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Donald B. Schewe

Jimmy Carter Presidential Library and Museum

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TRANSFERS AND TRANSFORMATIONS: PROCESSING THE PAPERS OF JIMMY CARTER

Donald B. Schewe

At noon on 20 January 1981 the world's attention was focused on two dramatic events unfolding simultaneously: In Washington, D.C., a new president of the United States was taking the oath of office, completing a peaceful transfer of power that upheld a nearly two hundred-year tradition; while half a world away, Americans who had been held hostage for 444 days sat in an Algerian jet on the end of a runway in Teheran, waiting permission to depart on their journey to freedom. At the same time, but little noticed, nineteen tractor-trailer trucks were leaving Washington for Atlanta, Georgia, carrying out yet another historic transfer--the last presidential papers to leave the White House as the personal property of a former president.

When George Washington became the first former president in 1797, he established the precedent, taking with him to Mount Vernon the papers generated by his terms in office. In the succeeding years chief executives followed Washington's example, so that by the turn of the twentieth century, custom (and lack of any other policy) made it virtually unquestioned that former presidents took their papers with them as they left office. The result was an uneven recording of presidential administrations, sometimes because the papers were well cared for but largely closed to research--as in the case of the Adamses--but more often because the family lacked a clear appreciation of the historical importance of the materials they inherited. The Madison papers were sold in small batches to underwrite his stepson's gambling and liquor obligations. The Andrew Jackson papers were largely destroyed when the outbuilding

they were stored in at the Hermitage burned. Some, such as the Harding papers, even suffered the deprivations of family members sorting through them to "clean up" the record.

In the early part of the twentieth century, historical scholars trained in the new school of scientific history with its emphasis on the use of original sources attempted to increase the availability of the records of past administrations. During the 1920s, this effort succeeded in getting money appropriated to the Library of Congress earmarked for the purchase of the papers of former presidents, specifically those of Washington, Jefferson, and Madison. They also succeeded in getting several presidents to give their papers to an institution which would care for them properly--the Library of Congress, a university library, or a state historical society. This course proved unsatisfactory on two counts: There was a good deal of institutional rivalry, and the papers of presidents were growing in volume as the United States government grew in size and as the country emerged as a world power. The size and complexity of the presidents' papers, more than anything else, militated against their being placed in existing facilities.

Franklin Roosevelt was well aware of these problems when, during his second administration, he asked a blue ribbon panel of historians and archivists to advise him. Roosevelt had a keen sense both of history and of the historical importance of his own materials. The recommendations of the panel were adopted, and the result set the example for handling presidential materials--private funds were secured to construct a building to house the presidential papers and display them to the public; and, once completed, the land, building, and papers were turned over to the federal government. Such a solution not only warded off the ravages of an uncaring or overprotective family, it also made open and equal access to the papers a reality. By 1950 (five years after his death), 85 percent of Roosevelt's papers as president were opened to research--the same year the first scholar received permission to use the Abraham Lincoln papers.

The system initially proved a great success, and each president following Roosevelt chose to adopt the same formula. In fact, Herbert Hoover thought it a good enough plan to build his own library in 1963, withdrawing his presidential papers from Stanford where he had earlier placed them. In 1955, the Presidential Libraries Act established a systematic way for former presidents to donate their materials and the federal government to accept them.

The question of presidential ownership of the papers of his administration was seriously questioned when Richard Nixon, leaving office under threat of impeachment, executed an agreement with the administrator of General Services which called for destruction of several segments of his materials, most notably the Watergate tapes. The outcry that followed resulted in Congress passing legislation which, in effect, seized the Nixon materials and established a National Study Commission on Records and Documents of Public Officials. While Mr. Nixon challenged the act in court, the Public Documents Commission began meeting, and it was clear from the outset that the tradition of presidential ownership of administration materials would come under heavy scrutiny.

Thus the situation stood as Jimmy Carter assumed the presidency in January 1977. Early in his administration, Carter indicated to the archivist of the United States his intention to donate his papers to the government and build a presidential library. By this time the Supreme Court had ruled on the Nixon case, expressly holding the seizure of Nixon's papers to be a *class of one*, thereby clarifying the legal position of President Carter's papers as his own property.

The national archives began to work with the Carter administration to plan for the placement of the papers and building of the library. A liaison office was established in the Old Executive Office Building, and plans for handling the massive volume of presidential papers were reviewed. Two archivists from the national archives were assigned to the liaison office: One would stay in Washington to assist the incoming administration, and the second, with his experience of

working with the materials from the time of creation, would go to the presidential library.

The liaison office worked with White House officials to bring a systematic approach to the handling and preservation of presidential material. John Dunn of the Georgia Department of Archives and History was invited to Washington to lend expertise similar to what he had provided Governor Carter in Georgia, and working together with national archives representatives, they established the first real system for both preservation and disposal of presidential papers in the White House. Using this systematic approach, much of what had been accumulated in previous administrations, only to be disposed of later by presidential library staffs after several costly moves and lengthy storage, was routinely sampled and disposed of by the White House central files staff.

These procedures need not be detailed here, but a few examples might serve to illustrate the types of material consigned directly to oblivion. The White House receives literally millions of Christmas, birthday, and anniversary greetings annually. Prior to the Carter administration, the secretarial staff had screened these against a master list of presidential friends and acquaintances. Those not on the list had been relegated to the files, usually unopened. During the Carter administration, the secretarial screening took place, but those not from friends or acquaintances were routinely sampled and the bulk ground into pulp for recycling. Another example, the White House is a target for "mail in" campaigns, often preprinted postcards to which the sender need only affix name and address. A highly organized campaign of this type can generate millions of such postcards. These, too, were routinely sampled and recycled. One such mail in campaign could potentially have caused a minor crisis had not this system been in place. In 1980, the buildings trades workers began mailing in short pieces of two-by-four protesting the Carter administration's housing policy, and eventually four tractor-trailers full of these unusual "postcards" were disposed of without the cost of shipment to a presidential library. While exact figures of

amounts disposed of were not kept, perhaps a third, or roughly fourteen million pages (not counting two-by-fours), were thus eliminated before the materials even went to file.

The liaison office served another valuable function. It collected much of the material necessary in processing and providing reference service at a presidential library. These include White House telephone books that document office numbers and staff relationships; internal memoranda on policy and procedures; instructions to staff on actions during visiting dignitaries' tours; and instruction manuals, files manuals and the like. All of these ephemera might or might not be saved by clerks and secretaries but they will prove invaluable to archivists and researchers.

The Carter administration introduced another innovation to the handling of presidential materials--the computer. Starting with the basic filing system established during the Kennedy administration, the White House central files staff began recording on computer tape information about the myriad of documents in the subject file--a file that comprises about one-third of the president's papers. As the administration progressed, other valuable information was added to the computer tapes--file locations for presidential gifts, dates and times of presidential appointments and meetings, and the votes of congressmen on roll calls. By the end of the administration, plans were underway to control fully the flow of paper within the White House on the computer. This would have provided an invaluable historical record--who saw what piece of paper when. Unfortunately, this system (labeled C-Trak for correspondence tracking) was not fully implemented by 1981, and only a small part of Carter administration materials are covered.

By the time the Carter materials started on their journey to Atlanta, the archival staff that would be dealing with them had a better organized, more concise body of materials with a better retrieval system than any previous body of presidential papers. This does not mean that the processing of the Carter materials is done or will be accomplished quickly. While the computer and

White House filing manuals provide a hint where materials might be found, they are not the comprehensive finding aids necessary for day-to-day reference work. Additionally, they cover only about a third of the presidential materials. While the White House filing staff did an excellent job of arranging the materials, the arrangement was to facilitate retrieval for the day-to-day needs of the White House, not the needs of historical researchers. Virtually no preservation work on the materials was done, and none of the materials had been screened for donor restrictions of classified documents. This mentions only part of the work to be done on the paper records; there are also presidential gifts, photographs, motion picture film, audio tapes and video tapes.

To complicate matters further, the processing began at the height of a government retrenchment period, and the staffing level of the Carter project had not reached the level necessary to insure prompt processing of the materials. In spite of the difficulties with budgets and staffing, the work has had to continue. Some innovative approaches were needed to complete the processing in a reasonable time frame.

First, the Carter project had a distinct advantage in having a computer. While this cannot do the work of processing, it can help with the production of finding aids. So, instead of the more complex finding aids usual to archival depositories, the staff will be producing those of the shelf list variety. Using a check off sheet containing the sixty basic filing entries for the White House central files, the staff will compile information on the balance of the president's papers not already in the computer. This information will later be entered in the data base, and the computer will become the finding aid for all the collections, not just the one-third or so of the president's papers now covered. Thus, a conscious decision was made to provide a lower than usual level of finding aid to researchers initially, hoping to provide eventually a much more detailed finding aid through the use of the computer. Meanwhile, the check off sheets, which will be used to add information to the data base in the computer, will provide a form of finding aid

which, if laborious to use, will still enable a researcher to find all the information he would normally seek.

Second, the Carter project could not hire a staff like other projects had done. Staffing had to come through transfers from the national archives and other presidential libraries. This also has its advantages. The staff is experienced and does not need to be trained. By utilizing the experience of these staff members, the project combines the best features of other institutions and thus provides the best processing and reference service within limited resources.

The way processing work was allocated had to be rethought. Perhaps it would be possible to segment collections, use intermittent employees on some tasks, student interns and volunteers on others, and reserve the more difficult arrangement and review tasks for the few experienced archivists available to the staff. Further, collections themselves could be segmented so less experienced staff could perform tasks traditionally reserved for the most experienced archivists.

Before any of this processing could begin, a complete evaluation of the Carter materials was necessary. Not only would the staff have to assess the quantity of material and its physical state, they would also have to make some rather critical judgments about the types of restrictions likely to be applied. The complexity of arrangement and description problems to be encountered, the nature of preservation actions to be accomplished, and the level of processing necessary to provide reference service on the papers also had to be considered.

Once this evaluation was completed, a plan for processing the papers was laid out. First priority was given to those portions of the president's papers likely to receive the most reference inquiry. The one exception is the national security material which will probably have a 90 percent closure rate for the next few years. This material is receiving the minimal care necessary to insure its preservation and comply with the security requirements that must be applied.

Levels of processing were established, with those portions apt to receive heavy use slated for processing to a high level. Portions of some interest, but not likely

to generate heavy researcher demand--such as the files of the White House social office (who sat where at which banquet while such and such was served) or the files of the White House operating units (who ordered how many paper clips, from whom and when)--will not be processed until all other processing work is done. Still other portions lend themselves to an alternative of taking basic preservation actions but not reviewing until researcher demand mandates it. The White House name file is a good example of this--correspondence with untold numbers of Americans who wrote the White House and whose correspondence is filed alphabetically. When a researcher requests a particular name, the file will be reviewed before it is released to him.

Experienced archivists will recognize that the procedures outlined for processing papers are not innovations. However, the degree to which the Carter project staff is committed to these new ideas, and their commitment of time in the future to such activities as review on demand, is, perhaps, unprecedented. This seems the only alternative if processing and opening are to be achieved in a reasonable time.

Finally, the Carter project has one other significant advantage that future presidential libraries will not have. The Carter papers will be the last processed and opened as presidential papers. In 1977, the Public Documents Commission recommended a change in the laws governing presidential materials. The following year, Congress passed and the president signed the Presidential Records Act of 1978. The act is applicable to all materials created after 20 January 1981 and, thus, will be applied to Ronald Reagan's papers and those of his successors.

The act creates two categories of material: *presidential records*--by far the largest category of materials--which, from the moment of creation, are the property of the United States government; and *presidential papers* which, like the papers of former chief executives, the president owns and may dispose of at his pleasure. Presidential records are those documents created by a president or his staff in the course of carrying out the constitutional and legal duties of the office of president.

Presidential papers are those created in the political and personal roles he performs. A president may choose to donate his personal papers to the government and build a library, just as in the past, but the rules governing access to the two types of material differ. Presidential papers will continue to be controlled by the donor's deed of gift and the restrictions placed on them, just as in the past. Presidential records will be closed for a period of five years to allow archivists time to process them, and the president may place certain restrictions on them for up to twelve years, but thereafter the records will be controlled by the myriad of agency rules and restrictions applicable to all government documents.

Some complications face archivists processing presidential materials in the future: Is the document a record or a paper; if it is a record, is it subject to the donor's restrictions for the twelve-year period; if not subject to the donor's restrictions, which of the some two hundred agencies of the federal government have an interest in it, and what are their restrictions? Thus, while the Presidential Records Act provides no positive advantage at the present time with the Carter papers, the project staff feels fortunate to be processing the papers of the last president to transfer his materials to the United States under his own deed of gift.