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Sources of Presidential Papers and Documents on the Web

By Barbara H. Garavaglia

The president of the United States and his staff produce a large volume of documents and other materials. These documents fall into two major categories. The first category is comprised of archival presidential materials such as papers, documents, visual and audio records of the presidency, and the personal papers of the president, his family, associates, and friends. This category of presidential material is primarily of interest to historians, political scientists, and other scholars because it provides “a comprehensive view of our Presidents and...[U.S.] history.”¹ The second category is comprised of presidential documents with legal effect used by the president to exercise presidential authority and through which the president also manages the operations of the federal government.² This category includes executive orders, proclamations, reorganization plans, administrative orders, findings, determinations, memoranda, executive agreements, presidential nominations, messages to Congress, and signing statements. This article provides information on how to find free sources of material in both categories on the web.

Archival Presidential Papers

Archival presidential research material is physically housed in presidential libraries, beginning with the papers of former President Herbert Hoover. The presidential library system was created in 1939 by former President Franklin D. Roosevelt³ and formalized by the passage of the Presidential Libraries Act of 1955,⁴ as amended by the Presidential Libraries Act of 1986.⁵ Although they are called “libraries,” presidential libraries are actually archives, i.e., collections of public documents, papers, and other non-book materials that require spe-

cial housing, storage, indexing, and access tools. The library system is governed by the Office of Presidential Libraries in the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), and includes 11 presidential libraries and Nixon presidential materials.⁶ NARA provides detailed, in-depth information about the presidential libraries system on its website, which also includes links to the web pages of each of the presidential libraries in the system: Herbert Hoover Library, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Harry S. Truman Library, Dwight D. Eisenhower Library, John F. Kennedy Library, Lyndon B. Johnson Library, Nixon Presidential Materials, Gerald R. Ford Library, Jimmy Carter Library, Ronald Reagan Library, George Bush Library, and William J. Clinton Library.⁷ President George W. Bush is currently working to establish the George W. Bush Library to house his papers when he leaves office.

The presidential libraries system was created because of the loss of presidential materials in the absence of such a system. According to the NARA website, “[b]efore the advent of the Presidential Library system, Presidents or their heirs often dispersed Presidential papers at the end of the administration. Though many pre-Hoover collections now reside in the Library of Congress, others are split among other libraries, historical societies, and private col-

lections. Sadly, many materials have been lost or deliberately destroyed.”⁸ The NARA website includes a list of libraries and other institutions in which such pre-Hoover collections are physically housed.⁹ The list includes the Library of Congress Manuscript collection, which holds the papers of Presidents George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, James Monroe, Andrew Jackson, Martin Van Buren, William Henry Harrison, John Tyler, James K. Polk, Zachary Taylor, Franklin Pierce, Abraham Lincoln, Andrew Johnson, Ulysses S. Grant, James A. Garfield, Chester A. Arthur, Grover Cleveland, Benjamin Harrison, William McKinley, Theodore Roosevelt, William Howard Taft, Woodrow Wilson, and Calvin Coolidge.¹⁰

Many of the documents and other material housed in the archives of the presidential libraries in the presidential libraries system and the pre-Hoover archives must be physically viewed in the various libraries and archives. Each institution housing presidential archival material provides extensive assistance to researchers in the form of online research guides to the archival collections to help researchers prepare for an in-person visit to the selected archive. An example of such a guide is the “Collections Guide and Finding Aid” on the Gerald R. Ford Library website at <http://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/library/guide.asp>. The

To find out what is digitally available on the web, researchers must visit each website to check for online content. Finding online collections in each website requires a bit of searching and browsing.

National Archives provides researchers a list of “Presidential Library Online Finding Aids” for each library in the presidential library system at <http://www.archives.gov/presidential-libraries/research/finding-aids.html>; links to each library guide are included in the list.

Each presidential library website may also provide access to any documents the library has digitized and made accessible through its website. To find out what is digitally available on the web, researchers must visit each website to check for online content. Finding online collections in each website requires a bit of searching and browsing, and there is no consistent method of displaying online content between the libraries in the system. Links to each of the libraries in the presidential libraries system are found at <http://www.archives.gov/presidential-libraries/about/> on the left side of the screen under “Visit the Libraries Online.” Examples of online collections of archival presidential materials include Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum “Online Documents” at <http://www.fdrlibrary.marist.edu/online14.html>; Lyndon Baines Johnson Library “Online Holdings” at http://www.lbjlib.utexas.edu/johnson/archives.hom/speeches.hom/selected_speeches.asp (see list of “Online Holdings” on the left side of the screen); and Gerald R. Ford Library “Online Documents, Photographs, and Exhibits” at <http://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/library/docs.asp>.

Online documents for pre-Hoover presidential collections are similarly found by visiting the website of each library housing a presidential archive. The list of such libraries, with links to each website, is found at <http://www.archives.gov/presidential-libraries/research/links.html>. Examples of digital collections from pre-Hoover libraries include the online “George Washington Papers at the Library of Congress 1741–1799” at <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/gwhtml/gwhome.html>, which can be searched and browsed, and the “Online: The Adams Family” digital collection of selected papers of John Adams, John Quincy Adams, and other members of the Adams family at <http://www.masshist.org/adams/>.

One notable major collection of free digital material on American presidents of enormous value to researchers is The American

Presidency Project (University of California–Santa Barbara) at <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/>. This site provides one of the best sources of information on the American presidency available. It was established in 1989, and its introduction indicates that it “is the only online resource that has consolidated, coded, and organized into a single searchable database: The Messages and Papers of the Presidents: Washington–Taft (1789–1913); The Public Papers of the Presidents: Hoover to Bush (1929–1993); The Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents: Clinton–G.W. Bush (1993–2007).” The site has useful search tools and explanations of the various types of documents issued by U.S. presidents, and it contains the searchable full text of most presidential documents of legal effect such as signing statements, proclamations, and executive orders. It also includes presidential election data from 1828–2004, with numerous statistics on the American presidency, including such things as numbers of vetoes, length in words of State of the Union addresses, and numbers and use of presidential signing statements. The American Presidency Project website also includes a media and video archive section. An especially useful area of the website that leads researchers to site content is the “Document Archive” at http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/index_docs.php.

Although researching presidential archival materials online requires researchers to move between and among websites devoted to individual U.S. presidents, most researchers should find the process made fairly easy if they use the many research tools provided on the web, including the links provided by NARA to all of the presidential libraries, the online research guides noted above, and the online information provided in the American Presidency Project website. We are fortunate to have free access to such a rich collection of historical presidential material literally at our fingertips. These collections will continue to grow in depth and breadth as more collections are digitized and made available online.

Presidential Documents with Legal Effect

The second category of presidential documents, those with legal effect, are in large

measure freely available on the web in legal publications familiar to lawyers: the Federal Register, the Code of Federal Regulations (CFR), the Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents, the Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, and the Congressional Record. Many of these documents are also readily found on the American Presidency Project website. These documents

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are issued by the president under constitutional or statutory authority¹¹ and include:

- Proclamations: “generally addressed to the entire nation and...frequently relate to ceremonial or celebratory occasions.”¹²
- Executive orders: “generally used by the President to direct and govern the activities of government officials and agencies.”¹³
- Reorganization plans: changes to the organization of federal agencies to “provide for the better management of the executive branch of the government;” proposed plans must be submitted to and approved by both houses of Congress.¹⁴ Note that proposed reorganization plans are published in the Congressional Record; once approved by both houses of Congress and the president, reorganization plans are published in the Federal Register and Title 3 of the CFR.
- Administrative orders: findings, determinations, memoranda, executive agreements, messages to Congress, and signing statements.
- Presidential nominations.

Researchers looking for these presidential documents should have no trouble finding what they need free on the web using the following online publications and websites. Each description indicates which presidential documents are included.

Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents <http://www.gpoaccess.gov/wcomp/index.html>

Free online; 1993–present (William J. Clinton–George W. Bush); full-text documents available in PDF format; searchable.

“The Weekly Compilation is issued every Monday and contains statements, messages, and other Presidential material released by the White House during the preceding week. It includes such material as: proclamations, executive orders, speeches, press conferences, communications to Congress and Federal agencies, statements regarding bill signings and vetoes, appointments, nominations, reorganization plans, resig-

nations, retirements, acts approved by the President, nominations submitted to the Senate, White House announcements, and press releases. Published by the Office of the Federal Register, National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), the Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents first began in 1965 [in print]. From 1977 onward, all material appearing in the Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents is incorporated into the Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States.”¹⁵

Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) <http://www.gpoaccess.gov/cfr/index.html>

Free online; 1997–present; full-text documents available in PDF format; can be searched and browsed.

Title 3 of the CFR covers the president; in addition to regulations relating to the Executive Office of the President, it also includes the full text of presidential proclamations, executive orders, and other presidential documents, such as notices, memoranda, administrative orders, approved reorganization plans, and presidential determinations.

Federal Register <http://www.gpoaccess.gov/fr/index.html>

Free online; 1995–present; full-text available in PDF format; searchable.

Presidential documents, such as executive orders, proclamations, notices, memoranda, and presidential determinations, are first published in the Federal Register, as are other federal regulations and regulatory information and approved reorganization plans. The online Federal Register is very current and is a good source for current and archival presidential materials.

Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Main Page <http://www.gpoaccess.gov/publicpapers/index.html>

Free online; 1991–present (George H. W. Bush–George W. Bush); full-text documents available in PDF format; searchable.

“The Public Papers of the Presidents, which is compiled and published by the Office of the Federal Register, National Archives and Records Administration, began in 1957 [in print] in response to a recommendation of the National Historical Publications Commission. Noting the lack of uniform compilations of messages and papers of the Presidents before this time, the Commission recommended the establishment of an official series in which Presidential writings, addresses, and remarks of a public nature could be made available.”¹⁶

Codification of Presidential Proclamations and Executive Orders <http://www.archives.gov/federal-register/codification/>

This website is the online version of the book of the same title, which is now out of print. It provides full-text html access to the edited and re-arranged text of presidential proclamations and executive orders from April 13, 1945 to January 20, 1989. It can be searched and browsed.

Congressional Record <http://thomas.loc.gov/home/r110query.html>

Free online; 1989–90 (101st Congress)–present; full-text documents available in PDF format; can be searched and browsed. Includes proposed reorganization plans and remains a permanent source for reorganization plans not approved by Congress and thus never published in the Federal Register or the CFR.

The American Presidency Project website, previously described in more detail, also provides access to presidential documents and compilations in its “Document Archive of Presidential Communication” at http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/index_docs.php. The organized links to proclamations, executive orders, and signing statements, and full-text access to Public Papers of the Presidents (Hoover 1929 through G.W. Bush 2007) and the Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents (Carter 1977 through G.W. Bush 2007) make this source an excellent starting point when looking for presidential documents of legal effect.

Another excellent online source that brings together links to a variety of sources of presidential documents of legal effect is GPO Access at <http://www.gpoaccess.gov/executive.html>. GPO Access is sponsored by the Government Printing Office and provides free electronic access to the CFR, the Federal Register (executive orders and proclamations), the Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, and the Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents. GPO Access provides links to myriad other federal documents and legislative material in other areas of the website. ■

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FOOTNOTES

1. The National Archives, *Research Presidential Materials* <<http://www.archives.gov/presidential-libraries/research/>> (accessed February 12, 2007).
2. The National Archives, *Presidential Documents Guide* <<http://www.archives.gov/presidential-libraries/research/guide.html>> (accessed February 12, 2007).
3. The National Archives, *A Brief History* <<http://www.archives.gov/presidential-libraries/about/history.html>> (accessed February 12, 2007).
4. 44 USC 2108.
5. 44 USC 2112, PL 99-323.
6. The National Archives, *Learn about the Presidential Libraries* <<http://www.archives.gov/presidential-libraries/about/>> (accessed February 12, 2007).
7. The National Archives, *Presidential Libraries* <<http://www.archives.gov/presidential-libraries/>> (accessed February 12, 2007).
8. *A Brief History*, n 3, *supra*.
9. The National Archives, *Other Places to Research Presidential Materials* <<http://www.archives.gov/presidential-libraries/research/links.html>> (accessed February 12, 2007).
10. *Id.*
11. Roy M. Mersky and Donald J. Dunn, *Fundamentals of Legal Research* (New York: Foundation Press, 8th ed, 2002), p 281.
12. *Id.* at 282.
13. *Id.*
14. *Id.* at 283.
15. Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents: Main Page <<http://www.gpoaccess.gov/wcomp/index.html>> (accessed February 13, 2007).
16. Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Main Page <<http://www.gpoaccess.gov/pubpapers/index.html>> (accessed February 13, 2007).