

The National Archives and the world

Each year, the National Archives Building in Washington, DC, welcomes more than a million visitors who come for a variety of reasons: to view the Charters of Freedom and the unique Public Vaults exhibit and/or to engage in genealogical and other research projects using the more than 2 billion pages of documents found in this building alone.

Add to this number the additional hundreds of thousands of visitors to our 12 Presidential libraries, 14 regional archives, and other facilities, including those in the Washington area. A substantial number of these visitors are from other countries, and the staff of the National Archives takes pride in welcoming them from virtually every corner of the globe.

We share with some countries—Canada, for example, and the United Kingdom—a range of programs attesting to close collaboration with our counterparts there. At the same time, NARA is the largest single dues-paying member in the major organization of national archivists and records keepers, the International Council of Archivists, and remains active in efforts to strengthen the programs and prospects for that body.

The National Archives has played a special leadership role in the past three years in forging strong bonds among the archivists of the world's great democracies, helping to create informal links among the national archivists of the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom and Scotland, France, Germany, Japan, Australia, Switzerland, and others.

The National Archives has also increased its training programs to assist less-developed nations in improving their archival and records management practices, including multiple sessions of the Modern Archives Institute.

We also launched in the past few years the Distinguished Foreign Visitors Program, which welcomes heads of state and government, foreign ambassadors, and other high-ranking officials to Archives I or to any of our four dozen facilities elsewhere in the country.

These visits often include a special tour involving original documents related to U.S. relations with their own country's government and citizens. Government



leaders from every continent have visited the National Archives as part of this program, and we recently welcomed United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-moon for a unique tour.

Groups of ambassadors representing various regions of the world, including Europe, Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean, have found their way to the Archives, visits that have involved nearly every country in the diplomatic corps. The Distinguished Foreign Visitors Program led the State Department's newly designated chief of protocol, Ambassador Nancy Brinker, to request that the National Archives host her first reception last October for the entire diplomatic corps—an event usually held at the State Department.

I should note that many of our foreign visitors come primarily not to view our archival treasures but to inspect our buildings. Our modern, well-equipped Archives II facility in College Park has become the more-or-less “gold standard” among modern archives. A number of foreign government officials come specifically to study its construction and operation.

In turn, several members of our senior staff travel abroad periodically to participate in mutually valuable conferences and seminars in order to share our knowledge of records management and preservation issues with our international colleagues.

I will close this brief survey of the National Archives' global outreach by returning to an earlier subject. Our closest partner in these transnational efforts remains Library and Archives Canada (LAC).

A visible example of that partnership will be the opening in Ottawa in May 2008 of a major exhibit (with work by the archives curators of both Canada and the United States) on the Treaty of Paris, which ended the Revolutionary War

and formally recognized the United States of America as an independent nation. The exhibit will move to Archives I later in the year.

The head of Canada's LAC, Ian Wilson, and I, as well as members of our senior staffs, exchange visits regularly and are otherwise in close cooperative contact with one another. We are in the process of developing similar partnerships with the national archivists of the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Australia, and other countries.

The National Archives of the United States proudly conveys its vast documentary resources on American history to interested people throughout the world, both at home and abroad, and will continue to welcome our visitors with creative exhibits and programs.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Allen Weinstein".

ALLEN WEINSTEIN
Archivist of the United States

*This column originally appeared
in the November 2007 issue
of the NARA Staff Bulletin.*