

U.S. National Archives and Records Administration  
Transcript of National Archives History Oral History Interview  
Interview with James Zeender  
Interviewer: Rebecca Watford  
November 8, 2017

[START RECORDING]

MS. REBECCA WATFORD: I am Rebecca Watford. I am an intern in the history office at the Washington, DC National Archives. Today is November 8, 2017. I am with James Zeender, who is a registrar with the National Archives in DC, and we are in the B5 Conference Room. So how did you come to work at the National Archives?

MR. ZEENDER: Wow, that's a good question. I was a, I believe, a junior at Catholic University here in Washington, DC and studying Political Science. My mother at the time was working in the library at the University of Maryland at College Park. She saw a posting for a position here at the National Archives. She called me up and said, are you interested in this, and I was, so I followed up on that. Some months later, I was working at the National Archives. That position was in the Office of Presidential Libraries. And so I was there for a while before I moved on.

MS. WATFORD: So did you finish your degree at Catholic University while you were working here?

MR. ZEENDER: I did. I did.

MS. WATFORD: And just stayed here for the rest of your life.

MR. ZEENDER: Well, no, I did have a little interval. I was, like I said, I think I started in '79 and graduated from Catholic University late in 1980. And then, I went to Boston and was in Boston for a year, I'd say a year and a half. And then, I came back to the Archives and back to the Office of Presidential Libraries. Then, sometime in 1983, I was working in Presidential Libraries when my supervisor, Doug Thurman, the late Doug Thurman, very good man, good friend, had talked to Dr. Jim O'Neill, who was the assistant archivist for Presidential Libraries at the time, and was Chairman of the National Archives Committee for the 50th Anniversary of the National Archives. There was a big exhibition planned, and they needed a registrar, or someone to collect the and care for the items to be in that exhibition. Doug mentioned me as a possibility, and I got drafted into working on that exhibit. Kind of opened my eyes to the world of exhibitions and the opportunity to work with a lot of people throughout the agency. And so I was essentially on loan for that year, and then transferred over to exhibitions, permanently, sometime in 1985.

MS. WATFORD: And you've been a registrar since then?

MR. ZEENDER: I've been registrar ever since. I started out probably when I transferred, I was probably a GS-5 or 6, but I remained a registrar all that time, but the position has kind of grown in scope and responsibility since then.

MS. WATFORD: What aspects of the work do you enjoy?

MR. ZEENDER: Well, I think I eluded to just there—it's—of course, there is a direct access to the archive's records and artifacts and artwork, and being able to just be up close to them. With an interest in history and knowing all the stories that are associated with them, that could be very special. But it's also the opportunity to work with other individuals here at the National Archives, in the Presidential Libraries, in the Field Offices. As registrar, the other major responsibility I have is for loans from the National Archives to other museums, and so I'm able to work with other institutions and staff, individuals in other museums. So it's both that access, that up-close access, and the opportunity with a great variety of people.

MS. WATFORD: What's a typical day in your unit?

MR. ZEENDER: For myself, or for the unit?

MS. WATFORD: For you.

MR. ZEENDER: There isn't one. That's another thing that I think makes my job challenging and interesting is yes, there is a fair amount of routine activity having to do with processing archival and museum materials for exhibition or for loan for exhibition, but it's also the things that come out of the blue; questions, the contact for another loan, a new loan to go. Maybe sometimes it's Japan, maybe it's Presidential Library. But it's usually something—there's always something new. And that's why I get up in the morning and come here.

MS. WATFORD: What interesting discoveries have you made through your work?

MR. ZEENDER: Well, that's hard to answer. But I'll tell you, I wouldn't exactly call it a discovery, but the end result, I think, was rewarding. Many years ago, I forget the context, but there was an archivist here by the name Dr. Milton Gustafson, who was our Diplomatic Archives Specialist, and he was in charge of, I guess it was civil textual records reference. And we were out at College Park at Archives II, and for some reason Milt said he wanted to take me into the stacks and show me something, show me a document. So we went into a stack, it was probably Stack 250, and he knew exactly where the records were. We walked down the row and he pulled a volume of State Department records. It was a series with miscellaneous letters, and he opened the volume and it was a letter from President John Adams to his Secretary of State, commenting on a passport application from a French philosopher. And Adams wrote back saying, "We have too many French philosophers as it is." And so I think that was one of the things—my reaction to that came on several different levels; one was just the insight that I got into what it was, what the archives had, what records might reveal, and I'll leave it at that.

Then stepping back and looking, what else was there, not at the moment, but over the years as I stood back, and I saw that this was part of a larger series that covered the State Department from 1789 going forward. And in those, I don't know, probably 20 or so volumes was chock full of original letters written and signed by George Washington, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and James Monroe. I'm sure there are others. But those, as far as I can tell, the Presidential letters tended to peter out and ended up going somewhere else, but they're not in that series so much. But there they were, this incredible series of letters, and they were in a regular stack area. I think it was Pat Anderson, who was an archivist at Archives II at that time, and we talked about moving them into the vault. And that happened sometime within a few months. Today those letters are—they're on microfilm, but they're in the process of being digitized and will be available in our catalog.

MS. WATFORD: What was your degree in? I don't believe you said.

MR. ZEENDER: Political Science.

MS. WATFORD: How do you use your Political Science degree in archival work?

MR. ZEENDER: Well, I mean, I would say the most important thing is having an understanding of the American Political system, the form of the United States Government, and how all that works, and how that is translated in the records themselves.

MS. WATFORD: What were your impressions of the agency when you started working here?

MR. ZEENDER: I'll go back a little bit further.

MS. WATFORD: Okay.

MR. ZEENDER: My father was a Professor of European History, taught at Catholic University. He actually went to Catholic University himself, back in the 1930s. And then, was invited by Catholic University to come teach in 1959. I was born in '58, and he was then teaching at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst. In 1959, he accepted the position at Catholic University and the whole family moved down here. But growing up, first in D.C., and then in the Maryland suburbs, my parents would bring us downtown to see the monuments and the museums. And I don't have a precise memory of the first time I came to the archives, what I have a memory of is driving down Constitution Avenue, probably in the backseat of my parents' car, and looking up at those awesome neo-classical buildings on Constitution Avenue, of course, including the National Archives. I thought to myself then, and I was just a youngster, that it would be really cool to work there someday. So—and I'm sorry, refresh me again what the original question was?

MS. WATFORD: What was your impression of the agency when you began your career?

MR. ZEENDER: When I started? Okay. Well, okay. So as a young child, I thought it was a pretty cool place to begin with. And so when I got the phone call from my mother, I was eager to apply. I knew, obviously, that the Declaration and the Constitution and the Bill of Rights were there, but I didn't have a very deep understanding of what else was there at the National Archives, or what people did at the National Archives. And that's, really, something I've come to, you know, just learn over the years. But I knew that it was impressive looking, basically, and that it would be a good place to work.

MS. WATFORD: What would you say was the most significant turning point in your career?

MR. ZEENDER: The most significant...

MS. WATFORD: Turning points.

MR. ZEENDER: Turning points. Well, I think the first one was that opportunity to work on the 50th anniversary exhibit, which opened in 1984, and opened my eyes to the broader National Archives. And that I had the opportunity to work with curators at the Presidential Libraries that then existed. Of course, there are many fewer than there are today. So I would say that's one, but I would also, at the

same time, it was a turning point. It was a turning point, not so much for me, but for the institution, was the whole independence from General Services Administration, which was all going on at that time, that I was—little Jim Zeender was busy working on exhibits. But the senior managers in the agency were focused on the independence movement, and which finally resulted in the 1984 act. And then, officially, I think we transferred some time in 1985. So those two linked together were very big.

I would say the next major one would be—again, this is not so much me, it's more Presidential Library, I mean, NARA as a whole—It's just the overall growth of Presidential Libraries which, when I started, I think there were maybe five or six at the most, and today we have twice that number. And so that institution has evolved a great deal in all that time.

Another turning point, obviously, was the renovation of the Natural Archives building. I can remember back to 1985, there was something called the Shepley Bulfinch Study, which was an architectural firm that was hired to prepare a proposal on what would be the best use of the National Archives building here on the mall. Basically, they outlined a plan that, 20 years later, we've implemented. That was to maximize the public use of the building, leveraging its location here on the mall. And so that study set things in motion. Just to sketch it out a little bit further, the plan called for gutting six levels of stacks, which would be used for an expanded exhibition space, auditorium, conference rooms, et cetera. So it was going to be necessary to move a lot of records out of the building. So the first thing that had to be done was to have a new building, that process got started in the early 90s, we were building Archives 2 and then by, I think, '93, '94, we were moving records out there. And then along came—this is another track that, kind of, helped expedite the process, at least from my perspective, was that a conservator here noticed some deterioration on the glass of—I forget if it was the Constitution or the Declaration of Independence. And so people took that very seriously, and it eventually—we realized that we're going to have to do a re-encasement of the charters. That merged with the need to renovate the building as a whole. With that, the vision of the original Shepley Bulfinch plan came together and we have the building that we have today. With a beautiful, permanent exhibit space for the public vaults and temporary exhibits gallery, the O'Brien Gallery, and now, also, the Rubenstein Gallery where we have the exhibition record of rights, and the Magna Carta, of course.

MS. WATFORD: Did changes in Presidential administrations or archivists of the United States administrations change the nature of your work?

MR. ZEENDER: No, not really.

MS. WATFORD: Okay.

MR. ZEENDER: I'm sorry, go back. Is it change of Presidents, change of administration?

MS. WATFORD: Uh-huh.

MR. ZEENDER: No, that wasn't an issue.

MS. WATFORD: How would describe the intellectual and institutional value of the records with which you work? You don't have to answer that if you can't.

MR. ZEENDER: Well, that's a hard question. I mean, that's one of the wonderful things that we in exhibitions are able to do, is we're able to explore the great breadth of the National Archives. But at the

same time, we're not—the individuals in the exhibitions office are not experts on any particular area, generally speaking. We're often dependent on the expertise of individual archivists, who work with a limited amount of records, that are limited, but they can still be very voluminous. Like modern military records, we're talking about tens of thousands of boxes and maybe more than that, so we're dependent on those archivists who've worked with those records over a long period of time, and developed an expertise, and we're very, very dependent on them. But, I mean, personally, I'm very interested in the American Revolution and the early Republic, and have, as I mentioned earlier, the early State Department Records piqued my interest even more, and so personally, that's the body of records that I'm most interested in. I would say they are the core of our government and American Democracy. The Journals of the Continental Congress, the Voting Record of the Constitutional Convention. You know, we debate a lot about what the founders intended, well, we can always go back to the record and see what they actually had to say. Sometimes they're contradictory, so history is sometimes messy. But what we have are the records, so we always have to go back to that.

MS. WATFORD: Do you feel you've made a significant contribution to the National Archives? And if so, what do you think that was?

MR. ZEENDER: I don't know. What I'm proud of is that I built the Registrar's position from a technician to a real professional position over the course of my career. I'm also just proud of the National Archives' loan program today, and being able to share records from the archives with museums around the country and around the world. I think that we, here in Washington, we're able to see great works of art, and we see these great records every day and we tend to be a little jaded. But it's when we get an opportunity to get these documents out of Washington and into museums around the country, and you can actually meet the individuals that the museums and also the people that are visiting those museums, and see their reaction, it's quite amazing and awarding.

MS. WATFORD: How do you view your time at the National Archives?

MR. ZEENDER: How do I view my time?

MS. WATFORD: Mm-hm.

MR. ZEENDER: All my time?

MS. WATFORD: Mm-hm.

MR. ZEENDER: I mean, over the last...

MS. WATFORD: Yes.

MR. ZEENDER: I feel like I'm a very lucky person, and I've had one of the best jobs in Washington for all that time. That amazes me every day.

MS. WATFORD: Is there anything you would like to add to the interview? Anecdotes, stories, words of wisdom, et cetera?

MR. ZEENDER: I would say anyone who's—I'll go back to before coming to the archives and being a high school student, and trying to decide what I was going to do. You know, my dad taught European History

and I was interested in history, and my mother was a librarian, so, you know, coming here would've seemed very natural. But I remember that my mother did not think pursuing a career in history would be very valuable. Or maybe that's not the right word, but so when I applied to Catholic University, I didn't apply for the History program, and I didn't apply for a Political Science program. I applied for Computer Science. But I had realized within that first year that that's not really what I wanted to be doing. I had relatively good math skills, but I wasn't passionate about it and I was much more interested in Politics than History. And so I put myself on that track, and then I was just lucky enough to get that phone call, my mother seeing that posting. So what I would say is, when someone tells you that your English Degree is not going to help you, or that you really need to go one way or another way, take that with a grain of salt and give yourself the opportunity to take another path.

MS. WATFORD: Is there anything else?

MR. ZEENDER: That's it.

MS. WATFORD: Okay.

[END RECORDING]



NATIONAL ARCHIVES

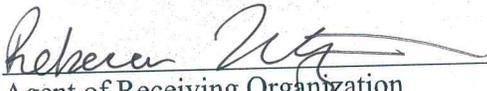
National Archives History Office  
700 Pennsylvania Ave. NW  
Washington DC 20408  
Tel: (202) 357-5243  
Email: [archives.historian@nara.gov](mailto:archives.historian@nara.gov)

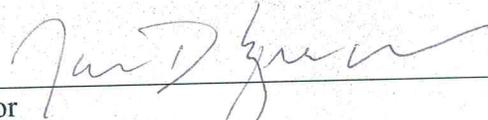
**DEED OF GIFT TO THE PUBLIC DOMAIN**

I, <sup>Jim Zeender</sup> {name of interviewee}, do hereby give to the National Archives History Office the recordings and transcripts of my interviews conducted on {dates}. 11/8/2017

I authorize the National Archives History Office to use the recordings and transcripts in such a manner as may best serve the historical objectives of their oral history program.

In making this gift I voluntarily convey ownership of the recording and transcripts to the public domain.

  
Agent of Receiving Organization

  
Donor

<sup>11/8/17</sup>  
Date