

Honoring our system of Presidential libraries

Last week, it was my pleasure to join former President Bill Clinton in a special ceremony at the Clinton Library in Little Rock that honored NARA's Presidential libraries.

It was the "First Day of Issue" of a postage stamp commemorating the 50th anniversary of the Presidential Libraries Act, the legislation that created what has now become a nationwide system of Presidential libraries—invaluable resources for scholars, classrooms for students, and popular destinations for Americans of all ages.

The ceremony at the Clinton Library, and ceremonies held simultaneously at the other 10 Presidential libraries and the Nixon Library the same day, honored the legislation that allows NARA to accept privately-financed libraries, built to our standards and specifications, into our Presidential libraries system.

And it was my honor to read a special greeting we received from President George W. Bush, congratulating us on the issuance of the stamp, expressing his appreciation for those of us who work to preserve the records of our nation's past, and underscoring the importance of the resources the libraries offer.

My visit to the Clinton Library was the last stop on a trip that also took me to the Reagan Library in Simi Valley, CA, and the Johnson Library in Austin, TX.

I came home once again impressed with what goes on throughout our system of Presidential libraries: conferences and public forums in which experts gather to discuss new scholarship about Presidents and their times, educational activities that enlighten and engage students of all ages, and museum exhibits that shed new light not only on the public President but also on the private man and the forces that shaped his thinking.

While visiting the Reagan Library in Simi Valley, I toured the new Air Force One exhibit scheduled to open this fall and met with Nancy Reagan at her home. I had the opportunity to meet with the archival staff, all of whom have been working full time to process Reagan administration documents pertaining to Judge John Roberts, who is President Bush's nominee for the Supreme Court.

At the Johnson Library in Austin, I met with the staff and visited with Lady Bird Johnson and other members of the



Johnson family. I was briefed on a pilot program underway there to make existing exhibits more interactive through the use of hand-held computers while touring the library. The program is being

tested with local fifth graders.

At the Clinton Library, I had time with President Clinton and met each staff member individually while touring the library. Our newest library holds the greatest number of Presidential records. I had more time than at the dedication to visit the exhibits, and I was impressed with the public spaces. I watched as hundreds of people toured through the museum, fascinated with the interactive displays and memorabilia on exhibit.

And at each site, I visited with the representatives of foundations, which provide us with added resources that support exhibitions, public affairs programs, and educational activities that would not be possible otherwise. They are examples of how valuable public-private partnerships are to the Presidential libraries and to NARA.

These partnerships extend to the University of Arkansas School of Public Service at the Clinton Library and the University of Texas School of Public Affairs at the Johnson Library. Both work closely with the libraries to create research opportunities for students and lectures and programs that enrich university life.

For full coverage of the First-Day-of-Issue ceremonies at our libraries, see the articles on page 1 of this *Staff Bulletin* and at www.archives.gov/presidential-libraries/news/stamp/.

As we all know, the first Presidential library in the Federal system was the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, privately financed and opened in 1941 as part of the National Archives. But it was not until 14 years later that there was a law in place—the Presidential Libraries Act of 1955—that made permanent the procedures used to establish the Roosevelt Library as part of the National Archives. Within 10 years of the act, former Presidents Truman, Eisenhower, and

Hoover built their libraries and turned them over to the National Archives.

The origins of the Presidential Libraries Act, and its development over several years, were detailed in an article in the Summer 2005 issue of *Prologue* by Raymond Geselbracht and Timothy Walch. It is posted on our public web site at www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2005/summer/preslib.html.

We also have two more Presidential libraries on the horizon for inclusion in our system: the conversion next year of the private Nixon Library in Yorba Linda, CA, into a Federally-owned and -operated facility and the establishment of a George W. Bush Library at a site yet to be announced.

Americans have always held a certain fascination about the 42 men who have served as their President, and for all the Presidents since Herbert Hoover, the libraries have been a focal point for that interest. They also demonstrate that we meet the test set out by Franklin D. Roosevelt in dedicating his library in June 1941. The dedication of a library, he said, requires a nation to believe in three things:

"It must believe in the past. It must believe in the future. It must, above all, believe in the capacity of its own people so to learn from the past that they can gain in judgment in creating their own future."

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Allen Weinstein". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

ALLEN WEINSTEIN
Archivist of the United States

*This column originally appeared
in the August 2005 issue
of the NARA Staff Bulletin.*