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Winter 2006

## Presidential Address--A Salute

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*National Historical Publications and Records Commission*

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Bruns, Roger, "Presidential Address--A Salute" (2006). *Documentary Editing: Journal of the Association for Documentary Editing (1979-2011)*. 243.

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# A Salute

Roger A. Bruns

**I** have enjoyed the presidency. It has been exhilarating. I especially loved the trips around the country in the Association's airplane—ADE One. This whole thing about being president has been heady. Of course there have been the lows. My job approval rating, for example—it is still around 8%. That hurts. At least ADE did not invade Iraq!

But we stayed the course, kept on message, did not cut and run. We were working for the spread of democracy—the right of all Americans to have access to the historical record, presented with exemplary standards of transcription and annotation. Now that is democracy!

Now, I learned to deal with the pressure in my own special way. I would seek solace in the surroundings during moments of crisis, such as Hurricane NEH. I would walk around Washington visiting the monuments for inspiration, looking for advice.

I remember one day I went to the Capitol Building and meandered through Statuary Hall. And what an impressive array of statues it was: Dwight D. Eisenhower, Henry Clay, Charles Carroll, Jefferson Davis, Daniel Webster, Will Rogers, Nathanael Greene, Roger Williams, John C. Calhoun, Andrew Jackson, and George Washington. And then it dawned on me; I realized something important. The good folks at the Capitol had engaged in a wonderful project. They had erected statues honoring the various projects undertaken by ADE editors.

I then walked outside to the west of the Capitol building facing down the Mall. And there was the magnificent statue of General Ulysses Grant on his war horse; it is the largest equestrian statue in the United States. Would Grant, with his serene look in his own moment of crisis, have any advice? And then I heard a voice. It said: "Simon says go see Jefferson."

And so I did. I hiked over to the Jefferson Memorial. Actually, I could have taken the ADE helicopter, but I decided to walk. I climbed the steps of the Memorial, advanced toward the imposing statue and then I heard a whisper: "Have Barbara check out footnote 14 in Volume 32—I have a question about it."

Later, at the nation's greatest obelisk, the Washington Monument, I stood

at the base looking up. There, too, I heard a clear voice. It said, "That supposed diary of mine is a forgery." This would be a dark revelation to Ted Crackel and his colleagues at the Washington project, recent recipient of the National Humanities Medal. And so I have decided not to tell them.

And later, near the State Department, I was standing in front of the statue of Albert Einstein. When I walked up, the seated scientist was about to shed light on a burning question: "How many editors does it take to change a light bulb?" he asked. Before I could answer he said, "One. But the editor needs reasonable space and time."

And so I left Einstein, and walked the short distance over to the Lincoln Memorial. There, I climbed the steps and walked in to see Abe. Did he have any advice for me? "What should I do?" I asked. Not hesitating, a voice said: "Why don't you take the night off and go to the theater?"

Looking back over nearly four decades since I began work with the NHPRC in 1967, I realize how historical editing has been transformed, although in some ways it has not changed. It is still a battle for projects to stay afloat financially. It is a struggle with funding agencies in two contrasting ways—on the one hand helping generate support on Capitol Hill for adequate agency funding and then, on the other had, seeking funds from the agencies—struggling to justify and explain the work of the projects against changing requirements and measures.

And in those struggles it is sometimes difficult for editors to gain proper credit. Sometimes, winning one struggle does not seem to help with other struggles. One notable project recently won a very prestigious award for scholarship; that same year much of its federal funding was cut off.

But, in many ways, this is a far different time for editing than in 1967. Then, twenty or so editorial projects were underway across the country, almost all of them supported by the NHPRC. Today, the number of projects represented in ADE is now over 160. Most importantly, the craft of editing in a large sense has become a field. And that field is characterized by increasingly scrupulous editing standards, innovative methods to reach the public, and of course, the presence of this organization, one that continues to grow and to become more diverse.

Computers have assumed increasing importance. There has been David Chesnutt's pioneering work with the Model Editions project. At the University of Virginia's Miller Center, editors are transcribing oral tapes from the White House using the most sophisticated electronic equipment available. *Newsweek's* Evan Thomas characterizes this series as "carefully,

painstakingly, knowingly transcribed and annotated.”

Also, a number of editions are now being prepared for publication on the Internet—including the Papers of Washington, Madison, and other Founding Fathers, Booker T. Washington, Eisenhower, George Marshall, Edison, Lincoln, the War Department Papers, and others. Roy Rosenzweig of George Mason’s Center for History and New Media has through the University of Pennsylvania Press made available online his and Daniel Cohen’s *Digital History: A Guide to Gathering, Preserving, and Presenting the Past on the Web*. And the new version of the *Guide to Documentary Editing*, edited by Mary-Jo Kline and Sue Perdue, will be online through the University of Virginia Press. Editors are, indeed, at the forefront in adapting historical editing to the digital age.

The editing field is expanding its influence in many areas—in the field of education, for example. Allida Black, the editor of the *Papers of Eleanor Roosevelt*, has worked with the National Council for History Education in training several hundred teachers to use Roosevelt documents in their classroom. And other editorial projects have produced curriculum and teacher guides that are being introduced in the school systems—such projects as the Lincoln, First Congress, Emma Goldman, Martin Luther King, Jr., Margaret Sanger, Stanton and Anthony, and Washington papers.

Editing is expanding its influence in arts and entertainment. A few years ago, the *Boston Globe*, reviewing a performance over here in Boston’s Symphony Hall, raved that it was “one of the great moments in the collective life of our musical community.” It was the premiere of an oratorio called *Slavery Documents: A Cantata*, created by Loren Schweninger, editor of the Race and Slavery Petitions Project. With full orchestra and seventy singers, the words from newly-discovered documents came alive words of freedom found in petitions and county court papers were now brought to life on stage.

Numerous television documentaries in the past few years have featured editors: Bobby Hill and Barbara Bair on Marcus Garvey, Ann Gordon on Stanton-Anthony, and many others. When the movie star Kevin Kline was preparing to play Ulysses S. Grant in *Wild Wild West*, he called John Simon to find out Grant’s characteristics. Kline later sent Simon an autographed still from the movie with his thanks inscribed at the bottom. “It was a terrible movie,” Simon remarked, “but it was not his fault.”

Editing is expanding its influence into areas of the judiciary. John Kaminski and Rich Leffler, editors of the Ratification Project, conduct series of seminars for Federal judges around the country to help fortify under-

standing of the relationship between the Constitution and current legal issues. What better service could editors of the Ratification Project provide than to connect the writings and thoughts of the founders to sitting judges over two centuries later!

A number of Supreme Court decisions have referenced the *Ratification* volumes well as other documentary editions. Justice Stevens and Justice Souter, in two separate opinions, recently used documents and information from the *Documentary History of the Supreme Court*, edited by Maeva Marcus.

Editors have dramatically changed the way we look at African-American society under slavery. The path-breaking Freedmen and Southern Society project, under the direction of Leslie Rowland, has led in unearthing extraordinary materials on black life and culture never before used by scholars. The Papers of Frederick Douglass, Marcus Garvey, Martin Luther King, Jr., Clarence Mitchell, and Howard Thurman—all of these together have provided a base of materials that have enabled scholars and teachers to break through myth and misunderstanding.

Editors have also been at the front in providing documentary evidence that has revolutionized the understanding of the role of women in American society through such projects as the Papers of Jane Addams, Stanton-Anthony, Goldman, Sanger and others.

Editors are also making available invaluable material on the American West. The days are nearly over for the teaching of American history as merely a chronological and geographical sweep of conquest from east to west. That kind of history—the kind of history taught in 1967—is giving way to a history of much greater understanding and awareness. Thanks to a number of editorial projects, we are building a store of information about those early civilizations in the American West. The Vargas Papers at the University of New Mexico and the Documentary Relations of the Southwest Project at the University of Arizona are bringing to light materials ranging from the lives of the Seri Indians and other tribes to the lives of missionaries and military leaders, documents found in records from Spain, Rome, Mexico, and other countries. And the Documentary Relations project includes commentary from the Native American tribes involved.

Recently, on the publication of a dual-language documentary edition of the Coronado Expedition, a reviewer characterized the work as “a magnificent gift of scholarship” that all serious scholars would “consult and cite for decades to come.”

The history profession itself is now realizing the enormous contribution

of the editors. The nation's most celebrated historians are extensively using the editions. Look at some of the books: Stephen Ambrose's *Undaunted Courage*, based on the journals of the Lewis and Clark expedition; Walter Isaacson's biography of Franklin; David McCullough's biography of John Adams; Joseph Ellis's biography of Washington; and Ron Chernow's biography of Alexander Hamilton. When Ed Lengel, Associate Editor of the Papers of George Washington, published his own book *George Washington: A Military Life*, Pauline Maier in her review wrote, "The people who know the subject best—the scholars' scholars of our time—are the editors."<sup>1</sup>

At last count, the Freedmen and Southern Society edition had been cited in seventy-two reference works, 179 scholarly monographs, 261 scholarly articles and essays, eighty-two college-level textbooks and anthologies, twenty-eight publications for general audiences, ten books for young readers, fifty-six workshops and institutes for grade school teachers, eleven exhibits, six films and videos, twenty-seven television and radio programs, eighty dramatic readings and theatrical productions, and 192 significant World Wide Web sites and more. To any skeptics who question whether these editions are used heavily, it is high time to wake up and read the acknowledgements.

Much of the documentary record being made available in scholarly editions is by and from institutions around the world. When the historian J. Franklin Jameson was lobbying Congress in the early years of the twentieth century for the creation of what became the National Historical Publications Commission, one of the principal models he pointed to was the Institute of Netherlands History in The Hague. Max Evans and I had the pleasure of lunching this week with Mr. Donald Haks, director of the Institute, and his colleague Ms. Marijke van Fassen. The Institute was established in 1902 and specializes in documentary editions, reference works, and data banks. This year, along with institutions from London, Paris, Brussels, and Vienna, the Institute is organizing a European network of editors. The first meeting will be held in December of this year. They are exploring common projects and perhaps a portal providing access to research data. This is yet another significant example of editors on the move, organizing, and spreading the documentary resources.

Modern documentary editors are also helping to undermine misinformation, distortion, tall tales, and secondhand storytelling. They continue to set the record straight. As you know, much of American history remains

<sup>1</sup>Pauline Maier. "The Founding Revisited" *Washington Post Book World*, 28 August 2005.

wrapped in myth and legend.

You can still pick up an American history textbook and read that the modern bathtub was invented in 1842 by a man named Adam Thompson and that it was not until President Millard Fillmore installed the first bathtub in the White House in 1851 that bathing became increasingly popular in the United States. The whole story was a myth propagated by H. L. Mencken who was out to prove that the press and the public would believe anything. They did, of course. Within a few years, Mencken's hoax had found its way into reference volumes, encyclopedias, and history books.

In 1989 a man named David Barton wrote a book entitled *The Myth of Separation*. The book's thesis is that the Founding Fathers really did not believe in the separation of church and state. In the book, he quotes James Madison as saying:

We have staked the future of all our political institutions upon the capacity of mankind for self-government, upon the capacity of each and all of us to govern ourselves, to control ourselves, to sustain ourselves according to the Ten Commandments.<sup>2</sup>

The quote has been used by that eminent "historian" Rush Limbaugh. It has been trumpeted by other talk show hosts and political leaders as evidence that the Founding Fathers really did not mean what we have always thought they meant about the separation of church and state. Even Congressman William Dannemyer of California read portions of the letter into the *Congressional Record*. Incidentally, for those of us who remember NHPRC in the eighties, Dannemyer was one of those who made a determined effort to abolish the Commission.

The Madison letter still flourishes on the Internet. But it is almost certainly a total fabrication. One of the Madison Papers editors, David Mattern, said that they found in Madison's writings nothing remotely like the sentiments expressed in the letter. "The idea," Mattern said, "is inconsistent with everything we know about Madison's views on religion and government, views which he expressed time and time again in public and in private." Barton's reward for such indulgence with the facts: he was hired as a national political advisor. As for the Madison Papers, they continue to get numerous inquiries about the authenticity of the fake document.

<sup>2</sup>Jim Allison, "Is It True That Madison Said, 'Our future is staked on the Ten Commandments'?" *The Constitutional Principles of Church and State*, <http://candst.tripod.com/misq1.htm>.

Ironically, the growth of the Internet has cast the legends and lore in an even stronger vise. Articles and studies repeat the misinformation and misguided assumptions to a larger and larger audience and create even more misconceptions. Say something enough times and a large percentage of the public will believe it. And even well-meaning scholars and history buffs post quotations and entire documents filled with errors. And the result is a multiplication nightmare of distortion. It happens all the time. Documentary editors increasingly stand as guardians against faulty historical evidence.

This is a growing field, one in which the first wave of professionally edited works is reaching its culmination. Several major projects have completed work in the last few years and numerous others will finish in the near future. But new and exciting projects are already taking their place—documentary editions of various kinds and formats that will uncover fresh materials on ethnic history, the arts, the history of science; editions that will reach increasingly larger numbers of users, especially electronically.

So, I thank you for the opportunity of this year. One of the crucial ways we can better face the challenges looming for the editorial community is to turn a powerful light on some of remarkable progress that has been made in this field and by those in this organization.

And this is what I have tried to do for a short time this evening—to say thanks to you for your work. As more and more individuals and organizations learn of the contributions of this field and turn to the work produced by editorial projects for historical accuracy and integrity, we will be an increasingly stronger professional community and organization.

You are challenging assumptions, making valuable discoveries, and opening new areas of study. With marvelous skill and professionalism, you are delivering the goods, if simply given the appropriate amount of space and time.



