Civics 101

Episode 80: The National Archives

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***[Virginia Prescott] I'm Virginia Prescott and this is Civics 101. The podcast refresher course on the basics of how our democracy works. Today we're taking a peek inside the National Archives and Records Administration or NARA. That is the place that collects and preserves the most important documents in the country -- the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution for example, and makes them available to the people. Joining us today is Jesse Kratz the historian of the National Archives in Washington D.C.. Jessie, Welcome to Civic 101.***

[Jessie Kratz] Thank you so much for having me.

***[VP] So first things first the agency is officially National Archives and Records Administration. So what does that mean broadly? What do they do?***

[JK] Broadly speaking we preserve the records of the federal government and we make them available to the public. The Records Administration part comes with where we're working with federal agencies in order to get their permanent records sent to the National Archives.

***[VP] When was the National Archives established and why?***

[JK] Well, Congress established the National Archives in 1934 after years and years of lobbying from the historical community to basically preserve and care for the records of the government and make them accessible to the public, because previously federal records were kept in various federal agencies and bureaus that had created them and the State Department was in charge of keeping federal records like the public laws, constitutional amendments and treaties. But as you can imagine record keeping practices weren't always the first priority for those agencies. And there was really no consistent way that these agencies were storing records. And the public really had no access at all. So after many years of the historical community trying to organize and petitioning Congress, Congress finally passed what's known as the public building act in 1926. And this basically provided federal building office space in the Triangle area of Washington D.C. and one of those buildings was the National Archives building and in 1934 President Roosevelt signed the legislation that Congress passed establishing the National Archives. And in 1936 our building opened to research and today we have a nationwide system that includes not only the building of Washington D.C. in College Park Maryland but we have regional archives all over the country. We maintain a series of federal record centers and we maintain the presidential library system.

***[VP] So what kind of documents is the archives required to maintain and preserve, you know, what would make it archive worthy?***

[JK] The kind of records that we normally tend to keep our ones that have enduring historic value.

***[VP] Who makes that judgment?***

[JK] Well we have these things called record schedules and every agency has one. And we create them in conjunction with the agency and it tells them what records they have that are deemed permanent and what records they have that are deemed temporary and then the permanent records that they have have to eventually come to the National Archives and then the temporary records get destroyed. So what might be deemed worthy, they fall into really broad categories. And so we have records that document the rights of citizens. And so we have pension files and we have court cases we have anything that deals with like how the federal government works. So we have a federal agency organizational change policies you know procedures that pertain to an agency's core mission. We having that has key agency decisions or actions and we also have a lot of records that document the history of the nation so that anything that documents really the role of the federal government in the history of our nation and our people.

***[VP] The Declaration of Independence, for example.***

[JK] The declaration of independents, the Bill of Rights, and the Constitution are most well-known ones.

***[VP] How many through the years does NARA have in total?***

[JK] We have 13 billion sheets of paper and we have 43 million photographs. We have miles and miles of videotape. We have you know millions and millions of maps. And our biggest record and growing record is the electronic records.

***[VP] Where do you keep them all?***

[JK] Well our permanent holdings are held to the National Archives and Washington D.C. and in College Park Maryland. And we also have regional archives. And so we have regional archives in Seattle Washington and Atlanta Georgia and Fort Worth Texas. We also have a network of these federal record centers and these record centers all across the country and they store billions of temporary and active federal records and some of these are even stored in manmade limestone caves underground. They're pretty cool.

***[VP] Well when a document comes in what does NARA do to ensure that it survives I mean if something is especially delicate for example would you digitize it and keep the original in one of those special vaults?***

[JK] Yes we actually do do a lot digitalization. Our goal is to eventually have all of our records digitized. But when they come in they only just go into the stacks. We're talking paper records. And then we were going to digitize it. Conservation will normally look at it to make sure that it doesn't need any repairs that it doesn't have any tears that it's flat. And then we'll digitize it and then normally once the document has been digitized we will no longer serve it to researchers. That's the goal. It doesn't mean that we you know won't serve it if the researcher has a need. It's not just paper records though we have a lot of you know things like videotapes and CDs, they wear out, or things like floppy disk they become obsolete and they need to be reformatted for use so sometimes outdated media like film reels they only have one play left in them. So we have to you know play at that one last time to capture that information and put it on another digital media so we can preserve it and make it available to researchers.

***[VP] As an historian does that give you the willies? You know something may just disappear right in front of your eyes?***

[JK] It really does. It makes me so nervous. Our staff in motion picture are great and they do it all the time but it just makes me nervous to play a film reel knowing that if you don't get it it's calm.

***[VP] I want to talk more about this research and request and public display because there is I guess a museum you would say at the National Archives right.***

[JK] We do. We have the museum for the National Archives in our building in Washington D.C. but also a lot of our regional archives have their own museums. And then at the presidential libraries all have museums as well.

***[VP] What kind of stuff is on display there?***

[JK] Well at our museum we have the -- obviously the Declaration of Independence, the Bill of Rights and the Constitution, which are what we call the Charters of Freedom. We also have a permanent exhibit called The Public Vaults which takes you behind the scenes look at our, you know our vaults and our holdings. And we have the Rubinstein Gallery which has David Rubinstein's 1297 copy of the Magna Carta and also a exhibit called the Records of Rights. So it explores the rights earned by women minorities and immigrants.

***[VP] Over the course of history with all this stuff how mean is it tracked? Could somebody come in and say I would like to see some record of New Deal proposals that were thrown out you know by this agency or something like that.***

[JK] A lot of people think that we have this big database and you could go in and just keyword search and find everything you want. We do have an online catalog that has some of the holdings digitized and a lot of our descriptions of our records. But it's definitely not everything that we have. And so researchers have to come in and oftentimes consult paper finding aids in order to look at a certain you know if they're looking for something that hasn't been already digitized or made available in our system. So we don't really have one big catalog. We have a lot of finding aids and other ways. We have a lot of electronic databases that can help you research. It's really depending on what you're researching. So we always tell researchers to conduct us in advance and we will tell you what you need to before you actually come to the building. So this just for researchers or any member of the public could come and ask for a document any member of the public can come look at a document as long as they're 14 years old. They don't have to be American citizens. They really just need a research need. And when I say that before researchers come they really should know what their topic is and why the federal government would have research this topic or kept records on this topic. So just think about how your research topic comes into contact with the federal government and then most likely will have something for you. And we have some fantastic archivists that can help points you into the right direction.

***[VP] So would somebody have to come in you know like take out white gloves and go into a special library to look at stuff?***

[JK] Well it's funny, the white gloves are really only for photographs. But now I feel like people always associate that with documents you actually don't use white gloves but you do come into the research room and you are looking at original records and some of these records are the only copy that we have. And yes when you your survey the record and you come in and you can you know see your great grandfather's pension file if you want it to.

***[VP] OK so aside from the vaults you're really destroying some of my little fantasies about the archive. Does the archive store classified documents?***

[JK] We do store classified documents but because our records tend to come to us about 30 years after they're created most the records within our holdings are no longer classified.

***[VP] How does the NARA work with the Freedom of Information requests?***

[JK] OK well for anyone who is not familiar with the Freedom of Information Act which what we call FOIA, it basically provides any person the right to obtain government information from an executive branch agency records. So the National Archives accepts FOIA requests for all executive branch records in our custody and that's both the operational records that we create as an executive agency but also the permanent archival records that we maintain as the archives of the federal government. We also accept FOIA requests for presidential and vice presidential records that were created under the Presidential Records Act. And that begins with President Reagan's administration. But it's really important to know that the federal government doesn't have a central office that processes FOIA requests for federal agencies and each agency responds to its own requests. We always tell people before coming to the National Archives that they should determine whether the agency still has that record that they're looking for. And then just one last thing to note about FOIA is that FOIA doesn't provide access to the records of Congress or the records of court -- federal courts -- or any records of presidential administrations before Ronald Reagan.

***[VP] I was wondering about that. The National Archives and Records Administration is an independent agency of the U.S. government. So how does that make it different from other agencies? And why was it set up that way?***

[JK] Well independent agencies simply means that we exist outside the federal executive departments those departments that are headed by a cabinet secretary like you know the Department of Defense in the Department of State. So the head of our agency and he's the archivist of the United States he's appointed by the president has to you know get the advice and consent of the Senate and are establishing legislation says that the archivists should be appointed without regard to political affiliations. But that's basically all it says about how our agency should be run. When we were first created we were created as an independent agency as a nonpolitical agency. So they didn't want to be put under a political entity within the federal government. But then for many years we were put under -- in 1949 actually, we were put under the General Services Administration, and it was a really odd combination because we were a cultural institution that stores and protects and provides access to the nation's most valuable historical records. And we are under this really strictly administrative agency. And it was really bad for the National Archives and the GSA were making decisions that weren't necessarily in the best interests of federal record keeping. So for a number of years we lobbied Congress to be removed from the GSA and in 1985 they were successful and we were once again made to independent agency.

***[VP] So you mentioned staying out of politics but NARA administers -- at least that's what it says on the website -- the Electoral College. What does that mean?***

[JK] Yes. One of the little known responsibilities of the National Archives. So basically every four years before the election the Federal Register staff sends these packages to state and D.C. officials that outline their responsibilities and guidance for electors. So who can be elector, who can't be, key dates, all this information, and then after the election the office collects and reviews all these certificates, they're called certificate of ascertainment and those are basically the names of all the electors and how many votes each state got. Each certificate, they must be signed by the governor of the state and they must carry the state seal. But federal law doesn't govern what they look like. So they vary very vastly in appearance and some of them are really cool and some of them are less so. But then after the electors meet in their state capitols, and this is the first Monday after the second Wednesday in December, the office collects and receives all these certificates of vote and that is who the electors chose for vice president and president and then the office works with the Senate to ensure that Congress gets all the certificates of vote. And then on January 6th the joint session of Congress counts the votes and certifies the election.

***[VP] What's the coolest thing, Jessie, you've ever discovered in your collection, or received?***

[JK] The coolest thing... Well, I'm such a nerd because I am this huge Alexander Hamilton fan and I was much before the musical made him as --

***[VP] You knew him when.***

[JK] I knew him, I knew him back in the day. I actually have a blog post where he's my history crush that came before the musical, but he actually -- he has a statement of his property and debt -- it was hand written statement that he made right before his duel with Aaron Burr and he's outlining why, in case he die,s he doesn't have any money and he's basically saying that he was a public servant his entire life. He could have been this high-priced lawyer but he wasn't. He served the people and he could have gotten a pension when he was -- from the Revolutionary War. But he decided not to take it. And so it's really great handwritten four page document with his initials, A.H., And every time I look at it and touch it... it just makes me melt.

***[VP] You're clearly in the right job.***

[JK] I am.

***[VP] Well, movies that been made about this. But has anyone actually ever tried to steal anything from the National Archive?***

[JK] Unfortunately yes. And we do maintain a website that includes these notable thefts and they date back to... the earliest was in 1963 when a robber and Elizabeth Murphy were arrested for transporting stolen documents taken from a number of repositories including the National Archives. And what they did was they visited the archives in 1962, during the evening times when there was less staff and so they were able to steal documents when staff weren't looking or out of the room.

***[VP] What were they after?***

[JK] These were after some military files. People steal the weirdest things. I think they -- it's kind of sometimes an opportunity. They're not necessarily going for value. But having said that we have become very vigilant over the last few decades and we've instituted a number of measures aimed at preventing these sorts of thefts. So if you remember like I said when you're in the research room you're looking at original records and like this is the only copy that exists so we go to really great lengths to ensure our documents are safe. We make visitors go through magnetometers when they enter the room, or the building, we limit what they can bring in. You can't bring a bag or a coat or notebook and you can't even bring a pen. You know, we provide you with blank paper and pencils. We have cameras and guards watching you and staff watching you. And then when you exit the research room you must submit any copies that you made to the guards to go through. And then when you leave the building everyone must have their bags searched.

***[VP] Jesse Kratz, an historian who works at the National Archives in Washington D.C.. We urge you to visit the website for the National Archives where you can browse photographs and request records. And Jessie, thank you so much for speaking with us today.***

[JK] Thank you for having me.