

Opening Statement

David Sean Ferriero

Hearing on Nomination to be Archivist of the United States

U.S. Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs

Thursday, October 1, 2009, 2:30 p.m.

Room 342 Dirksen Senate Office Building

Chairman Carper,

Senators on the Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs,
Committee Staff, Family and Friends, and Members of the Gallery

I am triply blessed to be claimed by three home states – Massachusetts, North Carolina, and New York – and I thank especially Senator Hagan of North Carolina and Senator Schumer of New York for their kind words. In all three states my institutions have benefitted from the hard work of their Congressional delegations. As my current institution, The New York Public Library, prepares to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the opening of the flagship building on Fifth Avenue in 2011, I am especially grateful to Senator Schumer for his support of an important façade restoration project which is returning that beautiful building to its original glory.

I appear before you today, the proud grandson of Italian immigrants and great grandson of Irish immigrants. It is a humbling experience to be called to service by the President of the United States—an experience which allows, indeed, forces one to reflect upon all the individuals and opportunities which have gotten me to this moment.

The product of the outstanding public education system of Beverly, Massachusetts, I attended Northeastern University, the nation's leading cooperative education program. My father worked at least two jobs, sometimes three throughout my childhood. My mother took a job cleaning floors at Beverly Hospital to ensure that I could go to college. The cooperative education program gave me an education and my first experience with research libraries which set the stage for a career spanning more than forty years.

A four year enlistment in the United States Navy, including a year in Viet Nam, afforded me the opportunity to be trained as a hospital corpsman with a specialty in neuron-psychiatry. The Navy provided me with a set of people skills that I use every day of my life.

My work experience in three of the nation's leading institutions has provided me with a set of professional credentials of particular value to the National Archives and Records Administration. At MIT, where I started shelving books in 1965 and left having served as Acting Co-Director of Libraries; at Duke, where I was the

University Librarian; and at The New York Public Library, where I serve as the Andrew W. Mellon Director of Libraries, I have had administrative responsibilities for institutional archives and records management programs. In all three settings I have had preservation and conservation experience, including creating the preservation program at Duke. Most importantly, I have experienced and managed aspects of technological transformation over the years in all three environments.

The mission of the Archives is to safeguard and preserve the records of our government, ensuring that people can discover, use, and learn from this documentary heritage. Carved into the north façade of the Archives building a few blocks from us the mission is expressed more simply—"This building holds in trust the records of our national life and symbolizes our faith in the permanency of our national institutions."

This is an awesome responsibility and, at the same time, given the impact of technology on those records, an exciting challenge for one who has spent his career managing change.

Robert Digges Wimberly Connor, our nation's first Archivist, in 1934 surveyed 225 buildings whose records would be housed in the new Archives building, some 1.4m cubic feet of records. To quote Connor:

...45.0 per cent of the total are infested with silverfish, cockroaches, and other insects, rats, mice, and other vermin, and exposed to such hazards as dirt, rain, sunlight, theft, and fire. More than...46.0 per cent of the total were in depositories that were dark, dirty, badly ventilated, crowded, and without facilities for work. Typical was the case of valuable records relating to Indian affairs which were found on dust-covered shelves mingled higgledy-piggledy with empty whiskey bottles, pieces of soap, rags, and other trash. In another depository crowded with archives of the Government the most prominent object to one entering the room was the skull of a dead cat protruding from under a pile of valuable records. If a cat with nine lives to risk in the cause of history could not survive the conditions of research in the depositories of our national archives, surely the poor historian with only one life to give to his country may be excused if he declines to take the risk.

We have come a long way since 1934 when Connor's survey was completed but I would suggest that we are at a similar defining moment with regard to our existing electronic records, social media communications, and emerging technologies being used throughout government offices. The vermin and insects have been replaced by a variety of software packages, platforms, and old technologies. The lack of standards, even with the same agency, adds to the complexity of the problem.

The ability of the Archives to fulfill its mission in the electronic environment is just one of the many challenges on the agenda for the new Archivist. Of equal concern are issues of collection security, the future of the Presidential Library system, backlogs in processing, staff job satisfaction, stakeholder relationships, preservation and storage needs, to name but a few.

I promise to you all, that if confirmed, I will work hard to ensure that I carry out my responsibilities in a professional, non-partisan, and collegial manner. I would ask, at the same time, for your support as I work through this ambitious agenda.

It has been forty years since my last commitment to serve my country. A more mature and seasoned servant asks for your confirmation.