

Testimony of  
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February 7, 2008

Testimony on "The Founding Fathers' Papers: Ensuring Public Access to Our National Treasures;" February 7, 2008; by Ralph Ketcham

Mr. Chairman and the members of the Senate Judiciary Committee:

I want to thank especially and acknowledge the long support of Senator Leahy, and of Senator Kennedy, Senator Biden, Senator Specter, and Senator Hatch, for the Founding Fathers Project. Without their constant and thoughtful support we would not be where we are today with the Project; in fact, there would be no collected national treasure of papers about which to discuss public access. The scholarly world, and many other parts of the public, are most grateful for this essential assistance.

The Founding Fathers Project has become the most lasting and significant effort to preserve the national heritage of the ideas and institutions upon which our political system rests. From its beginning in 1943 when Franklin Roosevelt dedicated the Jefferson Memorial in Washington and "Founding Editor" Julian Boyd conceived the first Papers project, a broad array of public officials, NGOs, and private persons have provided essential support. National Archivist Wayne Grover, Keeper of the Manuscripts at the Library of Congress David Mearns, and Philip Hamer, Chairman of the National Historical Records Commission, legendary figures of half-a-century ago, indispensably sustained the Projects. They set a high standard for public participation that has been maintained. They agreed with and encouraged the libraries, historical societies, foundations, universities, private individuals, and university presses that originated the papers projects to uphold the uniquely high standards established by Dr. Boyd and others. The first editors - Boyd, Lyman Butterfield, William T. Hutchinson, Leonard Labaree, Harold C. Syrett, W.W. Abbot, and others - and the university presses at Chicago, Columbia, Harvard, Princeton, Virginia, and Yale -- developed methods and benchmarks of thoroughness and accuracy for documentary publication that were so path-breaking that all previous such publication was rendered inadequate and incomplete, and all subsequent such publication has had to try to live up to those standards. As the volumes have come out - well over 200 in all by now - the projects themselves became legendary, and were seen as in a class by themselves for every scholarly and other public purpose. A review in *The William and Mary Quarterly* has referred to these publications as an "immense and invaluable . . . enterprise . . . [that has] already transformed the means and soundness of writing the history of the American founding." It is this "system" which all agree, I think, must be sustained if the remarkable and unique mission of the projects is to be fulfilled. Every American president, since Harry Truman and Dwight Eisenhower greeted the first volumes, has endorsed and encouraged them.

The question of the seemingly interminable length of the projects, though, remains problematic. One wonders why, after the expenditure of millions of dollars and the labor of countless scholars

and publishers for more than sixty years, the projects are far from finished, and seem unlikely to be completely so much before the middle of the twenty-first century. One obvious reason, of course, is the vast store of the papers, with one exception, of the leading founders - thousands of letters to and from them, drafts of official documents, notes, speeches, books, newspaper articles, etc., written over unusually long lifetimes. (The exception is Alexander Hamilton; Cy Syrett, the chief editor of his papers, the only project now completed, once remarked that he considered dedicating his work to Aaron Burr, who "made completion of the task possible."). I do not think that the present rate of publication, with present staff and funding, and providing that the focus of the staff remains on gathering, validating, editing, and preparing for publication of those papers according to the long-established and widely approved standards noted above, can be much hastened. Efficiencies and improvement of technique can, as they have often in the past, probably speed things up some, but the projects already do very well on that score; even new technologies are unlikely to be major factors.

One must look carefully, though, at the nature of the many thousands of documents the projects have in their files. In the first place, the projects own no "original" documents, nor do they have any documents that do not exist elsewhere. All their documents, in so far as it is possible, begin with facsimiles of hand-written documents archived or held elsewhere, or where autograph originals are not available (perhaps do not exist), from early transcripts, from various copy forms, from unauthenticated sources, from auction catalogues, etc.. Then these miscellaneous beginnings are typed or word-processed according to strict rules, often by people not trained as historians. The documents are then edited, a complex, highly skilled task perhaps done over some time by more than one person; notes accumulate. Then the transcribed documents are proof-read against the "originals", probably more than once, and the notes organized into the editorial apparatus that in fact is an important part of the presentation of the documents that has become so praised and insightfully used by scholars and others. So, where, what is the document in the editorial files that has not yet reached the public? Even if it were possible to present the editorial files to the public in some fashion, what might be presented? What form, and what part of the file on any given document could be offered? In any case, there would seem to be no possibility of presentation that would not require large amounts of highly skilled work - probably only doable by the editorial staff deeply familiar with the documents - time, then, taken away from the demanding work of preparing the documents for publication, which would further delay that essential process. All of this raises serious questions about any proposal to give the public immediate or quicker access to the "treasured documents." From the beginning of the projects, in order to protect their time for their essential editorial task, the staffs of the various projects have had to decline to answer random inquiries about or to act as reference librarians for the materials in their files. To have responded to such requests would quickly have consumed much, perhaps even most of their time, and publication would have been seriously delayed. This, of course, would have slowed the public's access to the very documents, accurately transcribed and skill edited, it needs and has every right to have.

Actually, modern technology has made many of the documents already used by the projects, and in their files, readily available. The University of Virginia Press "Rotunda" project has made or will soon make most the print volumes available in electronic form, complete with finding aids and cross-references far more sophisticated than those in the printed volumes. "American Memory" and other website facsimile reproductions now make available copies of many of the

same documents that are in the editorial files (of course in "raw" form; often tricky and difficult for the public to use). For example, all the James Madison papers in the Library of Congress, the major depository for his papers, are now available to anyone with access to the internet, including many documents thought by some to be "inaccessible" in the files of the Madison project. I would propose, then, that the best way to speed up public access to the treasured documents is to provide increased funding and staff for the existing efficient, highly skilled projects. Any effort to shortcut, bypass, or interfere with the work of the existing projects would, I think, only impede them, and in the long run diminish the useful access to their documents.

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