

U.S. NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS ADMINISTRATION
Transcript of National Archives History Office Oral History interview
Subject: Doris Hamburg
Interviewers: Rebecca Brenner
Date: July 10, 2015

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MS. REBECCA BRENNER: This is Rebecca Brenner and I am interviewing Doris Hamburg at Archives II, in Room 2803 on July 10, 2015. So, Ms. Hamburg, will you please provide a brief overview of your career timeframe at the National Archives?

MS. HAMBURG: I came to the National Archives officially April 1, 2001, to take the position of Director of Preservation Programs. And I've held that position since that time.

MS. BRENNER: Could you provide a brief background of your education or previous positions that led you to NARA?

MS. HAMBURG: Before I came to the National Archives, I was at the Library of Congress. I held a number of positions there. I was the Head of Preventive Conservation. I was the Acting Chief of Conservation over a long time. Previous to that, I had been the Head of Paper Conservation. And I began at the Library of Congress in 1980 as an intern, as part of my graduate program, and finishing my graduate degree. From an intern, I was hired to be a paper conservator, which is what I was for my first few years at the Library.

MS. BRENNER: How did your education influence your decision to start at the Library of Congress and NARA?

MS. HAMBURG: When I was in college at Mount Holyoke, I was a medieval studies major. And as I was figuring out what I would do when I finished my undergraduate studies. I was very interested in going into museum work. And I was trying to figure out what aspect I would be interested in. That had been something I'd learned about earlier and was very fascinated by, and the objects that museums bring to life. I was looking at museum programs, and I actually learned as a senior about the field of conservation of art and historic artifacts.

So, I began to explore that, and there are not many programs in the country that teach conservation. I decided to take some time off before going directly to graduate school, and I worked at the Morgan Library in New York City for several years. And at that point, I was also taking more courses because to go into conservation, you need to have a strong background in chemistry, you need a strong background in art, history, and art history, so I was supplementing my undergraduate work in those areas.

And then I decided to get a Masters in Art History, which I did at Columbia University. And after I completed that, I went to work for a year as an apprentice in conservation to a paper conservator in Philadelphia. The following year, I went to graduate school in conservation at the Ruth Kemp Weidner Conservation Center for Art and Historic Artifacts, which is associated with the University of Delaware. And that brought me to the Library.

MS. BRENNER: Just a comment, these are almost the same schools as Francis Perkins, who was an undergraduate at Mount Holyoke and earned a masters at Columbia.

MS. HAMBURG: Oh, okay. I didn't realize that she had gone to Columbia as well.

MS. BRENNER: When you got to NARA, what were your original impressions of the agency?

MS. HAMBURG: Well, I learned a great deal about archives, that I did not fully know all the aspects. And I was fascinated by the mission and by the importance of the mission that we have as an agency. The contributions that we make for the present and for the future, I think are invaluable. And certainly, from a professional standpoint of preservation, the challenges are also amazingly interesting, especially when one thinks about the quantities that we're working with in terms of the amount of records that NARA has, and the range of problems and needs that we have for ensuring the preservation in the future.

MS. BRENNER: Did you receive any training when you first came here?

MS. HAMBURG: The very first day I came, actually when I signed in, I learned how to work the mobile shelving in the stacks. That I remember very well. But over a little time, there may have been some supervisory manager's training. I am a little fuzzy on that at this point.

MS. BRENNER: What about mentors, did you have any mentors early on?

MS. HAMBURG: I reported at the time to Michael Kurtz, who was the head of Records Services in Washington, DC. He was my manager, and he was mentoring me when I came to NARA.

MS. BRENNER: What aspects of your work do you enjoy most?

MS. HAMBURG: I like very much working with people, and I think that as a manager, it's very satisfying to see staff grow and develop their skills and interests. I find the goals from what we're trying to accomplish from a preservation standpoint extremely fascinating and rewarding as well. We make progress on behalf of NARA's needs. That's also extremely rewarding.

MS. BRENNER: Can you describe a typical day in your unit?

MS. HAMBURG: Well, our unit involves includes a number of different departments. So, I would say that if we talk about the unit as a whole, that involves a range. We have the Preservation Program at St. Louis, which is focused on preserving and making available the records of the National Personnel Records Center, the archive side as well as the records center side. So, that's one component of our program.

We also have the Conservation Department, which is addressing the needs of the records, whether we're talking about paper, photographs, cartographic materials, a full range of original materials. So, the conservators and the conservation technicians are working to make records accessible.

In terms of my daily life here in Preservation Programs, the central office for preservation, I'm involved in meetings, I'm involved in discussions with other people about planning and how we want to go forward, addressing needs, and of course there's always email to do. I do some traveling to other facilities. Our Preservation Programs is a nationwide program, so we are addressing preservation needs across the whole agency. It includes Presidential Libraries, as well as Archives in Washington, DC, and

around the country, and we are also working actively with the records center program to ensure that the records are available for as long as they're needed.

MS. BRENNER: When you think of your career so far, what successes first come to mind?

MS. HAMBURG: I've been involved in a lot of interesting projects over time. One, we've been very pleased to see NARA have standards or directive policy for how we develop archival storage to try to bring consistency across NARA, and help integrate modern current research into what it is that we as an agency are doing. So, we have developed policies along the way, and that helps to bring consistency and bring NARA forward. So, that's one thing, we've really developed our program working with the libraries. One of the things that I was asked to do when I came to NARA was to make Preservation Programs a nationwide program. I think we have accomplished that, and are continuing to accomplish that, and that's a big goal and I think benefit for the agency.

On some more specific project-based elements, we had a big project that involves working with records that were found in a basement in Iraq during the war there in 2003. My colleague, Mary Lynn Ritzenthaler, and I went to Iraq in 2003 to assess those records. We got a call from the Coalition Provisional Authority in Baghdad at the time, and they asked that we come and assess those records.

MS. BRENNER: What exactly were these records?

MS. HAMBURG: They were books and documents from the Iraqi Jewish community in Baghdad, primarily Baghdad. And basically, they had been taken by Saddam Hussein's government, and put into the basement of his intelligence headquarters. And then with the war, there was a lot of water, and the items were in that water. They got very wet and then got very moldy. And the National Archives made the decision that it would provide assistance for this.

MS. BRENNER: So where are they now?

MS. HAMBURG: They're here at the National Archives. The project to preserve and make them available has essentially been completed. We've done all the work to stabilize the records and box them, and a website has been developed which provides worldwide access to these books and documents. And we've had feedback from people all over the world.

The Iraqi Jewish community had been in Iraq for more than 2,500 years, and in the 1950 to 1970s, basically the community completely left because they were forced to leave from Iraq. And most of them left in 1950 and 1951, but there were some who continued to live there. And now, there may be less than a handful of Iraqi Jews there. So, the people who pulled this out of the water, understood or recognized that this was a tangible link to the Jewish community that is no longer there. It had been so active, but is no longer there.

It's an unusual project for NARA because these are not Federal records, but we have been working very actively with the State Department, and the work that we've done has furthered ties with Iraq, and helped in the U.S. Government relationships, as well as made all this information available.

MS. BRENNER: That's fascinating, it sounds almost like a humanitarian service.

MS. HAMBURG: On the cultural side.

MS. BRENNER: Would you say that fits in the mission?

MS. HAMBURG: Well, it's certainly providing service to beyond NARA significantly. So yes.

MS. BRENNER: Wow. A few minutes ago, you mentioned the Presidential Libraries and to step back to that, can you speak to your involvement with them? Any specific anecdotes of conservation?

MS. HAMBURG: Well, we're very involved with the libraries. A member of our staff is the Preservation Program Officer for the Presidential Libraries. And her fulltime job is working with the libraries. We also do conservation work, treatment for the libraries and we do reformatting, and so on. We're involved with helping to plan each new Presidential Library. And also, we help the libraries regarding possible emergencies, by helping develop preservation planning for them, and providing services. Each library is a place unto itself, and they are fascinating to go to and see and learn about the respective President. And the artifacts and the records help bring all that alive.

MS. BRENNER: Does conservation play a role in which documents and which material culture items go to the libraries? Or is that something else?

MS. HAMBURG: No, as a President is in office, that person is receiving gifts, for one thing, and records are being created in the course of his—in this case so far—his role as President. All those materials end up coming to the National Archives. They are being deposited here, they are in physical custody of the Archives during the course of the Presidency. There's also a records office at the White House. And as the Presidency ends, those materials, the records, and the artifacts are transferred to NARA. And NARA takes both physical and legal custody. That's how we end up with them. And the President forms a foundation before he leaves office, and that foundation raises funds to build a Presidential Library.

There are certain requirements for building a Presidential Library. We have a role in developing those requirements from a preservation standpoint, and others contribute from a security standpoint, and other aspects. And there are laws involved with determining the size of the library, and what's involved. Once the library is built, it is transferred to the National Archives.

So, it's really the administration that is involved in developing or putting together everything that is part of that administration. We are involved with helping to determine what's involved to preserve those materials.

MS. BRENNER: Speaking of Presidential administrations, have changes in Presidential administrations or in the Archivist of the United States administrations changed the nature of your work?

MS. HAMBURG: The mandate to preserve has been with the Archives from the very beginning. That's written into law, and that's a responsibility of the Archivist of the United States, and the Archivist has many responsibilities that are then delegated. So, that's one aspect. That doesn't really change over time.

MS. BRENNER: Do you interact a lot with the Archivist?

MS. HAMBURG: Not so often. Occasionally, periodically, I do.

MS. BRENNER: I guess I picture that like a cabinet meeting.

MS. HAMBURG: Right.

MS. BRENNER: The head of each office meeting with the Archivist.

MS. HAMBURG: Right. Right.

MS. BRENNER: What challenges have you experienced in your work?

MS. HAMBURG: Challenges. Funding is always a challenge. There's lots to do and funding has gotten less in the government as a whole, so that continues as a consideration. It's not unique in that regard to preservation. And one of the things that we're always working on is developing, and looking at priorities because we don't expect that every single item is going to be completely perfect, that is not the goal. The goal is to stabilize the condition, to minimize further damage, and to address preservation so that materials can be used and made accessible. A lot of work and a lot of effort are going into digitization across NARA, so that as many people as possible can see the records, which is fabulous.

MS. BRENNER: What changes over time have you experienced here? I'm sure digitization could be an example.

MS. HAMBURG: Well, digitization has certainly grown significantly in its importance. That's a significant change, which is excellent for moving forward. It has a dividend also in that the more that people are able to look at records online, the less they need to handle the originals, so there's a preservation dividend to that. There are aspects to that that may or may not prove themselves out.

MS. BRENNER: Can you speak to those aspects, I haven't heard this before.

MS. HAMBURG: So, it has always been thought that when you digitize something and put it online, that original materials will be no longer accessed. It has been seen in institutions around the country or the world that sometimes in making certain things available online, actually raises questions on the part of the people who are looking at them, and they become interested and want to see the originals, and start to also ask about other things. So, we have, as an agency, sought as much as possible to do a thorough job of digitizing, let's say a whole series of records, and then we can put those records aside. If someone needs to see the originals, and there's a particular reason that the originals provide them with a lot more information, or there's a need to see the originals, we make those available, definitely.

But time will tell as to how that impacts NARA and making the records available online, and how use changes. I think our overall expectation is that use of the originals will go down. But there may be some groups of records that may go up.

The other thing about digitization is that it makes people aware of things they didn't know about before. That is very exciting, and everybody wants to see as much as they can online. Everybody wants that.

MS. BRENNER: How is it decided which documents are online?

MS. HAMBURG: The National Archives has a group at the present time called Digitization Governance Board, and they're involved with looking at the wide range of materials we have, and making decisions about our priorities and what we will do first.

MS. BRENNER: When did that board come into existence?

MS. HAMBURG: The Digitization Governance Board came into play about a year ago. There had been other groups before that.

MS. BRENNER: So how did that work before then?

MS. HAMBURG: Within Records Services, Washington DC, we had the Digitization Management Board, which I headed. And we also had a process for making priorities as to what would be digitized.

There are different drivers for digitization. One example is making decisions, okay, what would be the most popular to put online, so that as many people who might be interested can see. There may be a topical reason for putting something online. As an agency, we put online certain records related to a topic that might come up and be of interest. For example, elections or an anniversary of a particular event, when people would be interested in seeing the records associated with that.

We also do digitization, and have for some time, related to preservation goals. If something is in poor condition or is not accessible, we will decide to reformat it, in many cases that's through digitization. And by doing a copy of it, we're able to make a new copy that can be made accessible through current technology. This comes up particularly in audio and video, where equipment is no longer being made to play such things. Like, how many people have 8-track tape recorders, you know? That's just not used anymore. NARA needs to be able to provide access to that information that was used, or created in the course of doing government business. We actually have a "museum" here at NARA, so to speak, I put it in quotes, that has all this old equipment because the equipment has become obsolete. And we need to be able to have access to equipment like that. And then we'll play it on that equipment, and make a new copy so that people can then get to the information. Sometimes, some of those records have only one play left in them, and we need to make sure we capture that information.

MS. BRENNER: To what extent are you involved in the Electronic Records Archive?

MS. HAMBURG: At this point, NARA has created a department that focuses on digital preservation. It's the primary department, and moves around a little bit for a while. At some point, it was part of Preservation Programs, but it's now its own department within Information Services.

We work hand-in-hand with them, and digital preservation is part of NARA's preservation strategy, which is another great accomplishment within the last year or so. We have a preservation strategy that's taking us from 2015 through 2018. And certainly, the challenges of preserving digital are very prominent in that strategy.

MS. BRENNER: What other technological or other changes have you experienced?

MS. HAMBURG: Well, over the last decades, people were doing microfilming to make copies of things. Now, much of that has transferred to digitization. People are still doing microfilming in a variety of contexts. You may be interested to know that banks, for example, digitize our checks, but then they'll make microfilms out of that because it's cheaper to keep the microfilms.

Cost plays a role in all this. And certainly, the evolution of digital, and our use of digital systems is huge, and completely changes preservation needs, as we think about going forward. It doesn't change our needs for what we have retrospectively. We still want to take care of all those things that we've seen changes in. Science keeps evolving, and so does the field of research, and the field of preservation, so we continue to get more information, and it's like medicine in that regard. You want to stay up with the changes in technology, and want to keep being able to apply it and put the best information out there so we can achieve our goals of preserving.

We're focused, and have been focused over time, on preventive measures, making sure we have the best environment we can so that we can accomplish the most with environment. It's like, with the environment, we can slow deterioration and we can take care of huge stacks that way. We know we can't get to every single item and take care of it, or do hands-on work, so we're always looking for broad measures to accomplish the most we can.

MS. BRENNER: What are some specific challenges in conservation that digitization has solved or improved?

MS. HAMBURG: In digitizing, we don't necessarily handle everything. We're putting it out there, and people can look at the information. From a handling standpoint, it means that records may be handled less. Time will tell and we'll see, we just talked about that.

We also want to make sure that in digitizing we're not doing more damage. In some ways, we have changed, or we're also focusing resources to ensure that the records can be handled in a way that they can be digitized. That's another aspect.

I want to point out that sometimes we use the terms conservation and preservation interchangeably. But we think of preservation as the umbrella term, and that includes conservation, which is stabilizing and taking care of the physical items themselves. So, conservation is a component of preservation. Reformatting and changing from one format to another is another component of preservation. We also include in preservation, storage and environment and stabilizing and preventing damage. And, so those are components to preservation, conservation being one of them that focuses directly on the items and treatment of them and stabilizing them.

MS. BRENNER: Moving to a different topic, what has been your relationship with other Federal agencies, if any?

MS. HAMBURG: Oh, definitely, we're involved with working with other Federal agencies. We work with colleagues around the whole government. Sometimes, we've been involved, let's say with emergency response activities with other agencies. We are involved with comparing notes and research and working collaboratively on research with other agencies. So, we have joint projects with the Library of Congress, for example. And we have conferences. We have held, over the course of 25 years, conferences to talk about preservation and related topics, and they've been attended by colleagues all over the government and all around the world. We're on committees together, professionally, and also government-wide there are some committees that have been working on standards, and so on.

MS. BRENNER: What specifically has NARA collaborated with the Library of Congress on?

MS. HAMBURG: One example is standards. With an agency like NARA, we are ordering, for example, boxes to put the records in, whenever we're reboxing things. And the standards for those boxes, NARA and the Library of Congress have the same need. We've had discussions over time, and collaborating to bring together our standards so that they mesh.

We do joint testing on certain materials. We discuss treatment a lot together. Many staff members have gone from one institution to another one.

MS. BRENNER: [interjecting] Oh, interesting.

MS. HAMBURG: I mentioned earlier, that prior to coming to NARA, I had been at the Library of Congress. There are actually many people who have been at both institutions. Some started at the National Archives and have gone to the Library, and there are even one or two people who've gone from NARA to the Library and back again to NARA.

MS. BRENNER: [interjecting] The language of the National Archives vis-à-vis Library of Congress really reminds me of Mount Holyoke and Smith. It's like they're sisters.

MS. HAMBURG: Yes, there are some similarities. The Archives' mission, though, is different from the Library's mission. And I don't think that's always fully understood. In that regard, we are two separate institutions. The other thing that is a pretty significant difference is that the Library is part of the legislative branch, and the National Archives is part of the executive branch. And when it comes to funding, that actually does play an important role, because the Library of Congress goes directly to Congress. Whereas, the National Archives goes to OMB, and then it becomes part of the President's budget, and that's how our funding requests are put forward, and that's significant.

MS. BRENNER: You mentioned earlier that funding is a challenge. How does that relate to the executive branch? Does the legislative branch fund better? That might be a silly question.

MS. HAMBURG: It's not a silly question at all. The legislature has its priorities as well, and I think in general money is tight. So, it's not about more, but it is different. There are more layers in the executive branch than there are, maybe, for the legislative branch and budget. But the legislature is very conscious about how much it funds itself also.

MS. BRENNER: Overall, how do you view your time at the National Archives?

MS. HAMBURG: It's an exciting place, as I say, I'm really very supportive and excited by the mission of the Archives. The staff is really fabulous, and we're very lucky with the resources we do have. We have a research and testing office, for example, which has been very active in making contributions to the field as well as to NARA. And, for example, over the last couple years, through the work that we've done in Preservation Programs, we've been able to save the agency hundreds of thousands of dollars. That connects to research that has helped to identify options for going forward, and it's also involved with collaborating with other departments. Energy savings is one example. So, we're always trying to look at, okay, how can we do things better, and how can we prioritize, and make things go ahead in a good way.

MS. BRENNER: What would you say is your historic contribution to the preservation field?

MS. HAMBURG: [Laughter]

MS. BRENNER: I slightly reworded the question.

MS. HAMBURG: [Laughter] Okay.

MS. BRENNER: Originally it said, do you feel that you made a significant contribution to the National Archives or the historic preservation field? If so, what is it? So, that works, too.

MS. HAMBURG: I think that I have been a very strong advocate for preventive conservation, and have contributed a lot to furthering that aspect, which I think in the end is probably the way we are going to be most successful in ensuring preserving NARA's holdings and in general the collections that we have.

Because the numbers are so significant, we have to keep making choices, and the more we can do in a broad way. It's an interesting question.

There are a number of independent projects that have been very satisfying. The Iraqi project has contributed to people around the world, and made a big contribution to a community that is in—

MS. BRENNER: [interjecting] Have there been any NARA publications on that, or other publications?

MS. HAMBURG: There are some things in *Prologue*, and there's a website, www.ija.archives.gov, where all the materials are shown online. And we have the information about the project and the program set-up being developed, and the whole exhibit is online. Also, we have made available for the field information about how we've gone about doing the project. So not just the materials and the books and the documents are accessible, but also, we've made completely available how we did what we did, so that can be useful to other groups that might be digitizing, preserving and so on. We tried to make it as transparent as possible.

The funding was from the State Department.

In part through my time at NARA, and starting before, actually, I have worked also with the Dead Sea Scrolls. That also has been a major project. And there have been a number of major projects that I've had the good fortune to work on during my career.

MS. BRENNER: What was the trajectory of your involvement with the Dead Sea Scrolls?

MS. HAMBURG: As the Israel Antiquities Authority was putting together a lab.

MS. BRENNER: What year was that again?

MS. HAMBURG: That's about 1990. It started even before that because the Israel Antiquities Authority was working with the Library of Congress, and the decision was made to hold an exhibit about the Dead Sea Scrolls. I was the conservator in charge of this plan to have the Dead Sea Scrolls and artifacts come from Israel to be exhibited at the Library of Congress. And around the same time, the Israel Antiquities Authority was setting up a lab, and I was involved with a committee from the Getty Conservation Institute to provide guidance to the Israel Antiquities Authority. And then over time, that was done. Since then, I've also been assisting the Antiquities Authority as they developed requirements for their new building, and I recently led a committee to review their preservation practices for the Dead Sea Scrolls.

MS. BRENNER: Wow, so you personally participated in preserving the Dead Sea Scrolls.

MS. HAMBURG: Yes.

MS. BRENNER: That just gives me chills.

MS. HAMBURG: It is very exciting, and pretty amazing to think how old they are.

MS. BRENNER: Along those lines, I'm going to add a question.

MS. HAMBURG: Yeah.

MS. BRENNER: To what extent have you worked with the documents in the Rotunda?

MS. HAMBURG: So, I have been part of the team that has been involved in addressing the Charters of Freedom, as we call them. That work began before I came, and our team in conservation were the conservators who did the treatment, and then we all worked together in developing the planning for how they would be displayed and preserved. I would say, I'm certainly part of that effort, and have responsibility for that effort as the Director of Preservation Programs, but the work on a day-to-day basis is done by the staff in conservation.

MS. BRENNER: Okay, well thank you so much for your time.

MS. HAMBURG: You're welcome.

MS. BRENNER: And is there anything you'd like to add to the interview, such as anecdotes or words of wisdom?

MS. HAMBURG: I think that, words of wisdom, this is a key aspect of NARA, and we are well positioned to be able to accomplish a lot. And I hope that that will go forward for the future. So, at the moment I can't think of an anecdote.

MS. BRENNER: Thank you.

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