

U.S. NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS ADMINISTRATION  
Transcript of National Archives History Office Oral History Interview  
Subject: Sara Lyons Davis  
Interviewer: Dorothy Dougherty  
May 1, 2025

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**Dorothy Dougherty:** Today is Thursday, May 1st, 2025. And I'm speaking with Sara Lyons Davis, education specialist at the National Archives, in the National Archives Education Division, but a former staff member at the National Archives at New York City. 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. And I'm assisting agency historian Jessie Kratz with this interview. We are documenting the history of the agency by preserving firsthand accounts of events. So, Sara, let's start with, how about you tell us a little bit about where you're from.

**Sara Lyons Davis:** Okay. Well, I came to the agency in November of 2009. I have an educational background in history, specifically focusing on 19th-century history and museums, kind of a public history strain through it. I'm originally from the New York area, so I was really excited to have an opportunity to stay and work in cultural history in New York City at the National Archives.

**Dorothy:** That's wonderful. What work did you do before you came to NARA?

**Sara:** So, I graduated from graduate school at NYU [New York University] in 2007. So, there was about a year and a half or so, I guess two years from then to when I began at NARA. And during that time, as is kind of typical, I think, or typical of the early 2000s of beginning archival careers, I worked in several different contract positions. So, I worked as an architectural historian doing research for a New York City firm for a while, doing historical research about the landmarks around New York City. I worked at the History Channel as their digital archivist for about a year and a half in a contract there. And then I did a few archival projects around. But then transitioned from the History Channel to the National Archives.

**Dorothy:** Wonderful. Do you feel those previous work experiences prepared you for working at the National Archives?

**Sara:** They did because it was looking at things from the point of view of the researcher. So, at the architectural history firm, I was the researcher, and I was working in different archives. You know, and thinking about what I'm looking for, what I need to find, how things are cataloged and tagged and most accessible. And at the History Channel, I was the archivist who was receiving those requests from producers. So, they would send in, you know, keywords or what the documentary or the program was about. And then I'd have to connect them with the footage and the material. So, looking at it from both sides, when I came to NARA, it was fresh in my mind, that researcher's experience.

**Dorothy:** All right. Okay. So that's great. So when you started working at the Archives in 2009, how did you get the job? Like how did you hear about it? What led you to the Archives?

**Sara:** So I was looking for a more full-term position at the History Channel which was, I think, 18 months at the time. So I was nearing the end of that and was just looking for next steps and what might be available and looking for archival or museum jobs in New York City. So I saw it on USAJOBS.gov and applied and was fortunate enough to be called for an interview.

**Dorothy:** That's wonderful. What was your first position at the Archives?

**Sara:** I was an archives technician. I was in that role for, I think, a little under a year or so. You know, so my educational background is in archives. It's partly in archives from NYU, but I kind of fell into it. It wasn't something that I saw myself working in as a kind of traditional archivist, if you will. And I went to Smith College for undergrad and had done a semester at the Smithsonian, and I was matched with the archives at the Museum of American History. So, I worked on a historic photograph collection there, the Scurlock Studio Records, and I really enjoyed it. And it opened up that as a possibility for me. But I kind of knew that I just, I didn't really find the joy in cataloging that. I feel like some people who go into archives and who work as archivists are really, they really love it and are really fulfilled by it. And that wasn't my experience. Like I definitely saw the need for it. And there is a satisfaction, I think, with properly cataloging a collection, but it wasn't something I wanted to make my career with. I definitely enjoy the interaction with the public and kind of that public history engagement component. So, I thought when I was offered the job as an archives technician, I kind of thought, well, I'll try it out. I'll see what happens. My parents were also encouraging me to take it—kind of stable government job, give it a year, see what happens. But, you know, 15 years later, I kind of never thought it would be the beginning of what would end up being my career. But I'm glad that it was. And it worked in really great and fortuitous ways, but it wasn't necessarily like a love match as an archives tech.

**Dorothy:** Right, right. Well, when you started as an archives tech, what location in New York was that?

**Sara:** I was at Varick Street, 201 Varick. Yeah. So. And that work? That was a combination of fulfilling research requests. Usually, I guess maybe more straightforward, but largely immigration requests. So, naturalizations, dual citizenship requests, and then manning the research desk and working on the front desk.

**Dorothy:** Do you have any first impressions of the agency at Varick Street?

**Sara:** Well, I had done some research at Varick Street in graduate school. So, I had been somewhat familiar with it. There was always a pretty strong connection between the New York office of the National Archives and NYU and the archives and public history programs there, just through various alums who work at NARA or often would have staff members come in and

speak to the grad students at NYU. So, I'd been somewhat familiar with it. But it was definitely interesting seeing it from the other side. I know when I was at the History Channel, the catalog at the National Archives is not what it is now. It was not what it is now. It was much more unwieldy and challenging to navigate. So, we had always erred towards the Library of Congress and other federal repositories just because of the timeline that was needed. With that work being so fast, and when producers are reaching out, it's needed immediately. And often that couldn't be fulfilled by NARA at that time. So, then it was, it was really interesting to end up working there and see that other side of just the volume of requests and how, of course, you couldn't possibly answer every request within 24 hours.

**Dorothy:** Right, right.

**Sara:** Yeah. So that was interesting. The Varick Street building is just a very kind of nondescript, high security [building]. Not [that] it wasn't unwelcoming to the public, but it wasn't. It doesn't look like an open cultural space because the security matches the level of other offices in the building. At that time, I believe there was an immigration, like the first stop in a detention center or immigration court. Yes, both.

**Dorothy:** Both of those.

**Sara:** Yeah. So it wasn't—it's not a building that you'd be walking past and think, oh, I should go in and look up my family history or, or see what they have.

**Dorothy:** That's 100 percent right. Right. I don't even—I mean, we had a little sign by the entranceway, but even 201 Varick, the address was on Varick Street, but the entrance was on Houston, you know? Well, yeah, you had the two different entrances, but the public had to go in on the other entrance. It's very interesting. Do you remember at the time how many people you worked with and, like, what everyone else was doing at that time?

**Sara:** Yes. So I also say there was a fantastic view out of the Special Projects room at that time. I think we called it the Processing Room. But really just a magnificent view of Manhattan and the skyline. So, I was working with, I think, one other archives tech, Angela Tudico, at the time. Then we had, I guess, it was shortly thereafter when I started another, and someone from the archivist development program at the time, Elizabeth Pope, was there. So, she was almost like a junior archivist then. I think we had—would it have been three archivists: Bonnie Sauer, Trina Yeckley, and Patrick Connolly?

**Dorothy:** That's right.

**Sara:** And then, oh, I guess Joan. I don't remember her last name. Joan—

**Dorothy:** Joan Young.

**Sara:** Joan Young, thank you. And Carol Savo, I think were archives specialists working in those roles as well as Chris Cushman. When I started, Nancy Shader was the director.

**Dorothy:** She was your supervisor at the time?

**Sara:** She was my supervisor. So, she is who interviewed me along with Trina Yeckley. And then yourself and Chris Zarr were in education and public programs at the time. And I think that was the staff when I first started. I know that kind of shifted a little bit. Kevin Reilley was one of our volunteers, and he's now become a longtime NARA employee as well. But I don't think—I think he was in graduate school at the time. So, he was not on staff then.

**Dorothy:** Greg Plunges.

**Sara:** Oh, and Greg Plunges. Yes.

**Dorothy:** As an archivist.

**Sara:** Thank you. Yeah. Couldn't forget Greg. We're still in contact. He was always a wonderful support for the work that we were doing. And always, always happy to share his knowledge. He had incredibly deep knowledge of our records and particularly of the courts.

**Dorothy:** That's very true. Yeah. So, Sara, on a typical day, what was your typical day like? In terms of visitors, in terms of your work?

**Sara:** So, the typical day at Varick Street was usually split between half of the day on reference and/or conducting reference and research requests, and half of the day serving on the front desk. So, answering the phone, serving records to researchers, making copies. And a lot of the research as an archives technician that I did was immigration-focused so that it would be looking up—individuals would send in information of the person that they were looking for—usually petitions for naturalizations or declarations of intention connecting that with the person. Occasionally, Chinese Exclusion Act Case Files, which were always really interesting, because they would have to be screened before being copied or served to the researcher. Those were the main types of documents that I was working with at that time. I think [that] is pretty typical of that kind of tech-level job duty at the National Archives.

**Dorothy:** And your position, you said, you were an archives tech for about a year and a half. How did that transition into another position and what was that?

**Sara:** So, it was a little under a year, I believe. And there was—so education was expanding, and there was an opportunity for an education technician spot. And it really, it felt like something that really kind of matched my interests and my skills in a way that I wasn't sure that the archives tech job had, just in terms of engaging with the public, sharing the documents kind of as in an outreach function and working with different groups. And I think what was most

exciting about that to me was that there would be an exhibit component. Eventually, we started talking about moving to the Custom House.

**Dorothy:** Right.

**Sara:** Sorry.

**Dorothy:** No, I was going to say so were you detailed for a little bit like half and half or was it a, you know, I'm trying to remember how it happened. I think I got you for like 50 percent of your time initially, and then you came in full-force, which was phenomenal because we really needed you in education.

**Sara:** I don't remember if it was a detail, but I think because, you know, so much of the staffing story of the New York office is that there was not enough ever.

**Dorothy:** Right.

**Sara:** Just the volume of requests received just grew and grew, right? And through, you know, sequestration in the earlier years and then how kind of views of federal funding and staffing evolved over later years of my tenure when people left, the positions were not replaced, or if two people left, one would be replaced, perhaps. So, through that, there was a real deficit in the number of staff that were on-site and the requests that were being received. So, I don't know if it was a formal detail, but I was asked, I believe, to stay in research services for a little bit just to help with some of that volume, to help the desk.

**Dorothy:** And then I pulled you back into my side 100 percent, because you were the third member of the Public Programs, Education, Exhibit, and Outreach team. That was part of, you know, my world. And we were growing those programs on every front. And we needed more than one or two people to do it, because, as you said, there was so much to be done. And, you know, we certainly had a presence in New York, and we certainly had public interest in it. So, yeah. So, you came into my world and the Public Programs, Education, Exhibit, Outreach side, and tell me what that position, how that started, and what your daily work was within that position as we got ready to move to a new location.

**Sara:** So, the daily work really varied on the day and the time of the year. Some of it was supporting programs. Some were presenting programs largely at that time, genealogy ones. I would say preparing for the move in identifying materials that we would really highlight in the new spaces. At that time, we were doing—it was monthly programs at Federal Hall at the National Park Service site there. So, I would bring facsimiles downtown and sit in their rotunda area and promote the National Archives, write and share stories about those documents and the facsimiles, and recommend that people come and use our resources. Right.

**Dorothy:** And you eventually—I know I was doing Ellis Island programs on a monthly basis at that point, but I think eventually you took that role over. It went from me to Chris Zarr, then to you. And so that was another.

**Sara:** Yes. And then I took over the Ellis Island program. So that was generally from April through September. We would go to Ellis Island usually once a month. Occasionally, if the schedule allowed, we would go twice. It started with something called the Family History Game Show, where the rangers at Ellis were always huge fans of the National Archives and strong supporters of the work that we were doing. So, I think if we had been able to be there every day, they would have been thrilled. But just in terms of our duties on-site, it really could only be one or two days a month at that time. But they were able to give us a room that had, like, an AV system. And we ran this Family History Game Show looking at family history that related to individuals who had immigrated through Ellis Island. It was really popular. People really enjoyed it. And we did that for, I don't know, when we transitioned over. It was probably . . . I don't know, like—

**Dorothy:** I want to say in the early years of the Custom House, right?

**Sara:** What I was going to say, like 2013, 14, maybe 14.

**Dorothy:** Yeah, maybe 2014, 15. We just couldn't maintain it anymore, because once we got to the Custom House, yeah, there was too much on-site work.

**Sara:** So yeah. So, for that, we then went to once a month during those high visitation months at Ellis. And we would be in the rotunda of Ellis Island and have kind of a dock, what we would call a document discovery table, where we would have facsimiles and speak with visitors who came in. Interestingly, during kind of the height of the *Hamilton* musical craze in New York State, 75 percent of those conversations were about people asking us what documents we had related to the musical.

**Dorothy:** Well, sorry. Sorry, Sara. Continue.

**Sara:** No, I was going to say so. It's just it was always fun thinking, like how kind of culture seeps into history. You know, before that, no one had ever really asked about, you know, these secondary figures in Alexander Hamilton's story. And then, that would start. So yeah. So, we got a lot of questions about that and immigration.

**Dorothy:** And you remind me of the Family History Game Show. I think that actually shut down a little bit because of Hurricane Sandy.

**Sara:** I think you're right.

**Dorothy:** And we tried to bring it back, but we were moving and then we moved and then Lower Manhattan was closed for a while, and we, I think we tried to bring it back, but then it was, like you said, more productive to do the documentary discovery sessions.

**Sara:** Well, I think there was a technology issue after Hurricane Sandy at Ellis Island as well, because there were almost—[what] looked like TV remotes that people would engage with. But it was in a classroom that was kind of set off from the rotunda. So, when a ranger then suggested and said, hey, like our visitors love when you're here, we get lots of questions. Would you be willing to be in the Great Hall? We jumped at the chance because it had much more visibility. We were able to reach larger numbers.

**Dorothy:** That's right, that's right. Good. Good memory. So, we're talking about Ellis Island, Lower Manhattan, you know, Varick Street. But, you know, the last how many years were we at the U.S. Custom House? So, tell me a little bit about your work there and maybe how your position transitioned once we got to the Custom House.

**Sara:** So, once we got to the Custom House, kind of around that time, an opportunity came up for an education specialist position that would allow for kind of a higher level of work, so in terms of not just supporting programs, but then creating programs and developing them. So, I transitioned into that role. When we were preparing to go to the Custom House, there was a lot of conversation about what the exhibit program would be like there. So, we had not really had one at Varick. We had had a case or two that would have kind of highlighted or featured documents. But nothing like the scale of what we would be able to do at the Custom House. So, I would say the last few months of our time at Varick was also spent working with Lisa Royse, who was based in DC. I think she was an exhibit project manager at the time?

**Dorothy:** She was a project manager, and then she eventually became the head of exhibits.

**Sara:** Yeah, that was when we were already at the Custom House.

**Dorothy:** Yeah. But at the time, she started in New York as, like, a consultant. Project manager. Yeah.

**Sara:** And so she would work with you and Chris and I in developing what came to be *The World's Port* exhibit.

**Dorothy:** That's right.

**Sara:** Which was going to be a freestanding exhibit in the rotunda of the Custom House. And it was really our first foray into anything of the type for the New York office. So we identified the theme, looking at the Port of New York because it was the largest port in the world, really through much of American history, and particularly in the era of the Custom House of that early 20th century, late 19th century. And so we curated the exhibit. We worked with an outside

designer and fabricator to have it created and helped with the installation. It was a real kind of soup to nuts endeavor.

**Dorothy:** And how long was that exhibit up? Remind me. Was that just—that was just a few months for the opening.

**Sara:** So it was up—I think it got extended, if I'm remembering correctly, but I think ultimately it was up to like three or four months around the opening.

**Dorothy:** Yeah.

**Sara:** That's right. I don't remember the exact dates.

**Dorothy:** Yeah. And we got special permission to do that. Right, Sara. So the building worked with us because there was going to be a big opening celebration, and they usually didn't have exhibits in that open space.

**Sara:** Yeah. And there were in that space torchieres, which we really had to work with, how to incorporate them in the design, while not compromising the historical integrity of the space. And those installations.

**Dorothy:** That's right.

**Sara:** So, but it was, I think, a really great introduction to working with GSA [General Services Administration] and with their historic preservation department, because we got to know each other in a different way, I think, than we would have if we were just another federal agency moving into the building. I think they saw that we really cared about the history, and we wanted to do it correctly, and we wanted to be mindful of the space and the needs of the space as well as the needs of the public. So I think it really broke the ice in a way that would have taken a lot longer if we hadn't had that opening exhibit.

**Dorothy:** Right. And then they approached us about redoing the counter panels. And you did all the curation for, what is it? Twenty-seven panels in the rotunda?

**Sara:** Yes. So that was—when would that have been? That would have been probably 2014 or 2015, would be my guess.

**Dorothy:** 2014.

**Sara:** And we had those 27 panels. And it was an exhibit called *New York to the Nation*, I believe is what we called it. And they always called it kind of the deck around the rotunda. It almost, almost looked like a bench, but not like a bench to sit on—a bench where there were 27 panels that had been commemorating, I think it was the 100th anniversary of Customs Service at the time.



**Dorothy:** Prior to.

**Sara:** Prior to this, but was by the time we moved into the building outdated by several years, which was also a good lesson for us not to put specific dates on introductory panels, because often, as happens in kind of federal buildings, the opportunity arises with facsimiles to keep the exhibits up longer.

And that would have been more of an evergreen installation if it had not been for this 100th anniversary on a specific date. That then was several years past.

**Dorothy:** Right.

**Sara:** So we were able to take over that space and install this exhibit, which really highlighted the different documents from the National Archives looking at connections to New York through places, events, people and really drove traffic upstairs. The rotunda was on a different level than the National Archives.

**Dorothy:** And I remember the thought that went into that exhibit. And I remember sitting with you in the space and thinking of the colors [to] match the Reginald Marsh murals that were there and different times of the day to make sure that it, you know, kept up with the integrity of the building. So it wasn't, you know, it was a very fitting match to the rotunda at the Custom House.

**Sara:** Yeah, we took the Pantone book and really looked at the different colors. We ended up with a beautiful kind of jewel tone teal, which I don't think I ever would have just picked out of the book, but worked really well with the dark wood of this deck space. All of the marble throughout the building and those Reginald Marsh murals, which are very colorful. Yes, along with the blue carpet, which was there at the time, kind of like a rich navy blue.

**Dorothy:** Which has since been changed.

**Sara:** Many times.

**Dorothy:** So, Sara, you talk about the exhibit, but you were an education specialist at that time. But you did do a lot of work on exhibits because of your exhibit background. So can you tell me a little bit more about other exhibits you did and, you know, any of the other work? Not just the rotunda.

**Sara:** Yeah.

**Dorothy:** How did your daily work unfold with the other exhibits you did in the building and in our spaces?

**Sara:** So, I think through the success of that opening exhibit and support from exhibits in Washington, DC, but particularly from Lisa Royse for kind of those larger approvals. And we always worked with Dan Falk, who was a project manager in exhibits, who had helped with fabrication and come up for the installations. We, I think we showed that we really could have an exhibit presence in the Custom House, and that visitors were interested in that. So, the education spaces when we moved into the Custom House were the education, the Learning Center, and then the Welcome Center. So the idea was that on this third floor—so the public floor of the Custom House for the National Archives, if you were coming into research, you would enter through the Welcome Center door, and you would go right to the Research Center and you could go left to an exhibit gallery. And we called it the New York on the Record Gallery. And it was four to five cases that changed out annually. And the theme of that gallery would always follow what was that National Archives exhibit in the O'Brien Gallery in DC at the time. So, for instance you know, if one was *Making Our Mark* about signatures, it would be *New York on the Record: Making Our Mark*. We had *New York on the Record: Rightfully Hers*, about the path to the 19th Amendment, and we would follow that larger theme, but use original records from the New York holdings so they would relate to New York, New Jersey, Puerto Rico, or the U.S. Virgin Islands.

And it was really a way to showcase some of the fantastic documents that we had in New York and to show them as original records, because that space we were able to build out. So it was preservation compliant, and it had the security in place to show original records. So that was the only space with originals in the Custom House. But again, this program grew. So we were allowed by the building to put a feature document case outside of the rotunda entrance. So we highlighted the story of Matthew Henson, who was an African American man who worked with Peary to reach the North Pole, and he worked as a clerk in the Custom House. So we highlighted his story through facsimile documents. We ended up, then, as the traveling exhibits program grew out of Kansas City. We were able to add three cases in our hallway outside of the Learning Center on the third floor that would pull highlights from that exhibit as well. So there was like a Vietnam War photography exhibit, and we would use some of the photographs from that. And again, it would be a way to cross-promote the different parts of the National Archives. The Custom House, the people who were coming somewhere from New York, but largely they were tourists from either the greater United States or international. So it was a way to say we have these other things as well with the National Archives.

**Dorothy:** And I'm looking at a statistic you shared on the average number of visitors to the Welcome Center because of the tracking system that you were able to put in. Let's see, the number is between 900 and 1,400 visitors each month, which is pretty impressive for a floor that was previously closed to the public. And our office was, you know, up the stairs or up the elevator, down the hall around the bend. And, you know, down another little hallway.

**Sara:** Absolutely. Yeah.

**Dorothy:** And that's amazing.

**Sara:** You know, for the rotunda, we got even more than that. It was, you know, high 20,000s to mid 30,000 monthly. That's right. So for our full time at the Custom House, we reached over 100,000 visitors in the Welcome Center, over 1.6 million total through all of the exhibits.

**Dorothy:** That's amazing.

**Sara:** So it was. It had a large reach, especially when you think the program was the three of us. So we're creating it. I think, again, through the success it grew, and we got some funding. But in the beginning, the registrar in DC was sending us mats that they had finished using for the DC exhibits, and we were trying to match them with documents and document sizes. It was a huge win when we got a budget and could hire a matmaker.

**Dorothy:** I remember pushing for the budget, and I remember when they said, you know what this is? We can justify this and it's necessary. Yeah. And it was unheard of because before you came on board, I did an exhibit at Varick Street, and I was allowed \$100. I had the images scanned and sent up from the digital lab. Yeah. And I cut and matted all the pictures myself and had a friend help me frame them on the wall, you know, hang them on the wall. But yeah, big changes, because the Custom House was so important. And, you know, I just want to go back to the fact you mentioned about partnerships and, like, the support of other federal agencies. I mean, GSA loved your Matthew Henson exhibit so much, they asked it to be moved to the second floor. And as you know, they wanted us to keep it there. So they accessioned the facsimile documents into their space once we closed the office at the Custom House so people can still go see that little case that you put together. That speaks volumes for Matthew Henson's contributions to the government, to the U.S.

**Sara:** Definitely.

**Dorothy:** You know, started as a lowly man on the totem pole, became this significant factor in discovering, you know, the North Pole.

**Sara:** Yeah.

**Dorothy:** We digress. So, there are so many multiple tier exhibits that you helped put together at the Custom House. Any others you want to mention?

**Sara:** We had a case highlighting immigration documents from the New York region. So New York, New Jersey, Puerto Rico, U.S. Virgin Islands. We did pop-ups around the building based on themes of interest. I would say one of the projects—there are two that I'm particularly proud of. One would be the art and architecture reader rails. And those were, again, I think, like the theme of you, Chris, and I was always, we saw a need or an opportunity and we made it happen. And so from walking from the elevator on the third floor to the Learning Center, we would identify that there really was a space along that path where we would lose visitors. So it's kind of a long walk. Other NARA, I think, is the only space that's open full time to the public . . . without an appointment. So if you weren't familiar with the building or kind of confident in your

decision to get there, you could very easily think you were in the wrong spot. So, we saw that we were losing people halfway through the walk. We put up a huge, vibrant sign on the door outside of the Learning Center. It's where we installed the cases for those highlights from the traveling exhibit program, and we had reader rails fabricated that would overlook—it was a balcony, and it was a beautiful view down to the rotunda from it. And there were Art and Architecture reader rails that really showed the history of the space and the individuals, the historical individuals, who contributed to it through documents from the National Archives. So, visitors also were really interested in the space and the art and architecture of the building, because it is such a significant Beaux Arts–style building for historical New York.

I'd say that exhibit. And likewise there was, it was originally called The Basement. It was rebranded as the Lower Level once we installed an exhibit there. And it's where the auditorium was for—was that the GSA on that auditorium?

**Dorothy:** Yeah. GSA owns the auditorium, and they share it with the tenants. But yes, we pushed for the rebranding.

**Sara:** Yes. So at that time, it was just a space that was painted white, and it had a bulletin board up in it. And this kind of coincided with the anonymous gift to digitize the treaties from American Indian Nations that was received from the Foundation or to the Foundation.

**Dorothy:** Yeah.

**Sara:** And so, there was an opportunity for some funding. And we approached, you know, our supervisors in DC and the supervisors and exhibits and asked if we could create a facsimile exhibit in partnership with the National Museum for the American Indian of facsimile treaties. So, we called it *Be It Remembered: Treaties with Native Nations*. And it really transformed the space. And it's another exhibit that is still—that outlasted us at the Custom House. And that's being asked to keep.

**Dorothy:** And the building repeatedly thanked us, like GSA and NMAI thanked us for including them and their agencies in the framing of those exhibits. Yeah. And really beautified the space for the public.

**Sara:** It did. I think one of the most important parts of the exhibit—so often, you know, in the federal record and documents with different communities such as Native communities, the point of view is from the federal government because it's a federal repository. We made the design choice to wrap the columns with graphic treatments of the signatures of the individuals from the Native communities who signed the treaties. To really highlight these real people who negotiated these treaties and, you know, working with the Smithsonian, we were also able to tell, really to tell the story of the treaties and these treaty councils and the negotiations and also kind of where times when they were not honored and what the American Indian Nations did to reclaim their rights. So that was always a project I was particularly proud of. I think really through the work of the exhibits, through all of the work, but the work of the exhibits,

especially with Henson and the treaties there's a real want and need from the public to highlight stories of communities who are traditionally underrepresented in the federal record. Right. People are interested in that. People want to see themselves in the documents. And everyone is represented in the Archives. It's just what parts are highlighted, what stories are told. And who is telling those stories. So I think we always tried to share a full story, so that really everyone had the opportunity to see themselves in their communities through our documents and through our exhibits and through our education programs.

**Dorothy:** It's 100 percent right. Well, you're talking about records. Do you have a favorite record you want to talk about?

**Sara:** Gosh.

**Dorothy:** You want to list a bunch of them?

**Sara:** Yeah. If I had to choose one or a group of records, I think it would probably be—there was a group of women who were arrested with Susan B. Anthony for her voting illegally in the early 1870s in Rochester, New York, around Rochester, New York. None of their cases were ever pursued by the federal government. The Northern District of New York was the court. Susan B. Anthony was the figurehead of this movement. But the women she was arrested with—again, when we speak about, kind of, these untold stories or these lesser told stories, they were not well-known activists. They were shopkeepers' wives. They were widows, they were school teachers. They were members of the community who really felt strongly enough to go and vote illegally, as the government said at the time, in an election and say that they had the right to vote and it wasn't pursued by the government. But I think it really is something I bring up in education programs when I talk about these documents. It shows that moments of change throughout American history take so many people, and the people who become well known in the movement are, of course, very important and initiate a lot of change. But those are supported by a lot of people whose names you'll never know. Right. Who just saw something they didn't agree with and saw a space to do something about it and try and make a change. And they did so. So I think there are so many gems like that through the holdings of the National Archives that are really, really special to find.

**Dorothy:** Did you write an article on that document?

**Sara:** I did.

**Dorothy:** Is that in *Social Education*?

**Sara:** It was, I think. It was for a National Archives blog. I wrote an article. I've written a few articles for *Social Education*. One of my favorite documents—I won't take too long talking about all of them—but it was about Harriot Stanton Blatch, who was Elizabeth Cady Stanton's daughter. We had highlighted her story in one of our exhibits. I think it was the *Rightfully Hers* exhibit. So she was born in Seneca Falls, New York. She was a natural-born American citizen.

However, she married an Englishman. So at that time, prior to 1922, women's citizenship followed that of their husbands when they got married. So if you were an American woman and you married a foreign national, you would lose your American citizenship. So she lost her American citizenship by marrying a British citizen at that time. It was like the 1910s, maybe early 1900s. However, she did not think this was right. And she leaves a paper trail of acts of civil disobedience that show her just totally ignoring this fact that she's not an American citizen, which we know from kind of complementary sources, like she wrote an autobiography. In it, she speaks about how she really didn't think this was right. She thought it was another kind of disservice from the federal government enacted upon women, and she chose not to follow it. There's a lot of privilege that, you know, is assumed as a White woman, she could say she's an American citizen and wasn't questioned as much as perhaps people from other groups would be. But we see her on passenger arrival manifests when she's asked her citizenship. She says she's American.

And it's at a time after her marriage. So we know she wasn't in various other federal documents. And again, she speaks of this being kind of an act of civil disobedience. How she just doesn't—she wasn't going to accept that she had lost her citizenship. She was born in New York, you know.

**Dorothy:** Fascinating. Yeah.

**Sara:** But again, there are stories like this that you wouldn't know from just looking at the document if you just saw the passenger arrival manifest, you would just think, oh, American citizen coming back to the United States from England. But if you look farther, there's a petition of naturalization for her. And again, the birthplace is listed as Seneca Falls, New York. So just again, documents like that where they tell these lesser known stories of America and stories again of people who don't agree and feel like they are not receiving the same rights as another group, and they choose to do something about it.

**Dorothy:** That's really—those are great, great documents to share. Thank you. Sara. You know, I have a question about the research. When you did research at the Custom House, you know, what was that process? Maybe explain how—was that process maybe different from Varick Street? Because they were two very different facilities.

**Sara:** They were two different facilities. The process changed really based on staffing and staff availability. We always, you know, there were different divisions at the Custom House in terms of NARA offices. There was education and programs, research services, and is it—my gosh, I'm blanking on the name—the Records Agency services. Thank you. But in a field office, the lines are blurred. You just all work so closely together. And we were really a tight-knit crew as an office and really tried to help and support each other. So it kind of changed over the years. Sometimes we'd be asked to submit a research request and a pull slip for an archivist to pull the documents. Sometimes for several years, we had stack access and were granted access to pull our own records. So really kind of just depended on the period in time that was happening. As part of the exhibit work, though, we also supported preservation efforts. So when pulling the

documents, we would make the initial preservation assessment and then connect with an archivist who would then, kind of if they agreed, then liaise with preservation along with us.

**Dorothy:** That's great.

**Sara:** Move forward.

**Dorothy:** So you're talking about security for the records and how it was a little different. What about the building? What was the security like at the Custom House building?

**Sara:** So it was a much more welcoming environment for school groups, I think, particularly the guards. There are many federal agencies in the Custom House, but I think it's really associated with the Smithsonian, the Museum of the American Indian. The guards are used to—we're used to—when we moved in already, all of the school groups [were] coming in for the Smithsonian. So, it wasn't an unusual idea that we would have a strong public-facing component. So, it was very friendly because of the difference in the floors, like school groups would enter on the first floor. The Learning Center was on the third floor. The biggest challenge was just kind of coordinating that if groups were late or you know, ran into subway issues or for any of those reasons with the guards.

**Dorothy:** And now, Sara, you talk about, you know, school groups. But didn't you also do presentations for college students?

**Sara:** I worked with college students. Angela Tudico and I used to do a series on Chinese Exclusion Act case files for college students and graduate students. And again, just working for accessibility of the records. Chris Zarr did, I would say, the huge bulk of our on-site K through 12 programs at the office. I did some on-site college and grad student ones, some adult programs as well. Largely focused on genealogy.

**Dorothy:** Great. Great. Now, quick question about the Archives over time. Any thoughts on how it changed, you know, from Varick to the Custom House and currently? Yeah.

**Sara:** Well, I think like there was a real sense of momentum moving from Varick to the Custom House and terrible timing because it coincided with Hurricane Sandy in New York City. And as such, the opening was delayed for several weeks, I think, if I'm remembering correctly.

**Dorothy:** We had the party in October. I think the hurricane was a week later. Yeah. In the week.

**Sara:** Right around that.

**Dorothy:** February. So it was several months.

**Sara:** Yeah.

**Dorothy:** Before, well, we officially opened, and—but it wasn't because the building was shut down. It was because Lower Manhattan had massive flooding.

**Sara:** As an area, the building had fared very well. Yes. Through the hurricane, thankfully. But Lower Manhattan was not as fortunate. And a lot of businesses were closed in the area. And the subway, I think, was also closed for several months.

**Dorothy:** I think you're right. Yeah.

**Sara:** Down in that area because that was not—it wasn't like the original land of the island of Manhattan. That was all filled in. Right. So much more susceptible to that kind of groundwater-level flooding.

**Dorothy:** Right, right.

**Sara:** And other parts of the city. But it really, it feels like the story of the New York office may have been a different one. If Hurricane Sandy had not happened, which, you know, again, arguably this is not the largest casualty of Hurricane Sandy. Right. But I think it had a profound effect on the National Archives at New York City.

**Dorothy:** Yeah. And the media coverage of the media coverage? Yeah. For sure.

**Sara:** By the time just the infrastructure of Lower Manhattan was back for us, able to open, it was like people had kind of moved on. There was still support from headquarters and from the Foundation, but it felt like that initial excitement was gone.

**Dorothy:** Right.

**Sara:** Right.

**Dorothy:** Well, since we're talking about the momentum I feel like COVID did a number on the New York office, too in, you know, in different ways. What are your thoughts on how the COVID pandemic affected New York?

**Sara:** I think it had a significant effect on New York. In the early days of the COVID pandemic, there were hospital ships in New York Harbor. Yeah. We're serving as morgues and hospitals just because of the ability of New York hospitals to support those patients and those casualties.

It's hard to overestimate, I think, what New York felt like in those early days. It was one of, if not the earliest location, I think, in the United States that had had confirmed cases of COVID.

**Dorothy:** I think that was Rye, New York, right?



**Sara:** Yeah. Yeah. At that time, no one really knew what was happening. I remember being on-site in New York and speaking, you know, with our colleagues about it that morning. I think it was like, would it have been March? I think it was like March 10th of 2020. Yeah. Tuesday. Yep. Tuesday.

**Dorothy:** That's right.

**Sara:** We won't because we're all in the office that day. And so I had come out of the subway that morning. At the time, my daughter was four years old, turning five, and I had noticed that the trees—I live in Westchester County, so about an hour north of the city—the trees in Lower Manhattan were a few weeks ahead of the flowering trees where we lived. So I took a picture of this pink flowering tree outside the subway at Bowling Green to show to Gracie later that night. And it pops up in my iPhone memories every year, I think, like, wow, that was like, that was the last day. Yeah. It felt like. And so we were discussing it, and it had been announced that day that this case had been found in Westchester. And word quickly came that we should bring home what we needed and plan to work remotely. Everyone I think in the country really thought, oh, we'll be back in two weeks, because that had been the messaging. Yeah, I remember I went home from work that Tuesday, my daughter's preschool closed that Friday, and in both places it was like, okay, well, we'll see you. We'll see you in two weeks, you know? And then that's not how it played out. She wasn't in a physical space until, you know, like spring of her kindergarten year, a full year later and the National Archives at New York City, I don't—our work changed so significantly with that return to remote. I got moved to a team with distance learning that it wasn't until last spring I would—so would that be spring of 2024?—that we were called back consistently to the education and programs team to consistently work on-site again with an attempt to really kind of ramp up on-site programs in this space.

**Dorothy:** And the on-site programs prior to COVID, you know, we had daily programs.

**Sara:** We did.

**Dorothy:** Sometimes two.

**Sara:** Two or three field trips a day with a genealogy program.

**Dorothy:** As well as special events. So it was a real shift going all day long, you know, to only remote. And yeah, you're right. All our work changed, I guess, you know, thinking about the agency as a whole. I mean, obviously things changed for everyone.

Do you feel there were a lot of changes from one Archivist to the other? Because I think you served under two different Archivists at this point in your career?

**Sara:** I did. I think I started right after David Ferriero started. David Ferriero was like—I think of him as a man of the people, almost. He was very interested in New York. I remember when—I don't know. I don't even know the year of it. We might have still been at Varick Street in 2009.

Yeah, we had done—NARA had contributed to the Iraqi Jewish Archive exhibit that had curated it, and it was going to be at the Museum of Jewish Heritage, which is also in Lower Manhattan, and was one of our partners. There was a big snowstorm at that point. I was the only member of our team who was living in the city. I was living in Brooklyn Heights with my boyfriend, and now husband, at the time. I remember getting the call and asking, can you go to this opening? The Archivist is going to be there, and we need someone from NARA. And Chris, my now husband, and the Archivist came with me and the Archivist was so kind and so welcoming. And he was just a really open person who I feel, like, treated everyone in the agency the same, regardless of kind of their grade or their age.

At that point, I was in my, you know, mid-20s. I guess I was younger. He really he didn't have to talk to us at all, you know, but like, made sure to introduce us to who he was speaking with, including Doctor Ruth, who was there that night and just, like, made it a really welcoming experience, which I think was representative of his time as Archivist. He understood the world of archives. He had come from a library background, the head of New York Public Library and a long career in libraries and archives. So I think he really loved history and, you know, occasionally you would do something or be in some program that would be promoted internally, and you might get an email from him with like a comment saying, like, I had done something, some interview that mentioned that, like my family had immigrated from Italy in the 1920s, and I got an email from him being like, oh, what town? You know? So it's just like regular. It was just a regular guy who did the work and was really interested in supporting his staff.

**Dorothy:** I think definitely, definitely. Yes. Those emails. We on occasion got a little postcard. Yeah. Great job. Yeah. Wonderful person who fully supported his staff. I feel. And you're right. And he took us through COVID with those wonderful little video recipes. You know, how do you make the perfect grilled cheese at home?

**Sara:** You know, I've forgotten those. Yeah.

**Dorothy:** Which was, you know, on my radar because I love grilled cheese. But yeah, anyway, I digress.

**Sara:** So yeah, I think he was a huge supporter of the New York office, too. He and Deb Wall also always went out of their way. There were a few instances, like Hurricane Sandy, if there had been a larger kind of negative incident that was in the news, one or both of them would always reach out and ask how the staff was doing and add—and it wasn't something that was necessary. You know, I don't know that there was a technical business need for it, but it made a huge difference in terms of morale and in terms of feeling like if these are the people leading the agency, then like, I'm in a pretty good place.

**Dorothy:** The personal interest was sincere.

**Sara:** And exactly.

**Dorothy:** Which is why I, you know, I know you loved your job, which is why we had such a great team. We all love what we do, you know, and so that brings me back to the Custom House and the closure. So we're going to be ending our interview soon, but let's talk a little bit about the closure. And you know, maybe final thoughts on going from COVID back into the office and then knowing that the office eventually would be closed, if you have any comments on that.

**Sara:** Yeah. Well, I think, so Doctor Shogan, Colleen Shogan, was then the Archivist who succeeded David Ferriero as a congressional appointment. Deb Wall had served as the Acting Archivist for a while in the interim. When Doctor Shogan came on, she came to New York City, and it was a very different visit than the ones with David Ferriero. The interaction and the tenor was different. And the priorities were different, including New York. I think, you know, post-COVID, there was a very different budget situation to consider. So, I understand why the decisions were made. But it almost felt like that visit was the beginning of the end.

**Dorothy:** Yeah.

**Sara:** When Doctor Shogan was in New York, she was speaking about how she would be back and hosting all these events in New York. And it really never materialized. So it started to feel like the priorities had shifted in the agency. And I think that was a feeling in the agency as a whole, away from the regions, away from the field offices, and more towards the headquarters. So it started to feel like, you know, maybe this isn't such a certain place to be—

**Dorothy:** Right.

**Sara:** —in this New York office. But it wasn't. Nothing was shared for a very long time, I think. I think the staff kind of saw the writing on the wall. There had been two positions posted that they had worked for for a very long time to get approved and posted. Interviews were completed. I think it was at the stage of offering the job. And then word came that both were canceled. Yeah, but there were no additional details about why, and none could be shared. Right. So it really felt like, well, maybe there are some larger discussions at play than what we are being invited to contribute to.

**Dorothy:** Right.

**Sara:** So that would have been, would that have been like early spring of 2024, would you say?

**Dorothy:** Yeah, I would say March, April, May 2024.

**Sara:** Yeah. And so we tried to open the Learning Center. At that point, we received the mandate to open the Learning Center to the public for walk-in appointments. That had never been a really successful model for us.

**Dorothy:** And that wasn't the model. The model was on-site programming. And if you can do walk-ins, try and do it.

**Sara:** But how will you? Yeah, we had tried for years and it didn't work how we would do it. It's the very unscientific way of we would—one of you, me, or Chris—would be on the third floor doing some other work and would hear camp groups, because in the summer this was something I had never known until we moved to the Custom House in New York City, there are large camp groups that will look for free air-conditioned spaces to be. So you would hear, just like the cacophony of children, you know, downstairs, and we'd think, oh, well, I'll go in, I'll keep the door open for an hour or two. Sometimes you'd get like 80, 90 kids. And again, just because the camp counselors were looking for an air-conditioned, free space that they could bring these kids who are in their camp for. So I would say like in the summer, occasionally we would open it for walk-ins. But again, it was more like targeted walk-ins, knowing that there was a high building visitation day.

**Dorothy:** And I think the caveat to that also is there are no benches for people to sit down in the building. So when they come into the Learning Center and they see 50 chairs and it's air-conditioned, it's like, oh, I can sit here and just hang out. So, and the interesting thing is, before the summer groups, we would try—I remember standing in the hallway and trying to engage people like, you know, nonchalantly talking to them and being like, would you like to come in and do an activity and, and this and that, and one of us even being down at the first floor to get people and also being at the cart, having our cart on the second floor, yeah, and engaging people. And obviously, you know, there were three of us, so we could help each other with that instance. But on a daily basis, what you really need is promotion to say there's this happening in the space. Yeah. And it's really more worth your effort to have two or three classrooms coming in that are scheduled and want the program then somebody just happening into a space.

**Sara:** Definitely. And particularly with such a small staff, because it was always just the three of us in terms of education and programs. And, you know, you could do some work in the Learning Center, but it wasn't—you couldn't really get into a project because, you know, people might pop their head in. Often they'd ask, like for directions to some other agency in the building. So it was public interactions, but not like meaningful ones that you would count towards an engagement statistic, right, necessarily.

**Dorothy:** So, that mandate to open the space again and for walk-ins really never worked and could have been addressed differently because as we know, Sara, during the COVID years, we—I don't know how many—quadrupled is not even a fair number—the number of programs we did and then the reach for our virtual distance learning or distance programs, yeah, was incredible. I mean, we had internationals as well as national attendance. Yeah. We did alone—how many? I mean, you did how many distance learning programs alone, did you do that? Again, it was exponential.

**Sara:** Thousands.

**Dorothy:** The reach.

**Sara:** Thousands. And I think, like when you think of, yeah, when you think of the mandate of the Archives as providing access. So I was just looking at—I was just doing the statistics for this past fiscal year. Eighty percent of the people that we reach through distance learning live farther than 50 miles from their nearest NARA facility. Right. So these are people you're not going to get a school bus and bring, you know, one-hundred 3rd graders 75 miles down the road for a program. These are people who wouldn't necessarily interact with National Archives education. And we're able to connect with them in really meaningful and real ways. So I think, you know, distance learning was an unexpected but exciting pivot for me, because I was able to kind of take that approach towards accessibility that I instilled in the exhibits and use it towards the different groups and partners we were serving through distance learning.

**Dorothy:** So, do you think the closure affected our customers in New York negatively for those doing research or doing educational programs or visiting exhibits? Or where do you see a benefit? You know.

**Sara:** I think it really affected the genealogy community negatively. There was a real and deep relationship, I think, between the New York office, the research services side, especially in the program side as well with the New York genealogy community. The New York genealogy community is really fueled by really intelligent, dedicated, hard-working volunteers who are doing work that we would have never had the time to do, and they're doing it on a volunteer basis. So they gave an immeasurable contribution of their labor to the National Archives through that work. So, I do think the genealogy community was negatively affected. The education community, I think, in that there was no longer that ability for local New York City schools to come on-site for field trips. I think we have, you know, other offerings for them that kind of supports that transition a little differently. But, I think the biggest challenge of it all was the lack of messaging. There, when we moved from Varick Street to the Custom House, we had public meetings announcing it.

**Dorothy:** Yes, I remember.

**Sara:** I was in charge of the microfilm transmission. You would not believe how strongly people feel about federal microfilm. And I had to identify different, like, nonprofits or libraries or state agencies that might want to take on microfilm. And it took months. It was incredibly transparent. We gave updates to the community. We had public meetings. We posted it in the *Federal Register*. We really followed an approach of federal transparency for it. I don't know why that didn't happen with the closure of the New York office. I expect that, probably, the word came and the timeline was such that they didn't allow it. But I think our local partners probably didn't feel great about that.

**Dorothy:** I agree with you.

**Sara:** Being told originally—they were told once it happened, and we did reach out about that. But I think there was an expectation because of the high level of communication that was

offered with the move from Varick Street to Custom House, that a closure would necessitate even greater outreach.

**Dorothy:** There was definitely a disconnect from headquarters to New York for the last couple of years, I think, which is why there was no formal communication plan. And I think that was just a headquarters thing. I mean, it certainly wasn't for lack of the New York staff trying to get that plan.

But, as we come to a close, Sara, I'm just wondering if you have any final thoughts, like a memory from your time in the New York office that you're particularly fond of? Something that sticks out to you?

**Sara:** I don't. You know, I think, like, I can't stress enough how much we all did, everything that was needed. You know, I think of installing, like, we—you, me, Chris, and Dan Falk—installed the banner on the front of the Custom House. Like on a ladder. You know, we—you, me—drove material in, like, you know, whatever you would have called the Uber of the 2010s, you know, from Varick Street down to Custom House. Van. Yeah.

**Dorothy:** Remember the white van? We all got in. We were like, why are we getting into this van?

**Sara:** I do.

**Dorothy:** It was. And there were no seats in the back, remember?

**Sara:** I do, I do.

**Dorothy:** Empty. Empty. White van.

**Sara:** But I think they all, like, they speak to—we always did what needed to be done. And we did what best served the constituents, you know, and the patrons. And I think everyone who has worked in the New York office that I've crossed paths with just truly loves history, and they love the work and the National Archives and want to do the best job possible. I think that that is the hardest part. Throughout my time at NARA, there have been various kinds of negative public sentiments about federal workers, just as kind of the larger conversation of the general public. And I think, like, if people really knew the skill level and the education and the dedication and the knowledge of everyone I have ever worked with at the National Archives, it would, like—. It's astounding how great everyone is at their job, how much everyone knows, and how excited people are to really share that knowledge and provide that access to like their fellow colleagues and the public. And I think it really, you know, it's a great service to NARA and, like, really to the nation in terms of preserving these records and making them accessible. It's what democracy is based on.

**Dorothy:** It's a perfect sentiment. Sara, one last question. So the New York office closed in February of 2025. Your last day at the New York office, what was that like? And what are you doing now? Where are you working now? What office?

**Sara:** Well, I could not believe how much stuff I had accumulated over the last 15 years just in my cubicle. So, it was spent kind of organizing that, shipping material to DC to the rest of our education team so that it could be used, because the timeline was so short in the closing. We had a lot of supplies and things like that and didn't want to waste them. So we did want to send what we could and what could still be useful to the rest of our team in DC. So time was spent with that. It was, you know, really kind of taking in the building when you work. It's an outstanding space. When you work there for, you know, 10-plus years, you stop to see it every day when you go in and just sometimes, you know, tune in and it's just you're just awed by the art, by the architecture, by just being in such a space. So, I thought a bit about that and really tried to, like, take in the area. I've now transitioned to fully remote work, which I've largely been doing since the start of COVID, with the exception of those few months last spring. And I am running virtual learning for the National Archives. So I'm leading the distance learning programs for education and the agency working with students and teachers.

**Dorothy:** Perfect, perfect. And this is the last question. Is there anything you would like to add to the interview? Any anecdotes, words of wisdom? Anything else you feel you haven't said yet?

**Sara:** No, I don't think so. I think I just, I feel, you know, I feel very fortunate. I think I said in the beginning, I thought maybe I'd be here a year. You know, 15-plus years later, I feel entrenched and I feel honored to be able to be in this position and share this history and these documents with people.

**Dorothy:** Wonderful. Well my final comments to you, Sara . . . it's been wonderful working with you all these years and having you on my team and us being a team together. And you're right, we were able to do things because we wanted to and we pushed for it. And I think that shows in the work that we did at the Custom House. And I just want to thank you for your time and for your friendship over the years. And I'm going to stop the recording now and we'll then talk about next steps.

**Sara:** Well, thanks for this opportunity.

**Dorothy:** Thank you.

[END RECORDING]