

HISTORIAN AS EDITOR: THE CORRESPONDENCE OF JAMES K. POLK

By Michael David Cohen

James K. Polk was a “pre-eminently guilty” man. At least, he was according to a letter he received in June 1847. The officers of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society censured Polk in that letter for owning slaves and for upholding the institution of slavery — “the acme of human criminality.” A letter of that July, however, offered a more favorable assessment of the president. Three years earlier, Polk had promised a one-term presidency, but Benjamin Boston of Indiana now urged him to run for a second term. “[T]he Country,” Boston asserted, “Canot Do Without your Services four years Longer.” These letters typified Americans’ polarized views of the nation’s eleventh chief executive. The authors did not know Polk well. The abolitionists were too distant from him politically to be his intimates. Boston claimed to have met him, but many years earlier.

I like to think that I know Polk better. Granted, I have never met the man. He died in 1849. But I do closely read his letters. That is a large part of my job as a historian: I am the assistant editor of the Correspondence of James K. Polk, a project supported by the National Historical Publications and Records Commission and based at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville.

Few can know an individual better than a documentary editor surveying the course of his/her life. Most acquaintances only have extensive familiarity with one or two facets of a person. Polk’s business managers and plantation

overseers, for example, knew his financial life well but had little intimacy with his dealings in matters of state. His cabinet officers and political allies, by contrast, stayed in touch with him on state matters but knew little of his personal finances or family life. His closest friends knew something about most facets of Polk, but only his wife, Sarah Childress Polk, knew all of him well.

The staff of the Polk Correspondence, however, studies it all. Editor/Director Tom Chaffin and I read every known extant letter written by or to Polk. To make sense of these letters, we also pore over his diary, newspaper accounts, and other contemporary documents. We thus examine each day of the president’s life and each part of that day: personal, political, and professional.

Documentary editors occupy a space between archivists and most other historians. Archivists gather primary documents sharing a certain subject matter or author. Historians, in turn, analyze those documents to learn about the past. Editors do some of both in order to make documents accessible to those who rely on them for research or study. We at the Polk Correspondence first locate, to the extent possible, all letters written by or to Polk. From that cache, we then publish annotated transcriptions of selected letters and summaries of all the others. Prior editors published eleven volumes of correspondence; Dr. Chaffin and I are at

See POLK continued on page 3

INSIDE

Historian as Editor , <i>Michael David Cohen</i>	1
President’s Message , <i>Matt Wasniewski</i>	2
The Future of Digital Preservation , <i>Trevor Owens</i>	4
NCA History Program: 10th Anniversary , <i>Sara Amy Leach</i>	6
Oral History in the U.S. House , <i>Albin J. Kowalewski</i>	8

First Legislative Archives Fellowship	10
From the Archives , <i>Charles Downs</i>	11
Federal History Office Profile , <i>SSA, Larry DeWitt</i>	12
Making History	14
Federalist Calendar	16

needs to be more innovative in attracting new members: reaching graduate students and early-career federal historians; engaging the large but dispersed federal history community residing outside the Beltway; and attracting our academic cousins with like-minded research interests. I believe the proposed by-law changes will help provide the structure and forward-looking financial planning necessary to achieve such goals.

No set of by-laws can anticipate every challenge or

situation. But the right set will provide a necessary toolkit so that the Society's leadership can best navigate a future that holds great promise.

It's in this spirit that I invite you to take part in the process as it unfolds over the next several months. Please take the opportunity to review the revisions that will be forwarded by the Executive Council. As with all the Society's undertakings, this process will be successful only with the widest possible input and support of our membership.

POLK continued from page 1

work on volume 12, which will cover January to July 1847. Because of our work, scholars and students can read Polk's correspondence without traveling to archives and private collections. They also are spared the time-consuming and arduous tasks of deciphering the handwriting in frail original documents and microfilm, and of researching the individuals and events mentioned in the letters. We do that work for them.

Polk makes an excellent subject for a documentary-editing project. First, he was an important president. During his single term in the White House, Polk settled the boundary between the Oregon Territory and Canada, led a war against Mexico, and expanded the country's area by approximately one-third. Second, before and during his presidency, Polk corresponded with thousands of individuals. He wrote to family members, politicians, military officers, and business associates — a white, mostly male, and rather elite group. But he received letters from a much larger swath of humanity. Writers included nonelite white men such as Benjamin Boston as well as white women and a few African Americans. In June 1847, for example, Polk received letters from Lowell, Mass., factory worker Janett Richards and Nashville-born free black man A. Lefognain. Richards invited Polk to visit Lowell; Lefognain asked Polk to hire him as a servant because he feared being sold into slavery.

Finally, Polk makes a good subject because he *kept* most of his letters. He even copied outgoing letters by hand or with a letter press. Because he died three months after leaving the presidency, any plans he may have had to cull the letters went unfulfilled. As a result, we who gather, transcribe, and annotate his correspondence can present a thorough documentary account of a major historical figure that also offers insights into the issues and events in which he or his correspondents were involved.

Our work begins with finding the letters. Most are held by the Library of Congress, which bought a large collection from Polk's niece in 1903 and has added to it since. But the remaining letters are scattered among many libraries, archives, and private collections. Prior editors conducted thorough searches for these in past decades. Yet Dr.

Chaffin and I continue to turn up new letters. For example, we recently discovered a previously unknown letter of April 1847 by Polk about appointing an expert in the treatment of yellow fever to accompany the army in Mexico.

Next, we select letters to publish. Of nearly one thousand from January to July 1847, we can publish only about 350. We choose the most important, illuminating, or interesting ones. Nearly all the letters by Polk make it in. Of those he received, many get selected because they dealt with major political topics; the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society's letter falls in this category. Other published letters discussed his business or family affairs, came from particularly important people — such as inventor Charles Goodyear, who sent Polk shoes made of vulcanized rubber, and Jefferson Davis, future president of the Confederacy — or conveyed the concerns and political opinions of regular Americans.

After selection comes transcription — and a host of new challenges. The task is far more than simple data entry. Some of Polk's correspondents, even those with extensive educations and high government positions, had horrendous handwriting. Polk's own cursive was elegant, but his technology was not. The letter-press copies of his outgoing letters often are faint, blurred, or both; they also bled onto other sheets, forcing us to distinguish among multiple superimposed texts. Nonstandard punctuation, capitalization, and spelling force us to walk a narrow line between reproducing the texts exactly and forestalling confusion by our readers. Generally we retain the original content as closely as possible, but in a few cases — such as adding periods and capital letters to distinguish sentences — we lightly edit for clarity.

Finally, we annotate. People, institutions, and events that may have been familiar in 1847 are decidedly less so today. We search primary and secondary sources to identify Polk's correspondents and all individuals, organizations, publications, events, and issues mentioned in the published letters. Our notes give readers the essential knowledge that the letters' authors assumed. They also, where necessary, reveal the outcomes of events the authors discussed. Historians and students thus can quickly and easily draw on the letters' rich content.

The results of our labors are tangible. Many authors have drawn on the first eleven volumes of the *Correspondence of James K. Polk* for their books and articles. We look forward to seeing what scholarship emerges from the volumes to come. Because we select letters covering a variety of topics — from war to elections to slavery to science — and annotate them to maximize accessibility, our volumes are of value to scholars with diverse interests in nineteenth-century American history. I will never meet James K. Polk, but his letters enable me — and the readers

of the *Correspondence* — to get to know him and his era.

Michael David Cohen is assistant research professor of history and assistant editor of the Correspondence of James K. Polk at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. He thanks Tom Chaffin for helpful comments on this article. All letters mentioned herein will appear in volume 12 of the Correspondence of James K. Polk, forthcoming from the University of Tennessee Press.

THE FUTURE OF PRESERVING THE PAST: PERSPECTIVES FROM THE NATIONAL DIGITAL INFORMATION INFRASTRUCTURE AND PRESERVATION PROGRAM

By Trevor Owens

Digital technologies are touching almost every part of our lives. As a result, the historical record is rapidly changing from a set of analog materials (books, letters, manuscripts) to their born-digital counterparts (e-mail, PDFs, text documents, and other kinds of digital objects). This transition is happening so quickly that it puts the continuity of the historical record at risk. Over the last 11 years, the Library of Congress' National Digital Information Infrastructure and Preservation Program (NDIIPP) has worked with a network of partners around the country to ensure that tools, services, partnerships, and practices are developed and implemented to enable the preservation of important digital information.

In this article I provide a bit of background on the NDIIPP program and introduce three current initiatives and resources that might be of interest to the federal history community. These include: first, the National Digital Stewardship Alliance; second, a free software platform for displaying digital cultural heritage collections available at Viewshare.org; and third, a range of communications initiatives including our digital preservation blog.

THE NATIONAL DIGITAL INFORMATION INFRASTRUCTURE AND PRESERVATION PROGRAM

In December 2000, Congress appropriated \$100 million for the National Digital Information Infrastructure and Preservation Program, to be led by the Library of Congress. The legislation called for the Library to work with federal agencies and with a variety of additional stakeholders to develop a national approach to digital preservation: to collect, preserve, and make available significant digital content — especially information that is created only in digital form — for current and future generations.

NDIIPP is based on an understanding that digital

stewardship on a national scale depends on public and private initiatives working together. Currently, more than 200 partner organizations across 45 states make up our national network. Under the Library's direction, NDIIPP has worked with its partners to connect different platforms for storage and verification, for data and metadata management, and for access to and discovery of preserved digital materials.

This national network is currently preserving a substantial amount of our digital cultural heritage, including geo-spatial information, Web sites, audio visual productions, images and text, and materials related to critical public policy issues.

THE NATIONAL DIGITAL STEWARDSHIP ALLIANCE

Last year, in an effort to continue to broaden our network of partners, NDIIPP launched the National Digital Stewardship Alliance (NDSA), a membership organization for institutions committed to preserving the nation's digital information. The NDSA membership represents the diversity of the stakeholders in digital preservation. This includes universities, professional societies, commercial businesses, professional associations, government agencies, libraries, archives, museums, and other organizations with an interest in keeping digital information accessible.

Members of the NDSA collaborate to preserve access to our national digital heritage by:

- broadening access to our nation's expanding digital resources
- developing and coordinating sustainable infrastructures for the preservation of digital content
- creating and advocating professional standards for the management and stewardship of the country's digital records and objects
- facilitating cooperation between government agencies,