

Washington Star

Q and A

U.S. Archivist On Selecting, Saving Papers

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Dr. James B. Rhoads, as the nation's fifth archivist, stands guard over the records of the country's heritage. Among the 3 billion pages of documents in his care are the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution of the United States and its Bill of Rights. These will be on view around-the-clock for 76 hours after President Ford launches the Bicentennial Fourth of July weekend tomorrow night. Rhoads was interviewed by Washington Star Staff Writer Betty James.

Question: How many people visit the National Archives in a year?

Rhoads: In a year, close to a million people a year visit Exhibition Hall and we expect that this year it will be substantially higher than that. How much higher, your guess is as good as mine. I would guess at least a million and a half this year.

Q: Have you seen an increase already in the number of people visiting?

A: Yes. It is quite evident that there is a substantial increase, say during last month as compared with the equivalent month last year.

Q: You also have the Nixon papers here and the Warren Commission papers, all of the documents and various materials and exhibits relating to the Kennedy assassination?

A: Yes, the Warren Commission records would encompass practically everything that we have relating to the Kennedy assassination and those are here. The Nixon papers are in our custody also, although certain court orders pending certain legal decisions by the Supreme Court, probably early next year, prevent us from getting into them to process them, organize them.

Q: Mr. Nixon wants them himself, doesn't he?

A: Yes, he is challenging the constitutionality of the 1974 law which seized them and has appealed the case to the Supreme Court.

Q: Could anyone, could just a private individual see any of the material relating to the Warren Commission?

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A: Oh yes, and I think probably the Warren Commission records are the most heavily used body of material of its size that we have in the Archives. There are a large number of people who have taken a particular interest in the assassination of President Kennedy and the work of the Warren Commission. Many of them are people who have some doubts about the conclusions that the commission reached, and this is an historical event that many people for one reason or another have deep personal feelings about. And a great variety of people have come in to use them in some cases simply to satisfy their own curiosity about certain things, I suppose. But many of them to do rather extended research leading to articles and books. The purpose of this is that from the outset we have been concerned that if there should be another official investigation into the assassination, that the material evidence would be as well preserved as possible.

Q: As archivist, you play a role in urging government agencies to open up their materials to people who want to see them, in urging them to declassify more and more material?

A: Yes, since the new executive order of 1972 that established a new scheme for the handling of classified material — encouraging declassification of it — we've played, I think, a very substantial role. We organized a records declassification division here that has a staff of about 100 people who have, in the last three years, declassified about 250 million pages of material, mostly from the World War II period. The executive order mandates



DR. JAMES B. RHOADS
Chief U.S. archivist

us to review for declassification all material as it becomes 30 years old. I've also been active in the Interagency Classification and Review Committee, which was also established by the executive order. This has general oversight over classification and declassification programs throughout the government, and serves as a board of appeals for persons who are not satisfied with agency decisions as to classifying and declassifying. The ICRC has managed to cut the number of people who are authorized to classify documents by about three-fourths and we are confident that substantially less material is being classified now.

Q: How do you decide which records to keep?

A: You've asked a short question that doesn't have an easy, simple answer. First let me start by saying that each year in the federal government there are created or accumulated approximately 7 million cubic feet of records. That's enough to fill this building up 10 times in one year. So obviously the federal government would literally drown in paper if most of that material wasn't dis-

posed of when its usefulness is at an end. But there are several factors that we take into account in determining what is worth keeping. One is whether the documents provide evidential information that is of importance to the government itself. I suppose you could class treaties or laws, presidential executive orders in that category. There is another category: those records which may protect the rights of citizens, enable them to determine whether they have rights to the pension, proofs of birth and that sort of thing. Military records.

Q: What is the current trend of historical research?

A: Well, one trend, certainly, is toward greater use of statistical data. There is also, we have noticed this for several years now, a great upsurge of interest in the history of black Americans. The most recent big surge that we are experiencing has to do with women's history. We recently concluded a very successful two-day conference on women's history here at the National Archives.

Q: Do you already have quite a bit of material on black Americans and women or is this an area that is relatively slim?

A: Well, we have a great deal of material on both but because of the way the records are organized there is no single place that you can go to and find nothing but black history or women's history. It's scattered throughout our holdings; and we have two major long-range projects underway. One to prepare a guide to the important sources of black history among our holdings and a similar work with regard to the history of women.

Q: Surely the Declaration

of Independence is the most significant document under your care, how would you compare its symbolism with, say, Lenin's tomb or other monuments in other countries?

A: Certainly. Lenin's Tomb is the preeminent Soviet shrine. I think one can make that comparison. I'm almost a little reluctant to do so. I think it's clear that the motivation is similar for visiting both places, and that the way the average American citizen approaches the Declaration of Independence here is a little bit reminiscent of the way Soviet citizens approach the remains of Mr. Lenin.

Q: *Well, they are both symbols of revolution?*

A: Yes, yes, that's right.

Q: *Do they have any written document that is comparable to our declaration that we may have not heard a lot about?*

A: I'm not aware that there is any document that receives the kind of homage that the declaration does. There are undoubtedly documents from the period of their revolution that were very important or seminal, but I'm not aware of any one that is as outstanding.

Q: *How is it that the declaration is so?*

A: Yes, yes, it is. The declaration has lived a hard life since 1776 and it shows. It, of course, accompanied the government during the revolutionary period. It was moved around between Philadelphia and New York and Lancaster, Pennsylvania, and a number of other places; and rolled up, I think. And then was displayed here in Washington during the course of the 19th century in places and under circumstances that were not helpful. Exposed to direct sunlight.