

The Adams Papers

Massachusetts Historical Society
1154 Boylston Street, Boston, Massachusetts 02215-3695
Telephone: (617) 536-1608

5/17/10

May 8, 2010

The Honorable David S. Ferriero
Archivist of the United States
National Archives and Records Administration
700 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW, Suite 111
Washington, DC 20408-0001

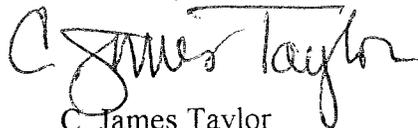
Dear Mr. Ferriero,

The project directors of the six Founders documentary editions appreciated the opportunity to meet with you on April 12. That meeting, in which we had a good exchange of ideas on the state of the editions, underscored for us your commitment to the digitization of the records of the founding generation. You, in turn, recognized our commitment to completing the scholarly editions. We believe that both goals are reasonable and attainable.

A central point on the April 12 agenda concerned the project directors' reaction to the NHPRC-sponsored report, completed by Documents Compass, on the current state of the Founding Fathers Papers documentary editions. You heard our reaction at that time and requested that we prepare a written response to the report. Now, after some weeks of discussion, the project directors have determined what we believe are the most important issues raised by the report. Enclosed with this cover letter, you will find the "Editors' Response to the 'Survey and Analysis of the Six Founders Papers Projects.'"

Again, for the Founding Fathers Papers editors, thank you for the time you have afforded us and the patience with which you heard our comments and concerns.

Sincerely,



C. James Taylor
Editor in Chief, Adams Papers

cc: Kathleen Williams

Editors' Response to the "Survey and Analysis of the Six Founders Papers Projects"

The editors of the six Founding Fathers Papers projects (FFP) raised a number of concerns during their meeting on April 12, 2010, with the Archivist of the United States and the Executive Director of the National Historical Publications and Records Commission about the "Survey and Analysis of the Six Founders Papers Projects," a report commissioned by the NHPRC and prepared by Documents Compass. At the invitation of the Archivist, the FFP editors hereby submit a collective response to that report.

The editors accept the idea of the Early Access presentation of preliminary transcriptions as a means to make these texts available to the public in advance of the published volumes. We strongly recommend a clear statement on each page that these are preliminary transcriptions that are not suitable for quoting and that researchers should consult the original documents before drawing conclusions from these transcriptions. The editors have serious concerns that the authority of the FFP editions may be damaged if the Early Access site and pages are not clearly identified as unverified. The work done by graduate students employed by Documents Compass may improve the transcriptions to a degree and may reduce some of the work needed in the ultimate verification process. However, Documents Compass states clearly that this "improvement" by non-experts will never be a substitute for the close readings currently performed by the projects. The editors agree. To reach the authoritative text for publication, the project staffs will still need to complete the same number of in-office readings. (We note here that the Washington Papers has begun the process of correcting its own transcriptions for Early Access and intends to complete that process.)

The editors are doubtful that Documents Compass can complete the remaining 70,000 documents in three years, as they expect. Their estimate is based on the Pilot Project sample of 5,000 documents. First, this sample, from only two editions, was not representative. The remaining documents will pose far more difficult problems, in terms of handwritings, the nature of the documents, and foreign languages. Second, in some cases, certainly in dealing with projects not located in Charlottesville, cooperation with this initiative will take a significant amount of staff time on the part of the editorial projects, especially if a three-year goal must be met. Third, the issue of access to the projects' files of photocopies has been assumed, but not yet investigated. The projects obtained these copies as a result of permissions agreements with hundreds of institutions and individuals, for exclusive use in the letterpress editions. Those permissions agreements may vary from project to project and will have to be examined. If new permissions are required, the time it will take to obtain them will have to be factored into the project.

The editors, who were afforded the opportunity to comment on a draft of the Report, do not regard the data presented in the summary tables as conveying a complete picture of the accomplishments of the projects. They especially advocate caution when evaluating the figures calculated as "average cost per document," based on current publication schedules. It should be remembered that the editions of these Founders contain many different kinds of documents, of various degrees of difficulty, requiring very different levels of research and annotation. This variation occurs within individual volumes, across the lifetimes of any given Founder, and across

the different projects. The Report notes, in a footnote to the summary table, that there is a wide variety of methods used to deal with documents not published in full; these have all been lumped together to create a single number, whereas, they in fact require vastly different amounts of time. Furthermore, the Report does not address the degree and quality of annotation that the documents receive, whether published in full or not.

In comparing the "average cost per document" against the cost per document that Documents Compass offers, it must be remembered that the projects' figures include all stages, from transcribing the handwritten manuscript through various stages of proofreading, intensive research, annotation, and final publication. While the Report notes the crucial value of this work, it focuses attention on the difference between the projects' "cost per document" and the Pilot Project's "cost per document." These two numbers cannot be meaningfully compared, as they do not represent equivalent products.

The Editors are concerned that the Federally-funded digitization of preliminary transcriptions may undermine or reduce support for the completion of the scholarly editions. The editors all support digitization and recognize that electronic access is not only necessary but desirable. However, a quick solution to commit to the cheapest work should not be alternative to the authoritative work of the FFP editions.

Standardization of markup to meet TEI guidelines is essential to present the most useable digital access. Standardization of the editions' annotation vocabulary (in a name and/or subject authority) or the indexes of the volumes, while desirable from the perspective of Documents Compass and the interoperability of Rotunda's "Founders platform," is not possible without extraordinary changes and investments of staff time at the FFP projects. Also, there is no way to impose standardization on the texts. The Editions that have launched work on consolidating the many single-volume indexes produced over the past fifty years, to aid in searching the online publications, have found this a time-consuming task. The texts are rich with information that is often not spelled out in modern recognizable terms. In fact the people, places and events are frequently referred to in a guarded, indirect, or implied fashion. Once annotated, the name may not appear again until the index is created. If it is a familiar person to the edition, the name may not appear anywhere but the index. Every additional task will add time to the completion of the work.

The pressure to finish the editions as soon as possible has been addressed by the directors of the projects for several years. In the early 2000s the FFP editors invested substantial time to respond to an offer by the Pew Charitable Trusts to assist the funding of an accelerated publication schedule. At the very end of the process Pew decided to withdraw the offer. The Jefferson Papers at Princeton, by working with the Thomas Jefferson Foundation to establish the Jefferson Retirement Series more than a decade ago, doubled production. The report shows the completion year for the final FFP volume to be 2043. All but one of the editions will be complete by 2028. The Adams Papers, with the latest completion year, has offered repeatedly to expedite publication and slice several years from the end date. These plans while commended have never been funded. The Franklin, Madison, and Washington editions have progressed to points at which additional resources will not significantly improve the rates of production. Despite the thought, energy, and staff time invested in providing digital access, the editions have not slipped

in their schedules. The editors believe that the rate of production for the last decade is something to be extolled.

The editors urge the NHPRC to design the Early Access project in a way that will help the editions. "Improving" transcriptions and converting texts into XML files have the potential to greatly aid the projects as they move forward. The editors welcome this, and would like to work with the Early Access team to devise a methodology that will serve the needs of both the Early Access project and their own editorial projects. The Report, however, seems to imply that the editorial projects will need to change their methodology and formatting for the sake of the Early Access project. It also suggests that the projects should adopt one standard Content Management System, also for the sake of Early Access. All these suggested changes would be counterproductive to the projects, most especially to those who are closest to completion.

The NHPRC's contribution to the projects' funding, as revealed in the report, averages less than 20% of the overall costs. The need for oversight and direction implied in the report and stated more overtly in the selection of an Advisory Committee of distinguished scholars to report to the Archivist on the status of the editions is questionable. The editors recognize that this was a decision based on a congressional directive. We believe that the Committee will recognize both the immediate and long-term significance of the work. Indeed, the editors believe that the data in the report confirm the basic health and success of these projects, and they look forward to continuing their long and fruitful cooperation with the NHPRC in bringing these essential scholarly enterprises to a successful conclusion.