

**FISCAL YEAR 2023 BUDGETS FOR THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS
ADMINISTRATION AND THE NATIONAL HISTORICAL PUBLICATIONS AND
RECORDS COMMISSION**

**Submitted by the National Coalition for History to the House Appropriations Committee's
Subcommittee on Financial Services and General Government**

Submitted by:

Lee White

Executive Director

National Coalition for History

May 29, 2022

The Honorable Mike Quigley
Chairman
Subcommittee on Financial Services
and General Government
House Committee on Appropriations
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Mr. Chairman:

The National Coalition for History (NCH) supports the Biden administration's recommended funding level of \$426.5 million for the National Archives and Records Administration's (NARA) Operating Expenses (OE) budget in fiscal year (FY) 2023, which is an increase of \$38.2 million from the FY 22 level of \$388.3 million.

NCH also supports the Administration's base funding level of \$9.5 million in FY 23 for the National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC) grants program. That represents an increase of \$2.5 million over the FY 22 base level of \$7 million. The NHPRC received a total of \$12.3 million in funding in FY 22. However, \$5.3 million of that was the result of congressionally directed funding which we expect will fluctuate from year to year.

The National Coalition for History (NCH) is a consortium of 43 organizations that advocates and educates on federal legislative and regulatory issues affecting historians, archivists, political scientists, documentary editors, teachers, students, genealogists, and other stakeholders. As researchers, teachers, and conservators of American history and culture, we care deeply about the programs and activities of NARA and the NHPRC.

NARA has reached an inflection point. Recently, David S. Ferriero retired after twelve years as Archivist of the United States (AOTUS). We want to recognize and thank him for his leadership, dedication, and integrity during what have been challenging times for NARA.

The new Archivist will face tremendous challenges in both the short and long term. For far too long, NARA has been neglected and underfunded. NARA has made progress but continues to struggle with the transition from paper to electronic records. As the quantity of material increases exponentially, NARA will have difficulty keeping up with federal records generated each year, let alone tackling the massive backlog of older, historically important paper records that should be digitized. Perhaps most importantly, the quality and quantity of services provided to our citizens will further deteriorate if not addressed in this budget cycle. There are indications that NARA may be unable to manage these important responsibilities, a trend that has only been exacerbated by the pandemic, the ensuing shutdown and delayed restoration of on-site services. This limitation owes less to management issues than to inadequate funding.

NARA’s operating expenses (OE) budget has remained stagnant for more than a decade at a time when the transition to use of electronic records by federal agencies is well underway. Investment in human capital, including professional archivists, is vital for providing an elevated level of service to the public. For too long Congress and the administrations of both parties have, unfortunately, viewed NARA as a mere housekeeping agency, rather than as a vital agency that ensures transparency, efficiency, and historical documentation for the nation.

NARA’s FY 22 operating expenses budget is \$388 million, which is only \$3 million more than the FY 18 level of \$385 million. NARA requires a level of appropriations commensurate with its vastly expanded responsibilities. This chart provides a summary of the NARA OE and NHPRC budgets over the past decade.

NARA and NHPRC Appropriations, FY 2012 to Present (in millions of dollars)

	FY 12	FY 13	FY 14	FY 15	FY 16	FY 17	FY18	FY 19	FY 20	FY 21	FY 22
NARA	\$373	\$353	\$370	\$365	\$372	\$381	\$385	\$373	\$359	\$377	\$388
NHPRC	\$5	\$4.75	\$4.5	\$5	\$5	\$5	\$6	\$6	\$6.5	\$6.5	\$12.3

[In inflation-adjusted dollars, NARA’s OE budget has declined for more than a decade.](#) No federal agency can absorb such significant reduction in funding without concomitant decreases in public services. Even before the pandemic, NARA had to reduce hours at its research rooms.

We fully understand, and agree, that NARA must prioritize the safety of its staff, researchers, and visitors and we realize they are doing the best they can under unusual and trying circumstances. [Currently, customers must make appointments in advance to visit NARA's research rooms and the wait time varies from location to location.](#) In a vast number of cases, researchers working on a project cannot complete their work in a single visit, thus increasing the time required to conduct research.

Researchers may be coming from some distance to use the records at, for example, a presidential library, and being unable to conduct research on consecutive days is not merely an inconvenience. It may make it impossible to do the research at all. To its credit, NARA has tried to enhance the customer experience by allowing the researcher to request the records to be pulled in advance. However, the current system simply cannot be allowed to continue indefinitely.

We appreciate the additional funds you provided to address the backlog of over 500,000 requests for veteran's records at the National Personnel Records Center (NPRC). However, these are not the only category of NARA's holdings that are experiencing delays. There are tremendous backlogs in responding to Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests. In addition, [NARA is also facing backlogs in the declassification of records hampering the ability of historians and others to perform research.](#) Delays in the processing of records and responses to records requests at presidential libraries have also increased.

In recent years Congress and the executive branch have placed additional responsibilities on the agency without providing the funding necessary to assume these functions. These include transitioning from the preservation and storage of paper records to the preservation and storage of electronic records. NARA also faces the continued addition of presidential libraries. Each new presidential library created and placed under NARA's care adds additional costs for staff, maintenance, and records management.

The federal government's transition to electronic records, including email, has exponentially increased the number of records that NARA must process and catalog. In 2019, NARA and the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) announced that the agency will no longer accept paper records from federal agencies as of December 31, 2022. We are concerned that with diminished resources and the impact the pandemic had on its ability to perform even its most basic functions, NARA will not be prepared to continue this transition without serious disruptions. We doubt that this deadline can be met without additional resources, both human and technological.

Despite the additional appropriations you provided for this purpose in the FY 22 budget, NARA lacks the funding needed to meet the imperative for digitization and accessibility. This need was made even more obvious during the pandemic which showed the public's expectation that the

federal government's records can be easily found on the internet. In addition, the need to manage large volumes of textual records is not diminishing. Proactively funding NARA's records management programs ensures that agencies operate more efficiently and that permanent records are preserved. We urge you to provide NARA the additional funding necessary to ensure a seamless transition to all digital recordkeeping in the coming years.

While not an issue that can be addressed in the appropriations process, we urge you to press the authorizers on the House Committee on Oversight and Reform to pass legislation strengthening and clarifying the Presidential Records Act (PRA). Events of the past few years have shown how woefully inadequate the statute has proven in ensuring that the complete historical record of an administration is preserved. Increased accountability and oversight are necessary.

National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC)

The National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC) is the grant-making arm of NARA. It enables the National Archives to activate resources that connect the American people with archival and historical materials of deep significance to the present. Archive-specific work includes the preservation and access of electronic records and disaster preparedness for vulnerable collections. Historical grants provide for the creation of documentary collections (websites, podcasts, books, databases, transcripts, and audio resources) of nationally significant groups and individuals. Some examples include the documentary histories of people like George Washington, Willa Cather, Thomas Edison, Frederick Douglass, Walt Whitman, Albert Einstein, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Eleanor Roosevelt. NHPRC grants also fund the curation of content pertaining to noteworthy institutions like the early Supreme Court, the First Federal Congress, and the Freedmen's Bureau. In addition, the NHPRC has funded an ongoing project to make the papers of the Founding Fathers available for free online.

NCH supports the Administration's minimum base funding level of \$9.5 million in FY 23 for the NHPRC. That represents an increase of \$2.5 million over FY 22 base level of \$7 million. The NHPRC received a total of \$12.3 million in funding in FY 22. However, \$5.3 million of that was congressionally directed pass-thru funding, an amount which we expect will fluctuate from year to year. \$9.5 million would enable continued support of ongoing programs and modest investment in new ones.

Thank you for the opportunity to present our views on the FY 23 budgets of NARA and the NHPRC.