

**ASSOCIATION OF RESEARCH LIBRARIES  
COUNCIL ON LIBRARY AND INFORMATION RESOURCES  
NATIONAL HUMANITIES ALLIANCE**

April 3, 2002

The Honorable Joe Skeen  
Chairman  
U.S. House of Representatives  
Interior and Related Agencies Subcommittee  
B-308 Rayburn House Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Chairman Skeen:

This letter is submitted on behalf of the Association of Research Libraries, the Council on Library and Information Resources, and the National Humanities Alliance. Once again, these national organizations write to request increased support from the distinguished Subcommittee for the preservation and access activities of the National Endowment for the Humanities. Our organizations support an increase of approximately \$4.6 million in the budget for the Endowment's Preservation and Access Division, raising it from last year's \$18,905,000 to \$23,500,000 for Fiscal Year 2003.

The flat funding proposed in the Administration's budget is inadequate for preserving and ensuring access to jeopardized cultural and intellectual resources needed by students, scholars, and the American people nationwide.

Why is it so important to receive such a relatively small increase in preservation and access funds? Because without them our preservation momentum will decline, particularly in two vital programs, and material now in fragile condition in libraries and related repositories in universities, colleges, and communities across the country will be in even greater danger of permanent loss.

One such project is the preservation of chemically deteriorating, brittle books, which are unique volumes in danger of becoming unusable because of acidic paper. NEH has been able to help libraries microfilm approximately one million brittle books. But the NEH project began with studies that estimated 12 million volumes could be in jeopardy and set a goal of preserving 3 million of the most endangered volumes. With only a third of the goal accomplished, we must move this project forward at a faster pace.

Similarly, there has been great progress in the Endowment's U.S. Newspaper Project. With the help of the Congress and NEH, libraries across the country have completed microfilming historical newspapers, which are treasure troves of insight into the history of our country, in 39 states. But more than one-fifth of the states have yet to carry out

newspaper preservation plans. If microfilming in all 50 states were completed, records for 151,000 unique newspaper titles could be made available in a national database through computer terminals at 40,000 institutions in the United States and abroad. These are major goals toward which we can make great progress with the small increase requested.

We understand fully that the nation must attend to its security and defense needs in the 2003 budget, but defense against deterioration of the holdings of America's libraries is vital as well. Information, education, and knowledge are the underpinnings of our country's domestic progress and international leadership in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The nation must preserve the historical record accumulated by past generations for use by students and scholars today and in the future. On behalf of the American people, the library and humanities communities ask that the underfunding of NEH be reversed so that momentum in the race against time can be regained, in order to save and ensure widespread access to the holdings of the nation's libraries. The challenges of this specific problem are explained more fully below, along with dimensions of the preservation need that goes far beyond brittle books and newspapers.

### **Preserving Fragile Materials**

In 1987, Congress took a significant leadership role in recognizing the importance of library print collections—the books, journals, and other historical and cultural records that are at the heart of the humanities. It was then estimated that more than 12 million unique volumes in the research libraries of this country were at risk of deterioration simply because they were printed on an unstable medium—acidic paper, commonly used between 1840 and 1980. Library stacks were lined with thousands of books, journals, and newspapers that were already so brittle that pages broke when they were turned. As a result, Congress allocated resources to NEH to coordinate and support efforts of the library community to preserve these resources through microfilming, the most effective means known at the time to preserve the intellectual content of and provide broad access to copies of fragile materials. The Brittle Books Program, as it has come to be called, was envisioned as a twenty-year effort to preserve 3 million unique volumes.

When current projects are completed, almost one million volumes will have been microfilmed through NEH-supported projects since funding was initiated in 1989. Many libraries and library consortia across the nation have participated. The coordination of effort by NEH with Congressionally appropriated funds has resulted in the preservation of a distributed, national collection of important materials, all microfilmed according to rigorous standards. Yet, much remains to be done. The nation's libraries have made every effort to meet the goals that were established more than a decade ago, but when the NEH budget was cut by 38 percent in 1996, funds for microfilm preservation grants were reduced proportionately. In consequence, at least two million volumes remain in jeopardy.

Fortunately, there are now ways to help extend the usability of these volumes. Microfilming has been the method of choice when materials are already brittle. But with newer, less embrittled printed works, mass deacidification, a chemical treatment, has also proven effective. In other cases, improving environmental conditions for

storage also seems significantly to extend longevity. Preservation has thus become a complex blend of techniques. The microfilming program launched in 1987 remains critically important, but it, alone, is not sufficient to meet the diverse preservation needs now faced by the nation's research libraries. They need help also to continue improving techniques for preservation storage and mass deacidification, and to do more research on acidic deterioration itself, its rates, and threats. Libraries need help from NEH to employ and further develop all these techniques.

### **Beyond Brittle Books**

Embrittled books and newspapers are not the only irreplaceable materials in jeopardy. Materials documenting the past that need to be kept for the future include films, videos, photographs, tapes, disks, and audio and visual recordings. These historical materials from the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries provide a sense of historical reality unattainable in print from past eras. These media capture the immediacy of historical experience and the diversity of American culture with vividness and fidelity. Regrettably, however, audiovisual materials are even harder to preserve than paper. Films and photographs fade and discolor. Audio tapes and disks break, or become unplayable as new recording technologies replace those with which original recordings were made. Without audio and visual resources, large segments of the record of more than a century of American experience will not survive. Here again, NEH grant assistance is greatly needed to preserve history.

Additionally, our organizations strongly support the efforts of NEH to complement its preservation assistance with grants to help make the intellectual and cultural record of the United States more accessible to educators, students, and scholars. NEH does this with grant assistance for digitizing library materials for online access. Digital technology provides new opportunities to extend the reach of humanities resources into every classroom, every library, every office, and every home. Because digitization enables individuals everywhere to view materials on the screens of personal computers, many repositories of specialized and rare materials are digitizing their precious holdings to provide easy access to them. Moreover, libraries and other humanities organizations are providing online access to an ever-increasing body of knowledge created in electronic journals, books, and databases that are available only in electronic form.

The transition to digital libraries creates new challenges. Digital information requires preservation, which cannot be achieved simply by building digital repositories. Successful digital preservation will require collaborative agreements and efforts involving authors, publishers, technologists, and librarians. The partnerships needed for long-term digital preservation are not now in place, although much-needed work toward developing a national digital preservation plan is now underway at the Library of Congress thanks to Congressional appropriations.

The Library of Congress' effort to develop a distributed system for digital preservation depends upon the ability of research libraries to add to the whole. It will be important that the National Endowment for the Humanities coordinate its efforts with the Library of Congress' program so that the citizens of the United States can be assured that the

raw materials of scholarship in all major repositories will be preserved for future generations.

NEH also provides critical assistance to our nation's libraries, archives, historical societies, and other repositories for preservation education and training. Grants in this area help support U.S. graduate programs in art and material culture conservation; preservation workshops, surveys and information services to hundreds of cultural institutions; as well as targeted workshops for staff managing digital imaging and preservation microfilming projects.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, past support from the Congress has made it possible for NEH to conduct a highly successful program for preserving library materials that constitute our national cultural heritage. Thanks to that program, students, scholars, and citizens throughout the United States now have convenient access to unique books, manuscripts, and other materials that libraries have microfilmed and digitized. NEH recognizes the need to expand the preservation agenda to include the preservation of material in audiovisual and digital formats. In addition, NEH recognizes that the preservation of digital information requires new collaborations and technical research. But NEH cannot meet these needs—nor can it complete the preservation of brittle books and newspapers—without increased funding. ARL, CLIR, and NHA strongly support an increase for NEH's Preservation and Access program. The students who learn from library resources, the scholars who create new knowledge from them, and the citizens who turn to them for enlightenment all depend on adequate funding for this program.

Thank you for your past assistance, and for this opportunity to explain unmet needs of high priority for the nation.

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