So Allen did defer for about a month, but he did go to Mississippi and he went to New Orleans. Let me tell the story at least a little bit here, because I think it's a relatively important story for the National Archives and it kind of change. My colleague Barbara Voss, who was the

regional director of Denver, came to Washington and spent about two weeks trying to figure out how to respond to all the requests we were getting from people in Mississippi and Louisiana. When we sat down with FEMA, we found out that, in terms of the national response plan, which is the thing that drives FEMA response to any kind of disaster, both historical and governmental records were not in the plan.

Jennifer: No kidding.

Howard: And therefore if it's not in the plan, we don't have to respond to it. And so part of what I did in the last three years at the National Archives was to work with FEMA. But in particular to work with the Department of Interior, which was responsible for that part of the national response plan that dealt with historical sites to incorporate records as a critical asset that would be subject to response and recovery in case of disasters.

Jennifer: Well, so you're saying that it wasn't until Katrina that there was a conversation about including records.

Howard: Yeah.

Jennifer: Wow.

Howard: In the National Infrastructure Protection Program and the National Response Plan, records were not considered. And if people talk about them at all, they talk about vital records, which they thought were births, deaths, and marriages. Because for a lot of people, that's what a vital record is, as opposed to an essential record that you need for the continuity of your operations. And so a lot of it was working within the bureaucracy to try to figure out how we raise the issue of records as an asset that needed to be recovered for the purposes of government continuity following a disaster. And the last time I checked, those are still all in the plans.

Jennifer: Well, we just did a COOP [Continuity of Operations Planning] exercise maybe a week or two ago. Were there COOP exercises before this?

Howard: Yeah, there were COOP exercises. There was an office in FEMA that was concerned with continuity of government, and that was our entrée. And a lot of it was also working with the Council of State Archivists, because the way disaster response is set up in the country, it's primarily the states who are who are initially responsible. And so the Council of State Archivists, which are the state archivists of all the 50 states plus some of the territories. We went together

to FEMA, and they were able to write a grant to meet one of the Archivist's requirements. Allen Weinstein apparently was on Air Force One with President Bush soon after Katrina. And Bush asked him, "well, what's the status of records recovery programs in the states?" And Allen said, "I don't know, but in three months, I'll have a report to you that provides that information." I'm sitting in my office in College Park. And the phone rings, and the Archivist says, "I just told the President in three months I'll have a report to him about the status of records disaster preparedness in each of the states. Make sure it happens." Okay. Lesson number one, never let the Archivist on Air Force One.

Jennifer: Wow.

Howard: So I went to the Council of State Archivists, which had a small staff. And we started talking to FEMA, and the result was that the Council got a small grant from FEMA, in the \$20,000 range, to produce this report, which they did. And they came back and got about a \$3 million grant from FEMA to provide disaster preparedness training for each of each of the 50 states. That's a partnership that the National Archives has really always had with state archives. But that's a very good example of it.

Jennifer: Well, yes, it is.

Howard: So early 2007 I told my boss I was going to retire. As we worked through that, the Archivist came back to me with a counterproposal that if I was to look at the position, would I be interested in working in disaster preparedness, trying to get this into the national plan. And I could work in Maine instead of retiring. That sounded like a pretty good deal. The second part of that assignment was to still try to coordinate coalescing the records management staffs across the country and into one unit. I spent the last three years working basically only on two issues: disaster response and the Integrated Records Management Program. And that was probably the most rewarding part of the whole National Archives 10 years.

Jennifer: Okay.

Howard: There's the old saying, it's not what you know, it's who you know. And I think in this business, that really is true. It's making the relationships. There's a disaster preparedness thing that says you don't want to be exchanging business cards as the fire department comes to put out your fire.

Jennifer: Yes. Yeah.

Howard: And FEMA and a lot of this thing is all about building relationships across the government. So when there is a disaster, you can pick up the phone and call somebody and they have some idea who you are. And I think the National Archives did that fairly well.

Jennifer: That's really great.

Howard: Parts of the National Archives that were fun? I think working with our colleagues up in Ottawa at Library Archives Canada. I enjoyed that immensely. Having a chance early on to look at the script for *National Treasure*, because at that time they wanted to film part of that movie inside the National Archives. So we had to try and figure out where they could film and where they couldn't film. And interestingly enough, once they did all of that and they looked at all the requirements to film in the building itself, they found it cheaper to rebuild the Rotunda of the National Archives on the soundstage in California. And if you look at the movie real carefully, it looks like the National Archives, the Rotunda, but there are some things that are different. You know, the whole premise of the movie: there was something on the back of the Declaration of Independence.

Jennifer: Yeah.

Howard: And there actually is.

Jennifer: Oh, right. Yes, I knew that. But what was it?

Howard: July Fourth. So in a sense it's a file header. So when the document was rolled up, there was an indication about what the document was, July 4th, 1776.

Jennifer: Okay. I see. Well, I will definitely look very closely next time. I had heard about the movie. They did end up doing some street shots, correct? Or do you know.

Howard: They did three shots outside and the opening sequence outside, but they ended up doing nothing inside the National Archives.

Jennifer: Okay.

Howard: But Nicolas Cage did come, and I was not there that day. My boss, Mike Kurtz, took him through the National Archives and said he was really just kind of a down-to-earth guy. And he went into the Rotunda and he spent a couple of hours just signing autographs for anybody who was there, who said, "oh, that's Nicolas Cage!"

Jennifer: Oh, that's so neat.

Howard: Yeah, I thought so too.

Jennifer: I'm sure that becomes quite onerous after a while.

Howard: I would think so. Although I suppose if you're a movie star, if you were someplace that nobody recognized you, that would be even worse.

Jennifer: And I never thought about it like that.

Howard: So that was one of the fun things that happened at the National Archives.

Jennifer: Yeah. There's so much you were a part of and you were involved in, I'm not even barely hitting the tip of the iceberg. I was going to shift focus to your time serving as commissioner for the NHPRC, but I don't want to move on if you still have other things to speak to.

Howard: I actually don't have a lot to recall about that, and I didn't have any notes for that that I could go back and look at. I was on the Commission from the late nineties while I was still a state archivist in Delaware. And obviously had to resign from the Commission when I started working for NARA.

Jennifer: Sure, of course. Got it. I think that's why you were recommended to me to ask about the archivist who did some work in the USVI [U.S. Virgin Islands], maybe because the NHPRC provided a grant for a year for that. But it was a little bit before your time.

Howard: Yeah. And maybe now that you said that, maybe the person to talk with would be Larry Hackman.

Jennifer: Larry Hackman.

Howard: Yup.

Jennifer: Okay.

Howard: Longtime state archivist in New York, longtime director of the Truman Library, out in your neck of the woods. But probably in that time, he was on the staff with Frank Burke at the NHPRC when that grant was done.

Jennifer: Okay. Well, thank you.

Howard: I don't have contact information for him, but I know he's now living in Massachusetts, and I could get that to you if that would be useful.

Jennifer: Yes, that would be. Thank you. Well before. Real quick, did you, did you spend a lot of time while you were at NARA being involved with other professional organizations? Or did it help your role at NARA to have those organizations to look to?

Howard: Yeah. I mean, the work with the Council of State Archivists was critical to reacting both to the Katrina situation itself and then incorporating disaster preparedness into the NARA portfolio. After Katrina, we did two or three disaster response work with the state archives. Especially in the Midwest with the river flooding, which in Missouri, at least on the other side, happens quite frequently. There was some serious flooding probably in 2008, 2009, somewhere around there that we did some work with. We worked a little bit with the Hawaii State Archives and some people on the west coast when there was a typhoon in American Samoa. And actually the last kind of disaster response thing, which has nothing to do with the United States, that I worked on, was trying to support the archives recovery efforts in Haiti after the earthquake.

Jennifer: Okay.

Howard: So. And that was working primarily through what is known as the Blue Shield and the International Council of Archives out of Paris. But overall trying to support the archives in Haiti. The Foundation of the National Archives actually provided some money to them to be able to buy supplies. It's always interesting to work with a foreign government. It made the job at NARA interesting.

Jennifer: Sounds very interesting.

Howard: Absolutely.

Jennifer: Well, and so you have mentioned a couple, but are there any other challenges or issues that you've faced? I can't imagine that for disaster preparedness, that things were easy on many days, but anything that you want to speak to?

Howard: We were responding to all these disasters, like 9/11 and stuff, but all the regular business was still going on. That kind of surprised me going back because these issues are so in your mind about your experience. But the day-to-day stuff continued.

Jennifer: Yeah. We're kind of wrapping up. Is there anything you want to add? Anecdotes? Words of wisdom? Any memories? I mean, like the Nicholas Cage one is kind of along the lines. I was thinking of anything like that that you want to share.

Howard: I'll tell you another kind of fun story, if you like. The Archivist was supposed to go to meet with the National Archivists of the European countries and Canada. And for some reason, Allen couldn't do that. So he said to Mike Kurtz, Mike, you go in my place. And about a week before this happened, Mike came to me and said, I got a problem. I don't have a passport that's current.

Jennifer: Oh, no.

Howard: I looked at him and said, I do. And so my last trip to Paris was to that meeting, and it was a very interesting meeting. One of the social things that we did there was that all the archivists from the European Union countries and the Commonwealth countries went to the ballet at the opera house in Paris.

Jennifer: Wow.

Howard: An amazing experience. One of our staff members on the records management staff had a sister in the State Department who was in Paris at that time. So I also got a tour of the American Embassy in Paris.

Jennifer: Oh, what a trip.

Howard: So for every 15,000 boxes of records that we had to deal with on the not-too-good days, there were always a lot of good days at the National Archives.

Jennifer: Oh, well, that's really nice. If you don't have anything else to add, I think I'll conclude our interview. I do appreciate your time very much. Thank you for speaking with me today.

Howard: It was fun to kind of go back and revisit 10 years.

Jennifer: Good to hear. Let me just stop the recording.

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