

Community Forum on the New DC Archives

May 21, 2015, 6:00 p.m., Washingtoniana Division, DCPL

Panelists:

- The Honorable Dr. Charlene Drew Jarvis (moderator -- CDJ);
- Lauren Vaughan, Secretary of the DC (LV);
- William Branch, Acting Public Records Administrator and DC Archivist, Office of Public Records/DC Archives (WB);
- Kerrie Cotton Williams, Special Collections Manager, DCPL (KCW);
- Jeff Bonvechio, Deputy Director at the DC Department of General Services, formerly Director of Capital Projects and Facilities Management/Capital Construction Services, DC Public Library (JB)

* Richard Reyes –Gavilan, Director of the DCPL was welcoming attendees, and David Ferriero, Archivist of the United States, was in the audience

Some notable items from the DC Archives on display: Photographs of a slave ball and chain, a freedom certificate, a slave deed, the Will of Frederick Douglass, and a photograph of the infamous electric chair from the DC Jail (the last execution in DC took place in 1957).

Opening remarks by the Secretary of D.C., Lauren Vaughan:

Welcomes the panelists on behalf of the Bowser Administration, thanks members of her office and the administration, including Beverly Perry, and Friends of the DC Archives (esp. Bill Rice and Fynnette Eaton), for their work in helping with organizing the event, notes the good turnout. Emphasizes that Mayor Bowser made the DC Archives project a “priority” for her administration, and that her office is committed to moving the project along.

The objective of the event is to ensure that the residents of DC have the opportunity to learn about and understand the importance of protecting and preserving DC’s valuable historical documents and artifacts, and discuss the plans to improve the function of the DC Archives by building a new state of the art facility.

A little bit of background on the project: The DC Council approved \$34-35 million for the project (note by KH: under the Gray administration), and a RFP was issued for “architectural/engineering services, DC OPR,” January 15, and closed on March 1st:
[http://dgs.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/dgs/publication/attachments/RFP%20for%20Architect-Engineering%20Services%20-%20DC%20Archives%20-%20\(ocr\).pdf](http://dgs.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/dgs/publication/attachments/RFP%20for%20Architect-Engineering%20Services%20-%20DC%20Archives%20-%20(ocr).pdf)

The goal is to develop a state of the arts, multi-functional facility, which will be addressing community concerns and needs (including climate controlled storage facility, researcher space,

museum). The Secretary's office has engaged stakeholders, determined technical requirements, and established and fostered close partnerships with the National Archives and the Smithsonian, leveraging the tremendous resources and expertise on historical cultural resources in the DC area. Office staff toured NARA facilities, including preservation labs. The Office will review retention policies and schedules. Secretary Vaughan says that the Bowser Administration has opened the search for a new Public Records Administrator; her office has begun the vetting and interviewing process. [KH: Even though the job was posted on April 14, it has not been widely publicized yet and is currently only accessible through the new MOTA website, which is not even linked to the DC careers website:

<http://mota.theresumator.com/apply>]

Dr. Jarvis (CDJ) —introduces the panelists, and says that she is pleasantly surprised about the turnout, thanks FDCA, emphasizes that the preservation of the past is critical to good governance in DC, and commends the movement in support of the archives for their engagement. Dr. Jarvis says that the panel will be a learning experience for her as well, and a good opportunity for the movement to preserve DC's history to move forward. Gives some background, credits Bill Rice with suggesting that she donates some her own papers to the Washingtoniana Division of the DCPL.

--CDJ: Why aren't the functions of the Washingtoniana Division and the DC Archives combined, why do we need a new facility?

-- The DC Archives have a different function – it is the OPR, which combines the DC Archives, the Library of Government Information, and the Public Records Center, which collects and stores both permanent and temporary records of the District government, and implements retention schedules. All functions need to be combined under one roof. (Lauren Vaughan)

-- Washingtoniana, including DC Community Archives, also has a rich collection of DC historical materials, but these are the records from private individuals, community groups and organizations, and not the official public records of the DC government. (Kerrie Cotton Williams)

--CDJ: Since when have the records of DC been collected?

--Records date back to the founding of the Republic, but the Office of Public Records, which includes the DC Archives, wasn't established until 1986 under Mayor Barry (Mayor's Order 86-28) (Bill Branch, Lauren Vaughan). [The first DC Historian/Archivist was Phil Ogilvie]

CDJ: Has a site been selected for the new facility?

--Several sites in discussion, but no site has been selected yet. Accessibility by public transport is an important consideration. (Jeff Bonvechio)

-- CDJ: How can we move forward with the process if there is currently no Public Records Administrator, no Architect, and no site selected? Why was there pressure to issue RFP? Is it possible to extend the process so that the new Public Records Administrator can be involved from the beginning?

-- Experience with District government in the past shows that dedicated funds in capital budget are always in danger, and therefore it is politically important to move the process forward, despite uncertainties. DGS is in process of narrowing down winners of competition following RFP, will be announced in a few weeks. DGS is working with NA and other stakeholders. (Jeff Bonvechio)

-- CDJ: The plan is that there will also be a museum – will it be open to the public and will it charge for admission?

--Yes, there is the plan to also include a museum – no admission is currently planned. In addition to the museum, the building will be designed to store and preserve records, offer a researcher space, digitization lab, among other functions. (Lauren Vaughan)

CDJ--When will the building be completed?

-- We are looking at a 2 ½-3 year process. We also need to ensure that the current facility at Naylor Court is being repaired, so that the preservation of the materials is ensured while the construction is in progress. (Jeff Bonvechio)

CDJ: Who owns the records that are held by the DC Archives – the DC government?

--Yes, records are owned by or in custody of DC government. (Lauren Vaughan)

CDJ: What is division of labor between, like, Washingtoniana Division and DC Archives – how are records documenting DC's historical heritage appraised?

--The functions of Washingtonian and DC OPR are different – OPR oversees the official public records of the DC government, Washingtoniana (and others) collect other papers – community groups, private papers, civic organizations – it's all part of DC's rich heritage, and there is need to collaborate, and opportunity to connect different communities, says Kerrie Cotton Williams, who just moved to DC from Atlanta, where she helped facilitate a network of academic and public libraries serving the community. Collaboration is also essential for preservation of digital heritage. (Kerrie Cotton Williams)

-Collaboration between DC Archives/OPR, DCPLs Washingtoniana Division, George Washington University Special Collections, Howard University, and NMAH, is already underway as part of the joint DC Africana Archives project, a CLIR funded project to create a joint portal for materials documenting DC's African American history. (Bill Branch)

CDJ: How do the different agencies in DC appraise their records, and how does the OPR communicate with the agencies? Are the records schedules available online, accessible for the public to see?

--Every agency has a retention schedule and an official record keeper, and OPR works with the agencies closely to develop their retention schedules, while bringing them up to date; one of the important functions of the OPR is to provide training for the agencies, and assist them with managing their records during the life cycle of a record (Bill Branch).

-- CDJ: What is the life cycle of a document?

--Life cycle are the stages that an official document goes through from its creation, active use, inactive retention, to its destruction or archival retention, f.e. in the DC Archives. (Bill Branch)

--CDJ: What are the criteria for determining the life cycle of a document, and for determining the historical value of a document? What, for example, is the life cycle for a piece of legislation, like the bill to create the DC OPR?

--It depends on the function of the agency – they have their own retention schedules, the schedule is the “Bible” for records management in every agency. The piece of legislation to create the DC Archives would be deemed permanent, because – as any legislation – it has permanent value. (Bill Branch)

--The retention schedule needs to be regularly reviewed and updated to reflect new formats, like electronic mail. Enforcement is critical. (Lauren Vaughan)

--CDJ: What are the greatest needs for the DC Archives?

--STAFF, everyone says.

--What staff do the DC Archives need? Digital archivists, processing archivists, scheduling archivists, technicians. (Bill Branch)

CDH: How do you preserve archival materials?

--Preservation is an ongoing process and it starts before collections come to our facility (Washingtoniana Division) – donations are appraised for potential preservation issues before they come in, and the process continues, and materials are regularly evaluated. Should be

ideally in climate-controlled environment – the environment at the DCPL not ideal, which is one of the reasons why a new facility is badly needed. Washingtoniana has a Digital Archivist (Lauren Algee) and is working on a plan for the long-term preservation of their born digital and digitized materials. (KCW)

CDJ: Just learned about the challenges of preservation electronic records – they may last a lot shorter than some of the physical materials. What do you do about this conundrum?

-DCPL is working on a plan to preserve digital records; you have to follow standards and best practices, collaboration is important – couldn't do anything without resources and committed staff. (KCW)

--Questions from the audience:

* How will new facility accommodate the existing plus future needs?

--It is critical to work closely with the OPR to figure out the scope of the existing collections and the future needs -- Naylor Court encompasses 26,000 square feet – the new facility will be about 90,000 sq ft. The storage can also be optimized.

* Will research hours be increased, especially for researching land records?

--Land records are in high demand, we have a terrific staff but not a lot of space (maybe 4-5 researchers at a time), we try to accommodate as many people as we can, but obviously more space is needed. (WB).

* Are there any plans to digitize the land records published prior to 1921?

--No, not currently. (WB).

* Can the digitization of (all?) materials start right now?

--We have been digitizing selected materials for many years –digitization for preservation and access needs to be important aspect as we are planning for the future (WB)

* How does the general public currently access the archives?

Public can come by during our research hours – prefer to make appointment:

Office Hours: Monday- Friday, 8:15 am-4:45 pm

Research Hours: Monday-Friday, 10 am-4 pm

Phone: (202) 671-1105

--How do the archives relate to the movement for open government?

--Public records legitimize the actions of the government, provide evidence and transparency – it is closely related to the call for open government.

* As you are planning the new facility, what standards and best practices do you follow?

– We make sure that we follow established professional standards and best practices, we belong to SAA and MARAC, we also look at other states that have planned or opened new state archives, such as Pennsylvania and Alaska, and also work closely with the National Archives.
(WB)

* Will there be the opportunity for the public to provide input in the plans for the design and programming of the new DC Archives/OPR facility as they are evolving?

--Yes, that is definitely planned, even though the specifics haven't been nailed down. The good thing is that the OPR/Archives can benefit from the experiences with the "robust" public input process for the renovation of the MLK Jr. Memorial Library. (JB)

The Honorable Dr. Charlene Drew Jarvis thanks participants and attendees for enlightening public forum, and encourages everyone to remain engaged in the planning process for a new DC Archives.

The next meeting of the Friends of the Dc Archives will be on June 17th.