

Heritage Preservation

The National Institute for Conservation

Statement of Heritage Preservation, Inc.

to the

Subcommittee on Interior and Related Agencies

Committee on Appropriations

U.S. House of Representatives

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Heritage Preservation, the national organization dedicated to preserving our nation's heritage, urges the Congress to restore the \$4,519,000 that the President's FY 2009 budget cuts from the Division of Preservation and Access at the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH). This cut is to be implemented in large part by the elimination of grants for Stabilizing Humanities Collections, an important program that addresses critical issues for America's museums, libraries, and archives. Heritage Preservation asks the Congress to instruct the agency not to terminate or substantially reduce this program in FY 2009.

The collections that embody the richness and diversity of our heritage are cared for by more than 30,000 archives, historical societies, libraries, museums, scientific research collections, and archaeological repositories (collecting institutions) in the United States. The Heritage Health Index, the first comprehensive survey of the condition and preservation needs of our nation's collections, was published in 2005. The survey results (at www.heritagehealthindex.org) found that 820 million objects in collecting institutions are at risk. Among the survey's findings:

- 65% of our nation's collecting institutions have experienced damage to collections due to improper storage.
- 59% of institutions have the majority of their collections stored in areas too small to accommodate them safely and appropriately.
- 53% of collecting institutions have had their collections damaged by moisture.
- 59% of collecting institutions have had their collections damaged by light.
- Only 44% of institutions have sufficient security measures in place.

What can be done to save the nation's collections from these dangers? Museums, libraries, and other collecting institutions need to purchase proper storage containers and shelving that will protect fragile documents and artifacts from damage. They need to install climate control that will prevent damage from light and humidity. Security and fire suppression systems must be updated. These are precisely the situations that grants for Stabilizing Humanities Collections are designed to address.

In recent years, NEH's administration of this program has been exemplary. Collections throughout the country have received Stabilizing Humanities Collections grants that will help ensure the objects that tell the story of our nation survive for future generations.

The Hancock Shaker Village in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, received \$262,000 to purchase compact shelving and storage units to preserve artifacts that document Shaker history.

The Museum of New Mexico Foundation in Santa Fe, New Mexico, received \$501,449 for storage furniture and rehousing of artifacts related to state history.

Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, received \$240,686 to create a visual digital database of the museum's holdings of Asian Art.

Laura Ingalls Wilder Memorial Society in DeSmet, South Dakota, received \$35,000 for storage cabinets and shelving for artifacts related to the *Little House on the Prairie* books.

The Virginia Historical Society in Richmond, Virginia, received \$488,077 for shelving and rehousing archives of the state's business history for the 18th through the 20th centuries.

The University of California, Berkeley, received \$415,000 for its Bancroft library to provide and install climate control and storage for photograph collections and related materials on the American West.

Despite the success of these projects, the findings of the Heritage Health Index tell us that millions more artifacts are at risk of mold because of moisture, at risk of fading because of exposure to light, at risk of breaking because of crowded storage conditions, and at risk of burning because of lack of fire suppression systems. **Sixty-three percent of collecting institutions need environmental controls, and 49% need reduced exposure to light.** Improvements to conditions for housing collections are among the most urgent needs cited by collecting institutions.

Stabilization of Humanities Collections is the only federal grant program for conservation/preservation that funds upgrades or installations of security and fire

suppression systems for museums, libraries, and archives. It is the only federal grant program for conservation/preservation that supports installation or purchase of HVAC systems for a collecting institution's building. Private funding for these critical behind-the-scenes improvements is difficult to come by, but with the recognition of a grant from NEH, other donors have been more willing to contribute.

Numerous museums and libraries with collections at risk are planning to submit applications to the NEH's October 1, 2008, deadline for Stabilizing Humanities Collections. Successful proposals are quite demanding and require extensive time and planning. If institutions believe this program will be eliminated, they are not likely to start the process of preparing an application. Heritage Preservation asks the subcommittee to signal its support for the program expeditiously, so that both the NEH and its applicants can plan accordingly.

The President's FY 2009 budget also calls for a reduction of \$2,249,000 in NEH's Challenge Grants program. These grants have led to stable funding for a number of activities related to preserving America's collections, including renovation of the research library at the Maine Historical Society; renovations, including climate control, at the Pilgrim Hall Museum; and endowment for graduate students in conservation at the University of Delaware. Each Challenge Grant requires a substantial match in non-federal funding—funding that might not have been forthcoming without the challenge. Heritage Preservation asks the subcommittee to restore this funding to Challenge Grants.

“Providing a safe environment and proper care for collections is a fundamental responsibility of all institutions and individuals who care about our heritage.” This statement from the Heritage Health Index report applies to us all, including Heritage Preservation, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the Congress. By ensuring that adequate resources are available for preserving collections, we can help fulfill this fundamental responsibility.