

# Preserving *the* Archives' Past

BY JESSIE KRATZ, *Historian of the National Archives*



At the National Archives Assembly's 2010 fall meeting, Archivist of the United States David S. Ferriero moderated a panel discussion on the diverse roles federal historians play in supporting agency missions.

Ferriero recalled that the first Archivist of the United States, R.D.W. Connor, was a prominent historian at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill when President Franklin D. Roosevelt nominated him for the position.

Yet at the time of Ferriero's remarks, the National Archives itself—the one federal agency whose mission is preserving the documentary records of the American government—lacked its own dedicated history staff.

Just over two years later, the Archives created the position of National Archives Historian in the Office of Strategy and Communications. This marked the first time the Archives sought permanent staff to document its own history, though many agency employees have temporarily and unofficially filled that role over the years.

During the hiring process, Ferriero acknowledged that the agency's first historian would initially need to do an assessment of the current state of agency history and plan the structure of the historian's office.

In March 2013 I was selected to be the first historian of the National Archives, and upon accepting the position, I created the National Archives History Office to ensure our agency's history is retained and made more accessible. I spent several months planning the office's primary operations and accumulating the most important sources documenting our agency's past. In doing so, I hoped to create a solid infrastructure that will outlast my tenure as historian and allow the office to preserve our agency's history for the long term.

After establishing the History Office, I had to determine what exactly an agency historian should actually do on a day-to-day basis. With limited time, resources, and budget, making a realistic plan of action presented quite a challenge. Luckily, I have close ties to other federal history offices from whom I could seek guidance.

I've been in the historian position for two years now. Most of my work has been educational outreach, such as writing about

significant historical events in our agency's history for both internal and public use.

Beyond research and writing, I perform reference work—answering requests from our own agency staff, other government agencies, journalists, the media, authors, and the general public. Many requests, such as those from the Archivist, journalists, or members of Congress, need immediate responses, requiring extensive knowledge of the history and workings of the agency. Therefore, if I don't know something, I need to know where to find it quickly. In these cases, the History Office's growing collection, as well as several colleagues who are well-versed in agency history, have proved invaluable.

I also engage in a number of other activities—I manage a thriving internship program, conduct oral histories, give talks, serve as an expert panelist at historical conferences and meetings, curate online exhibits, advise records managers, and digitize historical documents to post online (including thousands of historical photos of the National Archives). I have also created a new web page that includes information on National Archives history and links to relevant resources. I will continue to update this page, which is available by visiting [www.archives.gov/about/history/](http://www.archives.gov/about/history/).

I see any activity that makes the history of the National Archives more accessible as part of my mission—ensuring that staff and the general public understand what we do and why we do it.

Unfortunately, recent budget cuts have forced many federal history offices to cut back. I am hoping to resist that trend and in the next few years grow and expand the office in both staff and profile.

The History Office's first two years have created a solid foundation for preserving agency history and promoting the long-standing importance of the Archives' mission. The office's continuing success will depend on a sustained commitment to providing our history program with the resources it deserves.

In future columns, I will write about what we are doing to strengthen the National Archives History Office, important discoveries we have found relating to our own history, and any additional information of general interest about the National Archives.

You can reach the National Archives History Office by sending an email to [archives.historian@nara.gov](mailto:archives.historian@nara.gov).