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A Letter to John W. Carlin

At the end of October, the ADE Council learned that the agenda for the November 13 meeting of Commissioners of the National Historical Publications and Records Commission would include a plan for ranking ongoing NHPRC-funded editorial projects with an eye for possible curtailment of funds. Such a plan would have gone into effect only in case of financial emergency, and it would have applied only to the “second tier” of projects whose grant applications are considered in the spring, not the “first tier” Founding Fathers editions. Even so, the Council felt it wise to put the Association for Documentary Editing on record as opposing this measure, and the following covering letter and resolutions were approved and sent to NHPRC Commission Chair John W. Carlin on November 8, over the signature of ADE President Mary-Jo Kline.

Recent events have persuaded the Council of the Association for Documentary Editing, acting on behalf of the Association’s membership, to comment on proposed changes in the policy of funding editorial projects to be considered by the Commission at its November meeting. These are exceptional times for every American. The tragedies of September 11 and the response to them have brought home more strongly than ever the importance of our history as a nation. Preserving and disseminating the documents recording our history as the world’s longest-surviving republic are national priorities, and the Association believes that this should be recognized and supported more strongly now than ever. The continued publication of such documents, together with tools for their use, will cast light on the development of American democracy, the expansion of freedom and responsibilities of citizenship to an ever-widening circle of Americans, and the leadership and example that the United States provides to the world. Such a program is essential to historical research, the education of this and future generations, and an understanding of what the United States is and represents.

For fifty years, the National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC) has been the entity mandated by federal statute to plan and support the publication of the essential documents that tell the American story. There has hardly been another period in the Commission’s lifetime when fulfilling this goal has been more important. From the beginning, the NHPRC (or NHPC as it was then) pursued the mission of historical publications energetically, submitting a plan of work that listed significant individuals and institutions whose papers deserved such attention. This exemplary program did not remain static or tradition-bound. Rather, it sought to adapt its

grants to the full span of American history and the historical diversity of the American experience. Over the following decades, that list was expanded to include women, African Americans, Native Americans and others with a vital impact on U.S. history.

The NHPRC actively encouraged the creation of editorial projects to search out, edit, and publish scholarly editions of these papers and, after 1963, assisted these projects with grants as well as encouragement and endorsement. As a result, the NHPRC has a long and proud record of making accessible the papers of individuals and institutions that have played a pivotal role in our national history through dozens of completed book and microform editions as well as hundreds of edited volumes in series that are currently in progress. And to maintain the high standards of modern-day historical editions, the Commission has encouraged the development of historical editing as a profession and the creation of the Association for Documentary Editing as a forum for these editors. Historian Edmund Morgan called the products of NHPRC-sponsored projects the most significant contribution to American history in the twentieth century, one that has brought about a scholarly revolution.

Until now, the Commission has rightly shown its pride in this record of achievement. Even in the bleakest days of 1981–1982, the NHPRC consistently demonstrated its commitment to the editorial projects that it helped plan, nurture, and bring to fruition. Now, we learn, this commitment may be threatened: at its November meeting, the Commission will consider adopting a new system that would introduce the ranking of ongoing editorial projects with an eye to terminating funding for those that do not meet certain criteria. This is such a marked reversal of NHPRC tradition and policy, that we must register a strong protest on behalf of ourselves and the organization we represent, a group of more than 400 scholars and scholar-editors embodying a broad community of interests and erudition. While many of our members of the Association for Documentary Editing are affiliated with NHPRC-funded projects, the majority do not fall into that category, and our concerns are with the well-being of American historical scholarship, not personal financial support.

Viewing the matter from this perspective, we can say that the loss of NHPRC funding will inflict serious and even fatal damage on the projects involved. NHPRC sup-

port is, in many cases, the key component of an editorial project's funding structure, regardless of the share of the total project budget. The loss of NHPRC funding would precipitate the collapse of the project's support system because host institutions would not or could not continue to support the documentary edition without the presence of these federal funds.

The re-creation of such projects at a later date with other funds will not be a practical possibility. These are particularly difficult times for editorial projects precisely because of a steady decline in the sources of foundation and corporate funding (a decline that has become even more precipitous since September 11) and an equally alarming decline in funds from state universities and other state institutions resulting from falling tax revenues. Further, NHPRC grants to editorial projects are committed almost exclusively to salaries: if an experienced team of editors must be discharged wholesale, such a staff cannot be reconstituted quickly, easily, or cheaply. Indeed, with a precedent of such volatility in support, it is doubtful that such projects could be reconstituted at any price.

In fact, the Commission itself has long recognized that a NHPRC grant is almost invariably the lynchpin of a project's funding, for until 1997, Commission policy listed all ongoing editorial projects as NHPRC priorities. (All such projects, of course, met the test of national significance and were subjected to a rigorous annual review process.) The Commission recognized, as well, that editing projects, by their nature, are long term. It has never been the practice of the Commission to withdraw funding once endorsement and support have begun, so long as professional standards are met and reasonable progress is demonstrated. The wisdom of this system is demonstrated by the fact that a substantial number of current ongoing editions will be completed in the next five years if adequate support continues.

The proposal to be considered at the Commission's meeting next week will undo these accomplishments. If a project's NHPRC funding is terminated abruptly, that project is almost certain to die. Editions would end before completion, and substantial NHPRC investments would be lost. Thus, instituting a drastic system of this kind would serve neither the NHPRC's mandate nor the Commission's interests in protecting its substantial financial investment in the ongoing editorial projects whose existence would be endangered. Instead it would have a deadly effect on historical editing. American history and scholarship and national pride will be the losers.

In light of these considerations, the Council of the Association for Documentary Editing has adopted the following resolutions on behalf of the Association:

Resolved that

The Association for Documentary Editing urges the National Historical Publications and Records Commission to reject any system of ranking ongoing documentary editing projects that are making satisfactory progress for the purpose of terminating the funding of projects in this category.

Be it further resolved that

The Commission consider cuts in funding for documentary editions only if the Commission's annual appropriation dips below \$6,000,000. Should such a drop in funding occur, the Council of the Association for Documentary Editing recommends that the Commission consider the following steps:

1. Hold all NHPRC grants to one-year terms, rather than voting two- or three-year grants in some categories, during any period of financial crisis.
2. Instruct the NHPRC staff to initiate an aggressive fundraising effort focused on providing additional private resources for editorial projects nearing completion.
3. Adopt across-the-board percentage reductions in the budgets of all editorial projects (including those of top priority) if cuts must be made, thus ensuring the survival of all ongoing projects.

And be it finally resolved that

The Association for Documentary Editing stands ready now, as we have for the past twenty-three years, to assist the Commission by joining with others in taking the case for increased NHPRC funding to the Office of Management and Budget, the Congress, and the American public.

At no other time since the founding of the Association for Documentary Editing have Americans and other members of the world community been in greater need of the documentary heritage to which we are all dedicated. It is our deepest hope that we and the Commission can continue to work together toward that goal. I am forwarding a copy of this letter to the NHPRC's Executive Director, Ann Newhall, so that she may provide the other members of the Commission with copies of this statement.