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The Editor's Responsibility

John P. Kaminski

*T*here seems to be an almost unwritten rule as to what documentary editors are required to do in their day-to-day work—at least for those editors whom Charles Cullen characterized several years ago as “the soft money generation.” These editors, for the most part, are not tenured faculty. They receive full-time financial support from the National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC) and/or the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), supplemented by private funds often in the form of matching grants. It is assumed that these publicly supported editors, as professionals, do not punch a time clock. (For some at state agencies this may not in fact be the case.) More often than not, however, no supervisor stands over project personnel making sure that a necessary forty hours of work are put in each week. In reality, though, most documentary editors who supervise projects feel constrained to require a forty-hour work week of themselves and their staff. To be sure, some editors work many more hours; few work less.

What is done during this time? Generally speaking project directors on documentary editions spend less time in editing documents than do the other editors on the staff. Senior editors are forced to devote varying amounts of their time to administration, fund-raising, and different kinds of public relations. If an editor also teaches, those responsibilities take up time: preparation of lectures, classroom time, consultations with students, and reading, critiquing, and grading papers. Editors also have other responsibilities such as committee work, responding to inquiries, consulting with other projects and individuals, assisting the federal funding agencies in reviewing proposals and projects, cartographic design and production, learning new computer systems, as well as working closely with the publishers in the production and marketing of their documentary editions.

All of these tasks consume time and take editors away from their primary responsibility of editing texts. All of these chores are important, and I could spend the rest of my allotted time discussing these things. But, I want to focus on something more important—something more nebulous—something documentary editors don't usually mention, at least not in the presence of officers of their funding agencies.

What responsibilities do documentary editors face as scholars? Obviously it

is our responsibility to produce accurate editions arranged in a logical format. But I believe we as documentary editors—as *those* scholars who know more about our subjects than anyone else in the world—we have additional responsibilities to elucidate our documents fully. How do we go about accomplishing this?

For several years now the two major federal funding agencies have advocated a more streamlined approach to annotations in documentary editions. Julian Boyd is often held up as an example of the editor whose production of volumes slowed to a snail's pace because of his voluminous annotation, which sometimes took the form of lengthy headnotes and footnotes occasionally longer than the documents they accompanied. Now, almost ten years after Boyd's death, it is perhaps time to reflect on Julian Boyd's message to documentary editors.

Julian Boyd did not want to be known as an editor. He considered himself a historian—a scholar of Thomas Jefferson. He was, in fact, one of the premier authorities on Mr. Jefferson. No one knew more about Thomas Jefferson than Julian Boyd. For almost forty years Boyd and Jefferson were inexorably connected.

Now, let us suppose that Boyd had published the Jefferson Papers with streamlined annotation; that he had published an additional ten volumes of Jefferson's papers; and that he published nothing else. What a loss! Here, one of the greatest Jefferson scholars who had ever lived would have published only the bare-boned documentary edition of Jefferson's papers.

Now, don't get me wrong. I don't mean to denigrate the importance of publishing documents. What I mean to say is that the papers are but a portion of the scholarship that we as editors are responsible to publish. Julian Boyd's legacy is contained not only in the twenty volumes of the Jefferson Papers (both the documents and the annotation), but also in his many other publications—articles, pamphlets, speeches, and books. This is what Julian Boyd gave to the scholarly world. This is something we as documentary editors ought to emulate—not to eschew.

What is it that I am advocating? I believe that documentary editors as a prime source of knowledge for their own subjects must be responsible for getting this information published; not necessarily, however, within the covers of their own documentary editions. Purchasers of *The Documentary History of the Ratification of the Constitution* ought not to be forced to buy the results of related but not essential research by Gaspare Saladino, Richard Leffler, and John Kaminski. But these three editors know more about the ratification of the Constitution than anyone else in the world. It is therefore incumbent upon us—it is our responsibility—to publish the knowledge that we have accumulated over

the years; to publish this information in articles, books, reviews, papers, and in the form of outreach programs addressed to our home institutions, our local communities, and to the scholarly community at large.

Let's try to put this in a university context. Professors are paid to teach two or three classes a semester. They are expected to perform committee assignments, serve their communities, and, most importantly, in their judgment, to do research. The implication is that the results of this research will be published. What a waste if professors are paid to do research but then do not publish their findings.

The same can be said for documentary editors. We spend far more time than anyone else working with the documents and discovering new things about our subjects. What a shame if this information doesn't get published.

Many documentary editors do publish papers, reviews, articles, supplemental documentary editions for the general audience, biographies, and monographs. Generally these editors feel that this kind of scholarly activity should take place after their regular editing jobs are completed for the day. That is, editors feel that they should put in their eight hours at the office. After that responsibility has been met, work on other projects can begin. This, in fact, is the policy at the Ratification Project. No one on our project is in the office for as few as eight hours a day. I'm sure this schedule is repeated often throughout the editorial community.

It should be questioned whether this is the optimum arrangement. I raised such a question at the 1981 ADE convention in Madison, Wisconsin. Frank Burke, then executive director of the NHPRC, responded by saying that once NHPRC funds are granted to an institution, that money belonged to the institution. Editors, Frank said, should follow the general guidelines set by their home institutions. If committee work was expected of professors, then editors should also serve on committees. If professors and academic staff were expected to attend conventions and give papers, editors would be expected to attend conventions and give papers. In other words, editors were expected to pull their own weight within the scholarly community in which they resided. Most importantly, Frank indicated that the NHPRC expected that this would be done on project time because it was "project work."

In the mid-1970s, Lester Cappon as director of *The Atlas of Early American History* at the Newberry Library had a general policy that the editorial staff could (in addition to their regular vacations) take one month a year off from regular project duties to do research—research not necessarily related to the Atlas. NHPRC staff are given four hours a week to work on their own research. Other

projects I'm sure have similar policies, although perhaps not publicly acknowledged.

Several years ago I raised this very question with representatives from the NEH who were in Madison for the NHPRC summer editing institute. Would the NEH, I asked, allow each member of our editorial staff a month off to do research on project-related subjects? Such a request made the NEH officers uneasy. A couple of weeks later I received their formal response. The NEH would consider a month's "sabbatical" for no more than one staff member per year. A request for such a "leave" should be submitted in writing subject to approval on an individual-case basis. I have never submitted such a request to the NEH, and our staff continues to work its full-time schedule on the project with other supplemental activities taking place "on our own time."

The time is now ripe to reconsider this issue. NHPRC and NEH should make clear policy statements on this subject. What is expected of the editors of our documentary editions? Here are some proposals that might be considered.

1. Editors should be allowed to devote a portion of their regular work schedule to research on project-related subjects to be published outside the covers of their documentary editions.
2. Part of every editor's schedule should be devoted to keeping up with the burgeoning literature in the field.
3. Editors, like professors, should be eligible for leave to do research—leave in the form of grants obtained from private and public foundations as well as sabbatical leaves earned after having productively worked a sufficient number of years on a project.

These and similar ideas are important to the professional development of editorial staffs. Our product as editors ought not only to be a published documentary edition. We are scholars—our job is to disseminate the information we have gained through our editing. We have a responsibility as scholars to publish not only our documentary editions but other information that does not rightly belong in those editions. Some editors will continue to perform this task "after hours." Other editors will have absolutely no desire to publish beyond their documentary editions. All editors, however, should be encouraged—not discouraged—to publish.

The obvious response to my suggestions is that documentary editions already take far too long to complete. Diverting editors' attention and efforts to this kind of supplemental research and publication will further delay projects and reduce productivity. I'm not so sure that this would be the case. The kind of project-related research and publication I'm talking about would have a number of benefits:

1. Research on supplemental publications will have a tendency to get editors more intimately involved in their subjects and thus could increase—not decrease—the number of hours that they devote to their projects. In the process, editors would become more knowledgeable about their subjects—more knowledgeable particularly in the sense of putting their documents in a different scholarly perspective than a documentary edition. Editors, in essence, would become consumers as well as producers of documentary editions. This consumption will make editors better producers.
2. Supplemental research and publications will assist projects with their major focus, and perhaps even increase productivity because project research that would normally be done on “project time” might well be done now after “project time.”
3. Supplemental research and publication will gain greater awareness and recognition for the documentary editions both in the general and scholarly communities. The example of editors researching and publishing in their own documentary editions will have a beneficial effect on other scholars who will see the fruitful field that documentary volumes offer.
4. Royalty income from these project-related publications could be used to assist in funding documentary editions. Such financial arrangements already exist at a number of projects.
5. These kinds of supplemental publications will heighten the image of editors among more traditional scholars while raising the self-esteem of editors themselves.

Over and above all of these reasons, however, my case still stands squarely on the responsibility we editors have of disseminating the knowledge we have accumulated. If our funding agencies acknowledge this responsibility and encourage editors to devote part of their “project time” to such publications, the projects, the editors, the funding agencies, and the scholarly community will all be the beneficiaries.

