

National Archives and Records Administration

Strategy for Digitizing Archival Materials for Public Access, 2015-2024

December 2014

Introduction

The National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) is the Government agency that identifies, preserves, and provides access to the U.S. Government's vast holdings of archival materials. These records are selected and preserved to protect Citizens' rights, ensure government accountability and document the national experience. Our archival holdings number more than 12 billion pages of unique documents plus electronic material, maps, charts, aerial and still photographs, artifacts, as well as motion picture, sound, and video recordings. The records we hold belong to the public and our mission is to drive openness, cultivate public participation, and strengthen our nation's democracy through public access to high-value government records.

This ***Strategy for Digitizing Archival Materials for Public Access, 2015-2024*** derives from the NARA Strategic Plan ([U.S. National Archives and Records Administration Fiscal Year 2014-2018 Strategic Plan](#)) and our goal is to expand public access to our important historical holdings through digitization. Our Strategic Plan articulates that the National Archives will strive to: (1) Provide public access to the most important archival materials of the Federal Government, (2) Connect with customers, (3) Maximize NARA's value to the Nation, and (4) Build our future through our people. Digitizing NARA's archival and important historical materials is integral to achieving these goals and our continued success. In developing this document we examined NARA's digitization efforts and activities over the past decade, considering those areas in which we have enjoyed successes, as well as those areas in which there are opportunities for improvement or changes in direction or focus. Furthermore, the insights and comments of NARA's stakeholders, both internal and external, have been invaluable and are reflected in this document.

Scope

This document outlines our strategy to digitize the vast and diverse range of permanent records that are stored and available to the public throughout NARA's nationwide system, including our Washington, D.C. archives buildings, regional archives facilities,

federal record centers, and presidential libraries. Separate from our efforts to address permanent records in our custody that are “born digital,” the focus of this strategy is how we plan to make our analog records available to the public online as quickly, efficiently, and cost-effectively as possible.

The strategy thus puts forth a comprehensive, system-wide approach to NARA's digitizing activities.

Digitizing Objectives

NARA has identified the following objectives for digitizing our holdings for public access:

- Provide online access to an ever increasing number of NARA’s holdings.
- Make our digitized material and metadata available in our online catalog for reuse on other platforms.
- Maximize our value to the nation by encouraging private industry and others to reuse our digital content in new and creative ways.
- Advance the preservation of records by reducing wear and tear on the originals. While digitizing for access has some preservation benefits, it is not the same as digitization for preservation reformatting. We will not destroy or de-accession any originals that are digitized for access.
- Provide access to those materials that can no longer be accessed in their original format.
- Maximize the efficient and effective use of resources to carry out digitization and achieve cost-saving benefits whenever possible. For example, original records that have been digitized may, if appropriate, be relocated to less expensive archival storage locations. Partnerships, where the partner provides resources for digitizing, expand the scale of digitizing beyond what NARA itself can do. Digitizing high-use records improve ease of access, while decreasing the cost of providing access to records.
- Improve our service to customers by responding to their evolving expectations and with consideration of NARA's available resources.
- Promote online access to Government information by the public.

Current Public Access to Online Content

To ensure that users everywhere can access all of our digitized records, we will continue to make the National Archives' catalog a hub for discovering NARA's collection of records. The catalog is available on our website, <http://www.archives.gov/research/search/> and currently contains series-level descriptions of more than 85% of our permanent records, as well as more than 2,000,000 digitized copies of our holdings.

Although most of our holdings are currently available only at the archival facility in which they are stored, our digitization efforts are continuously increasing public access to our records. Through the catalog, our customers, regardless of their proximity to our holdings, will have access to digital copies of NARA records on the web. Furthermore, the catalog will provide the essential archival context of these digital images.

Definition of Digitizing for Public Access

For the purposes of this document, "digitizing" should be understood not just as the act of scanning an analog document into digital form, but as a series of activities that result in a digital copy being made available to end users via the Internet or other means for a sustained length of time. The activities include:

- Document identification and selection
- Document preparation (including preservation, access review and screening, locating, pulling, and refiling)
- Basic descriptive and technical metadata collection sufficient to allow retrieval and management of the digital copies and to provide basic contextual information for the user
- Safety of the material being digitized
- Digital conversion
- Quality control of digital copies and metadata
- Providing public access to the material via online delivery
- Providing online ordering for reproduction services at quality or quantities beyond the capacity of an end user to create themselves
- Reviewing the existing IT infrastructure to ensure that it can sustain long term growth, storage, and preservation of digital copies and metadata

- Utilizing a management system that ensures the authenticity, reliability, usability and integrity of the digital copies

Approaches to Digitizing

NARA will use a combination of five approaches to strive towards our strategic goals and make our holdings available online:

Approach One: Partnerships

To date, digitization partnerships have delivered the vast majority of online content available through the catalog. NARA has shown that partnerships with private, public, non-profit, educational, and Government institutions to digitize and make available holdings can be a powerful model.

Partnerships will continue to be a large contributor to our online content. The majority of the records digitized through partnerships have been genealogical in nature. To expand upon this success, NARA will cultivate and attract additional partners from other fields and different business models, which will encourage the digitization of a greater diversity of our collection. These partners may perform digitization themselves, or provide funding for NARA to manage the digitization process, or propose other options. Given the breadth and complexity of NARA's holdings, we will continue to be flexible and open to multiple types and structures for our partnerships.

To ensure that NARA maintains its public trust, NARA established a set of principles to guide partnership agreements that it continues to follow. These principles are found at our web site <http://www.archives.gov/digitization/principles/>. A list and description of current partnerships into which NARA has entered formally can be found here <http://www.archives.gov/digitization/partnership/>.

Approach Two: Crowdsourced Digitization

On a daily basis, researchers come to NARA facilities and digitize permanent records. The challenge facing NARA is to leverage the public's interest and digitization activities to populate our online catalog. NARA will establish and publish standards, such as technical and metadata, for use by the public if they wish to contribute their records to our catalog. NARA will pursue multiple tactics to engage the public to share their digitized copies of our records. These tactics could take many forms, but three possible options are:

- Establishing a Contributor status for individuals interested in donating images and metadata in the appropriate format to NARA

- Crowdsourcing digitization by providing scanning stations for use by the public in NARA research rooms
- Soliciting digitized material from researchers and authors

Approach Three: Agency Transfers

NARA will encourage agencies to transfer digital copies of analog material they have scanned for inclusion in the catalog as access copies. We will support agency digitization efforts by providing defined metadata elements for such transfers. With defined digitization guidelines, such as the [Federal Agency Digitization Guidelines Initiative](#), and metadata elements, digital access copies of unrestricted archival records will flow efficiently into the catalog and will be made available to the public. Electronic records that are transferred to us for permanent retention are outside the scope of this document.

Approach Four: Culture of Digitization

All internal digitization of unrestricted archival records will be included in the National Archives' catalog. By incorporating digitization and a focus on online access into our work processes, NARA will ensure images can be efficiently added to our catalog. Business processes for archival digitization will ensure that content can flow seamlessly into the catalog. All workflows, including preservation reformatting and vendor and grant recipient digitization, will be utilized. NARA will also continue to gather and make available on the web archival materials that we have already digitized in the course of performing our agency functions.

Approach Five: NARA Digitization Projects

NARA will invest its own resources to conduct digitizing projects with materials that may not be suitable or appropriate for partnerships. For example, we might digitize our "treasure vault," or at-risk material that only NARA can handle, or high-interest materials for which no partner can be found. These projects could take a variety of forms, with a variety of funding sources including education or exhibit related digitization. This digitization will also serve as a key preservation action for providing access to fragile and/or high demand records, obsolete formats and deteriorated records. In these cases, digitization ensures that the records will be available in the future.

Key Enabling Factors

There are many factors that will contribute to the ultimate success of this Digitization Strategy. This section is intended to highlight the critical factors that must be addressed by NARA for its digitization objectives to be met.

- Staffing Resources – With this strategy, NARA is acknowledging that digitizing for public access is a significant business process that crosses multiple business units. NARA will need to develop a separate human resource plan to support this digitization business process.
- IT Infrastructure – Along with staffing, NARA will require an IT plan to support digitization that includes bandwidth, storage, the ability to share images and metadata across business units, among other requirements.
- Policy and Guidance for Digitization Activities: NARA will promulgate policy and guidance that provides further implementation direction as business units begin implementing the strategy
- Technical Digitization Standards: NARA will develop technical digitization requirements for the approaches outlined above to ensure uniformity and standardization.
- Funding Strategies: The size and scope of NARA's collection is such that traditional funding sources may not be sufficient to achieve our digitization goals. NARA will seek out and explore other options and relationships to digitize and make content available.

Prioritizing Digitization Projects

This strategy does not intend to enumerate specific sets of holdings and identify the order in which they should be digitized. Our holdings are too vast and our users too varied to do that in any meaningful way. Rather, this document establishes, at a high level, basic principles for prioritizing our efforts:

- Candidates for digitization projects will be prioritized according to established criteria for significance and use.
- Candidates for digitization projects will be prioritized in order to achieve a demonstrated high priority preservation benefit for the agency.
- Funding is available or likely to be available and sustainable for the project.

In order to manage and publicize our efforts and to serve as many user groups as possible, NARA will maintain a public list of its completed digital projects. Although these projects will be developed and implemented by a variety of NARA units throughout the country, we will strive to manage them as a coherent, coordinated portfolio. This list also will be available on our web site at www.archives.gov/digitization/.

Future Revisions

NARA takes its stewardship responsibility very seriously. We recognize that we are entrusted with the care of America's documentary evidence, and that these materials are an invaluable public resource.

The principles embodied in this document are intended as guidelines rather than hard and fast rules. We expect that the plan will undergo revision given the fast pace of technical change and the broadening of our own experience. Accordingly, we will review this document at least annually, and if we make significant changes to our strategy, we will seek public comment on the new version.