

TEACHING FOR THE FUTURE BY REACHING INTO THE PAST

Don W. Wilson*

I am pleased—and flattered—to have such a distinguished and learned audience today. Just think: there are probably more history-minded persons in this room right now than anywhere else in the United States. That is a great credit to the organizers of this conference.

Speaking at such an occasion as today's though, I am reminded of something Winston Churchill once said. A listener asked him, "Doesn't it thrill you, Mr. Churchill, to know that every time you speak the hall is packed to overflowing?" Sir Winston replied, "It is quite flattering, but whenever I feel this way I always remember that, if instead of making a speech, I was being hanged, the crowd would be twice as big."¹

Which reminds me: I have been advised that while I am in Missouri I should deny that I am a native of Kansas. I cannot do that; I am just as proud of Kansas as a great citizen of Missouri, Harry S. Truman, was of this state. Returning home after the close of his incredible "whistle stop" campaign in 1948, President Truman said, "I have been from one end of the country to the other—north and south, east and west—and none of them has been any better than this."² Well, over the past five years I have seen about as much of the country as Harry Truman did, including a lot of Missouri, and I feel almost as good about being back in this state as he did. So, it is a honor and a privilege to address you today.

At a banquet in Philadelphia in 1899, Willard Duncan Vandiver also uttered some words about Missouri—words that have become immortal. You will surely recognize them when I repeat them today. I am not referring to his statement, "I come from a state that raises corn and cotton and cockleburs and Democrats." Missouri certainly does not raise as much corn or cotton or cockleburs as it once did. And I'm not sure what it's doing about Democrats in this day and age.

I should point out, of course, that Missouri did not raise that particular Democrat, Willard Vandiver, either. He was a native of Virginia, but he did adopt Columbia as his home. And he did represent Missouri for several years in Congress, and he did serve as president of the Boone County Historical Society, so perhaps he is with us in spirit today.

*Don W. Wilson, then Archivist of the United States, presented this keynote address at the thirty-fourth annual Missouri Conference on History, April 10, 1992. It appeared in the October, 1992, issue of the *Missouri Historical Review*.

¹William Manchester, *The Last Lion, William Spencer Churchill* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1983), 810.

²*Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Harry S. Truman, 1948* (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1964), 933.

On that occasion in 1899, however, Willard Vandiver went on to speak the words that I am calling to your attention today: "Frothy eloquence neither convinces me nor satisfies me. I am from Missouri. You have got to *show* me."

My theme today is the role of the National Archives as an educator. I will show you how we at the National Archives take seriously our need to go beyond "frothy eloquence," how we preserve this country's unique and important records and how we make them accessible to all those who wish to use them. How we, in fact, *show* people that these records are living links with our shared history.

The work of the National Archives supports what teachers and students do in the classroom. By the same token, what you do helps us to fulfill our role. We are natural partners in educating all Americans about their history.

Most of you—perhaps most Americans—realize that the National Archives is the keeper of the Charters of Freedom: the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. These three basic American documents, each over two hundred years old, are among the major attractions of Washington, D.C. Every year more than a million visitors come to view these documents, which enunciate the principles of liberty, delineate our framework of government and identify the limits that we place on our government in order to preserve individual rights. The National Archives is proud to be the permanent caretaker of these documents.

But the National Archives is much more, and it does much more. It is not just a monumental building on Pennsylvania Avenue in downtown Washington. It is also a major cultural institution. And it is truly national, with more than thirty facilities, including twelve regional archives and thirteen records centers, each of which is represented in Kansas City; nine presidential libraries like the Truman Library in Independence; and the National Personnel Records Center in St. Louis. All in all, Missouri is quite well served by the National Archives.

Besides the Charters of Freedom, there are currently about four billion other records of the United States government in the custody of the National Archives. These include pieces of paper, films, audio recordings, computer files, photographs, maps and more. Only a small portion of the vast array of records created or received by the United States government in its daily activities—perhaps 1 or 2%—is valuable enough to be retained permanently. We help federal agencies to identify that small percentage and house these records, along with their temporarily valuable ones, in inexpensive storage. We then transfer to the National Archives building those federal records that are to be retained. We preserve these records and assist researchers in using them. Much the same process takes place with the records that the White House produces, which ultimately end up in a presidential library. The valuable records of all our presidential administrations since Herbert Hoover's are preserved and made available in this manner.

I probably have not told you much that you do not know. Some of you will even be aware of National Archives activities that are not as well known, like the publishing of the *Federal Register* and other reference guides to the United States

government. Or the National Historical Publications and Records Commission, which awards grants for preserving and making available important non-federal records and for publishing documentary editions. Or our role as the representative of the United States within the international archival community—a growing one in light of recent developments in Russia and Eastern Europe.

But I suspected that few of you know much about perhaps the best-kept secret at the National Archives: our educational mission. The National Archives is a large, and growing, force in educating Americans about the United States government and its records, about our nation's history and about the diversity of American society.

Why is the nation's keeper of documents increasingly involved in education? Because knowledge, and the ability to employ that knowledge in forming—or rejecting—opinions, is the backbone of the system we have created. Citizens and consumers need to be able to make sound decisions, based upon the facts. Well-informed Americans are vital to the preservation of our democratic system. We at the National Archives, like you, have a key role to play in this process.

It is our conviction, moreover, that records, no matter how well preserved and arranged and described for potential users, do not do anyone much good if they are not actually used. Only by examining and reflecting upon the record of our past can we bring the information in that record to bear on the issues of today. The National Archives thus plays a vital role in linking the heritage of the past with the analysis of today by showing Americans how documents form a vital part of that heritage.

To that end, the National Archives has created a variety of public programs that educate the American people about the records we all share. These public programs are in addition to our other educational endeavors, which include instructing our own staff, and others, in archival skills and management; training federal agency employees how to care for records; teaching genealogists how to search census and other federal records and showing citizens how to use the *Federal Register*. I am talking this afternoon about using records in the National Archives to show Americans what our common past has to say to us. Let me give you some examples.

Several times a week, the National Archives hosts a number of series, free to the public, that constitute our own brand of "adult education." Here, authors discuss the books that they researched at the National Archives. On the fiftieth anniversary of Pearl Harbor Day last December, for instance, we featured several authors whose recent books deal with World War II. We also screen films from our extensive holdings, which include some eleven thousand films of the United States Information Agency and hundreds of other films produced or obtained by the National Archives. The "Road to War" series, now being shown at many of our facilities throughout the United States, includes eight memorable feature-length films on the Second World War. We host dramatic and musical performances based on records in the National Archives. One recent production, *The Rice of*

Strangers, is a compelling account of the internment of Japanese-Americans during World War II.

Through these and similar programs, we acquaint all who can attend—nearly twenty thousand last year alone—with the content and the enduring meaning of records held in the National Archives. Our regional archives and presidential libraries throughout the nation offer similar programs. Nor is our "adult education" confined to National Archives buildings. Each year we assist the Kettering Foundation with its innovative National Issues Forum. We select three original documents that serve as the focus of the forum's community discussion groups on public policy issues. More than seven thousand educators also receive these materials annually. In discussion groups in their own communities and schools, Americans learn more about the vital issues of today through the documents of the past.

We take our message to the homes of some five thousand American families who subscribe to our quarterly magazine, *Prologue*. Each issue of *Prologue* contains solid—and readable—articles based on the records in the National Archives. Recent issues described such World War II-related topics as the rationing of typewriters and the defense of Wake Island.

Exhibitions are another way we use records to educate Americans about important topics and themes. Our current exhibition in Washington is entitled "DRAW! Political Cartoons from Left to Right." It features 135 original cartoons that criticize or poke fun at virtually every aspect of our political system and its leaders. The exhibition vividly demonstrates the value of the First Amendment and the right of free expression that this amendment protects.

We are particularly excited about a major exhibit on World War II that opened in San Antonio last December 7 and will travel all over the United States through 1995. This exhibition, which includes dramatic and often moving first-hand accounts of the war—from GIs as well as from generals—will be at the Eisenhower Library in Abilene this fall and at the Truman Library for several months in mid-1993. I hope you will go to see not only it but also another World War II exhibit entitled "A People At War" that the National Personnel Records Center in St. Louis has put on display in various locations in and around that city.

You could hardly have missed noticing that a World War II theme runs through many of these educational activities. The National Archives is playing a leading role in our nation's commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of our participation in the Second World War. We are taking advantage of this anniversary to call attention to the importance of the war, which was probably *the* major event of the twentieth century.

But we are also calling attention to the value of records in understanding what happened during that conflict. This, our last chance to honor personally many of those who served and sacrificed in World War II, is an excellent occasion to reflect upon the importance and lasting significance of the war. We at the National Archives view a major commemoration like this as a unique opportunity

to capitalize upon the public interest: to demonstrate how records are indispensable to our national understanding of the event we seek to remember.

All these National Archives activities bring people face to face with the record of the past. Through this encounter, we reach out to those who lived then. Documents are already our principal link to the generation that actually experienced the Second World War; soon they will be our only link. Much remains to be discovered about that war and its powerful impact on American society and world history. It is the responsibility of the National Archives to be actively involved in this discovery, and we are.

My major topic today is how the National Archives works to support classroom education directly. This is a matter of applying our agency's strength to a clear need. The strength of the National Archives is the unique power of the original record. The educational need is a face-to-face encounter with the past.

I do not have to explain this to you; encountering the past through its remaining records, after all, is what got many of us who were trained in history into the field in the first place. We grasped the chance to be in touch, through primary sources, with the men and women who shaped our nation's destiny, or whose lives and activities reflect the vast changes that were taking place in society while they lived.

Such documents enable us, as the late educator Hazel W. Hertzberg wrote in the 1985 study entitled *History in the Schools*, to "enter into other times and places to see how the past looked to the people living in it." She went on to write that "the historical imagination, which the story of history should cultivate, develops not just through reading or hearing about statements about the past but through acquiring for oneself a sense of the concrete circumstances of life—its sights, sounds, smells, tastes, textures." And here is her clincher: "If history is to have deep and lasting meaning to students, they must make it their own."³ We at the National Archives would add: Is there a better way to do this than through original sources? From primary sources, students learn how to evaluate and interpret information in its basic form. Documents created by those who participated in or witnessed the events of the past tell students something that even the best historical writing—even the best teacher—cannot convey.

Students see how historians, using their own thinking and judgment, have interpreted the past. They discover how to identify fact and bias, how to weigh evidence and how to detect contradictions and other limitations within a particular source document. They learn how to determine the reliability of sources and how to draw inferences, conclusions and generalizations from factual information. They see how to compare one source with another. They come to recognize differing points of view—and how to form their own, independent conclusions. Development of these skills is vital not only to doing research, but also for

³Hazel W. Hertzberg in Matthew T. Downey, ed., *History in the Schools* (Washington, D.C.: National Council for the Social Studies, 1985), 26, 36.

intelligent and responsible participation in a democratic society. Nothing conveys like original sources the flavor of another era. Nothing communicates better than the words or pictures of those who actually took part in events. Nothing is like encountering an authentic primary source. By wrestling with original documents, students do make history truly their own.

Do we have faith that primary sources still have this power? Do we still believe that primary sources empower student? We at the National Archives believe that they do. And we believe that it is our responsibility, as the holder of so many of these important primary sources, to give teachers the opportunity to use them in their teaching.

Twelve years ago we launched a series of teaching packets, based on the vast and incredibly diverse documentary holdings of the National Archives. These packets enable teachers to introduce these resources to upper elementary and secondary school classes. The packets are researched and written by our own staff, advised by classroom teachers. We have now published for sale more than a dozen of these packets, on topics ranging from the Great Depression to the Bill of Rights. Each packet includes facsimile copies and audio tapes or slides of about fifty key documents—letters, photographs, diary entries, drawings, posters, newspaper articles, charts, government reports and the like. All of these documents are drawn from the holdings of the National Archives and help to illuminate actions of the federal government, or citizens' responses to those actions. All the items have been chosen for their ability to communicate with young persons. Some of these documents are famous, but many of them have never before been published.

Two packets of particular interest to Missouri students are those dealing with the westward expansion of the United States from 1785 to 1842 and from 1842 to 1912. The first includes copies of a land certificate, Zebulon Pike's exploration notebook, the Louisiana Purchase agreement, a committee report on Indian affairs, a map of the National Road, the patent drawing of the cotton gin, a proposed amendment to Louisiana territorial organization to restrict slavery and much more.

Documents in these packets address social and economic themes as well as political and diplomatic events. They show how national events affected the lives of people. I have looked at these documents myself, and I find them an exciting way of learning about westward expansion. I wish that I had had them at my fingertips when I was in school.

The National Archives staff members who create these packets and the accompanying teacher's guides have many, many years of classroom experience themselves. In addition, teachers assist us in developing packets and in preparing the exercises that the teacher's guide recommends.

When the National Archives began this series, we were virtually alone in promoting the use of original documents in teaching at the pre-college level. Now others have joined in doing so. Nevertheless, the National Archives believes that it has an ongoing role in this area, and so we will continue to produce and

distribute these packets. We are now developing a similar series of packets for the collegiate level and for adult learners. Working with Kendall Hunt Publishers, we have already published several of them: on the Watergate affair, on the internment of Japanese-Americans during World War II and on women in industry during the Second World War.

In addition, we produce sets of posters, available to teachers and others, that feature authentic historical images and reproductions of original documents. These posters are designed to help schools, libraries, historical societies and others who would like to use facsimiles of historical materials to educate their own audiences, in their own exhibitions, and within their own limited budgets. Our current series of thirty-two posters, "The World In Flames," includes documents ranging from America First materials to invasion maps of Normandy beaches to the surrender document signed aboard the battleship *Missouri*. A second set of seventeen posters, on the Holocaust, is in production.

We also offer guidance for teachers who wish to use primary sources in their teaching. This takes place through district in-service training, at workshops and professional meetings and as part of the Exemplary Schools Program. We offered over two dozen such training sessions or presentations last year for seven hundred educators. These activities help ensure that the teaching materials we produce meet the needs of teachers, who also identify new topics that we should be exploring. And, of course, these teachers often go back to teach other teachers in their district or region, thus multiplying the effectiveness of what we do.

Each summer the National Archives hosts an eight-day institute, "Primarily Teaching," that focuses on teaching with documents. Here teachers share strategies for using original historical resources in their teaching. This institute has become an important device for teachers interested in revitalizing their instructional techniques. We publish a bulletin for past participants in our workshops and institutes, available to others upon request. The bulletin reports on these teachers' activities as change agents in education within their own communities.

The National Archives-Central Plains Region in Kansas City also conducts teacher workshops. It has just created its own innovative teaching unit—a videocassette entitled *Over Here, Over There: American Home Life and the Second World War*. This videocassette employs actual footage from combat, propaganda films, personal accounts of war experiences and dialogue based on World War II materials in the National Archives. The teaching unit comes in seven 20-minute segments that a teacher can incorporate into his or her personal teaching plan.

The National Archives also publishes, in *Social Education* and in other magazines, highly praised feature articles on "Teaching with Documents." Each article includes a document that teachers can employ in their classrooms. Fifty-two of these articles have been compiled in book form, which helps to make the documents more accessible. The National Archives participates in and supports the work of the National Council for the Social Studies and similar professional educational associations. Few other federal agencies so actively assist teachers in such tangible ways.

In recognition of the importance of primary sources in the classroom, the National Historical Publications and Records Commission and the National Archives annually make two highly prized awards. One of these awards goes to a teacher, the other to a student or group of students, who uses original documents in particularly innovative ways. These awards, which we are particularly proud of, are presented at National History Day held at the University of Maryland every June.

We are delighted that so many teachers bring their students to the National Archives—for workshops, for research or just to visit. With nearly thirty facilities around the country, we can reach out to many schools and colleges. Many of our holdings are especially valuable for regional and local history, and these National Archives facilities actively support history teaching within their regions.

Let me cite two examples that involve Missouri. Our National Archives-Central Plains Region, working with the Johnson Country Museum System and the Veterans of Foreign Wars, recently published an activity book entitled *Through My Eyes: A Child's View of World War II*. This activity book, intended for grades five through eight, helps children to understand the American homefront during the war. With documents related to topics ranging from V-Mail to Victory Gardens, *Through My Eyes* helps students today grasp how youngsters their age fifty years ago experienced and coped with the war.

My second example of what the Central Plains Region is doing reflects a wholly different kind of cooperation, but one just as important. For over twenty years, the Region has worked with half a dozen Missouri colleges and universities to offer archival internships to graduate students. This program provides these students—perhaps prospective archivists—with formal, on-the-job experience that can be an advantage for them when they are looking for a job. The program covers training in areas ranging from conservation to management. Having worked with interns myself, I know that there is no better way for someone to acquire a first-hand knowledge of archival work.

In addition, I know of many teachers and faculty members—my friend Steve Kneeshaw at the College of the Ozarks, for instance—who regularly bring their classes to do research at National Archives facilities. Steve recently wrote to say that his history students

have suffered through the same frustrations as professional historians, often finding ways to work around obstacles. They have also known the joys of historical discovery. And they have been inspired to stay with history. Another nice benefit: There have been some prominent researchers at [the Lyndon Johnson Library] during our times at the library, many of whom have taken time from their own research to visit with my students—e.g. Robert Caro, Robert Divine, and William Leuchtenburg.

I am happy to be able to quote Steve's next three sentences: "In all of the libraries," he writes, "we have always received the best treatment. In their attention paid to the students, staff members have never treated them just as undergraduates who are novices at this sort of work. They have been gracious in

their support and they always seemed to find time to go an extra step, for example to give us behind the scenes tours."

The Truman Library has been especially innovative in encouraging research, in particular through its Student Research Program. The archivists there are assembling fifty research files, each containing photocopies of the library's most important documents on a variety of Truman-era subjects—usually five hundred to one thousand pages in all. These files are put in the research room where visiting students can examine them. This frees the archivists to work individually with the students, who have already been able to consult the list and choose manageable topics from it. The next phase is for the Truman Library not only to bring in more students to use these files but to take the files themselves out to classrooms throughout this area. We at the National Archives would love to have more classes use our holdings and facilities as these classes already do.

But we also must work together in other ways. I have said that we need an enlightened public. Without citizens well acquainted with their history, we have an inadequate base for common values—and inadequate support not only for schools but also for the National Archives. And without well-trained teachers, history education itself will languish. All of us have a vital stake in this matter.

In 1970 the late Walter Rundell wrote a major study of historical research and training in the United States. He concluded that more adequate training in historical methodology is necessary.⁴ Over the past two decades, things have not improved: historians—and history teachers—still do not receive a systematic training in research methods and tools. Few graduate programs offer methodological courses to teach how to use the new technology and the new finding aids that have been developed recently; few graduate courses require future historians, or teachers, to use primary documents in their own research.

A new consensus on the essential aspects of sound training in historical methods in today's revolutionary climate for research is needed. Once such a consensus has been achieved, graduate schools and others can develop specific programs to train their student historians in research methodology. It goes without saying that the National Archives is most interested in this topic. Without history teachers well trained in the use of primary sources, and how to find them, we are unlikely to find students who are exposed to these skills and insights. The National Archives is ready to help in building that consensus, and whatever else will strengthen the quality of historical research training.

While the National Archives encourages additional uses of archival materials, we must work with teachers—and graduate programs—to build greater awareness of original materials and the unique perspectives they bring. This should be one of the major educational goals of the National Archives. I intend it to be such a goal. You can count upon the National Archives to lend its efforts to the

⁴Walter Rundell, *In Pursuit of American History: Research and Training in the United States* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1970), 36, 328.

cause of better history education and better schools. Recent national reports indicate that history education is holding its own within the schools, at least insofar as United States history is concerned. But there are fewer year-long courses than there ought to be. There are fewer world history courses than we should have in this international era. And there are far too few courses that examine state and regional history.

Where the National Archives can contribute appropriately to reassessments of curricula, of syllabi and of teaching methods, we will do so. Where we can speak effectively on behalf of a broader and deeper history education for all Americans, we will do so. For example, we have presented testimony to the National Education Assessment Program regarding what parts of the history curriculum should be assessed.

It is a matter of critical importance for American society that we have generation after generation of well-trained young people—young people who can make the link between the issues of today and the heritage of our common past. Where the National Archives can contribute to this broad effort, which I am glad to say seems to be gathering increasing support throughout the country, we will gladly do so. I know these topics are close to the hearts of every educator and parent—and student—in this room.

The National Archives is also vitally interested in these issues. Without a broad understanding of our history within the learning public, the National Archives faces an even more difficult task of building awareness of and support for its own work. So, in many ways, we already have a partnership. Let us look for ways to implement, and to strengthen, that partnership. I often describe National Archives facilities as "classrooms of democracy." Your classrooms are truly classrooms of democracy too, and we can work together toward our common goals.

We are all familiar with another quotation that has become associated with this part of the country through that magnificent film called *Field of Dreams*. The quotation goes, "If you build it, they will come." That concept may work in films like *Field of Dreams*, but it will not work for our nation's documentary heritage. The National Archives must show Americans—teachers, students and citizens—how documents are crucial to our common understanding and to our future.

Frothy eloquence is not convincing or satisfying. Only by showing people documents can we fulfil our mission, and we depend on teachers and schools to work with us to this end. Let us all work together so we can do more to contribute to this cause in which we all believe.

A NOTE FROM THE EDITOR:

In this essay, "Teaching for the Future by Reaching into the Past," Don W. Wilson discusses a variety of publications and programs that are available through the National Archives. Two of these publications are reviewed in this spring 1993 issue

of *Teaching History*: the National Archives kit—Wilson calls it a "teaching packet"—on the Bill of Rights (see p. 39 of this issue) and *Teaching With Documents* from the National Archives and the National Council for the Social Studies (see p. 40).

For more information about the teaching packets, posters, training institutes and workshops, internships, research opportunities, and other National Archives educational initiatives mentioned in Wilson's essay contact:

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