

National Archives Oral History Project

Oral History Interview

With

Charlene N. Bickford

January 24, 1985

At

The Office for the First Federal Congress Project

The George Washington University

Washington, D.C.

Interviewed by Rodney A. Ross (National Archives Employee)

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Charlene N. Bickford, Washington, DC
January 24, 1985
Interviewed by Rodney A. Ross

Bickford is editor of the NHPRC–funded First Federal Congress Project, which is sponsored by The George Washington University

In the course of her interview, although not in strictly chronological order, Bickford discussed the following advocacy with which she had been involved: opposition to GSA Administrator Rowland Freeman’s objective of decentralizing National Archives holdings; funding and reauthorization for the National Historical Publications and Records Commission, and National Archives independence from the General Services Administration.

Her interview gave background on and told of the activities of both the Emergency Committee to Preserve the National Archives and the Coalition to Save our Documentary Heritage.

Near the end of the taped interview Bickford discussed personnel and funding questions relating to the First Federal Congress Project.

The interview, approximately 50 minutes in length on one cassette, was conducted in Bickford’s First Federal Congress Project office on the George Washington University campus. The two parties in the taped conversation can be readily heard for the most part.

Conversation with Charlene N. Bickford

Coalition to Save our Documentary Heritage

24 January 1985

At her office for the First Federal Congress Project, Washington, DC

Tape 1, Side A

Bickford's Background

Charlene Bickford was born October 5, 1944, in Watertown, N.Y. and spent her youth in Adams, NY, a small town of about two thousand people. She graduated valedictorian of her class and went to St. Lawrence University for her B.A. in history and government. She spent her junior year in Paris and Rouen, France. In 1966 she came to Washington, DC to begin work on a master's degree at George Washington University. She earned her M.A. in the summer of 1969 in European history and Russian history. She started working at the Archives as a graduate student in 1967 for the Ratification of the Constitution editorial project under Robert Cushman. She stayed there five months before moving to the First Federal Congress Project in December of 1967. She became the director of that project in 1983.

Ross began the interview by observing that Bickford's name was synonymous with political activity on the part of Archivists-Historians in pressing forward with their needs. He asked her how she thought she got that reputation.

Bickford replied that it was probably just because of the fact that she was willing to take on the job. Her first effort was on the part of the Emergency Committee to Preserve the National Archives in 1980. This ad hoc committee, created over the GSA Administrator's plan to disperse records at the Archives to Records Centers across the country. It started out with a small group of Washington based activists. The letterhead had some big-name historians, but the people who were doing the work were a core group of historians in the Washington area. Pete Daniel, who was then a staffer to Senator Robert Morgan of North Carolina, was the one who brought them together because he had heard of the predicament at the Archives through his basketball association with some of the staff at the Archives. He brought this group, which eventually included Ray Smock, Ira Berlin, Richard Baker, Anna Nelson, Page Putnam Miller, Gerry Haines, and others together in his living room in January of 1980. The immediate problem was the dispersal of the records—decentralization—and the concern of the historians about it. The major historical organizations had neither advocacy staff nor the ability to act quickly enough. This committee was a mechanism to get some sort of movement started. Not long after they started meeting, the Archives National Assembly also was organized. It was largely for the same purpose, a mechanism for voicing professional opinion without fear of losing one's job.

Bickford's assignment for the Emergency Committee was to get in touch with the genealogical groups. She worked at this that winter and spring. The move for decentralization was stopped fairly quickly. The group then went on to support Pete Daniel and Senator Morgan's proposed legislation which would have made the National Archives and Records Service an independent agency.

The Genealogical groups Bickford worked with were:

Daughters of the American Revolution
National Genealogical Society
Federation of Genealogical Societies
Historical Genealogical Society of New England.

These groups had relatively large memberships and good networks. Together they were responsible for hundreds of letters to the House Government Operations Committee's Subcommittee on Government Information and Individual Rights. In fact the subcommittee was overwhelmed with letters. Decentralization was the unifying issue on these letters. There wasn't anyone that used the Archives that disagreed with what the Emergency Committee was doing. Bickford was in touch with the leadership of these genealogical organizations frequently, giving them instructions as to what to tell their membership to do.

Role of Ed Gleiman

Congressional staff assistant Ed Gleiman, who was directly responsible to the chairman of the House Gov't Ops. Subcomm. on Gov't Information and Individual Rights, Rep. Glenn English of Oklahoma, came to a meeting of the Emergency Committee. He and others present had a round robin discussion of the problems of the Archives and its image with Gleiman's House subcommittee.

The National Archives had just been through some tough oversight hearings. There had been problems with the fire at the Suitland facility and with poor storage at the Lansburgh building. In fact, a series of problems had been blamed on the Archives. The group told Gleiman that they felt that NARS management was not totally at fault for some of the things that had happened. The Archives management was being blamed for things that GSA was responsible for.

Gleiman didn't think the Archives could manage itself. He honestly told them that they would get an independent National Archives over his dead body. He eventually changed his mind...

... and other influential people on the Hill

Ira Shapiro, who worked for Senator Thomas Eagleton (D-MO), the chair of the Senate Governmental Affairs Committee, came over to talk with the Emergency Committee and mentioned a man named Knox Walkup who worked for Senator Pryor (Dem., Arkansas). In 1980 Pryor was then chairman of the authorizing subcommittee. Walkup was very helpful on the decentralization issue

After the 1980 elections (and then the Coalition) since there was no strong subcommittee leadership, the Emergency Committee dealt with members of the full committee. Senator Mathias had taken the lead in the independence movement even though Senator Stevens was the chairman of the subcommittee. Mathias and his staff person Marion Morris was the key majority people they had been in contact with all of these people.

QUESTION: How did the transition between the Emergency Committee for the Preservation of the National Archives and the coalition to save our documentary heritage come about?

Bickford replied that it was more of a progression than a transition. They were two separate organizations.

The Emergency Committee went out of existence. Its members still worked for independence, but its activity level was at a low point at the end of 1980 and the beginning of 1981.

A new movement sprang up in the middle of February 1981 when it was learned that the Reagan administration was recommending no funding for the grants program of the National Historical

Publications and Records Commission and also that the Reagan administration was not going to recommend reauthorization for that grants program.

At that time, Bickford had just become chairman of the newly-formed Federal Policy Committee of the Association for Documentary Editing. After discussing the situation with certain NHPRC staff members, she and A.K. Johnson, of the National Association of State Archivists and Records Administrators, discussed the problem and decided they were going to try to form a coalition of organizations based on a recommendation of Guy Land worked for David Bowen, a Congressman from Mississippi who was a member of the NHPRC at the time. Land, who had sat in on a few meetings of the NHPRC in place of Bowen, stated that the year would be a tough budget year and NHPRC supporters would have to form a coalition to get any funding.

Historian Gerda Lerner later referred to the coalition as “brilliantly unorthodox” because while most such organizations operated in a very formalized way, the Coalition simply began on an ad hoc basis. Bickford and her allies knew that they had only a few weeks to get any funding into the appropriations bill. Hearings were going to begin the next month. They had no time for formalities.

It was mostly Bickford and A.K. Johnson who manned the phones and called organizations asking if they would join others in a coalition to help with reauthorization of NHPRC. Funding it at a \$3 million level (a 25% cut from the then current fiscal year). After about a week of telephoning, they had a list of about 26 organizations. The membership in the Coalition kept building towards 57 organizations.

All organizations that were asked signed on except for the Society of American Archivists, which didn't join until the coalition was about eight months old.

Bickford told of how the local organizations would form a network of information and communication among one another. In Massachusetts they formed their own group called the Massachusetts Coalition to State our Documentary Heritage. In Tennessee much the same thing happened. The Tennessee State Achieves, editorial projects, and the American Association for State and Local History all banded together and formed their own humanities coalition to work on the NEH and the NHPRC.

It was the smaller organizations—regional archival organizations, NASARA, the Association for Documentary Editing, the Society for History in the Federal Government—who were more active in advocating for the NHPRC than was the American Historical Association in the beginning. The AHA's leadership was wary of actively advocating, and didn't see the NHPRC's programs as having the impact on the history professors as it did on the people in the state archives or who were working in historical societies.

QUESTION: Is the Coalition still an active organization?

Bickford answered that her group was not as active as last year, but they continued to exist. Currently, they were sort of an action group under the National Coordinating Committee for the Promotion of History. They thought it was useful to have a group that continued to function with a focus on the Archives.

QUESTION: Did you play the role of coordinator, similar to that later played by Page Putnam Miller on the Independence question, in getting people to testify?

Bickford replied that regarding the independence question the two of them certainly worked together. Bickford did a lot of the mailing to stir up of the constituency. Bickford worked with the staff on the Hill. Miller spent a lot of the time going from door to door getting co-sponsors for the bill. Bickford was more into planning strategy with the staff.

Back in 1981 Jack Shulimson, from the society for history in the Federal Government had called together a lot of people who were interested in the Archives and asked who was going to deal with the funding problem. The NCC had not yet been expanded to take on the lobbying function. Since the lobbying function of the Coalition was still intact, the Coalition became active in seeking more money for the Archives. This involved a supplemental appropriation for FY 1982. Then there were other problems that needed to be dealt with.

- Rumors of replacement of the Archivist
- Staff switches by GSA without the consent of the Archivist
- GSA abuses that gave evidence for Archives independence

Reference is made here to the Smithsonian study and how it was ignored with no comment forthcoming from Gerald Carmen about what he was going to do with it.

The Coalition began to work more with the NCC as it became more of an advocacy organization. The main thrust was of mailings to the grass-roots organizations to encourage their members to write letters making the same point. At the same time members in Washington talked to the people on the Hill every chance they had.

QUESTION: What was the role of Mike Richman?

Bickford answered that he was now co-chairman with her on the Federal Policy Committee of the association for Documentary Editing. Richman spent a lot of time in getting the mailings of the Coalition to Save Our Documentary Heritage out. In particular he was very, very active in making staff contacts, phone calls, etc.

QUESTION: Were there others Bickford would single out? Would these be the same people Bickford mentioned in her MARAC Publication on advocacy and success?

Bickford talked about Dick Baker, who as Senate historian couldn't really lobby, but who could express his opinions to a Senator. He was helpful in keeping track of things and letting coalition members know what was going on.

Ray Smock was another such person. He was head of the Bicentennial Office in the House. He was on Emergency Committee to preserve the National Archives. His previous position has been as Co-editor of the *Papers of Booker T. Washington*.

John Y. Simon, editor of the Papers of Ulysses S. Grant, constantly encouraged Bickford's efforts and came to Washington several times to meet with Representatives and Senators.

The editors at three presidential papers projects in Tennessee formed the Tennessee Coalition to Save our Documentary Heritage with archival groups in the state and were very effective.

Returning to the earlier effort, Bickford made the observation much of the work of the Emergency Committee was done by documentary editors: Ira Berlin, herself, Maeva Marcus, Nate Reingold, Louis Harlan, and Walter Rundell.

Non-editors on the Emergency Committee included Anna Nelson, Dick Baker, Pete Daniel, and Gerry Haines.

QUESTION: Who were the archives people involved besides Gerry Haines?

Bickford acknowledged that without the cooperation of the people at the Archives, independence would not have been achieved. She lists a few of these involved: Trudy Peterson, Gerry Haines, Mike McReynolds, Lee Johnson, Maygene Daniels, Jill Merrill, Bob Brookhart, and Frank Burke.

As success seemed possible, the top administrators like Claudine Weiher and Bob Warner joined in. Franke Burke was a key player from the day that he suggested the formation of the Coalition to the day that NARA was established in the independence bill.

Bickford noted that a lot of people at the National Archives thought there was a very real risk in getting involved in the independence effort. It was a sign of commitment to the cause of independence that some of them took that risk in providing information as needed for committees on the Hill.

QUESTION: What was the role of Sam Gammon?

Bickford answered that the big thing Sam Gammon did was to finally get the AHA involved in the independence movement. Mark Thompson, the previous executive director, had been

unwilling to be a part of the effort. One of the first things Gammon did on becoming executive director was to meet with Bickford and John Simon, who was both the editor of the Grant papers and president of the Association for Documentary editing. Gammon asked them how he could help the Coalition. Since then he has helped with different contacts around Washington not available to Bickford or her Coalition. Most of all, he gave Page Miller the authority to use the NCC as an advocacy office.

QUESTION: How did John Simon help convert Rep. Bob Michel into an active NHPRC supporter?

Bickford mentioned Howard Westwood, a member of the advisory board of the Ulysses S. Grant association. Westwood, a Washington lawyer and Civil War buff, took a great interest in the NHPRC fight. He also played Golf with House Minority Leader Bob Michel and Rep. Jamie Whitten (Dem—chair House App. Comm.) Bickford noted that this is how the real lobbyists work- on the golf course, at dinner, and at parties.

John Simon put a great amount of effort into winning Bob Michel over to a pro-NHPRC position. He canvassed the Peoria, Illinois area looking for people with an interest in history to write to Michel. Eventually Michel asked for information on NHPRC and its projects.

The coalition supplied him with the information in the form of a speech at the end of which was a plea for reauthorization. This speech stated that funding at the three million dollar level would be a small price to pay to preserve the nation's heritage. Eventually, Michel submitted this speech as testimony at the March 1982 hearings in support of reauthorization.

Bickford added that her group was unable to get Rep. Michel to go on record in support of Archives independence.

QUESTION: Was Bickford involved in lobbying for Archives Independence back in 1980?

Bickford replied that it was originally presumed the bill that had been introduced by Senator Morgan would be reintroduced in 1981. After Sen. Morgan's defeat partisans of independence let the issue drop until things really began to deteriorate at the Archives: the funding crunch, the staff changes dictated by GSA Administrator Gerald Carmen, and the constant meddling by GSA in Archives business.

Independence supporters needed to get all the organizations that had been involved in the Coalition to Save Our Documentary Heritage, as well as the strengthened National Coordinating Committee for the Promotion of History to commit themselves to independence for the National Archives. There were a lot of people who had doubts that the Archives could manage itself. There were some who thought there might be some way to stay under the GSA or some other

agency and still be more independent. The Coalition had to convince the people on the Hill that being under the GSA was no protection for the National Archives.

Bickford concluded that the introduction of Sen. Morgan's bill did not mark the beginning of pro-independence lobby efforts. There had been another effort in the 1960s, code named "Operation Exit."

QUESTION: Anything further to add?

Bickford answered that the Archives independence fight had been an education in regard to the way the legislation process really works as opposed to how it should work.

It has also been a period of coming together for the historical and archival professions, the library profession, and the genealogists. They all had a common goal and it forced people to cooperate.

For her it was a great experience. She got to know people all across the country, and enjoyed both being involved in the fight, and the feeling of actually being able to do something in bringing together this Coalition. The Coalition was successful on several issues beginning with NHPRC funding, or at least keeping it alive three years into the fight for reauthorization. Bickford participated in the independence fight with some allies she had gained over the years. There was a core of people who had been active from the beginning. Many were there in Ray Smock's office to toast with champagne the house passage of the independence bill. This was a group that had shown a tremendous amount of persistence in the face of discouragement.

Here Bickford related an anecdote concerning the 1983 reauthorization bill which involved Ira Shapiro, Marion Morris, Bob Brink Rep. Jack Brooks and the Senate Enrolling Clerk.

Bickford then told a second anecdote about how the NHPRC had almost gone out of business in 1981. The story had to do with Rep. William Dannemeyer's legitimate use of a threatened point of order on the House floor.

QUESTION: Was the First Federal Congress Project affected by the budget cutback?

Bickford stated that the First Federal Congress Project was one of the NHPRC's priority projects, so that project was funded at a higher level than were some other projects. Those less fortunate projects came up with some innovative ways to stay in business. For instance one editor at the Nathaniel Greene papers went on Social Security so that his staff could be paid. Others went on unemployment and continued to work on the project while looking for other jobs. The NEH stepped in and funded some projects.

Bickford's project was funded by George Washington University for a period of four to five months in fiscal '82. GW did this again in '83 and '84 with no guarantee that the project would get NHPRC funds.

Other institutions who were the co-sponsors for these projects helped during this time. The National Trust for Historic Preservation helped out for the Daniel Chester French papers. The Ratification of the Constitution project, and the First Federal Elections Project got notification of funding for fiscal '82 just one day before they were to close their offices in Madison, Wisconsin.

Desperate conditions at that point certainly discouraged some people from going into editing. Interestingly, the last few years have been the most productive in the amount of columns documentary editing has ever had.

QUESTION: How many people were involved in the First Federal Congress Project?

Bickford listed: Three editors—herself and two associates; two Graduate assistants who worked during the school year half time; part time people were hired during the summer.

All did their own typing using work processors and the professional staff handled the editing.

Ross related that various persons including Sara D. Jackson, Ed Gleiman, and Page Putnam Miller had said Bickford was the person who activated grassroots support which resulted in Archives independence. He asked for details of her involvement.

Bickford replied that the first step was to pinpoint the proper people to meet with or contact and to find allies. It was important to contact the right person regarding your issue. Their first action was with the committees and staff people like Ed Gleimen. Ira Shapiro and Marion Morris. There really wasn't a comparable minority staffer on the House side when they started. John Parisi has the job now.

The thing they learned right away was that the staff wanted people who could give them answers and supply them with information on behalf of a united front of organizations. Too many times before when such groups had testified on behalf of the Archives they had not agreed on a position beforehand. Squabbles about Archival matters would come out at the hearings, and it ended with the committee not knowing what these people wanted them to do. Congressional staffers were thrilled that the Coalition to Save Our Documentary Heritage had managed to achieve an agreement among its constituent groups regarding the NHPRC reauthorization and funding. The coalition could cite the organizations that backed them. Letters from these organizations were at the time already being sent to the congressional offices in question.

NASARA had paid for the first mailing that went out to the members of the state historical records boards, NASARA members, and members of the Association for Documentary Editing.

Then the Coalition expanded its mailing list to all organizations and individuals that told them they wanted to be on the mailing list. The list now contains 700 names.

Whitfield Bell from the American Association for state and Local History testified for the coalition at the first hearing for NHPRC reauthorization. Ann Campbell testified for the GAA.

QUESTION: How did the First Federal Congress Project Compare in size with other NHPRC projects?

Bickford stated there were ones that were bigger than hers in terms of staff members. Most of those had money from somewhere else besides NHPRC. During the lobbying days, Ms. Bickford did not seek additional funding because she wanted Congress to be aware that it was their papers that were being endangered. The First Federal Congress papers was begun by the NHPRC in the National Archivist, consequently it is a priority project.

Bickford emphasized the need for Federal funds which could be used to attract private funds.

GENERAL SERVICES ADMINISTRATION
NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS SERVICE

Legal Agreement Pertaining to the Oral History Interview of

Charlene N. Bickford

In accordance with the provisions of Chapter 21 of Title 44, United States Code, and subject to the terms and conditions hereinafter set forth, I,

Charlene N. Bickford of Arlington, Virginia
(name) (city and state)

do hereby give, donate and convey to the United States of America all my rights, title and interest in the tape recording and transcript of a personal interview conducted on January 24, 1985 at 2120 L St., Suite 255, in Washington, D.C. and prepared for deposit in the National Archives. This assignment is subject to the following terms and conditions:

- (1) The tape recording shall be available to all researchers upon its being accessioned by the National Archives.
- (2) The transcript shall be available to those researchers who have access to the tape recording, as soon as the National Archives' processing schedule allows sufficient time for transcript preparation.
- (3) I hereby assign to the United States Government all copyright I may have in the interview transcript and tape.
- (4) Copies of the transcript and the tape recording may be provided by the National Archives to researchers upon request.
- (5) Copies of the transcript and tape recording may be deposited in or loaned to institutions other than the National Archives.

Charlene N. Bickford
Donor

Robert M. Stone
Archivist of the United States

January 24, 1985
Date

February 6, 1985
Date