

U.S. NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS ADMINISTRATION  
Transcript of National Archives History Office Oral History Interview  
Subject: Mary Kinahan-Ockay  
Interviewer: Dorothy Dougherty  
May 5, 2025

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**Dorothy Dougherty:** Today is May 5th, 2025, and I am speaking with Mary Kinahan-Ockay, retired archivist for the National Archives Northeast Region, New York office. My name is Dorothy Dougherty, and I used to be based out of the National Archives facility at the U.S. Custom House in New York City. I am assisting agency historian, Jessie Kratz, with this interview. We are documenting the history of the agency by preserving firsthand accounts of events. So, Mary, thank you for joining us today.

**Mary Kinahan-Ockay:** Thank you for having me.

**Dorothy:** And to get us started, can you tell us a little bit about where you are from?

**Mary:** Okay. Born and raised in Bayonne, New Jersey. Still living in Bayonne, at the same address I was born at. So, 73 years at the same address.

**Dorothy:** Wow.

**Mary:** Very uncommon these days, I think. I traveled a little bit and was away for college and grad school, but my permanent address has always been the same. I recall when a background check was being conducted for my secret, top secret, and Department of Energy clearances for NARA. The person working on it commented that it made his job easier!

**Dorothy:** Wonderful. And what were you hoping to do after school?

**Mary:** Well, I was hoping to get my Ph.D., so I started grad school at Trinity College, the University of Dublin in Ireland, and was accepted into the Ph.D. program, but I did not have a work permit to work in Ireland between semesters. So, during the summer that we had the three- or four-month break, I flew back to the United States to work because I could make more money here than I could over there. I was working under the table in Ireland and not making much. I realized at that point that the debt was beginning to mount. Even though it was only like 30 grand way back then, that's probably about 200 grand in today's terms. My brother had a Ph.D. from Harvard and was having trouble finding work teaching literature on the East Coast, so I wondered how difficult it would be for me once I finished my studies.

**Dorothy:** Wow.

**Mary:** And we were both in English heading for education. And I thought to myself, if he's having trouble finding work and here I am in all this debt. . . . He eventually found a position at the University of Chicago, and was very happy. But I decided that I had to pull the plug on my aspirations to teach at the university level. So, I went back to Ireland because I had a round-trip ticket, figuring I was going to pursue my Ph.D., and told everybody it's just not feasible financially right now. I stayed for a couple of months, saying my goodbyes and traveling a bit, then came back here and started looking for work. I had been bartending to make money for school. So that was always something I could fall back on. But I wanted a job, a career. My mother worked in the New Jersey unemployment office here in Bayonne, and requests came through for archives technicians at the newly opened Federal Records Center—New York at the Military Ocean Terminal in Bayonne. Even though my background was in English and this was a history job, my mother suggested that the résumés are similar. The academic backgrounds are related, so why not give it a shot. So I went down for an interview, was hired, and started my career as a GS-5 archives technician.

**Dorothy:** Wow. Wonderful. So what year was that that you started?

**Mary:** 1977.

**Dorothy:** Excellent. And how long were you in that position?

**Mary:** Archives technician. I would have to look at my résumé, but I was promoted along the way as my skills and expertise grew. So I would say as I got to the GS-7 level, I realized that I loved the work and wanted to go further with it. The technician positions, classified at the 1421 level, were slightly different from the 1420 level positions, which would include the archivist title. As an observer, I liked and respected the depth of the research the archivists were immersed in. The experience gained as a technician was valuable, but I was drawn to the challenges of the research more than to the technical side of the operation. So, I talked to the supervisory staff at the Federal Records Center. It turned out that I was short of some American history credits in order to qualify for the archivist title. Most of my background was in European history. I went back to school at night. Gratefully, NARA subsidized some of the coursework. I think I needed 15 American history credits. So, I studied maybe for two semesters—

**Dorothy:** Wow.

**Mary:** —to make up those credits and then applied for an archivist position and got it. The job was in the Archives branch where I had started as that GS-5 technician. As time went on, I became interested in more mobility, maybe another promotion. So, I moved over to the Federal Records Center side.

**Dorothy:** Mary, before we continue, I want to hear more about the Federal Records Center work. But, before we go there, in one of your notes, you mentioned that there were positions starting with the Archives, that there were more coming about because of trends going on at that time in the late 70s. And you mentioned the Alex Haley novel *Roots*.

**Mary:** And that was happening nationwide because the population became so interested in their family backgrounds based on that book. And then the film. Yeah. So, the Archives nationwide was hiring a lot of staff to mainly help with genealogy.

**Dorothy:** Now, when you were at Bayonne in your first position, what was that facility like? Can you describe it for us? The history of the building, access, security, things of that nature.

**Mary:** Well, the structure was only one story, and it had been a military base. So pretty much most of the structures on a military base resemble small airplane hangars or warehouses. So that's how the records center was built out. We had maybe four modules or areas holding units of shelving maybe 10 or 12 feet high, and then the office space. We had a nice front entryway, a nice waiting area, a nice research area. And the records center staff was also in that office space, but set a little bit away from the archives space.

**Dorothy:** Were there many people working there at the time?

**Mary:** Yeah, I don't remember. I was looking for a photograph we have of all of us outside when we gained independence. I know I have it. I just don't know exactly where it is. And I was going to send that off to you. I don't know. It would be a guess, but maybe 100 full-time staff. Pure conjecture!

**Dorothy:** Wow. And who was your supervisor? Do you remember Joel Buckwald? And what were your main responsibilities day to day?

**Mary:** Well, at that point, because I started as a GS-5, I was more or less an administrative assistant. And we were responding to reference requests, as we still do, but by typewriter. So, Joel Buckwald, being the Archives Branch Chief, had a lot of correspondence to be typed up. I was a fairly good typist. I had taken a commercial course in high school in preparation for all those term papers we would have to type up in college! So, I said, "Okay, I'll type." However, you know, we didn't have Wite-Out yet. Yeah. And Joel liked four copies of everything he wrote.

**Dorothy:** Wow.

**Mary:** Even though I think the requirement was two copies, he wanted extras. There was always the white copy and the yellow copy, and he wanted two extras. So, if you made a typing error, you had to go push back the carbon on each of those copies, erase the mistake, and then backtrack with whatever they call the roller on the typewriter to make the correction. So, it drove me crazy because he, Joel, was a perfectionist. And believe me, that kind of incorporated itself into my training, which I was thankful for later on. But at the time it was kind of nerve-racking because I knew he was a perfectionist and it wasn't easy, as I said, to correct mistakes back then on a typewriter.

**Dorothy:** Right? Wow. So, you were part of the Federal Records Center? And how long were you in the Federal Records Center?

**Mary:** I think I was there. Oh, in the Federal Records Center itself? Yeah, until we closed. And was that 1998 or 99?

**Dorothy:** Yes. Okay. And then you mentioned you then came to Varick Street, or where did you go from there? Was Varick Street open at that point?

**Mary:** I did go straight to Varick Street. Many of us were offered jobs, especially in Kansas City, where most of our records were moved after we closed. But I think just about everyone in Bayonne turned those offers down. I remember talking to John Allshouse, a colleague who had moved on to Kansas City. He reached out to maybe encourage me to relocate to the Midwest. And I said, "John, you don't have an ocean there. I'm sorry, I can't do it." And he said something like well, everybody has swimming pools. I said, "It's not the same thing!"

**Dorothy:** No.

**Mary:** So, I stayed. I just turned down whatever was out there. I don't even know if I officially applied for anything in Kansas City. And fortunately, they were able to place me at Varick Street.

**Dorothy:** Great. Now, when you moved to Varick Street, it had already been the Archives, had already moved right from the Archives building then to Varick Street. So that was the second, I guess, location outside of Bayonne. Is that correct in saying that?

**Mary:** I guess so, yeah. Because the Archives branch and the Federal Records Center were one until before we closed, actually. So, yeah, the Archives moved over before we closed.

**Dorothy:** Okay. And so, when you came to Varick, you know, what was that like? I mean, you obviously now had a longer commute, slightly longer. But what was that space like at Varick Street? Can you describe that building?

**Mary:** I enjoyed it. It's just that my role changed because I was no longer in supervision. You know, I was a branch chief when we closed, so that's a whole different way of working for the National Archives. And here I was coming full circle and getting back into reference and research, which I really didn't mind at that point. You know, I thought I'd spend 10 or 15 years there and then retire somewhere in my mid-60s. And it was almost relaxing at that stage of my career to give up the supervisory work and not have to be responsible for all that comes with it, like the oversight, the performance appraisals, the reporting, etc. It was nice to just concentrate on research.

**Dorothy:** Yeah. Well, now, you mentioned NARA gaining their independence. So, for you, you were still in the records center when NARA became independent. Can you tell us a little bit

about, you know, how that all unfolded? You know, what was it like to be a staffer when NARA became independent?

**Mary:** It was interesting to watch the whole process unfold, because it was a little bit of an uphill battle to separate ourselves from GSA [General Services Administration], to form a small federal agency. Our numbers were small compared to other regional agencies. But those we had on staff, in the central office and around the country, whatever input they came up with, clearly a very rich and accurate summary of why we deserved to become an independent agency, they won that uphill battle. It was exciting to watch that process unfold, and of course, it ultimately resulted in our becoming an independent agency of the federal government.

**Dorothy:** That's great.

**Mary:** Yeah. There were some bumps in the road once we achieved independence. We had to rename everything, and we had to pare down those functions no longer connected to GSA, which, as you know, is a huge agency. We had to establish our own unique identity because, while we continued to do the work of the agency, we had to adjust to standing alone, I guess.

**Dorothy:** Yeah. Yeah, that's a great way of putting it. So, while you're at the Archives at Varick Street, what is a typical day there like for you?

**Mary:** Well, I enjoyed working with the whole crew. We were all serious about our work, but we also had a nice, sociable connection. Everyone was always ready to help out, you know? And no one, no one held back on their expertise. If you had questions or needed some advice, everybody shared what they knew with everyone else. And as a result, we all gained and everybody moved forward, so everyone got better at their work. It was a really special environment to be in, especially at the end of my career.

**Dorothy:** That's great. And I have another note from you saying that at one point, you know, central office would chime in and suggest some things for the regions. And you created this genealogy for beginners' workshop.

**Mary:** That was some anniversary, which I can't recall. I was still in the Archives branch. That was prior to 1989. It must have been a GSA anniversary. When did we get our independence?

**Dorothy:** In 1985.

**Mary:** I think we were still part of GSA.

**Dorothy:** Okay.

**Mary:** It was a GSA anniversary.

**Dorothy:** Interesting.

**Mary:** Yeah.

**Dorothy:** Well, that's great. So that was GSA. Did you notice a major shift in terms of interest and input when we moved from GSA to independence? Did you notice headquarters getting more involved once NARA was independent or not? I guess that's my question.

**Mary:** I think GSA was more involved in our everyday activities because we did, you know, we relied on them for human resources. So, all the personnel work and as I mentioned, I think in my summary, I was an EEO [Equal Employment Opportunity] counselor. So, I reported to someone in GSA at 26 Federal Plaza. There were different "arms" that we were involved in with GSA, which was no longer the case when we separated. We moved under one umbrella. And while we continued to do the work we were doing, I guess there were bumps along the road in figuring out the personnel aspects. And what do we do about EEO representation? We can't set up an EEO office ourselves. I don't even remember what we did because I left counseling at that point. Yeah. So, I don't know if in Washington we had an EEO office within the new National Archives.

**Dorothy:** Yeah. They did. Does it still exist there? I'm not sure.

**Mary:** Yeah.

**Dorothy:** So, let's talk about the records. Do you want to tell me about any of your favorite records or records you used mostly with your work?

**Mary:** Well, I think a highlight I recall, again, toward the end of my career, was over at Varick Street working under Director Bob Morris. The bulk of my work at the time was reference research and answering inquiries. This one fellow, I think he was in Michigan, working on his genealogy, was tracking three aunts and wondering if they ever became American citizens. The three sisters emigrated from Ireland into the United States, settling in the New York area. So that was a request that fell on my desk. I did the typical preliminary research. And what was her name? Hannah. Hannah Riordan was one of the three sisters, and I did come across her Declaration of Intention and Petition for Naturalization, which, of course, document departure and arrival information. Well, she departed from Queenstown, Cork, Ireland, on the RMS *Titanic*, April 1912.

**Dorothy:** Whoa!

**Mary:** She was a domestic, so likely a passenger in steerage. Her documents list her as arriving at the Port of New York on the RMS *Carpathia*, which, as you know, was the ship that rescued survivors of the disaster.

**Dorothy:** Wow. That's fascinating.

**Mary:** Right. So I went to Director Morris, and I said, “Bob, this is pretty exciting. This is going to blow this guy’s mind. To learn that your ancestor was a survivor of the *Titanic*. Yeah. Can I pursue it further and take a look into the passenger arrivals?” And he said absolutely. So, we did that. And, of course, the fellow was very appreciative. I talked about her in subsequent workshops. I did some additional research and learned that she married, but had no children. And she’s buried in a well-known cemetery, Gate of Heaven Cemetery in Westchester County.

**Dorothy:** Wow.

**Mary:** Good ole Hannah Riordan. A brave lady. Yeah.

**Dorothy:** That’s amazing.

**Mary:** Yeah.

**Dorothy:** Wow. So, you mentioned a highlight. I love those kinds of stories. Yeah. You mentioned Dr. Morris. Can you name any of the other staffers that you worked closely with in New York? Well, I guess what I’m getting at is, was the Archives branch in Varick Street as big as Bayonne?

**Mary:** It was bigger than Bayonne. Yeah.

**Dorothy:** Okay. And a lot of staff. Do you remember?

**Mary:** Well, we had—. Let’s see. What did we have? One, two, three, four archivists, maybe three archives specialists.

I don’t think we had any technicians on staff. So, we had, like, 7 to 10 people at any given time, I guess. And then when the public programs became popular, that was added to our workload at some point. Those programs were great and heightened our presence in New York City. You know, it took us in another direction.

**Dorothy:** Yeah. And I mean, I used to go to you, Mary, for tons of questions and tons of advice. Yeah. You know, you, John Celardo, Richie Gelbke, Greg Plunges, Carol Savo, Joan Young. I mean, you all gave me information that I used in workshops that I did, but these were records you had researched quite extensively in the past. So yeah, it was great.

**Mary:** Very good crew.

**Dorothy:** It was a very good crew, and everyone was very helpful for everything that needed to be done. Yeah. So, in terms of the records, what were the procedures? I mean, we like to document how the work unfolded. Did Varick Street have certain procedures for pulling records from the stacks? Did the public need an appointment to come in back in the Varick Street days? Right. Can you expand a little bit on that.

**Mary:** I think we allowed for walk-ins, of course, because a lot of people were just using microfilm, so it was almost self-service. But when it came to in-depth research, I think we often had, for example, representatives from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the Coast Guard, Social Security, and other federal agencies conducting research. And members of the general public from various walks of life would come from all over to search specific topics. So those visits had to be arranged ahead of time, because the archivist who was taking on the request would need to do preliminary research. Often visits were initiated through written requests: I'm interested in this. Can you tell me how to go about it? And we would review finding aids, go out into the stacks and see what we could find and get back to the person, and say, this is basically what we've got. From that point on, we would arrange a visit if they were interested in our preliminary findings and in making an appointment to come to New York.

**Dorothy:** The stacks, I recall, at Varick Street were the majority of the space on the top floor. You know, could you explain or describe what those stacks looked like and how they, you know, connected the two areas of the stacks? Could you explain a little bit about that?

**Mary:** Yeah, just rows and rows and rows of shelving on that 12th floor, the top floor. And, you know, it was like we could make a U-turn across the front of the building to get to the other side where the remainder of our records were. And I guess there were maybe a dozen or so security doors that had combination locks to get into. But, yeah, a vast space. I think the only other occupant up there on the 12th floor was the cafeteria. Right?

**Dorothy:** That's correct. Yeah. Fascinating. Well, in terms of your move from Bayonne in the Archives at Bayonne to the Records Center, then to Varick Street, how do you think the New York Archives changed over time? And how involved were you in helping craft any of those changes?

**Mary:** Well, let's see. I guess in Bayonne, a lot of the work, because of the time period, was related to genealogy. So, it was almost one-faceted. Once in a while, we'd get an obscure request for U.S. Navy records, for example, which, you know, we all jumped on because it was taking us out of the routine of referring to genealogical records, such as census and citizenship—not that you get in a rut because every one is a separate individual request. But it became very routine. It was work, and it was valued. But once we got to New York and became better known, more people got interested in looking at our inventory and what our holdings were and then from there, we would get requests from other federal agencies, authors, and other professionals in certain fields. They would come in and take a look and word of mouth would spread, or they would take it to another level, and would continue their research. And so, I think relocating to Manhattan was a good idea because we got more professionally oriented researchers, not just someone wanting to look up a census record. I'm not undervaluing that type of research—after all, it was the starting point of my career in archives. But I think we opened up our holdings in a much brighter, multifaceted light once we moved to Manhattan.



**Dorothy:** Yeah, that seems to speak to what I've seen statistically that New York, and Varick Street and then at the Custom House, had some of the highest, if not the highest, research requests from the public versus any other region. So.

**Mary:** And some of it very in-depth. Yeah, intricate research required.

**Dorothy:** Yeah. So, in terms of the Archivists, how many Archivists did you serve under? Archivists of the United States, I'm speaking about.

**Mary:** I was trying to figure that out. I meant to look up the chronology. I don't know. My guess is, maybe half a dozen or just below it.

**Dorothy:** Yeah. As a regional person, did you notice any changes in the region from one Archivist of the United States to the next, or were the regions more or less more independent?

**Mary:** Well, no, we did. We wanted to know a lot about who was serving as Archivist of the United States. But, you know, that's a political appointment.

So, sometimes people are placed in those positions, maybe not necessarily based on their background and expertise. And because they're political appointments, connected to the President or to the administration in some way, some of the Archivists were rather disappointing because we felt they didn't really know what the National Archives was about. Yes, they took the job seriously and learned as they went along, but sometimes it just fell flat by the time they left; they didn't have enough time to really make a positive difference. So, I think sometimes we felt under the leadership that depending on who the person was, maybe we were stagnating a bit. It didn't stop the work from continuing, or from us doing outreach and making ourselves known. We just went about our business. But some Archivists were more disappointing than others, lacking in vision.

**Dorothy:** Yeah. Thinking again about the move from Bayonne to New York, were you involved or were the staff involved at any point in that move and the discussions about it, or was that something that was happening in and around your, you know, your office and it's just something that happened?

**Mary:** Well, I think that at that point I was serving as the Appraisal and Disposition Branch Chief. So, I was on the other side of the house, but those of us from middle management and up would have meetings about it. Questions like, okay, how are we going to get this stuff over there, how long will it take, and so on. So they did ask for our input. In the end, it was arranged through central office, or I guess we were under Boston at the time, so through Boston and Washington. We had to coordinate the move with whatever contractors we were using. And make sure any security concerns were addressed, such as going through the Holland Tunnel or however this stuff got there. Right. We would have regular meetings about logistics.

**Dorothy:** Okay. And when you got there again, I'm looking at some of my notes. You mentioned that you at one point went part-time. Could you expand a little bit more about that from going full-time to part-time? And that time in the agency?

**Mary:** Yeah, that was when my first son was born, 1987, and I was in middle management at the time. I was the A&D Branch Chief when I came back to work. I took a lot of leave without pay because I wanted to be home a little bit longer with my son, and we had to use all our sick leave. I think we didn't have, like, other types of leave at that time. So, I just took leave without pay, which of course was a little bit of a struggle, but I never regretted it. And I think my son was maybe five months old when I got back to work, and I did my best to continue working as the A&D branch chief full-time, and just realized I was failing at both ends, home and work. I was tired. It was hard to handle everything. So I pitched to my supervisor at the time. Well, no, I guess I was not the branch chief. No, I was under John Celardo, so I wasn't the branch chief yet.

**Dorothy:** Okay.

**Mary:** So, I pitched it to John Celardo, who was the branch chief at the time, and he was like, okay, let me go talk to Ray Whitelock, the Director. And I have always been sincerely grateful that they both supported my request to just take one day off a week, work four days. And Ray was happy, too, because he said, "All right. What day would you like to take off?? I said, well, Wednesday. And he said that was a good choice because, you know, if you pick Monday or Friday, "I just feel like you're extending your weekends." And I said, "Well, I feel like I could work Monday, Tuesday, then take a day off and come back Thursday, Friday and keep things flowing." And it worked out really well. When my son started in school, I was able to volunteer in his classroom on Wednesdays. So, it was a nice balance of life for me. And I really appreciate those two men pitching on my behalf to central office, because I really think I was among the few or maybe the only one at the time able to work alternatively and achieve a better balance of life. I don't think we had alternative work schedules implemented yet.

**Dorothy:** That's really amazing, Mary. Yeah. And you're right. You have a compressed work schedule so you can do longer days. Take every Friday or every other Friday as leave. But you really are working those other hours, right? You know, those hours on another day. And then there were, of course, telework options later in the agency. But that's wonderful they let you do that. And I'm sure your son appreciated it greatly to be home with you.

**Mary:** Yeah, it was good. And I continued that schedule for the rest of my career.

**Dorothy:** Yeah, that's wonderful. Yeah. When the New York office at Varick Street was talking about moving to the Custom House, were you still there when those discussions were having, you know, starting?

**Mary:** Yes, I was still there.

**Dorothy:** And what were your thoughts on Varick, you know, moving from Varick to Custom House?

**Mary:** Well, I think we were getting squeezed out of the space little by little anyway. It was a GSA building, right? It's a federal building. And so, I guess the handwriting was on the wall that we needed to relocate somewhere else. But as beautiful as the Custom House is and the fact that it's a national landmark, was it really suitable for an archives operation? And the answer, I guess, is no. And as a result, just about all of our records went somewhere else.

**Dorothy:** Yeah, we had how many? So, how many records were at Varick Street? Do you have—?

**Mary:** Oh, gosh. No, I don't know, but we had enough to continue providing original documents to our visitors. We had the naturalizations, right? So, we could just go into our stacks and do the research we needed to do and spend however long it took, and come back with a firm, accurate, and full answer for the person interested. And yeah, having to transfer the bulk of our holdings changed that. And I saw that change coming and felt it was not the best decision. Not to mention how the South Ferry neighborhood floods.

**Dorothy:** Yeah.

**Mary:** Well, even though we were high up, you know, the building could be impacted by deterioration, which could affect us on the high floor.

**Dorothy:** Yeah. Well, I will say I think the numbers of records at Varick Street, I want to say that the range was about 150,000 cubic feet of records. And you're right, the majority of those records went off-site when Varick, you know, we moved from Varick Street to the Custom House. Yeah. Because the building just couldn't house it all, but mostly because the cost of rent space was so high. And you're right, there was a trade-off for the Archives in a sense. You know, you had less access, direct access to some of the records. But you had better access for other things like programs, education, exhibits and more computer research at the Custom House. And the building was more accessible from Varick Street. But there was certainly something lost in the translation or the transition because. . .

**Mary:** More and more records were becoming digitized as well. Right. But, that's a gradual process, right?

**Dorothy:** Right. Like everything. Yeah. Yeah. So, did you visit the Custom House before you left? Remind me—your last date was March 2007. 2007. So, I think the Custom House was a discussion, but I think Federal Hall in 2007 was another discussion. Possible sites in Brooklyn and maybe some other sites in Manhattan. I think at one point, they were looking down at the World Trade Center area in one of the buildings there.

**Mary:** I don't remember any of those. I remember Federal Hall and the Custom House. I don't remember Brooklyn, and I don't remember elsewhere in Lower Manhattan. That's interesting.

**Dorothy:** Yeah. Was it? Well, what's the space right next to the building?

**Mary:** Oh, American Express?

**Dorothy:** I don't know. I'll have to look it up, but yeah, there was discussion about multiple spots in Lower Manhattan. And it's funny you say that about flooding, because with Hurricane Sandy, when the office opened at the Custom House in 2013, Hurricane Sandy hit right after the opening.

**Mary:** Wow.

**Dorothy:** But the building was secure. The building was safe. The problem was the surrounding area and the subways were flooded.

**Mary:** Yeah.

**Dorothy:** And there was a massive cleanup in Lower Manhattan as a result.

**Mary:** Right.

**Dorothy:** So that brings me to another question, Mary, about the closure of the New York office. So, the Custom House was the last space for the New York office. They were there from 2013 until February of this year, 2025. And now all those records are off-site. So, I just wonder if you had any thoughts on what the closure of the New York office has for the customers of Lower Manhattan?

**Mary:** Well, as you know, we had quite a loyal following . . .

**Dorothy:** Yes.

**Mary:** . . . of serious researchers and genealogists and professional authors. And while we didn't have a crowd every single day, it was still a place that people valued to come to and to do the research, to ask the questions of the experts on staff, to look for guidance and utilize our resources. And that's gone. Just wiped out. Gone. So where would you go from there? Do you have to travel far? Where did all the records from the Custom House go? Kansas City?

**Dorothy:** Half went to Pennsylvania, and the others went to Kansas City. Yeah.

**Mary:** So, if a person wants to look at original records, that needs to be set up, and, yeah, pay the expense of getting there and possibly a hotel room for a night or two.

**Dorothy:** Yeah. Yeah. Do you think NARA should still have a presence in New York?

**Mary:** Absolutely.

**Dorothy:** And what would you recommend NARA should have done differently if they could keep it open.

**Mary:** What was the reason for closing? Was it financial?

**Dorothy:** It was financial. Yeah.

**Mary:** And the plausibility of finding low rent in Manhattan is not there.

**Dorothy:** Not there.

**Mary:** So, would you have a small storefront, or could we petition to have space in a New York Public Library facility, for instance, like a small operation there? Even if everything is remote, at least there would be contact with NARA staff to guide you through it all.

**Dorothy:** All great ideas, Mary. Yeah, all great ideas.

**Mary:** New York is critical. It always has been. It was one of the first outside Washington, and it's on the East Coast. It's the New York City region, a huge market.

**Dorothy:** Yeah. Well, that brings us to near the end of our interview. I wanted to ask you, Mary. You worked through March of 2007, right? And so how many years of federal service did you have? How many years of NARA?

**Mary:** Yeah. I was 25 when I started and retired at 55.

**Dorothy:** Wow.

**Mary:** I planned to stay on a little bit longer, but circumstances changed. So, yeah, I left and started to work in academia.

**Dorothy:** And what did you do in academia? And are you still doing work there?

**Mary:** Became the archivist for Saint Peter's University. Well, actually, I was the archivist part-time while working for the National Archives and Records Administration. Our regional Director, Diane LeBlanc, gave me permission to take on this second job.

**Dorothy:** Wonderful.

**Mary:** And I worked there on weekends and on my Wednesday off. So, I was a part-time university archivist at Saint Peter's University in Jersey City. The budget was constrained, and they felt that they didn't need a full-time archivist. Once I left NARA, I petitioned to become full-time. They allowed that. Then COVID hit, straining the budget further, and cuts had to be made. The archivist position reverted to part-time. I continued in that capacity for a little while and then just decided to retire in December 2022, three years ago come December.

**Dorothy:** Wow.

**Mary:** I was also working as the archivist at Xavier High School, another Jesuit institution. That's only one day a week. I started there in 2013, and I'm still doing that job, but I plan on retiring at the end of this year.

**Dorothy:** Wow. Wow. That's amazing. That's amazing.

**Mary:** Truly, I've been in archives, like, 50 years.

**Dorothy:** That's amazing, Mary. And probably one of the first women, if you go back, to really be in that career field all those years.

**Mary:** Yeah, we had the glass ceiling, all right.

**Dorothy:** Wow. So is there a memory of your time at the New York City Archives that you are most fond of? I know you mentioned the *Titanic* relation, that record.

**Mary:** Yeah.

**Dorothy:** Anything else that sticks out to you?

**Mary:** Well, as I said, I enjoyed the camaraderie. We also had a really strong staff of volunteers, as you will recall.

I always enjoyed whenever we would have a gathering like let's do a luncheon for whatever, maybe Christmas or holidays. And we would include the volunteers, of course, and we'd all sit around and enjoy lunch together and swap stories and just get away from work for a little bit. I enjoyed that, getting to know all those interesting people. Yeah, it's very satisfying for me. And I was fortunate to end my career on that type of a note.

**Dorothy:** Yeah. That's wonderful. Is there anything in particular you wish people knew about the New York City office that we haven't already discussed?

**Mary:** I guess I wish more people with writing ideas or research projects in mind were familiar with our operation, and would seek us out: "I'm writing a novel in this time period. What have you got? What have you got about the local federal world at that point in time that might

enhance my work?" So, I think maybe we could have advertised better to get more professional writers and researchers in. Yeah. But we had our fair share. We certainly did.

**Dorothy:** Yeah. Well, what accomplishments are you most proud of? Are there any in particular that we haven't touched upon?

**Mary:** Well, I did enjoy the fact that John Celardo and I were chosen to present at a national conference in St. Louis, Missouri, and the Archivist of the United States at the time, and I can't remember who it was, was front row and center.

**Dorothy:** Wow.

**Mary:** And I was a nervous wreck presenting. I know it was prior to 1993, because I called my brother, who was a university professor, and I said, "I'm so worried about my voice. You know, I'm afraid I'm just going to be nervous and nothing's going to come out." And he said, "Well, drink citrusy things like lemonade or orange juice because that oils up your vocal cords." And I said, "Okay." I also said, "I don't know what to do with my hands. I'm on a stage. What do I do with my hands? I feel like I need a dress with pockets." And he said, "So go buy a dress with pockets!"

**Dorothy:** And that's all the rage today. Everyone loves their dress with pockets.

**Mary:** Yeah. And so I did that. I was still a nervous wreck. And a colleague, another A&D branch chief from San Francisco, Jim McSweeney, who moved on to Atlanta, Georgia, to become director there, helped me out with a kind gesture. We were friendly. That was another aspect of working at NARA in those days. A&D branch chiefs from around the country all became friendly. Service branch chief as well, and so on. There was a lot of camaraderie working for the National Archives. But anyway, I expressed my nervousness to Jim, and he came by the morning before John and I were presenting, and he gave me a penny, and I said, "What's this for?" And he said, "Well, my brother's a pilot, a commercial airline pilot. My mother and I and my siblings, whenever he went on a flight, we'd hand him this lucky penny, and it goes around the family." So, he said, "I'm going to lend it to you for today."

**Dorothy:** Nice.

**Mary:** So, I put it in my pocket, you know, my dress with pockets! And I held on to it. And John and I did very well. Of course, John has a great sense of humor, so he's always opening with jokes. But we were, I think, there were three two-person teams who presented at that conference.

**Dorothy:** Wow.

**Mary:** We were one of them. So that was nerve-racking and thrilling at the same time. And then when Jim McSweeney became Director of the Atlanta Federal Records Center, I remember sending a congratulations card and putting a new penny in it and saying, here's a penny for luck.

**Dorothy:** So nice. Oh, that's really nice.

**Mary:** Little stories like that. There are personal moments and there are professional moments and there are team moments. And that was the National Archives all rolled into one.

**Dorothy:** That's very true.

**Mary:** My experience, and I'm sure you've experienced the same.

**Dorothy:** Oh, yes. Yes. And I mean, starting in New York with what I think was the ultimate New York team. You. John.

**Mary:** Oh. That's nice.

**Dorothy:** You know, seriously, you really helped me start my career in New York off on the right foot because—.

**Mary:** Well, you were such a pleasure to work with as well and so creative and can handle problems on the spot, and put up beautiful exhibits, workshops, and training sessions. And so it was a pleasure working with you as well, Dorothy. Yeah, and we always fit a little Irish laugh in there somewhere.

**Dorothy:** That's right. That's so true, Mary. Yeah. So true. Well, can you describe your last day at the New York office and what that was like? Did we do anything? Did we have a little party? Did we do anything special?

**Mary:** Well, I didn't want any of that. I'm just, you know, I'm a low-key kind of a person. Yeah, but Diane LeBlanc, our Regional Director, was kind of insistent. So, she told our Director at the time, Nancy Shader, to do something by way of a send-off. So we went to lunch at an Italian restaurant I like on, what street was it where Bob Dylan lived? Oh, Bleecker. But not Bleecker, a side street off Bleecker.

**Dorothy:** It's not MacDougall?

**Mary:** Oh, MacDougall, I think.

**Dorothy:** Oh, okay. Macdougall.

**Mary:** What is it? Il Mulino or something like that.



**Dorothy:** That sounds familiar. I can't remember. Yeah, that was—.

**Mary:** Ah, you know, Italian restaurant with a lot of homemade food.

**Dorothy:** So, yeah.

**Mary:** There were, I think, 10 or 12 of us for lunch.

**Dorothy:** Yeah, right. That was a very nice day, Mary.

**Mary:** Yeah. It was. I enjoyed everyone's company. It was a nice way to wrap it up.

**Dorothy:** Very much. Well, before we end the interview, are there any final thoughts, words of wisdom, any anecdotes, anything you want to share?

**Mary:** No, I'm just, I'm sad that the New York presence is gone.

**Dorothy:** Yeah.

**Mary:** And there probably is no getting it back, at least in the climate we're in right now and probably for the next several years. Yeah. Sometimes in government, when things get cut, they don't grow back until a real need asserts itself, just like they hired all those people when the *Roots* novel and movie came out. They needed more staff to accommodate the volume of requests. So, they rose to the occasion. But I don't see that happening in this day of technology and people relying on things like Wikipedia, which are not the permanent original record. Right. You know, a lot of hearsay and misinformation is floating around and working with, as you know, original documents and seeing them for yourself firsthand and sharing them is a unique experience. And the valid interpretation is there because you're looking right at it. And I think we've lost a lot of that, especially with New York now being closed.

**Dorothy:** You're 100 percent right. I mean, nothing beats looking at that original record, right? The feeling you get from that. But, Mary, it's been a pleasure.

**Mary:** And same here.

**Dorothy:** Yeah. Thank you so much for your interview. I'm going to stop the recording, if you can hold on for a moment.

**Mary:** Okay.

[END RECORDING]