



# A Conversation with David S. Ferriero

## Archivist of the United States

### National Archives and Records Administration

*The National Archives is more than just the nation's keeper and protector of records. It is the steward of the American story, preserving the past to protect the future. The records it holds are the original sources of that story, documenting the collective history of our nation through the actions of individuals and institutions. Every day, the National Archives and Records Administration touches the lives of people all over the nation, from the visitors who come to see the Constitution to the government officials seeking assistance in managing their agencies' records. Yet changes in the federal government, in our society, and in the nature of records themselves are driving the National Archives to change the way it does business and addresses the needs of the users.*

*How is the National Archives transforming the way it does business? What about its digitization strategy, and how can you become a citizen archivist? David S. Ferriero, Archivist of the United States, joined me on The Business of Government Hour to explore these questions and more. The following provides an edited excerpt from our interview.*  
 – Michael J. Keegan



#### **On the History and Creation of the National Archives**

It's interesting that it took this country so long to create a national archives. There had been discussions as early as the end of the Continental Congress. There's this wonderful conversation of Rufus King, delegate from New York to the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia: "Mr. King suggested that the journals of the Convention should be either destroyed, or deposited in the custody of the President. He thought, if suffered to be made public, a bad use would be made of them by those who wish to prevent the adoption of the Constitution." (reported by James Madison, <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-29-02-0047>)

Ultimately, the decision was left to George Washington, who, thank God, thought it important to keep these records. However, it wasn't until Franklin Roosevelt's administration that the country actually became serious about creating

a national archives. In 1934, FDR created the National Archives along with the presidential library system.

As I was preparing for my confirmation hearing, I read everything that the very first archivist of the United States wrote about, what he was up against when he was actually creating the National Archives. Robert Connor, a faculty member at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, tells wonderful stories about the state of the records stored in attics and basements; the many things lost or destroyed by fire, flood, or theft. There's a wonderful story that the records of the White House used to be stored in the garage on the White House grounds. The story goes that there was a fire in the garage with President Rutherford B. Hayes out there on the lawn in a bucket brigade trying to put the fire out. There are many stories illustrating how historical records were treated. In fact,

the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights were spirited out of town the night before the British burned D.C. Given the circumstances, it's a miracle that these treasured pieces survived.

In the end, our collection starts with the journals of the Continental Congress, the oath of allegiance signed at Valley Forge by George Washington and his troops, all the way up to the tweets that are being created in the White House as we speak.

### **On the Mission of the National Archives and Records Administration**

We are responsible for the records of the country, so that means all the records of federal agencies in all three branches, Cabinet offices, and federal departments—about 275 agencies. At the National Archives, we preserve the past to protect the future. The records we hold are the original sources of the American story, documenting the collective history of our nation through the actions of individuals and institutions. It is a unique mission that is grounded in law and regulation. We're governed by the Federal Records Act. We are responsible for what's created in the White House under the Presidential Records Act with courtesy storage for the records of Congress and the Supreme Court. Congress owns their own records, but we provide storage and retrieval servicing. Similarly, the Supreme Court records are in our custody. We are responsible for the records management life-cycle from the creation of records to scheduling when these records become part of our collection or can be destroyed by the agencies.

Each federal agency creates a records schedule that describes the records they're creating. They work with my staff to create the records schedules. The records schedules describe how long the records stay in the agency and at what point the two to three percent that is of historic or legal value gets transferred to the National Archives. The transfer process is one that's managed by National Archives staff.

On the White House side, another group of staff works closely with the White House Office of Records Management to ensure the records are being created, captured, and preserved so that at the end of the administration, they get transferred to the National Archives. We are also responsible for ensuring that the gifts received by the president are recorded, and taken care of, so they can get transferred at the end of the administration also. At the end of an administration, actually during the inaugural ceremony, my staff is in the White House grabbing the records and transferring them



to temporary storage for the next presidential library. This describes the basic record-keeping piece of our mission.

We also have a role in managing classified records. The Information Security Oversight Office is responsible for classified information, monitoring, and working with the agencies around classification and how records are classified. Just after I started, the Office of Government and Information Services was established as the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) ombudsman, serving the American public [and] helping resolve problems involving FOIA requests, so it's an additional responsibility that the Archives has taken on. We also have a grant-making function, the National Historical Publications and Records Commission, which provides grants to states and institutions to preserve, digitize, and make available their records.

### **On the Scale of Operations of the National Archives and Records Administration**

We have 44 facilities from Anchorage, Alaska, to Atlanta, Georgia, with a collection of about 12 billion pieces of paper at the moment, about 40 million photographs, miles and miles of film and video. The largest growing collection is electronic records, about 500 terabytes at the moment. We started collecting electronic records during the Reagan administration so between the Reagan and the Bush 41 administrations, we have about 2.5 million e-mail messages; Clinton White House, 20 million; George W. Bush, 210 million e-mail messages; so that tells you—gives you a snapshot of where we're going with that. There's about 3,200 staff in those 44 facilities, [with a] budget of about \$400 million.

## On Transforming the National Archives and Records Administration

NARA was organized geographically with a fair amount of repetitive operations and stovepiping. With this transformation effort, we reorganized around business lines rather than by geography; doing this permitted us to make better use of our resources. We are also creating new units of opportunities to support the work we're doing. In October 2012, we opened a new center for innovation that gives the NARA staff opportunities to work on specific ideas they may have for improving NARA services and processes. This is a new opportunity for our staff to be more involved in the work that they're doing; increasing staff involvement represents a key aspect of this transformation.

Another major goal of the agency's transformation is to make its services more user-friendly to the public. We

have pursued the use of social media in making this vision a reality. Our innovation hub also enables people from outside the agency to come in and work with us on research projects that are focused on improving access to government information and records.

## On the Rise of the Electronic Records Environment

Our mandate is to collect, protect, and encourage the use of the records of the government so that people have the opportunity to primarily hold the government accountable while learning from our past as we make decisions about the future.

As a result, we are crafting a strategy that is based on rethinking the concept of records, asking questions such as: What is a record? What needs to be preserved? How are records in new formats to be preserved and made available in 100 years and more? Each one of these strategic questions



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has a separate set of strategies involved. For instance, the preservation piece of it is huge even with paper, but when you bring in preserving electronic information it becomes much more complicated. There are many obsolete formats that need to be preserved. We have a tremendous number of NASA records in an old programming system, EBCDIC. No one uses EBCDIC anymore. We need that ability to translate and migrate these old formats. Just think of the word processing systems that have disappeared and all of the e-mail from as far back as the Reagan administration. The attachments to those e-mails need preservation attention.

### **On the Challenges of Archiving Electronic Records**

It’s clear that the biggest challenge we face is electronic records, electronic records, and electronic records. Across the entire federal government, the transformative use of information and networking technology to carry out governmental functions is creating both challenges and opportunities for the National Archives and how we conduct business. Having the ability to manage, use, find, share, and appropriately dispose of electronic records is becoming a vital element of our mission. Given the magnitude of what we’re facing, the transition from paper to electronic formats makes the paper environment look really good.

It’s ensuring that the agencies are using technology in a way that ensures the records are going to be available 100 years from now. We need to make sure that people can have the same opportunity to hold the government accountable and learn about the history of the country through these records. It’s ensuring that these records are being created in the appropriate way and preserved, taken care of, and transferred to the National Archives at the appropriate time. As an example, though this is just a little piece of a huge, complex issue: those records schedules that I talked about earlier specify how many years the records are kept in the agency. For some agencies, it’s 20 or 30 years that the records stay within the agency. This works in a paper environment, but it doesn’t work as well in an electronic

environment. It makes me really nervous to think about 30 year’s worth of electronic records outside of the National Archives—changes in technology, just the ability to read those over time is a huge challenge.

We have created the Electronic Records Archives (ERA) which is the system that ingests those two to three percent of the permanent electronic records at the appropriate time. We’re incredibly fortunate to have the attention of this administration around records management. In November 2011 the president issued a memorandum on records management, which authorized me and the director of the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) to issue a directive with a set of requirements for each agency, especially around electronic records. It’s the first time since the Truman administration that a president has gotten involved in records management; it’s really an exciting time for us, and I’m confident that we’re going to nail this one.

### **On Forging a 21st Century Records Management Framework**

If you’re serious about open government, then the only way you’re going to have an open government is if you have good records. Since the records management process regulations are dated and largely crafted for a paper-based records environment, it’s important for us to have the authority to move forward, revamp the records management system, and ... meet the challenges of today’s environment. The presidential memorandum on managing government records marked the beginning of the administration’s government-wide effort to reform records management policies and practices and to develop a 21st-century framework for the management of government records. The memorandum authorized the creation of the Managing Government Records Directive that spells out a set of requirements for every agency to work towards a unified electronic records future.

The very first thing the directive does is to require every agency to identify a senior official responsible for records.



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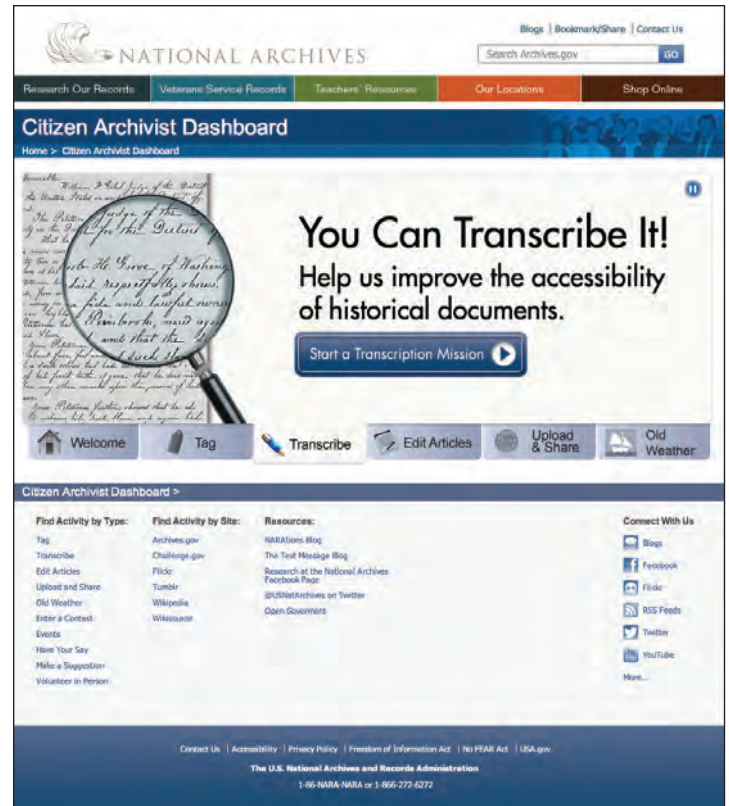
It stresses the importance of records management within agencies. Prior to the issuance of this directive, records management was frequently not a full-time job, assigned to a mid-level person in an agency, [who was] often not very well-trained. The directive made it a priority, so I convened the first meeting of the senior officers in November 2012; we outlined the set of responsibilities that we need to create this new records environment. There's a tremendous amount of work that needs to be done in terms of redefining the processes, looking at records retention schedules, identifying legislation that needs to be changed or created to accommodate new technologies. The fact that this administration and OMB are on board gives me great hope of realizing a new framework and way of doing business.

### On Becoming a Citizen Archivist

I am very proud of the success of the Citizen Archivist Initiative. In December 2012, we received the Walter Gellhorn Innovation Award from the Administrative Conference of the United States (ACUS), recognizing our effort to transform the agency's relationship with the public through crowdsourcing projects. This initiative is our way of engaging Americans in helping us do our work. We have an array of projects. We have thousands of records up. You can go online and help us transcribe them. We have opportunities for you to tag photographs. We have 40 million photographs. Not all of the people are identified in them so we've got opportunities for people to help us catalog our photo collection. There are five or six different opportunities for people to engage. One of the really exciting citizen archivist activities was a crowdsourcing effort around the 1940 census. In April 2012, we released the 1940 census in electronic form. We didn't have the resources to do the name index. One hundred and sixty thousand volunteers from around the country worked state-by-state to create the name index, which they did in three months. This is an excellent example of citizen archivists at work. The Citizen Archivist Dashboard ([www.archives.gov/citizen-archivist](http://www.archives.gov/citizen-archivist)) is a central location for these crowdsourcing activities.

### On the Future

We are creating opportunities for the future through our education programs; we're doing a massive amount of work to create digital opportunities. We have something called DocsTeach, which is a digital facility that has thousands of primary sources, records, and lesson plans teachers can access for use in their classrooms. It enables teachers to bring history to life for their students and gives them a powerful set of tools to do just that. We have a long tradition of inviting citizens to practice civic understanding and exploration through America's historical documents.



We also have the National Historical Publications and Records Commission, which is a grant-funding agency within the archives; it supports the work being done in state archives and institution archives, making the records that they have in their custody available. The commission also funds new ways of doing archival work, focusing on new techniques, new processes, and the future enhancements of archival work. I'm proud of the work being done in this area. ■

To learn more about the National Archives and Records Administration, go to [www.nara.gov](http://www.nara.gov).



To hear *The Business of Government Hour's* interview with David S. Ferriero, go to the Center's website at [www.businessofgovernment.org](http://www.businessofgovernment.org).



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