

Draft Transcript of National Archives Assembly Legacy Project Interview with Adrienne C. Thomas.

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Interviewer: John LeGloahec

LeGloahec: I'm John LeGloahec with the National Archives Assembly. We're here today to interview Adrienne Thomas on her recent retirement from the National Archives on her long and distinguished career. We'll start as we usually do at the beginning...And after receiving your degrees from Iowa State university, how did you find yourself in Washington, DC in the National Archives?

Thomas: Well, I had a professor at the time who was doing research Hoover Library, which I had never been to even though I grew up in Iowa and everything. I knew there was a Hoover Library I had never visited--at that time ever visited--the Hoover Library. He was one of those professors who decided that if you were not going for your Ph.D. if you were not going to be a college professor, he did not know what in the world you were going to do that was going to be worthwhile. He made that-- attitude very clear. [laughs] He was at the Hoover Library and had been doing research. He saw on the bulletin board there in the break room an announcement about the National Archives Training, Archival Training Program. At that time it was a training program that was sort of combined so that the Office of the National Archives and Presidential Libraries, a lot of the trainees went through some of the same training, certainly the educational classes, not necessarily the same rotations. It was this one was concentrating on what part the Presidential Libraries part of the training program was going to be. He brought it back to me. He says, "You know I think maybe you ought to apply because what else in the world is out there for you?" My attitude has always been I love history, I majored in history. I didn't think a whole lot about what was going to come late except I thought it was a liberal arts background and it could mean I might go on to law school, which was a possibility at one point. I was not aiming for an archival career. I mean, I don't think I knew when I started, certainly when I entered, I would state, "Was there a National Archives?" I mean, you know really I didn't. There weren't any training classes that I would state. It was back when basically there were a few universities across the country that offered archival programs, but most did not. I wasn't aiming for the National Archives, but I also knew by that time I did not want to be a school teacher. My father had sort of insisted that I get a minor in education just to be safe, but I knew that wasn't something I wanted to do. I had gone through student teaching as part of getting my minor in education and I had also been a TA in graduate school. That was better than high school, but I still didn't want to teach. [laughs] So I applied for the Archival Training program. I thought, Washington DC, why not? In terms of the application, first of all, Trudy who I had met as a freshman at Iowa State was working in Washington on the Kennedy Oral History Project and I'm forgetting those names Rendell?--that was his first name? I can't remember. Anyway, he had just

finished a year's sabbatical and done a grant through NHPRC and then he had become a chair at the history department at Iowa State. So I had Trudy who knew me so they could ask her, "Is this woman presentable? Can she fit in?" I got interviewed by the chair of the history department, who had been at the National Archives through the previous year. I got selected as one of Dan Reed's Presidential Libraries Trainees. May of 1970 I got on an airplane and whipped off to Washington and started my career. At that time, Presidential Libraries Trainees were supposed to do a year in Washington, where they would do rotational assignments and they would take training classes and so forth. And at the end of the year they were supposed to one of the libraries. At the end of the year I had decided that I didn't really want to go out to one of the libraries. Fortunately, Dr. Reed and Dick Jacobs, who was his deputy at the time decided that they had a position for me and in the Presidential Libraries Central Office and I stayed there for the next two years.

LeGloahec: Describe that first day impression walking into the National Archives and what was your impression of the agency at that time?

Thomas: Well I actually came a week before. I did the tourist thing, which included going to the Rotunda and doing that you know. So I at least knew where the building was, and where I was supposed to go. I was staying with a friend from college who was a school teacher in Wheaton. What I remember most in that first day if coming to work was the long bus ride down from Wheaton, coming down 9th Street. I guess it was next to the huge hole in the ground that would become the FBI building, but it was like 5 stories below grade. I know enough from that week of walking around looking at things that the National archives was not sitting in the greatest of neighborhoods. It was, there were porn shops and the gaiety theater, burlesque theater and some sort of sleazy restaurants. It was a little intimidating and I was to be intimidated even more when I met my first supervisor, Mary Walton Livingston. Mary Walton was Virginia through and through. She was a woman who even in 1970 was wearing white gloves and hats, but she was extremely liberal. She had been one of the people who marched in Richmond for integration. She wasn't typical Virginia by any stretch of the imagination but she was very intimidating. She was an extraordinary tennis player and she would always challenge any of the trainees to play tennis with her. I knew I was a horrible tennis player, so I didn't even admit that I knew how to pick up a racket, but almost everybody else who did get whipped [laughs] extraordinarily easy by this woman. She was very opinionated and she was the supervisor for all of the trainees. So, it was interesting.

LeGloahec: For what was a very impressive career at NARA let's take a moment and let's go start to finish and talk about the various positions that you've held. So it started...

Thomas: So it started as the Presidential Libraries Trainee for a year. I would say it was still

training obviously to stay in the Presidential Libraries Central Office and get to work on the budgets and the museum policy and a lot of the things that the central office was trying to instill in the libraries, each of whom of course thought that they were independent agencies of their own. That never changed, it was always kind of a negotiation with the libraries as to what policies would be accepted and wouldn't be. I got involved with the Presidential Papers Commission, which was the commission that ultimately decided the change in the Presidential Libraries Law about whether the President's papers were government property or personal property. The other thing that occurred, and through my Presidential Libraries connection, was that the person that became Deputy Archivist was James O'Neil, who had been the director of the Roosevelt Library, and was recruited when Herb Angel was then Deputy retiring. Dr. O'Neil came to Washington actually; I think 6, 8 months, something like that before Mr. Angel's retirement so that there could be a smooth transition. Of course because I had been a Presidential Libraries and knew all the directors, I knew Dr. O'Neil. One of the pieces of advice that Mr. Angel gave to Dr. O'Neil—when he was retiring was a question, “What would you do differently if you had to do it over?” One of the things he said he would do differently, he said, “I'd have an assistant.” [laughs] Dr. O'Neil picked up on that right away. I think it was 1973 when he became deputy and he offered me the job of being his assistant. At the same time, John Scroggins offered me the opportunity to come work n what was then Planning and Analysis. So I was going, “John Scroggins, Dr. O'Neil, John Scroggins, Dr. O'Neil. I think I'll go an assistant to the Deputy Archivist. It was an exciting time because that's when the Freedom of Information Act got passed. It's when the executive order on declassification got signed, and for the first time, the National Archives had some authority for declassification. We were creating the declassification vision, and we recruited Allen Thompson from the Eisenhower Library to come in and be the head of that organization. We were basically starting from scratch with no people, a budget we finally got some money for, and some new authorities. It was also the time when the Privacy Act got passed in '74, so there were a lot of access related things swirling around the agency; which were Dr. O'Neil's particular interests in taking the Archives into a leading position in terms of access to records. So that was a very exciting time. Of course there were those agencies who weren't in tune with what we were doing. It was during that period of time, mid 70's to '77, '78, when the Census Bureau tried to revoke the memorandum of understanding that we had with them about releasing the Decennial Census after 72 years. We had to battle through Congress; their effort to get legislation passed that would have closed the census forever. What we wound up with was a replacement for the memorandum of understanding with legislation hat said that it should be available 75 years after. So, interesting times...

LeGloahec: So you just spoke there a moment ago about how you were presented with two opportunities of staying in Presidential Libraries or going off to Planning and Analysis.

[Ultimately you did, so what was...]

Thomas: Well actually, working for Dr. O'Neil as the assistant to the Deputy Archivist was leaving the Presidential Libraries. But what made me decide to do that? Well, it was a lot of the things that Dr. O'Neil was interested in, and that he had a leading role for the agency that was interesting to me. I had encountered John Scroggins, who is extraordinarily bright, [laughs] but sometimes difficult, when I did my rotations through it was I think then NAP. Anyway, so it wasn't too hard a decision to make.

Legloahec: So you ultimately became Director of Planning and Analysis within NA at one of the most critical points in NARA's history, it's independence from GSA. Talk about that time, and the sort of roles that you played and your impressions of that period.

Thomas: The Archives under GSA was a terrible match. For all practical purposes, you know we barely got by with enough money to say we were doing what our mission was. There was never any support from the administrators. That's maybe too harsh because some of them were really bad, and some of them were neutral you know. It wasn't that they were all ogres. I think as Claudine [Claudine Weiher] talked about at my retirement party, she was talking about what was going on when Dr. Warner came to be the Archivist of the United States. He came close to being fired more than once by the administrator for the things he was doing. He was probably one of the few people who could do it, cause he had tenure at the University of Michigan. He had a place to go back to. His intention was not to become the longest running Archivist of the United States. I mean he had in his mind that there was this window of maybe five years, which is what it turned out to be, where he was willing to dedicate his time to trying to get the National Archives independence from GSA. He had a lot of contacts that would be necessary to pulling this off, but he wasn't the typical politician, glad hander kind that you would expect to be the leader of that kind of movement. He was more like your grandfather. [laughs] You know, your nice grandfather, the one you want to go visit because he's so nice, kind, pleasant, and so forth. It was deceptive because he was really quite the organizer and knew how to work the people, work the contacts, develop new contacts, and there were a lot of people. I won't say a lot of people. It was a very small group that were part of the war cabinet, if you will, with Dr. Warner who were plotting the strategy on how to get independence. In truth, he was the only one that was sort of safe because he had some place to go. The rest of them were career National Archives employees who could have been fired instantly, and careers ruined. Claudine was definitely one of the leaders in that group, Dr. Burke was, and there were others. They used to have meetings off-site at Claudine's house on Capitol Hill, with people from the Hill, and the people they were trying to recruit to their cause. It was an extraordinary time. Because the National Archives had been part of GSA for 25 years at that point, the way GSA organized the agency, a lot of the administrative components any agency needs to run itself were not in the National Archives. They were centralized in the GSA. Each one of the services, including the

National Archives, would have a budget office of about two or three people, and a personnel office of 2 or 3 people who just fed stuff to GSA, a procurement staff that was authorized to do only small purchases. So I may think that there were only 4 to 5 people who did small purchases for the Archives, but nobody who had any experience of doing the major kind of contracts if you were an independent agency and needed to be able to do for yourself. So when they finally got to the point where the little cabal that had been working on independence had worked their magic, it had happened. The legislation passed in October, 1984, with an independence date of April 1. [It was like mid, I think it was mid October 24th, something like that.] You basically had a number of months to basically do everything you needed to do to set the National Archives up so that it could run as an independent agency as of April 1, 1985. Part of what was going on, it was interesting. There was the “what are the resources the National Archives are going to have?” When they wrote the legislation that set the National Archives up as an independent agency, it was basically that they have to decide when the two agencies have to decide what are the resources that have been devoted by GSA to support the National Archives. Those resources have to be transferred to the new agency. The negotiations over what resources were to be transferred was critical and difficult. What the losing agency would try to do would be to send you people, people that they could spare, and didn’t necessarily always translate into the best people that the agency that was leaving the new agency needed to start running as an independent agency. This is where Claudine played an extraordinary role, because she did the negotiation with GSA. We had to create this document, which I forgot what it’s called. It’s like a divorce decree, where everything has to be laid out, every person, every dollar, every chair, every whatever that’s transferring has to be in this document, which was about, you know, “yea thick,” [Demonstrates thickness of about three inches with fingers] by the time all the appendices where all of the detailed listing of property and so forth were added. That had to be filed with OMB, and then they have to bless it. Then that becomes basically the divorce decree. She [Claudine] was very determined and successful in getting a lot of vacancies transferred, which obviously put you a little behind the ball to start filling them until you’re independent, but gives you a lot of flexibility. So you start with the people, that you could name from GSA who were supporting the National Archives. Mainly, that was Gary Brookes, in the General Counsel’s Office. He was dedicated to National Archives legal issues. So he was clearly someone you could identify by name that should transfer to the Archives. But then in most of the personnel offices in procurement and so forth, they would just say, “Well the workload, when it came in you know, would be assigned out.” So there’s no specific person that’s responsible for those things, and that’s where we started getting the push back on sending us some people. We got some, and that’s when Claudine was pretty successful in negotiating that divorce decree with GSA. But in the meantime, we had to then set up a Procurement Office, Personnel Office, we had to get all of our treasury accounts set up because we didn’t have separate independent treasury accounts. I mean when you get money, it flows through the treasury, and has to flow through your agency. All of your reporting back and forth that is with the Treasury used to go

through GSA. So there was just a tremendous amount of administrative stuff to be set up. All of our directives were GSA directives, and there was no way to replace all of those directives, no way. So it was like identifying which ones we needed absolutely to be Archives directives, and which ones of GSA we could sort of adopt. Until... it could be replaced with just a transmittal that said, "Everywhere you read GSA, it's the National Archives, and everywhere it said Administrator, it's the Archivist," and so forth. So it was going through all of those administrative directives, and the building, and selling all the bonds. Do the design, do the construction, and then ultimately move. I would have to say that the physical move was probably my least involvement. We had a whole lot of people from the Archives like Meda Losier. We set up a special branch and she headed it. I think they had about 5 years by the time we said we were going to build a building, and by that time we got to begin to start the move.

She had to basically work with everybody who was going to move records, and figure out how they were going to control and make sure that everything that got moved was accounted for; they knew where it was going to go. They had a system set up so that they would have at the end a 100% perfect location register of the records, which she did phenomenally well. In terms of myself for the move, it was money. It was making sure that contracts were in place for the movers. The real guts to get the records ready to move, that was Meada Losier and the people that she worked with. My involvement started almost immediately after I became Deputy NA, because we had been independent for, I think at that point two, three years when we started thinking about how are we going to...? We need a new building. We've needed one since 1969, which is when AI was filled up and we started moving records out to Suitland. This was before I even came and created the General Archives Division, which was not a happy answer to the fact that you needed archival storage space. We had worked with GSA trying to convince them that you know this is something that they ought to support. We had one administrator who decided that the answer was not to build more space, but to take the records and split them up and send them out to the regions. He was going to do the Civil War records to Atlanta, and western advancement, military records, Indian records, and so forth were going to go to Denver. That created part of the environment, the reaction of the historians and researchers to that kind of idiotic proposal was part of the groundwork for getting support for independence. There were other efforts during that period of time when we tried to get GSA to consider the possibility of a new building. We got to the point of GSA working with PBS on a prospectus for an underground facility across from the existing building. This was before the two buildings, before the Navy monument was there, before the two buildings were built. It was when there was a department store there, and some other old buildings that deserved to be torn down. We were trying to sort of get on the bandwagon of the PADC, the Pennsylvania Avenue Development Corporation, who was trying to all up and down the Pennsylvania Avenue inaugural route, to get rid of the old and incorporate new buildings; make a new look for Pennsylvania Avenue, getting rid of some of those porno shops, and the gaiety, some of those things that I mentioned there [laughs] when I first came to the Archives. So we got to the point of a prospectus, which is a

legal thing that you have to do if you're going to get an appropriation from GSA. We were going to build underground, and part of the funding was going to be to sell the air rights above, this is GSA, so the that somebody could build on top of us and we would have the ground rights. Well that didn't go, and in truth that's a good thing it didn't because there certainly would have been no way to build as much space as we needed. There would have been no way to expand. To get what you really needed in the way of space, you needed to go outside of the District because there were so few parcels of land left in the District. We were talking about building a big building. So Frank Burke, who was then acting Archivist of the United States, had connections. He taught part time at the University of Maryland, and he raised the idea of well, you know, maybe there would be land the university would be willing to provide to the National Archives for a new building. We got involved with Stanley Hoyer, who was the Congressman that included the University of Maryland in his district, and he was very supportive. His, I'm going to say Chief of Staff, may not be the right title for this person. But John Berry, who is now the head of OPM, was Stenny Hoyer's legislative assistant or whatever. Actually, he was on appropriation, but anyway, we dealt with him on getting approval through the Congress. I'll have to say that we risked some money too, because it might not have happened. We needed to get started on a concept design for the building and an idea of where it was going to be, so how it would be laid out in order to come up with the estimates we needed to be able to go back to Congress and say, "Here is the amount of money. We're going to need to do this." We didn't have any appropriation of that money. So Joe Magronigal, who was then head of NA and my boss, basically gathered together some of the money needed. Then we got contracts with an engineering and architectural firm to start the process of the design of the building. At that point it was how much space, what kind of space, so that they could do estimates of the cost. Then we worked very closely with Stenny Hoyer. I mean you can't give the man enough credit for this building. Without his support, it wouldn't have happened. It was all through the University of Maryland connection and Frank Burkes connection with the History Department over there to get the whole thing started. One of the things that—was unique about the financing for the building was that we didn't get an appropriation per sé, which is what you have to have now. You have to have the whole amount appropriated up front. At that time, they still had the possibility that you could basically sell bonds, which is what we did. We got approval to sell bonds on Wall Street. The company who did it no longer exists. So we got the authorization for \$301,000,000 and that was to cover the construction of the building, the construction of the garage, and it was to cover... When you sell bonds at the moment you sell them, you're selling bonds to raise the money to build the building, the building that doesn't exist at that point. The design isn't even done at that point, but you have to paying your bondholders money, your interest that you owe from the minute you sell the bonds. So basically, although the limitation on what the building could cost, and the garage, and all the related things was \$250,000,000 we sold bonds for \$301,000,000 so that we could pay interest to the bondholders during the time that the construction was underway. The way it all worked was that at the point when the building

was finished and the government could say, “We have a building now, and basically have a mortgage,” we would start getting an annual appropriation to pay off that mortgage over twenty-six years. In October 2019 we will pay our last mortgage payment on this building. [smiles and laughs] There are a lot of agencies who are just intrigued by the way that we had done the financing for the building, because it hadn’t been done before. GSA used to do it back in early 70’s, and then it stopped for whatever reason. So nobody had done it for a long time. Nobody knew how to do it, so we were getting calls. Joe was getting calls from lots of agencies that were saying, “Can we come talk to you about how to do this?” The Architect of the Capitol, which was one of the agencies that came to us and said, “How did you do it?” ,were able to do it and pull it off, and then Congress. Then the White House changed the rules. [smiles] Nobody else could do it that way ever again unless they change the rules again, but they’re not likely to. So from that point on agencies have to have the full appropriation.

Legloahec: So you’ve been very busy all along. After this, you took one more step up, becoming Assistant Archivist for the administration and Chief Financial Officer. During your time in this position, keeping your nose to the grindstone, so to speak, you supervised the renovation of the National Archives building in Washington DC, specifically the Rotunda, as well as supervising the building of a new regional facility in Atlanta...

Thomas: Yeah, the design and construction of the Atlanta building.

Legloahec: So let’s talk about those [three things.]

Thomas: So I was on the plane a lot to Atlanta for a while. Also, during that period, we weren’t building buildings. But in St. Louis, there was a period there where I was on the plane along with some other people about every eight weeks at least, sometimes six; going to St. Louis because we were doing a complete, total BPR of the processes of the St. Louis Records Center, the military personnel records; specifically because there had been such a back log of requests that had been building up, attributed partly to a buy out that occurred in—’93?, ’92. It’s the only buy out I’m aware of that the Archives has ever participated in. It wasn’t managed well. The theory behind a buyout is that you are giving somebody up to \$25,000 to retire early, with the theory being: since you are trying to cut what your resources are, what resources are needed that you don’t fill the job behind. It’s buy out and then the vacancy goes away. Well, that only works if your targeting jobs you know you don’t have to fill. The Archives just didn’t do that well, and offered it basically to anybody who wanted to take it. So my boss, Joe Magronagal, took it, the head of NA. You think we’re not going to fill the NA job? You know, it didn’t make a whole lot of sense. 50 of the most experienced technicians at St Louis took the buyout, which

meant that there was a huge backlog that already existed. You had 50 of your most experienced people deciding that they were going to leave, which just created a horrible mess out at St. Louis. Plus, these are people who had never seen a computer, didn't have telephones on their desks at all. I mean it was such a manual paper driven... We're talking 2,000,000 cubic feet of military personnel files. When we first went out there, [laughs] and you go out and go through their offices, it was just records everywhere, just stacked up. I mean I don't know how anybody knew where anything was. Unfortunately, they didn't know where everything was. We were in a position where you didn't really know where the back log was, because people would get tired of waiting to hear about their initial request. So they would go to their local VA office, and another one would go in. Then they would get upset, because they didn't hear anything. So they would go to their Congressman, and another request would come in. So you got three or four requests, which is really only one, but you don't have any system for figuring out what you've got. So for three years we totally worked on redoing all of the processes out at St. Louis; introducing computers to a staff who had never seen a computer, introducing the idea that there's a telephone on your desk, and when you've got a question about what the person wants, you don't stick it in an envelope and send it back and say, "Send us more information." Pick up the phone and you call the person, and you try to get it worked out on the phone. Well, this was totally a new idea and concept. We totally reorganized into cores that were... They used to have the Navy Branch, Air Force Branch, Army Branch, and the Congressional Branch that was for getting the requests in. They haven't heard anything from us for a long time, and so the Congressman gets involved. That was a branch of probably some of the best and brightest, because they had to answer the question as fast as they could. So we reorganized to that each core would, could basically be assigned as the material came in. You had to learn. You weren't doing just Navy, weren't just doing Army. You weren't doing just Air Force. You're going to do it all. So a huge amount of developing training courses, training courses in specific how the different branches, how the military treated their records, how they were filed. The rules were different, what could be released, that sort of stuff. Also, training classes on how to use a computer. We developed basically a computer guide that would take somebody who had never done a request, answered a request before, and stepped them through all the processes for all the different kinds of requests that they would get, and they would get to do it online. I would say given the experience of building this building, Atlanta was a piece of cake compared to St. Louis. So it wasn't just building. [smiles]

Legloahec: [laughs] And the renovation of the Rotunda?

Thomas: Yeah, it wasn't just the Rotunda. I mean it was the whole building, because—the infrastructure, the plumbing, the electrical systems; pretty much had not been touched since the building was built in '34. Some of the things had been patched. Some of the systems--, kind of

the add onto the electrical systems, some of the computer systems, and so forth had been layered on top of old systems. We wanted to basically expand the experience for the people who were coming to the Archives. We wanted to show them just the Charters of Freedom, and we wanted to make the Charters of Freedom experience much more satisfying to everybody. So it was a matter of trying to get the resources. We also promised, I'll have to say, the people who were left at Archives I. It was important, not only for them, but also for the public and the Archives in total to keep the promise that we would after we built the new building that we would go back to AI. We would bring it up to state of the art, or as much as you can do state of the art in an old building. There were always limitations. We worked on how to get the money, because we are in a new game now. You can't sell bonds, you know; spread it out like a mortgage. You've got to get the total appropriation up front. One of the ideas, I have to give credit to Dave Millane, who was then the budget director. At the time, one of the things that we had been thinking on the financial side about how to get more resources for the agency, were the Record Centers; taking the record centers and making them a reimbursable program. One of the problems with the Record Centers was there was a continuous need for more space, more space to deal with the records that were coming from the agencies as they were being retired. Since it was totally dependent on appropriation, the regular OE appropriation for the National Archives, it meant that we often didn't, were not nimble enough to be able to get any money to support bringing new space on line in a timely fashion. We went through periods where we had to freeze taking accessions into the Record Centers, or limiting the accessions that could come in certain ways. So we really weren't serving the agencies and we weren't serving the archives, because the Record Centers are the way you get the permanent records into the Archives, under our custody/control until they are ready to be accessioned into the National Archives. It also meant that trying to eke out enough resources to bring at least some space online meant that we were crippling other programs that needed the resources. So David and I had been talking about the possibility of the Records Centers going reimbursable, because all, practically all the services that are provided by agencies by GSA, by OPM, had become reimbursable. The records center program was one of the last that had not. So we went through a process where we got the agency convinced. There was a committee, a huge committee. We looked at various options and basically got the agency behind going forward and making a proposal to OMB about going reimbursable. We had a sympathetic budget officer at the time, Kim Newman. What we were trying to do was get the Record Centers set up as a reimbursable program, which meant that we could charge the agency for the services provided. That would enable us to bring space on as it was required because the agencies were paying for it and the people top support those new records that were coming in. What we hoped to do was negotiate with OMB to retain at least some part of the appropriation for our appropriation that had been dedicated to the support of the record center program. Now, we didn't think we were going to be able to hold on to all of it. It was probably, well, a lot of good people working toward a good cause that enabled us to keep a major chunk of it. So that's how we negotiated back and forth. We were able to maintain, keep

some of the record center appropriation, and spread it out to other programs. Also, to use it for design money and things like that related to the renovation of the National Archives building.

Again, because you've got to get a design done, you've got to come up with good estimates before you could go and convince people this is something that's really worthwhile doing and that's what it's going to cost. So it was through that whole process that... You don't think of record centers having to do with the renovation of the National Archives building, but certainly it did. The connection, you got to follow the money.

Legloahec: So we are looking at one of your last steps, that was to become Deputy Archivist. How did that position come to you?

Thomas: Our Archivist at the time had Parkinson's, which affected his voice. So we would often go to meetings where we'd have to consult afterwards, "What did you hear that Allen said? Because you know we're not sure." He was very resistant to wearing a microphone or anything that would enhance his voice. After Lou decided that he was going to the (Liberato?) that was going to retire, Allen was thinking about who he wanted to be as his deputy. I wasn't particularly interested in being Deputy. I mean NA was a good good job, and you had involvement with every possible program in the National Archives. You could help guide where it was going through your ability to get resources to support it. I loved the construction part. It was just a very good job, so I was very happy where I was. Being somebody's deputy, you know, where you're not really running a program, I wasn't sure it was something I wanted to do. So I did not express any interest in that job, none. There were other office heads who did. So I was downtown one day, and had a meeting with Allen on some topic that I don't even remember. He was talking and I was really only hearing every fourth word he was saying. Then I laughed and he kind of looked expectantly at me, and I didn't know how to respond because I didn't really know what he was saying. [laughs] So I got up, walked out, and I'm walking down the hall. I'm beginning to kind of hear what he had said. Michael Kurtz was coming down the hall the other way, and he said, "How'd your meeting go?" I said, "You know, I think he just offered me the job of his Deputy Archivist, but I'm not really sure." [laughs] So he offered it to me again, and that time I actually heard all the words. He sort of convinced me that it was sort of my duty to do it. I still was reluctant, because I had a good job. So I told him at the time that I didn't... Lou had been one kind of Deputy, and that wasn't the kind of Deputy I wanted to be. Because Lou had taken on special projects, and headed some very important and records management things that were going on and so forth. I wanted—a better sense of being, continuing to be involved in all of the program areas. So I laid out some criteria. If I was going to become Deputy, then I wanted systematic review programs with the agencies, which Allen wasn't doing. I said, "I'll do them on my own, or we can do them together or whatever. But it seems to me that we need these kind of satisfying meetings. We need to know what's going on

in the agencies, coming up with a strategy how to run the agency.” Allen was more that willing to let me do anything I wanted to do. [smiles] So I agreed to become Deputy Archivist, and that went on for three years I guess before Allen left.

Legloahec: And then you say with Dr. Weinstein’s departure, you became acting Archivist of the United States. What was that experience like to be suddenly thrust to the top of the heap?

Thomas: Well, if it had only been running the agency internally, then it would have been no problem whatsoever. Because basically with my experience in NA, and with the way I was able to restructure the Deputy’s job under Allen, I mean that’s kind of what I was doing anyway. The difference was of course the demands on the public stuff that you have to do as Archivist. While I had done Congressional hearings for the appropriations staff, we were now going into a period of time where the oversight committees were getting involved. There were some really nasty things that were happening at the National Archives, the loss of the Clinton hard drive being one of them. I had to go up and try to explain how we could allow somebody to steal a hard drive with all of this information from the Clinton White House. I mean, there is no explanation. I mean there is no satisfactory explanation that you can provide to yourself or to anybody else outside. Yeah, it was difficult. I am glad that I had the appropriations experience so I wasn’t totally quaking in my boots as I was sitting at the table, but it wasn’t fun. The other fun public stuff, that’s not my thing either. But I got better at it as I went along. I certainly didn’t go out and seek speaking. You know, the Archivist of the United States gets requests to go speak anywhere and everywhere. That just isn’t something I wanted to do, but I did certainly all of the National Archives centered stuff. That was fine.

Legloahec: What do you think are the qualifications and background needed for the Archivist of the United States?

Thomas: You know, in my experience with the Archivists we had, and I started out under Burt Rhodes in 1970. Bert Rhodes had worked his way up through the system. I think he started as a grade 5 technician, or 4 technician, or maybe it was a grade 2 technician. You know, up through the system. If he had not had to spend most of his time trying to fend off GSA, he would have been an extraordinary Archivist, because he knew all of the programs. He was dedicated and personally involved and supportive. But circumstances, politics being what they were, he basically had to split his times. He doesn’t go down in history as the best Archivist, probably that we’ve ever had, but only because he wasn’t able to dedicate his time. But he had the right background for it. Of course, Dr. Warner—came in with a specific agenda. He carried out that agenda very well, but it also meant that he was dedicated to doing, getting us our independence. That took most of his time and attention. So did running the agency, figuring out a strategic where are we going, and so forth. Where we were going was trying to get out. [laughs] He had

Claudine, he had me, he had Jim you know, so we could spend our time more dedicated to what was the agency, the day-to-day operations and so forth as he made his contacts. We've gone through since independence, two long periods of time where we had acting Archivists, Dr. Burke and Trudy Peterson. That was not good for the agency. I mean truly in terms of the agency, it is not good to have an acting Archivist for that long a period of time. You need somebody who can be in charge, and there's no question that they are in charge. It isn't just a temporary thing and they aren't just holding the position until somebody comes. So we've had at six years of our twenty some years of independence, going on twenty-seven, anyway, we've had acting Archivists. That's not a good thing. Now, we're not unique. Archivist of the United States, as much as we may think it is an extraordinarily important job, when you have a new administration, and they're filling jobs, "Who's going to be the Secretary of Defense, Secretary of State..." those are the ones they're going to concentrate on. The Archivist is going to fall somewhere down. My time was shorter, but it wouldn't have been except that Tom Wheeler, who had been the President of the National Foundation, was also a fairly major player in the transition to the Obama administration. He was able to say, "We need to fill this job," otherwise I could have been acting Archivist for three years too. I mean, it's just the nature of the beast unfortunately.

Legloahc: So looking back at the previous three Archivists that you worked probably most closely with, so we've now had a librarian, a historian, and an administrator/politician. What do you see in each of those?

Thomas: Probably John Carlin, who spent almost ten years as Archivist of the United States. We probably made the most progress I would have to say. Of course he had ten years, you know Allen had three, the current one has been here a year and a half. So it's kind of hard to compare. I'm not sure all the politicians that I've encountered would come in with the same sort of openness that John did; in terms of not thinking that he knew everything that he needed to know to be Archivist of the United States. He certainly didn't. He was very open about the fact that he needed a lot of help. He certainly wasn't going to say he knew it all, because he didn't. He was there to learn. So if you got somebody who's open enough to come in with that kind of an attitude: he's not just saying it because people want to hear it, but really means it, then that goes a long way to being what you need. Obviously, he'd been a manager. He had managed a state. He was president of some small tech company in Kansas too. I mean he had run businesses. So for somebody who came without any kind of background that would say, "This is a person who should be Archivist of the United States," he did extraordinarily well.

Legloahec: Can you comment on the establishment of the Assembly? You mentioned it in one of your earlier answers about how the proposal by GSA to disperse the records...

Thomas: Which galvanized the creation of the Assembly.

Legloahec: Let's talk a little about the establishment of the Assembly.

Thomas: Well, I think it was—Archivists tend to be reserved and more introspective. You don't see them really leading the charges across the barricades, but in this case we had an administrator who had gone so far to just threaten basically the entire existence of the National Archives in what he was proposing. This did encourage the archival staff to get motivated, and to create the Assembly, which I think was an extraordinarily good thing. It was very helpful in terms of independence, because you had an independent voice, people who were willing to risk. I mean there was some risk involved in creating the Assembly, and in being involved with the Assembly activities because they're lobbying to say, "Our parent agency does not understand us, and we should not be a part of this agency." So in the same way that a lot of office heads and the Deputy Archivist, executive director, and so forth, were putting their careers on the line, I think a lot of the Assembly members were too at that time.

LeGloahec: Do you think that the Assembly is appropriately fulfilling its mission in its...?

Thomas: Well there's always been an issue from the very beginning about what was Union responsibility and what was the Assembly's responsibility. I think that's been worked out pretty much without too much difficulty over the years, but in the beginning there was this, "Ok that's working conditions, so that's Union responsibility." That's not something the that Assembly, that the administration of the agency can talk to the Assembly about because they're required by law to exclusively deal with the Union on those issues. I think that the Assembly has certainly—found a way to dedicate itself mainly to the professional responsibilities and activities of the people in the agency, and to reflect those sorts of concerns. I think like any organization, it kind of goes up and down depending on who's running the Assembly from time to time. They can probably get a little more involved if they wanted to. I think there's room for that.

LeGloahec: How do you view the role of professional organizations in general? For instance, can you comment on your activity in professional organizations? There's that 80 hours rule that staff are allowed for up to only 80 hours in professional activities and things like that. Where do

you see that work into the life of a National Archives employee?

Thomas: Well—because I was primarily in administration, I mean I’ve done presentations at SAA. I’ve been on committees and things like that, but I’ve not been one where SAA has been my other life outside of the National Archives. [laughs] I’ve actually been more involved in the ICA, than I have with SAA activities, and came to that through the construction of the building. I then became a member of the ICA Archival Building Committee for six to eight years, something like that. That had the advantage that you also got some trips to Europe out of it. [laughs] That was ok. I think it’s important for the National Archives employees to become part of the SAA. I mean it’s the professional organization that represents archivists. When I first came to the Archives, it was during a period of time when the other members of SAA were concerned that the National Archives had for too long dominated the administration of SAA. I can remember a point and time where the National Archives used to provide the editor and all of the support for the creation of *The American Archivist*, which is the journal of SAA. Ultimately that was moved into the SAA administration proper, and the National Archives cut off its support. They would have continued to support it, the SAA wanted that to happen. So we went through this period of time where National Archives employees didn’t feel very welcome into SAA. It was very difficult for people to get committee chairs, or get elected to the board. So that was kind of my initial involvement with SAA, it was at a time when the agency was pulling back from SAA, which maybe answers why I was more involved with ICA than SAA.

LeGloahec: If you know the Program Committee is sitting around the table, and they are planning a session or a panel presentation, and somebody says, “I know who we need to speak. We need Adrienne Thomas!” What’s that panel about? What do you think is your area of expertise if someone wants a topic to be covered? What are you going to be able to talk about?
Thomas: Planning, whether it’s construction, or whether it’s planning how to get support for particular programs, how to set up different programs. - I don’t think it matters specifically what the topic is, but it’s how you plan for, establish, and manage a program.

LeGloahec: You have obviously addressed some of the biggest challenges that the National Archives has faced over the course of your career. What’s left? What are the biggest challenges that are still facing the Archives today?

Thomas: Well, I think that the Archives has had so many agencies, had a period of where we were talking about austerity again. We’ve—between the time where we were part of GSA, where we got almost no support for our budgets, and a time where we went through the “Reagan Rifts,” where we lost a lot of good people, and the time the time it took to basically rebuild our

resource base and to get additional resources, I would say that right now in the comparison between the two of where we are now and when we were GSA, we're swimming in money. Nobody's going to believe that, but in the comparison between what resources were available to do things... Obviously we're headed to a period of time...It's going to be a prolonged period of time where all of the agencies are going to have to take budget cuts. So it's going to be very important for the National Archives to figure out with reduced resources, it would be stupid to try and do everything that we're doing now. All that means is we're not going to do anything very well. Having gone through just a couple of cycles most recently where we're trying to talk about the fact that we're starting the budget cut process, the budget that went forward in 2012 was a 10% cut from OE. It's a 10% cut on the entire NARA budget, and we were cushioned by the fact that we were at the point with ERA [Electronic Records Archive] where we were going to be cutting back a lot of money in ERA anyway, and put that towards making up the 10%. It helped us get to where we needed to be without a whole lot of pain, but we don't have that anymore. ERA is going to be at operational level, and we're going to be asked for 10% or 15% cuts. So far I haven't seen a whole lot of serious thinking about what is the core of what the National Archives needs to do. We would love to be involved in all these things we simply are not going to be able to do, and that is going to be really tough. You're going to go through some years next year, maybe the year after, where it's going to be one of those, "we got to take it across the board," which is not the way to do it. Then eventually you'll find out you can't do that. You just weaken every program. Then you'll have to start figuring out what's the core, huge challenge.

LeGloahec: What would you identify sort of as the most significant turning point, or turning points over the course of you 40 year career?

Thomas: For the agency, or for me personally? [smiles]

LeGloahec: Either. For you. We sort of talked about challenges, but let's...[do either one you like.]

Thomas: It's deciding to go into...you know I worked with Dr. O'Neil for like 4, 4 ½ years, and at that point it was like you don't continue to be an assistant for the Deputy Archivist much longer than that, not if you want to go somewhere else and move up in the agency. Figuring out where to go, obviously I had those 4 years seen all of the programs, which is very helpful in trying to decide where I wanted to go. [laughs] In that time period too, basically there were the office heads, there were the 3 people that were more important than the office heads: the Archivist, the Deputy, and NA Executive Director or head of administration. It was pretty—

clear to me that if I wanted to go into areas that I was really interested in, that were going to have an impact across the board, it was NA. I was right, not always but this time it worked out.

LeGloahec: [Obviously you chose right.] Looking at the many accomplishments you've had over the course of your career, can you identify one that you would like to be most remembered for?

Thomas: Well I suppose it's this building. It kind of has to be. You know, this is representative of the ability to figure out how to get resources. I mean it all goes back to "Do you have the money? Do you have the...", I'm looking for the right word, "Are you willing to risk?" In a lot of cases, in order to move forward, you have to take a risk. In this case, in this building, it was risking money that we didn't really have for this building in order to create the information that we needed in order to try and sell ourselves to OMB and to the Hill. In the case of this building, OMB was not supportive. So it was the risk of dealing directly with the Hill on this, knowing that the people of OMB were not happy about what you were doing, and kind of judging how much you can get away with. [laughs] I guess it would have to be the process by which you get support for the things that the National Archives needs at particular times, and in that case it was this building. We had needed it for 17, 18 years and had never had a chance. It was like recognizing the opportunity and taking some risks in order to move forward.

LeGloahec: How do you view NARA's reputation with other federal agencies? For instance, and you sort of commented on this in your earlier answers that...how have the changes in those agencies, when the administration changes over...how does that impact the work the National Archives is doing? And if you can identify something NARA could be doing differently as you commented that, "NARA needs to be significantly looking at how we're doing things."

Thomas: Well if you're looking at what are we going to support? What's the core mission? As far as I'm concerned, the core mission has to be getting the records into our custody. Maybe that means we're not going to be able to bring them into "1521" standard conditions, but I mean the most important thing is to get the records and make sure that they continue to exist. Then you work on getting them into the best, getting them preserved in the best possible way. Therefore, I think the one area we really cannot afford to cut, and we ought to be trying to increase our efforts in records management, dealing with the agencies. We have always been behind the curve. We've got records analysts who are dealing with 20 different agencies. It's kind of like the social workers with all their cases. It's the same sort of thing, but I think that's the most important thing that we need to improve upon, add more resources, even if that means taking some resources. That's what it's going to mean in the future, in the near future with the budget cuts. It's going to mean if you improve records management, it's going to be taking resources from other programs, but it is the important thing of getting the records.

LeGloahec: How do you respond to those federal agencies that tell us, “Oh, I’m not giving you my records. You can’t be trusted with them. Look, you’re losing records.” How do you respond to agencies that tell us that?

Thomas: Well I mostly don’t think we had that much of a problem with that. I mean there have at various times been agencies where they’ve created their own historical office: Navy, Energy, Army, some of the others, where for their own reasons wanted to retain their records. It hasn’t been that they didn’t trust us with the records. It’s simply that they got their own cadre of historians who want to write the history of the Navy or whatever. Of course, those things always go cyclical too, because the historians’ office in the Navy is not going to perceive to be the core mission for the Navy when their resources get cut. At those times records then are suddenly coughed up. I think the bigger problem is that we haven’t had enough people out there making the contacts in the agencies and explaining to them what their responsibilities are under the law, and what our responsibilities are; making sure there’s a relationship that is developed. I mean mostly that the agencies just want their records for as long as they need them to do their daily business, and after that they can care less for the most part. There are some agencies where that’s not true, the CIA being one. For the most part I think it’s our failure to have made the contacts and sold ourselves to the agencies on what the roles and missions are of them and us.

LeGloahec: Imagine for a moment you have the opportunity to stop yourself on the sidewalk in 1971, and to stop your 1971 self on your way to the National Archives. What are you going to say to yourself? What are you going to say to that person who’s starting out at the National Archives? What’s the piece of advice that you wish you had when you started?

Thomas: I guess at...I was so naïve then. I can’t tell you how naïve I was. [laughs] I guess it would be to pay more attention to the politics and who’s who, and who’s doing what to whom, and so forth. Although, sometimes that doesn’t serve you too well wither. Sometimes it’s better just to do your job, move on, and not get involved in the internal politics to the extent it’s possible. It’s probably smart to be a little more than I was at that time.

LeGloahec: What does the 30 second commercial for the National Archives sound like right now?

Thomas: I have no idea. I mean we’re in the midst of a complete redo of the organization of the National Archives.

LeGloahec: Do you think that’s necessary?

Thomas: No, no I think that if you look at the agency, and you looked at what’s working ok and where it’s not working so well, and concentrated on emphasizing the things that aren’t working well and doing something about those. That’s fine. It always needs doing because things don’t stay static, they change over time. Programs that were once just great over time for no reason,

different managers, different resource availability, it changes. It is a revolving picture, but to take the whole agency and basically rip it up and piece it back together in some strange organization that I don't think is going to work is not where we need to be, particularly at this time. I'm not sure we ever need to be there, but at a time when we are going to be facing really difficult times in terms of resources, it is [still] reorganizations even if they are small, cost money. This is going to cost a lot of money. I don't know where it's going to come from.



Adrienne C. Thomas, Acting Archivist of the United States, with President Barack Obama, 2009.
(Records of the National Archives)