

Testimony of
Rebecca Rimel

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"The Founding Fathers' Papers: Ensuring Public Access to our National Treasures"
Judiciary Committee of the United States

I am Rebecca Rimel, president and CEO of The Pew Charitable Trusts. It is a privilege to appear before you today to discuss the papers of the Founding Fathers. I am equally honored to join a panel of such distinguished scholars and historians.

Benjamin Franklin once said, "An investment in knowledge pays the best interest."

That is why the Pew Trusts has been willing to invest in the work of the Founding Fathers Papers for more than two decades. To date, Pew has contributed more than \$7.5 million to the various projects. Our original donors, the Pew family, were profoundly committed to the founding principles of this nation and they understood the vital role of an informed citizenry.

George Washington, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, Alexander Hamilton and Benjamin Franklin stand among the most significant leaders from our nation's formation, and the papers of these six Founding Fathers are among the most important documents of our American heritage.

Thomas Jefferson said 185 years ago that "It is the duty of every good citizen to use all of the opportunities which occur to him for preserving documents relating to the history of our country."

The correspondence and other documents that are the subject of this hearing are more than a treasure. They are an invaluable record of what happened during the seminal decades of our nation. Dan Jordan, the president of the Thomas Jefferson Foundation, has referred to these papers as "American Scripture."

"American scripture." They are the best record of the aspirations, thoughts and actions of our Founding Fathers. They take us backstage, where we can eavesdrop on motives and personalities; where we can finally understand the opportunities and challenges of the day almost as the Founding Fathers themselves saw, weighed and determined them.

Indeed, completing the effort to publish the writings of the Founding Fathers and ensuring that they are made readily available to every American--and people around the world--are vital to understanding our past and to navigating our future.

Now there are those who might question the relevance of the papers of these six men to a nation at war, facing a challenging economic future and about to elect a new leader. But among the American people, it seems that our Founding Fathers have never been more relevant.

These days, one of our most popular non-scientific barometers of the issues that matter most to the public is a Google search of the Internet. Out of curiosity, we "Googled" the names of each of our last six presidents--from Gerald Ford to George W. Bush--and got a total of 50.3 million "hits." Then we Googled the names of the six Founding Fathers. That search yielded 54.4 million results.

It's hard to believe. Modern-day leaders are beamed into our lives worldwide in a 24-hour-a-day news cycle, yet interest remains even higher in the Founding Fathers 24 decades after they lived.

History is highly personal--it is intertwined with how we interpret our roots, how we understand our Founders' legacy of representative democracy, and how we respond to that civic calling.

Indeed, history is intensely relevant. The interest in the Founding Fathers has probably never been higher and more sustained than it is today. Life has become more complicated--we are looking for guideposts, maps, standards--something to help us find our way through challenging times. We hark back to our national icons to help us apply basic civic principles in complex situations, so that we can be wise stewards of our republic and informed participants in our democratic process.

Right here, in your own proceedings, search the Congressional Record for the last six Congresses and you will find the words "Founding Fathers" used more than 2,400 times on the House and Senate floors... 240 years after the last of these great Americans passed away.

A quick search of news articles over the past few years finds nearly 800 in which people invoke the ideals or intentions of the Founding Fathers in stories about everything from the recent debate over eminent domain to an argument over stricter motorcycle helmet laws in North Carolina.... From the recent court decision about the District of Columbia's gun laws to the fairness of the voting system used on American Idol.... From the debate over congressional earmarks and the line-item veto to the First Amendment implications of YouTube.

Indeed, in countless dilemmas about justice, personal liberties and the proper role of government, Americans wonder, "What would the Founding Fathers say?"

Around the world as well, people look to the wisdom of America's Founding Fathers to inspire and guide them as they seek to build more free and open societies. As just one example, since 1984, more than 30 heads of state from across the globe have visited Monticello--Mr. Jefferson's mountaintop home in Virginia--to learn more about this leading architect of our democracy.

In spite of the regularity and fervor with which people of all backgrounds reference the wisdom of our founders, the reality is that we have yet to compile and fully understand that wisdom, let alone to truly share it with the American people and the rest of the world.

The Web site for one of the Founding Fathers Papers projects proclaims that its goal is to "make this source material available not only to scholars but to all Americans interested in the founding of our nation."

Sadly, this goal has never been realized and will not be realized unless the approach to this important task is dramatically changed.

The failure to complete these projects has become a national embarrassment. I strongly encourage you to take action to rectify it.

Nearly eight years ago, The Pew Charitable Trusts approved a \$10 million challenge grant to create an investment fund that would help accelerate the completion of letterpress and electronic editions of these papers. We were deeply disappointed that this vision was not realized.

I think it is safe to say that we all agree with George Washington's statement that, "As the structure of a government gives force to public opinion, it is essential that public opinion should be enlightened."

When it comes to documents as significant as these, from a time as distant as the 18th century, enlightenment requires more effort than simply acquiring and reading the original journals, correspondence and other writings. As this committee looks to speed access to the papers, I urge you not to abandon the essential steps of research, historical editing and annotating. This important scholarly work provides the critical context that enables us to determine the meaning of our founders' words. The editing and annotating process is essential to our understanding of history.

Until today, in spite of an enormous investment by the American taxpayer, there has never been any significant Congressional oversight of these invaluable projects.

These ambitious endeavors were established at major academic institutions during the Truman Administration. Tens of millions of dollars in federal funds have been spent on these programs during the past 30 years alone. And while I can tell you what Pew and some of its partners have invested, the total amount of private funding toward these projects remains unknown. No one knows the total costs to date because there has never been a full and accurate accounting.

Equally startling is the cost to produce the annotated editions. The National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHRPC) estimates that, on average, each volume costs almost \$100,000 to complete.

I have no doubt that the American people would be surprised to learn that in spite of the untallied millions spent, less than half of the Founding Fathers papers have been transcribed and annotated.

Approximately one volume for each Founding Father is completed per year. At this pace, the estimates of when the projects will be completed are disheartening. There are no benchmarks or reporting requirements, and no one has ever questioned the efficiency of these programs or the pace of their progress. I would like to think that these worthy projects can be finished in our lifetime.

Princeton University is the home of the Thomas Jefferson Papers project. Frustrated with the slow progress of the effort to produce editions of Mr. Jefferson's voluminous writings and correspondence, the Thomas Jefferson Foundation in Charlottesville, Virginia, was granted the opportunity to research and annotate the documents from the period after Mr. Jefferson retired from office. The result has been encouraging, practically cutting in half the amount of time expected to finish all of Jefferson's papers.

One of the stated goals of these projects is to make the papers available to the American people. They are not. The average price to purchase a published volume is staggering. A single volume of the Papers of Alexander Hamilton costs \$180, and a completed set of 26 volumes costs \$2,600, putting these books out of range of most individuals and institutions. In addition, few public libraries have any of the books. A poll of 200 principal public libraries found that only a few had one volume and just 6% had more than one volume. These completed works were never intended to be available only to the most serious scholars. What would the Founding Fathers say to learn that their most important documents and correspondence were only available to a select group of academic historians?

We no longer have to merely hope that the papers will eventually be completed in our lifetimes. With a renewed focus on this project by the federal government, we can provide a much-needed "stimulus," if you will, to complete this project and ensure that the wisdom of the founders is available to every American and to people around the globe looking to create free and just societies.

To be successful, a new approach will be necessary, one that includes an accelerated publication schedule and increased public access to the ideas and thoughts of our nation's founders. I respectfully recommend three objectives for a congressional oversight plan:

First, Congress should draft a plan for completion of this project and conduct regular oversight until it is finished. The Senate Appropriations Committee has directed the Archivist to submit a plan by the end of March to make these materials available online, and these recommendations should be carefully considered.

Second, expeditiously complete the letterpress projects. The original goal of the Congress more than 50 years ago is still valid today. This scholarly work is important. Sufficient funding, coupled with appropriate reporting requirements, will be necessary to complete the projects in a timely manner. More accountability, transparency, efficiency and effectiveness must be introduced to this process. The handling of the Jefferson papers should be carefully reviewed as a model of how the ongoing projects might become more efficient.

Finally, the published volumes should be digitized--along with the original, unannotated documents-- and placed on a single, easily accessible and searchable Web site, such as that of the Library of Congress. Access should be free, available to anyone who can access the Internet.

Mr. Chairman, I applaud this committee's interest in this noble and critical work. I urge you and your colleagues to continue and even ramp up the oversight you have begun today with this hearing. We need an accounting of where each project stands, how much has been spent--by federal and private sources--and how much more needs to be invested for the letterpress volumes to be expeditiously completed. I sincerely hope that the papers of the Founding Fathers can be made available not only to a handful of scholars, but to everyone.

I will conclude my remarks, rather appropriately I think, by taking you back to the early 1780s. It is a story found in the papers of John Adams--a story in which someone suggests to Adams that that he should argue that America will never challenge Europe in trade and will never be interested in colonies in the Pacific or anywhere else.

Adams' response to this suggestion, we learn from his papers, is swift and clear. He says, "Never think of limitations on what we might do."

Mr. Chairman, members of this committee, I urge you to take the wise counsel of John Adams as you approach the task of completing and making available to the American people--and the world--the papers of our Founding Fathers. Let's not limit our aspirations.

Let's share our "American Scripture" with the world.