Laudations, Omissions, and Admissions: Skewing the Narratives in Presidential Libraries

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Abstract

Architecture and presidential museum critic Benjamin Hufbauer argues: “Almost all of the presidential libraries, initially at least, present to the public a version of history that is quite distorted and overly favorable to these presidents. This is not surprising, because the presidents and their supporters tend to be significantly involved in creating the museum displays.” It is true that presidential museums can improve in time, and at least three, maybe even four, have redesigned exhibits to show a more honest interpretation of an administration or event. But the potential for improvement by no means assures it, and just as many presidential museums are woefully ineffectual. While rigorous and honest interpretations come only with the passage of time, they do not come always with the passage of time.

This paper describes the structural deficiencies of the presidential library system, considers how presidential museums, despite their inherent peculiarity, face the same market pressures as their more commonplace counterparts, and examines specific examples of how these deficiencies cloud objectivity in the museum exhibits. To build context, this paper begins with a history of presidential records preservation and the genesis of the presidential library system. It relies on scholarly articles, historic newspaper articles, virtual exhibits, and exhibit reviews for sourcing.

“Finally we discussed the problem of exhibiting the museum objects – the pictures, the ship models, gifts to the President, objects associated with his life, and the thousands of little gadgets of which those on his desk were examples. This was a matter in which the President was especially interested. I recall that in a later conference I expressed the fear that we might be allotting too much space to the museum functions of the library. To this the President replied, ‘Well, you know, if people have to pay a quarter to get into the library they will want to see something interesting inside.’”

Introduction

In his quest to see the papers of his storied political career gathered in one place, President Franklin D. Roosevelt set myriad precedents for presidential libraries that each of his successors followed. In addition to his personal collections (which included the most complete extant collection of American Navy ephemera), the donation of his governmental documents must have seemed monumentally generous. His presidential library plan was endorsed unanimously by the committee of academics and historians to whom he pitched the idea in December 1938. To further sweeten the deal, FDR arranged for the land on his Hyde Park estate in New York and the archival building to be paid with private funds, then later transferred ownership to the federal government. Other presidents followed suit, and presidential...

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libraries opened in 1957, 1962, and 1966 – and four more within twenty years of that. Today, the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) manages thirteen presidential libraries.²

In 1955, Waldo Leland, Chairman of the Executive Committee of FDR’s Library Foundation, recorded his personal recollection of the establishment of the FDR Library, and as a byproduct, the presidential library system. The epigram describes much of what is problematic and challenging about museum programming in the presidential libraries. Few artifacts are substantive indicators of a president’s efficacy; they range from pieces of the Berlin Wall to gifts from heads of state to “thousands of little gadgets,” which in FDR’s case includes a “heroic-size bust in papier-mâché from a cartoon by Clifford Berryman – the head of Roosevelt, sphynx-like, with an 18-inch cigarette holder protruding from the mouth.”² FDR isn’t the only principal to be so interested in exhibitions; ex-presidents, their families, and trusted friends too often insert themselves into museum programming, encouraging exhibits that can be banal at best and sycophantic or whitewashed at worst. And nearly seventy-five years later, FDR’s assertion about the public’s expectations still resonates with museum directors and trustees – value for your admission fee matters. Even presidential sites are privy to market and commercial pressures, and museums matter not at all if patrons don’t come through the doors.

To archivists and historians, FDR’s move was a windfall. This was a chance to move beyond mere celebration of presidents to a systemic means of gathering the fragments of their administration, fragments that could be used for the study of the presidency. For most of those archivists and historians, however, gratitude eclipsed the long-term view: the perceived potential of presidential libraries and museums was diluted by ex-presidential meddling and construction of inherently-biased boards of directors and fundraising foundations who are more driven by commerce and loyalty than truthfulness. While any number of cultural institutions are privy to such crippling demands, these trends are particularly worrisome in presidential museums, which commemorate men whose positions make them necessarily important – and that importance has too often been stretched to give a president credit for all the good that occurred during his “era” and to absolve him from all that was bad. Such interference with the construction of collective public memory creates a distorting effect that overinflates presidential performance and legacy.

Bruce Craig, a former senior historian for the National Park Service, suggests that “meaningful scholarly input relating to critical issues that a president confronted generally is incorporated into exhibits only after the passage of a significant period of time and after the lessening of intensity of public fervor over the legacy of a particular president.”³ Architecture and presidential museum critic Benjamin Hufbauer agrees: “Almost all of presidential libraries, initially at least, present to the public a version of history that is quite distorted and overly favorable to these presidents. This is not surprising, because the presidents and their supporters tend to be significantly involved in creating the museum displays.”³ It is true that presidential museums can improve in time, and at least three, maybe even four, have redesigned exhibits to show a more honest interpretation of an administration or event. But the potential for improvement by no means assures it, and just as many presidential museums are woefully uninspiring. While rigorous and honest interpretations come only with the passage of time, they do not come always

² For a listing of presidential libraries, their mission statements, notable board members of the libraries and/or their foundations, and links to the 990 tax forms of the fundraising foundations, visit here.
³ Leland, 22.
with the passage of time. Particularly at their genuses, presidential museums struggle to find the balance between prejudicially celebrating a legacy and unbiasedly interpreting an administration. So, to what extent do presidential museums prioritize casually celebrating legacies over thoughtfully decoding administrations? And why does it happen?

This paper describes the structural deficiencies of the presidential library system, considers how presidential museums, despite their inherent peculiarity, face the same market pressures as their more commonplace counterparts, and examines specific examples of how these deficiencies undermine honesty in the museum exhibits. It considers the perspectives of limited constituents: presidents, their families, boards of directors, museum directors, and anyone who’d like to see candid, balanced interpretations in exhibits. To build context, this paper begins with a brief history of presidential records preservation and the genesis of the presidential library system. A note on language will be helpful. For these purposes, “museum” refers to the interpreting and exhibit-producing component of a presidential institution, whereas “archives” refers to the manuscript-holding division. “Library” is used to describe the entire institution, both museum and archives. “Principal” refers to the president.

Preserving the Presidency Before NARA

Before examining the common problems across presidential libraries, it’s important to consider the context in which FDR made his benevolent offer. Until President Richard Nixon endeavored to keep – and destroy – records that implicated him in the Watergate scandal, executive papers had been considered the personal property of the president. Prior to Nixon, papers could have met any number of fates. George Washington took his home; not until 1849 was Congress able to procure most of its Washington papers. Presidents John Adams’ papers were deposited in the collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society. Presidents Jefferson and Madison took their papers to their Virginia homes; the federal government purchased the incomplete Madison collection after his death in 1837, but it was collecting Jefferson’s papers as late as 1922.

Other presidential papers were treated more deliberately. President James Garfield’s widow installed his in a library wing she had added to their estate after his assassination. After some wooing by the Library of Congress, the Garfield family agreed in 1926 to transfer the papers there; however, delays by his son, James R. Garfield, meant that the papers did not arrive to the Library of Congress until 1931. A 1937 inquiry by the daughter of a President Garfield confidante revealed that James had withheld some of his father’s public papers at Mentor, and by 1941, the same year that FDR opened his museum to the public, the Library of Congress was asking the Garfield family to send the additional papers to D.C. Garfield papers showed up throughout the years 1955, 1956, 1960, and 1963. In all, it took six chiefs of the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress to amass the Garfield collection, a process that took more than fifty years. And even then, not quite all of the Garfield papers made it to the Library of

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6 Such as art museums, regional history museums, science centers, etc.
7 It addresses only the NARA affiliated presidential museums, not the privately maintained commemorative presidential museums and libraries. Ample literature addresses the archives and their governance and non-NARA presidential libraries. To learn more about the paper transfer laws, visit the Laws & Regulations page of the Office of Presidential Libraries at http://www.archives.gov/presidential-libraries/laws.
9 Ibid., 88.
11 Ibid., 12.
12 Ibid., 12.
13 Ibid., 15.
Congress. A few are preserved in the Rutherford B. Hayes Presidential Center,¹⁴ which holds at least some papers of six presidents.¹⁵

The Forbes Library in Massachusetts honors President Calvin Coolidge with a room to make available most of his pre-presidential papers, some of his presidential papers, and his personal White House Library. President Herbert Hoover donated his to his alma mater, Stanford University, only to have them withdrawn and transferred in 1962 to his presidential archives in West Branch, Iowa. Before NARA and the presidential library system, forty-six repositories held the papers of thirty-one presidents.¹⁶

While these presidents were thoughtful in preserving records for posterity, others were injurious to history. Martin Van Buren, Franklin Pierce, and William McKinley destroyed their papers. Millard Fillmore’s papers were reportedly ordered to be burned (the would-be burner failed to act), and Mrs. Warren Harding burned her husband’s papers after his death (the Ohio Historical Society holds his remaining papers).¹⁷ Chester A. Arthur’s grandson, upon donating some residual papers to the Library of Congress, explained that there were so few papers, because “the day before he died, my grandfather caused to be burned three large garbage cans, each at least four feet high, full of papers which I am sure would have thrown much light on history.”¹⁸ One can’t help but wonder what Vice President Arthur thought during those 80 days that President Garfield lay dying.¹⁹

These papers are the evidence of the triumphs and tribulations of America’s ongoing experiment in democracy, and the best that some of them could hope for is that Congress would make an attractive (and often delayed) offer to whomever held the papers. Lucky for historians, with each collected series, the Library of Congress looked only more attractive to presidents, which made them more inclined to make gifts of their papers. A letter from the Chief of the Manuscripts Division to the Garfield sons reveals as much; Charles Moore highlighted the collections of other presidents in the Library of Congress, and further appealed to the Garfield sons by writing, “Can you not send the Garfield papers here on deposit, subject to withdrawal for your purposes in preparing a Life of President Garfield? We will arrange them chronologically and put them in order, so that, when you come to see them, they will be much more convenient than they are in their present condition.”²⁰ Even that offer took eight years to bear fruit.

Predictably Preserving the Presidency: Establishing NARA and the Presidential Libraries

Because presidential papers were considered personal property, nothing obligated presidents to make them accessible via the federal government. This is why FDR’s offer seemed so magnanimous; his gift to the public was a watershed moment for researchers. Upon his departure from office (which many presumed would come in January 1941), his papers would be transferred to Hyde Park, ensuring, for the first time ever, a predictable transfer process.

The National Archives was itself a rather new institution, established in 1934. In 1907, President Theodore Roosevelt issued an executive order that called for government agencies to indicate how much space their records would require. Some agencies had no idea, as they had not employed a systematic

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¹⁹ President John Tyler’s papers were lost accidentally, burned in Richmond during the Civil War.

means of maintaining their records. In December 1907, Herbert Putnam, the Librarian of Congress, indicated that his agency should not be the one to hold commonplace executive records; he wrote, “There is a clear distinction between such manuscript collections as the Papers of the Continental Congress, of the Washington and other personal collections and those records which are accumulated from the ordinary operations of the various executive functions.” While Putnam was clear to indicate that a federal archival building was necessary, his bias is clear: for Putnam, the Library of Congress is for the papers of great men and great events, not the everyday business of what was then a small federal government.

A 1921 fire in the Census Office archives proved the need for a fireproof, national archival office and engaged the support of organizations such as the American Historical and American Library Associations. One-time president of the American Historical Association, J. Franklin Jameson, made a suggestion that would foretell the presidential library system: While waiting for the federal government to take action on the national archives idea, Jameson asked the Roosevelt Memorial Association to construct an archival building for the papers of Theodore Roosevelt and others, serving as a memorial. The Association declined, for reasons that Jameson surely understood: it believed that the federal government should manage an archival program.

The government eventually did build and staff such an institution, which could have received the papers that document the minutiae of everyday governance. Even so, FDR preferred an archives of his own in Hyde Park rather than housing them in the National Archives, even at the financial cost of donating the land for the library. The impetus for personal presidential archives, Benjamin Hufbauer suggests, is that “Most presidents, even if they would not phrase it this way, hope to find a place for themselves in what has been called the civil religion of the United States: that veneration that has existed since the country’s founding for particular events, people, and things.” In other words, they desire to be celebrated, not necessarily examined. This was almost surely true of Roosevelt, who was a keen historian and knew the value of his personal collection.

These tensions between the libraries as research sites and as museum diversions are evident throughout the scholarly literature addressing presidential libraries. R.D.W. Connor, first Archivist of the United States (NARA’s top position) wrote that “Franklin D. Roosevelt is the nation’s answer to the historian’s prayer. Never before has the White House sheltered a president who has had so clear an understanding and so sympathetic an appreciation of the historian’s unceasing petition for the raw materials of his science.” Other academics have put it differently. “Presidential museums celebrating the positive and downplaying the negative are all too easily seen as monuments to an ego,” reported culture critic G. H. Bennett. Why such dichotomy?

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21 Ibid., 104.
23 Ibid., 112.
24 Ibid.
26 Connor, 81.
Structural Deficiencies in the Presidential Museum System

From the start of the presidential library system, the buildings have always included museum exhibits, whose interpretations have been criticized for their bias. Larry J. Hackman, former director of the Truman Library, aptly described this division and dilemma when he wrote, “Although it is presumed that execution of the archival function is objective, the museum function is inherently more subjective, not only in the interpretations presented through exhibits, but also in the selection and character of many other programs aimed at students, teachers, and the general public.” Subjective museum exhibitions have resulted from the interference (and sometimes, simply the aliveness) of ex-presidents, overtly protective boards of directors, and a financial support arrangement that puts the costs of museum operations squarely on the shoulders of the private foundations that govern them. All this, and the museums face the same market pressures as other museums; namely, bringing patrons – and their dollars – through the doors.

The museums have received criticism from archivists, political scientists, and historians. At least three scholars – Hufbauer, R.J. Cox and H.G. Jones – have unfavorably compared the overtly commemorative functions of the museums to Egyptian pyramids or Grecian temples. It’s an historic criticism; as early as 1969, critics described the Johnson building as “King Tut’s Tomb” and “Montezuma’s Mausoleum.” Others are less caustic in their comments, but nonetheless convey similar criticism. Hackman indicates that the museums “memorialize our presidents and promote an appreciation, many would say exaggeration, of their character, performance, and legacy.” Bennett writes that the museums “manufacture public memory about a particular president,” suggesting that presidential museums are more interested in preserving favorable legacies than in presenting complete truths. Others are more apologetic; Sharon K. Fawcett, former Assistant Archivist for NARA’s Office of Presidential Libraries, writes that the early, laudatory exhibit of a presidential museum is itself “a historical artifact – representing how the former president views his life and his presidency,” a statement that proves two points: that museums do have capacity to change over time, and that ex-presidents can be meddlesome.

In 2011, the presidential museums drew nearly 2 million visitors, more if one counts the non-NARA sites like the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum, which had 293,000 visitors that year. Presidents continue to build them and federal laws continue to allocate tax funds to the archival operations, even though the papers could be stored at the National Archives buildings. So how can it be that sites so popular – with patrons and presidents – can be privy to such censure? Structural deficiencies in presidential museum governance permit the museums to misrepresent presidential administrations, whether crediting a president with circumstances that were beyond his control, excusing him from circumstances that were not, or allocating precious resources to unrelated exhibits.

The means by which the museums and archival buildings are funded have political implications. If a president chooses to have a presidential library (and he is not obligated have one), federal law requires that his library’s non-profit foundation raise the money for the construction of the facilities, plus 20% of the total cost to put in an endowment for future operations. When the foundations transfer to NARA the presidential archives building, NARA funds the archives, whereas foundations continue to fund the museums. The law caps the size of a presidential facility at 112,000 square feet; a president can exceed that amount, but must contribute more to the endowment. However, the law makes no distinction for one-term and two-term presidents, the latter of whom would likely require more space than the former. While

30 Hackman, 167.
31 Bennett, 23.
34 The law was amended to call for an endowment equal to 40% of the total construction costs. President Obama will be the first president to raise that much, should he choose to build a library.
building presidential libraries has always been expensive, the endowment requirement makes more onerous an already challenging endeavor.

Consequently, library fundraising can arouse suspicions. In 1951, Truman directed his foundation to cease fundraising after allegations of selling influence surfaced,a a charge that President Clinton faced when he accepted donations from Denise Rich and the Saudis, both of whom received political considerations from the Clinton administration. b President George H.W. Bush pardoned the son of a long-time supporter who donated at least $100,000 to Bush’s Library; even if Edwin L. Cox, Jr. was a good candidate for pardon, the timing of the donation and the pardon is too close for comfort. c FDR had some sense of this; he had hoped to limit the maximum donation to $1,000 (about $16,000 in 2012 dollars), but nothing came of his suggestion.d Indeed, the overlapping timing (towards the ends of terms) of library fundraising and presidential pardons might make it more tempting to disregard scruples. If one can buy political influence, then one may well be able to buy a favorable exhibit.

Occasionally, big time donors are honored with positions as directors or trustees of the foundation, as are relatives of former employees. Edwin L. Cox, Sr. serves as a trustee for the George Bush Presidential Library Foundation. The board of directors for that institution is entirely composed of people who either worked for President Bush or are related to him. e The Dwight D. Eisenhower Foundation has four members with the Eisenhower name, as well as the daughter of his Attorney General. f Caroline Kennedy serves as president of John F. Kennedy Library Foundation; Jackie, Robert, and Ted Kennedy served on the board in their lifetimes. g The LBJ Foundation includes both of his daughters and former White House aide Joseph Califano. Truman himself attended board meetings until his failing health kept him at home. While these positions are sometimes honorific, a foundation’s board can exercise power over the timing and content of exhibits and programming, and do make determinations about how funds are raised and spent.

Overly loyal boards can be hindrances to library directors. In 1976, Philip Brooks, a former director of the Truman Museum, wrote, “I get disgusted with the three people on the Board who want to carry the glorification too far.” h Timothy Naftali experienced tension with the board of the Nixon Foundation when he indicated his intention to tell the truth about Watergate. According to Hufbauer: “Naftali’s focus on historical accuracy proved to be problematic for the Nixon Foundation. The foundation spoke out repeatedly against Naftali’s work and filed complaints with NARA, but Naftali and his staff succeeded in creating an exhibit that thoroughly explains the Watergate scandal.” i Both the Truman and Nixon examples prove boards’ tendencies to celebrate legacies rather than detachedly examine administrations. The board at the Nixon Museum posed a real threat to Naftali’s position, because the director of a presidential library can be removed by the Archivist of the United States at any time. j But perhaps here Naftali had the upper hand; at its incorporation, the Nixon Foundation’s board included members who had been involved in Watergate. k

The ability to hire and fire directors is a power that NARA does have to influence the content of the presidential museums. Legally, NARA can approve and deny exhibits, but seldom makes use of this

36 Geselbracht, 44.
39 Leland, 23.
45 Fawcett, 31.
authority. Hackman theorizes that NARA seldom involves itself in exhibit design because NARA officials believe that responsibility should lie with those who manage the museum’s purse strings. “Most of all,” he writes, “the Archives may fear that a more formal and extensive policy on exhibits would create high tension with influential individuals interested in such exhibits, especially in new libraries and those of living presidents.” Hackman points out that NARA has never rejected an initial exhibit, though it has suggested and made adjustments to content. However, even this is done in a way so as to not “denigrate the president’s legacy.” Perhaps the Office of Presidential Libraries is hesitant because of its lack of expertise in museum design; the OPL had just added a museum expert to its staff—and that employee has experience in art history, not American history.

Site selection is another way that the principal of a museum intervenes in its governance and interpretation. While situating museums in particular locales is commonplace and expected—such as the Warhol Museum being placed in his hometown, Pittsburgh, or the Tenement Museum’s location in New York City—the location of presidential museums is an important consideration, one often up for debate. Whereas one can see a natural history exhibit in many major cities, one can see the Lyndon B. Johnson presidential collection in just one. Some researchers have heralded this geographic diversity, claiming that it makes NARA resources available across the country, and that experiencing a president’s environment helps a researcher to understand that president’s formative experiences. Others lament that accessing files often requires time and expensive travel that could be avoided by collecting all presidential papers in a centralized repository.

The nearness of living ex-presidents to their museums has given museum directors reason to moan since FDR. In an American Archivist article in April 1940, Connor celebrated the fact that nearness to FDR made it easier to contextualize artifacts and papers, but in his personal journal that same month, he wrote, “I don’t envy the man who takes over the job of administering the FDR Library unless he is able to conform to the ideas—I may say the queer ideas of FDR—about how it ought to be administered!”

Leland confirms that FDR was involved in interpretation, but reserves judgment as to its efficacy.

Truman followed FDR in so many ways, and engaging in the development of exhibit content was one of them. While Truman insisted that his presence in the exhibits be minimized, and apologized that there “was so much of me” in the museum, the Trumans personally approved every artifact that was to compose the initial exhibit. Brooks wrote that the museum benefitted from “the enthusiastic and understanding cooperation of former president Truman” and admits that “its features...are] very much to the character and interests of Mr. Truman.” The Eisenhower grandchildren are involved “helping the foundation raise the money needed to preserve the legacy of their grandfather.” The Reagan Library hosted Republican presidential debates; a news reporter wrote that “The

![Harry Truman examines the artifact storage room at his presidential museum. Date unknown. Photo from Truman Library photographs archives.](image)

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47 Hackman, 174.
48 Fawcett, 31.
49 Hackman, 172.
50 Connor, 88.
51 Quoted in Cox, page 50.
52 Leland, 27.
53 Geselbracht, 51.
55 Dave Bergmeier, “Renovation Work Ahead for Eisenhower Museum,” Abilene Reflector-Chronicle,
backdrop was an overhauled exhibition on the Reagan presidency, done under the watchful eye of Nancy Reagan.”

No wonder that archivist and presidential museum critic R.J. Cox analogized presidents, their families and their museums to “the equivalent of the fox guarding the hen house.”

**Public Expectations for Presidential Historic Sites**

Like all cultural institutions, presidential museums must try to live up to the public’s expectations. The inherent significance and scarcity of presidents makes them necessarily important, and this perceived greatness seems to translate into heightened hopes for what a presidential museum can do for a community. As wrote Cox, “We are buried under the…great expectations for these institutions.” Visitors put this pressure on museum employees as much as boards, trustees, and former presidents do; writes Craig, “Presidential library exhibits also tend to reflect what the public wants to see (often curiosities from the president’s gift cache), and what the public is comfortable with (narratives that provide little critical interpretation and hence do not offend or challenge beliefs). Rarely do exhibits challenge visitors to question biases, belief systems, or perspectives on past events.” It might be more instructive to encourage visitors to exercise critical reasoning skills, thereby encouraging the employ of reasoned decision making for future political decisions – but that’s not as marketable to the masses.

One can’t blame the foundations for trying so hard to please – they know that the community expects a presidential museum to bring transformative economic opportunities. In 2009, NARA published its “Report on Alternative Models for Presidential Libraries,” and reported that “Community leaders cited the economic, cultural, and educational impact on the entire community. These respondents argued that the presence of the library offers a unique cultural and educational asset that provides an important historical experience for locals and visitors alike. Many respondents cited economic data that details how the libraries have impacted the surrounding communities. Respondents in this category noted that, in addition to providing vital economic benefits and increasing tourism revenue, the library offers a sense of pride, connection, and identity for area residents.” Cox agrees, but with more cynicism, suggesting that the presidential museums are “more useful for tourism, the local economy, and unbridled hero worship” than in any meaningful examination of a president’s administration. For Cox, the museums are commercial endeavors, not educational institutions.

The communities that host the museums have high expectations for revenue generation. Little Rock Mayor Jim Dailey indicated in 2004 that the Clinton Museum was intended to become a bedrock of the local tourist industry, and that the formerly depressed area of town would include “restaurants, museums, nightspots, a 14-mile foot (sic) and bicycle loop trail that will include a bridge at the library property and more.” In 1992, West Branch, Iowa officials were optimistic that the recently expanded Hoover Museum would double its visitor attendance, which was 100,000 visitors annually at the time. In 1970, the Associated Press reported on the popularity of the Eisenhower Museum, crediting it with the expansion of Abilene’s hospitality industry, triggered by 10,000-tourists weekends – more than the population of the town. The Eisenhower Museum was a boon to even the auto mechanics who serviced distressed road trippers. Some property increased fivefold in value. Of course, museums attract more visitors when they “reflect what the public wants to see,” as Craig said. So perhaps the museums omit the narratives that chafe visitors.

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58 Ibid.
59 Craig, 82.
61 Cox, 61-62.
65 Craig, 82.
The economic consequences of hosting a presidential library create a wooing process in presidential site selection. San Marcos, Texas, would have liked to have won the Johnson Museum; instead, it has a smaller museum dedicated to Johnson’s years as a college student and school teacher there. Kennedy’s foundation received more than 175 offers of land upon which to build. In 1982, Leavenworth, Kansas, in spite of itself, made a pitch to host the Nixon Museum. The Associated Press reported, “He (Nixon) was once inf amous, but he was still president of the United States,” [Mayor Pro Tem Clyde] Graeber said. “We are constantly looking for ways to bring tourists into Leavenworth, and this would certainly do it.” Mayor Robert Dougherty said, “I’d like to see a presidential library in Leavenworth, but I wish it didn’t have to be his.” Such interest in securing the Nixon Museum is all the more remarkable when one knows that Duke University, a Nixon alma mater, had rescinded its plans to host the institution, and that Independence, Missouri officials considered it, only to decline on account of the insult it would be to Truman, who had publicly denounced Nixon. By March of 2010, Hawaii was vying for the Obama Museum. Naturally, so is Chicago; an economically depressed neighborhood in Chicago’s South Side wants it, but so does the University of Chicago. The president of a South Side organization was explicit in his motives to secure the museum: “Why not provide an economic boon to a community that is deprived?” he asked.

One reason for the economic advantages is the situation of presidential historic sites within the heritage tourism industry. The National Park Service (NPS) markets a Discover Our Shared Heritage program that encourages travel to 72 presidential sites. Its marketing materials include an essay by presidential historian Richard Norton Smith, who extols the virtues of presidential tourism in “Being There: Encountering America’s Presidents.” Of the Eisenhower home in Gettysburg, he writes, “No one can walk out of the white brick residence, generously embellished in Mamie Pink, without taking away a vivid sense of its former occupants, their humanity as well as their historic contributions.” The Carter residence is worth visiting, because “In Plains, Georgia, visitors to the Jimmy Carter National Historic Site are introduced, not only to a life, but to a way of life. Through a restored high school, rail depot, and rural farm, the stories of Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter are interwoven with the narrative of a rural South long since consigned to memory, and to books like Carter’s own classic tale, An Hour Before Sunrise.”

Tourists who access “Being There: Encountering America’s Presidents” are primed to glorify the presidents, to commune with them, even, but not to think critically of them. The NPS travel itinerary includes 13 presidential burial sites, speaking to the popularity of memorial tourism. The uptick in presidential museum visitation when a president dies reveals how their commemorative functions can trump their educative functions. The Johnson Museum saw increased visitation for a year after his death. Within eleven months of Eisenhower’s death, 765,000 tourists had visited his museum. In the five months after Reagan’s death, the museum received more than 110,000 visitors, a 31% increase. In fact, the whole of Reagan tourism benefited from his death; the 1999 opening of the Reagan Trail “doubled or tripled” tourism to Reagan sites in eleven Illinois cities, and in the ten days following his death, his boyhood home drew 350 visitors daily. The promise of those ten days inspired tourism officials to consider promoting Illinois’ ties to three presidents. And while he’s certainly not dead, tourists can already travel the Obama Presidential Trail in Illinois. Presidential museums aren’t just museums; they are tributes and moneymaking endeavors. And fulfilling the

68 Ibid.
73 The Associated Press, “Tourists Flocking to Eisenhower Center.”
75 The Associated Press, “Reagan’s Death Boosts Tourism in Ill.”
commemorative agenda – whether that agenda is officially part of the foundation’s mission or not – means telling slanted tales of a president’s administration.

Interpreting a Presidency: Laudations, Omissions, and Lies

Particularly obvious are celebratory exhibits that lionize the president, a transgression of which all museums have been guilty. Cox quotes historian Louis Leonard Tucker, who wrote of presidential museums, “These massive structures, with their elaborate, dramatic, and sophisticated museum programs, make a profound symbolic statement about the individuals they memorialize. Their size and pretentiousness connote the view that there were ‘Great Men’ who were involved in ‘Great Deeds.’ They magnify not only the importance of the presidents but also the events in which they were involved. Every administration assumes the dimensions of a ‘Heroic Age.’”

For Tucker, every presidential museum is celebration. An exhibit in the Eisenhower Museum uses hyperbolic language to describe America’s midcentury economy: “The 1950s became an age of prosperity – a time when average Americans moved into new suburban homes, drove shiny automobiles, and basked in the sunshine of summer vacations and the nightly glow of television and movies.”

The language fails to describe the material wealth of what social critic Michael Harrington called “The Other America,” a name he coined after serving in Dorothy Day’s soup kitchen during the Eisenhower administration. The Eisenhower Museum exhibited a short-term installation called Eisenhowers Agent of Change, whose three-minute promotional video lists addressed topics: statehood for Hawaii and Alaska, the interstate highway system, “keeping the Cold War cold,” intelligence gathering, the rise of covert operations, “the beginning of the Internet,” and NASA. Just once is an Eisenhower failure mentioned: the crash of the American U-2 spy plane in the Soviet Union.

Eisenhower is painted as a civil rights proponent, but as Hufbauer points out, Eisenhower wasn’t particularly invested in the expansion of rights to African-Americans. Again, exhibits perpetuate the celebration of legacy rather than present a balanced, instructive interpretation. Henry Jameson, an Abilene civic leader in 1970, predicted as much would happen to the Eisenhower legacy when he said, “Eisenhower was not just a former president. He was an international hero and will be remembered through the generations, just as Lincoln.”

Of course, celebratory museum exhibits help presidential legacies to achieve that enduring stature (though admittedly, Eisenhower’s war successes do deserve reverence).

The examples of glorification are endless. A former special assistant to President Kennedy writes that his museum celebrates the president’s commitments to mental retardation and civil rights legislation, but the Kennedy Museum itself communicates his ambivalence about civil rights. An online exhibit indicates that “JFK deferred civil rights legislation to avoid alienating southern Democrats” and mentions the Birmingham demonstrations, interventions at the Universities of Mississippi and Alabama, and Kennedy’s 1963 civil rights speech. Certainly, such actions by Kennedy are meritorious, but do not reveal the entire story of his engagement with the civil rights movement. Likewise, the aforementioned video doesn’t mention the Bay of Pigs, but another video celebrates Kennedy’s leadership during the Cuban Missile Crisis. When the Johnson Museum opened in 1971, it was composed mostly of “positive achievements of the Great Society,” with nearly no content on the ongoing Vietnam War.

76 Quoted in Cox, 64. Original quote in: Louis Leonard Tucker. Footnote 91 in Cox.
79 Hufbauer, Presidential Temples, 138.
80 The Associated Press, “Tourists Flocking to Eisenhower Center.”
81 Fenn, 438.
83 Hufbauer, Presidential Temples, 99.
Johnson believed that his museum and memoirs would be his last best chances to restore his good image of 1964. The examples of filiopietistic exhibits continue. The description for an upcoming exhibit at the Roosevelt Museum indicates that it will examine his “heroic struggle to regain his strength and political career after polio,” as though to make an already-admired president even more impressive. When it comes to exhibits, so much is celebration.

Presenting an un tarnished image of a presidency also entails hiding the unflattering and unpleasant. It also compromises the integrity of the educational missions of the museums. In just one paragraph, Hufbauer reveals the extent of the whitewashing: the Roosevelt Museum’s fifty-year delay in addressing Japanese internment; the Kennedy Museum’s omission of his mafia ties and dissemblance about his health problems; and the Johnson Museum’s sidestepping of extralegal wiretapping. A panel in the Eisenhower Museum reads, “In April 1953, Eisenhower issued Executive Order 10450 which instituted new standards for internal security. Investigators reviewed thousands of government workers deemed possible security risks, and dismissed around 1,400 between 1953 and 1957” – but makes no mention of how this order removed loyal employees. A New York Times article describes “a decidedly modest accounting of the Iran-contra affair” at the Reagan Museum, and Bennett suggests that a video at the same museum portrays “little sense that Reagan did not always get it right or that events like the Iran-Contra scandal and the Tower investigation merit serious discussion.” The Truman Museum delayed in considering exhibits about the use of the atomic bombs in Japan; in fact, at his insistence, there was little about Truman at all in his museum for its first forty years. Such omissions underscore Cox’s point that “the President, incumbents and former holders of this office often do not want the American people to know certain things, especially as found in their records.” For Cox, these museums fail to keep “all federal officials—elected and appointed—accountable to the people.” Such accountability is harder to promote if former employees of an administration sit on the library’s board. Given their role in an administration, they’d likely prefer to celebrate it, rather than rigorously examine it.

In a worrisome twist to the commonplace accolades and exclusions, the Hoover and Nixon Museums have presented their principals as hapless martyrs. Hoover’s Museum constructs a narrative wherein President-elect Hoover cautioned against speculation in the stock market, and was ultimately defeated by events and economic cycles beyond his control. Before his inauguration, a museum panel indicates, “He urged the Federal Reserve to halt ‘crazy and dangerous’ gambling on Wall Street by increasing the discount rate the Fed charged banks for speculative loans. He asked magazines and newspapers to run stories warning of the dangers of rampant speculation.” Panel content heralds Hoover’s initial reaction to the Black Tuesday stock market crash, emphasizing that even the New York Times identified a South Pole expedition the year’s major story, not the crash. In its interpretation of the Bonus Army march, the Hoover Museum portrays Hoover as a deceived benefactor and General Douglas MacArthur as a villainous egomaniac. By the end of his presidency, the Hoover Museum’s Hoover is a depleted man, having exhausted himself in service to his country. An exhibit display titled “From Hero to Scapegoat” reads, “To most Americans, the president was a remote, grim-faced man in a blue, double-breasted suit. They saw none of his private anguish throughout sixteen-hour days, engaging in fruitless mealtime

84 The Franklin D. Roosevelt Library and Museum, “Renovation Diary,” National Archives and Records Administration, http://www.fdrlibrary.marist.edu/library/renovation.html (accessed November 27th, 2012). The museum’s decision to consider FDR’s handicap is admirable, as it communicates an inclusive message to patrons.
85 Hufbauer, Presidential Temples, 138.
87 Nagourney.
88 Bennett, 28.
89 Geselbracht, 60.
90 Cox, 56.
91 Ibid., 57.
conferences with economists, politicians, and bankers. Hoover's hands shook as he lit one Juan Alones cigar after another. His hair turned white and he lost twenty-five pounds. 92

While patrons may muster some sympathy for Hoover, the Nixon Museum's case is egregious. Its delayed affiliation with NARA was conditional upon reworking the Watergate exhibit to tell a more accurate interpretation. The first Watergate exhibit was not a mere attempt at lionizing Nixon; it was a blatant misinformation campaign. One panel in the first exhibit read that “Nixon first learned of the attempted break-in the following morning in an article in the Miami Herald.” 94 “The President did not try to shift blame to others,” reads another. Another claims, “One result of this massive investigation is irrefutable – President Nixon was in no way connected with this attempted ‘third-rate burglary.’” 95 Bennett characterizes one of the messages communicated at the museum this way: “Nixon is portrayed as largely innocent, a victim of some members of his staff. The President was, however, an honorable man who did the right thing by resigning – right in terms of honor and right in terms of the national interest. This analysis of the greatest constitutional crisis to face the United States since the Second World War might upset some, but at least it falls within the bounds of historical debate.” 96 The new, corrected exhibit was opened in 2011, and Nixon's presidential papers will eventually be transferred to the site in Yorba Linda. 97 It took an act of Congress to repeal the portion of the Presidential Recordings and Materials Act that kept Nixon’s tapes in D.C., and a willful Archivist of the United States to broker the deal with the Nixon Foundation. 98

Cox worries about the political consequences of such lopsided admiration. In comparing the museums to pyramids, he writes, “Their American counterparts have seemingly become a part of the permanent public memory business, a process with no end in sight as long as the American Republic exists or until the American people and taxpayers say, enough.” 99 Hufbauer sees implications for governing, claiming that the commemorative efforts reflect and promote presidential supremacy among the three branches of government. Because each president has his own museum, the American public expects the executive branch to be the most powerful in the federal government. 100 This perception in turn grants acceptance of the library system. Historian Robert Burk addresses aptly the public history and political penalties of museum commemoration:

The presidential libraries, because of a combination of ideological and institutional limitations, have contributed to distorted public perspectives of American politics, most notably an undue faith in the capabilities of presidents by themselves to renovate the social order. Because Americans have assumed that presidents alone possessed both the power and the inclination to remodel the face of society, unrealistic and simplistic perceptions of the nature of political power have been cultivated. Unrealistic expectations of presidential performance have resulted in subsequent disillusionment, cynicism, and apathy. That apathy, that withdrawal from citizen activity in politics, is the real tragedy of the cult of the presidency and the role of the presidential libraries in its perpetuation. Institutions of political education today face a greater challenge than ever before to replace simplistic articles of faith with a search for the complexities of political reality, and to replace naive optimism and subsequent cynicism with formulations that suggest both an active role and realistic expectations for the citizen. 101

93 Ibid.
95 Ibid.
96 Bennett, 28.
99 Cox, 46.
100 Hufbauer, “Spotlights and Shadows,” 131.

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Because, as Martha Joynt Kumar states, “The National Archives and Records Administration is the custodian of our governmental memory,” NARA and patrons alike must insist on better balanced content and exhibits, education over celebration.

Aforementioned examples prove that presidential museums are susceptible to curating exhibits that exaggerate achievements and ignore inconvenient lapses of humanity. A third, more benign class of exhibit also exists: the politically immaterial. Rather than exhibits from which patrons can draw informed conclusions in order to make educated decisions about political actions in the future, many boards of directors allow unrelated fare. Unbalanced boards – those with disproportional ratios of directors loyal to the principal to directors loyal to the truth – seem less likely to promote rigorous, unbiased interpretation of the administration. The Reagan Museum hosted Treasures of the Walt Disney Archives in early 2013. The George H.W. Bush Museum has shown exhibits on cancer, the genome, and a 2004 exhibit on Judith Leiber’s handbags. The Ford Museum held exhibits on Grandma Moses and professional football. In 2012, the Eisenhower exhibited Elvis at 21: Photographs by Alfred Wertheimer. The Hoover Museum hosted Under the Big Top: The Circus in America. The Nixon Museum showed Lego trains, which it credits with an increase in 2012 attendance.

Fashion and style matter in some presidential museums. In 2013, the Clinton Museum exhibited the works of couture designer Oscar de la Renta. The Reagan Museum shows three of his suits, and the Kennedy and Clinton Museums rotate the former First Ladies’ wardrobe pieces. These same museums have displays on state dinners, while the Reagan Museum goes a step further to include an etiquette quiz. While such artifacts and exhibits prove the influence that presidents and First Ladies have on pop culture and tastes, they still emphasize the less consequential aspects of presidential governance at the expense of examining the more meaningful arords and consequences of executive leadership.

While it seems that anything goes in the presidential library system, trends emerge across sites. Transportation is a favorite sideshow of the presidential museums; the Clinton Museum shows a limo, the Reagan Museum a limo and a jet, the Nixon Museum a limo and a helicopter, but the Roosevelt Museum excels here, with its two boats, a carriage and the specially-adapted Model T that Roosevelt himself drove. Most museums have a replica of the president’s Oval Office, but the Nixon Museum also has a replica of his post-presidential office. Christmas exhibits are a perennial favorite. In 2012, the Nixon Museum offered Happy Holidays...From the White House, a display of Hallmark cards, and in 2013, the Reagan Museum will exhibit A California Christmas, its follow-up to 2012’s An American Christmas. The Hoover Museum exercises creativity on this theme; over the years, it has exhibited A Little House Christmas, Christmas at the White House, Christmas Around the World, Cowboy Christmas, and A Fairytale Christmas.

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The volume and frequency of Christmas exhibits suggests that these exhibits attract the public, which brings money to the presidential museums. Because they generate revenue from the local and tourist economies, the museums must pitch to their audiences. The museums compete with malls and amusement parks for tourists’ discretionary income; the Reagan Museum showed a Disney exhibit not just because Reagan was a movie star, but because his museum is so near Disneyland. Ford turned down two invitations to play professional football, and with its proximity to the University of Michigan, the museum must have seen the opportunity to attract college sports fans with its football exhibit. For the previous four years, the Ford Museum’s most popular event has been ArtPrize, an art contest, not a historic exhibit, which attracted 195,000 people in 2012. And the George H.W. Bush Museum counts on its annual Halloween Night at the Museum event to draw a crowd; in 2012, kids picked up 22,000 pieces of candy.

Federal laws indicate that the libraries “may include” museum components, but, as presidential library reform advocate Anthony Clark indicates, these laws do not offer direction around the “movie nights, political events, hay rides, public programs, gift shops, and craft fairs” that museums have hosted. Such frustrating exhibits and programs prompted Cox to remark that “We gain a more intimate portrait of the President in watching West Wing on televisions, however skewed that portrayal might be, than we do in recreations of Oval Offices around the nation with noncritical exhibits and accompanying gift shops.” However, if one considers that these museums are expected to be self-sufficient in terms of generating operating revenue, one understands the pressure to cater to the local market. The fact that a museum treats the subject of a presidential administration does not absolve it of its obligation to bring visitors through its doors. In that light, one can be more sympathetic to the boards who allow their museums to host extraneous exhibits and events.

Presidential Museums Getting It Right

Despite ample evidence of subjectivity and triviality in presidential museums, some exhibits manage evenhanded representations of the triumphs and tribulations of an administration. Hufbauer is particularly pleased with the Truman Museum’s representation of the atomic bomb decision, a consequence of a $4 million bequest and efforts to be more truthful. It showcases racist propaganda used to promote the war in the Pacific and graphic depictions of the loss of human lives after the bombs fell. The exhibit allows students to consider what decision they’d have made, and includes comment books for patrons to leave their opinions about Truman’s decision, creating room for patrons to criticize Truman’s performance. After decades of downplaying the Truman administration in particular, the museum has made quite a transformation, and it doesn’t seem outlandish for Truman archivist Raymond Geselbracht to suggest that “Millions of people have benefited from the Truman Library’s programs in some way, and some of these people have experienced something so important at the Library that their lives have been changed for the better.”

The Nixon Museum and Timothy Naftali deserve commendation for recent changes to the Watergate exhibit. After its redesign, the Nixon Museum included primary sourcing, including the infamous tape recordings, Nixon’s notorious enemies lists, and memoranda describing methods of attacking said enemies. The museum posts the former exhibit online, so that patrons can recognize that a museum that once lied to visitors more or less admits as much, and is now trying to make amends and win the public’s trust. A New York Times reporter acknowledged this (and the tensions between private memory and public history) when he wrote, “The Watergate exhibition is so detailed, searing and unapologetic – ‘What did the president know, and when did he know it?’ asks a panel that greets visitors – that it was

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108 Ibid., 13.
109 Clark.
110 Cox, 68.
111 Hufbauer, Presidential Temples, 148.
112 Ibid., 155.
113 Geselbracht, 76.
shunned by Nixon loyalists. They did not attend the opening ceremony this year and provided it no financial support, and last week, one museum docent resigned his post in protest.114

Other museums warrant mention for their efforts. The Johnson Museum unveiled new exhibits in December 2012, whose interpretations received input from Johnson scholars Michael Beschloss, Robert Caro, Robert Dallek and Doris Kearns Goodwin115 (the latter of whom admits that her personal relationship with Lyndon Johnson opens her to criticism).116 The local press reported that “While this exhibit gives LBJ credit for mammoth accomplishments, it doesn’t ignore the quagmire of Vietnam, a conflict that Johnson did not initiate but fatefuly escalated. This is the section some older Americans familiar with the subject might be tempted to skip, but the war overshadowed everything else in the late 1960s and early 1970s in a way that younger Americans can’t imagine, given the country’s comparatively short attention span regarding Iraq and Afghanistan.”117 Fawcett compliments the Johnson Museum for showing footage of Vietnam protests and the Roosevelt Museum on showing video that questions whether he could have done more to stop the Holocaust.118 These two museums have evolved, from hagiographical and propagandistic commemorations to dispassionate narratives that better approximate the truths of our American story – they’re among the three, along with the Truman, to which Craig was referring when he wrote that museums can get better with time.

Conclusions

Efforts such as these prompt some constituents to applaud the presidential library system and NARA. At their best, the presidential museums genuinely do have the capacity to become “less monuments to great men than classrooms of democracy.”119 Hufbauer, who so often leans toward the cynical, writes, “As presidents and their families begin to exercise less power at the older presidential libraries, or at those whose presidential families are more open minded, good displays with engaging public history have been developed.”120

The evidence seems to confirm the accuracy of Hufbauer’s assessment. Efforts by presidential museums to address the difficult aspects of their respective administrations – Roosevelt the Holocaust, Truman the bomb, Johnson the Vietnam War, and Nixon the Watergate scandal – do contribute to a “righting” of collective public memory, efforts to meaningfully educate the visitor rather than lionize the principal. The Hoover and Eisenhower Museums came between the Truman and Johnson Museums chronologically, but both are still celebrations and absolutions of their administrations. The Eisenhower grandchildren are perhaps protecting his legacy, and his son John is still alive, but the Hoover children have been dead for twenty years. The idea about presidential families being open to honest interpretation may be true—the Johnson family gave their blessing to broadly using LBJ’s recorded phone calls in the new museum exhibits – but even they should not be able to influence the construction of American public memory about their fathers. Rather than taking forty or fifty years to arrive at transparent truths, museums that opened with unprejudiced exhibits would spare themselves deserved criticism and afford patrons worthwhile knowledge. While it’s part of human nature to endeavor to impose upon the collective public memory one’s best self rather than one’s whole, imperfect self, thoughtful patrons will appreciate a president who was so aware of his own humanity that he put it on display for all to see.

Whatever the impetuses behind unprejudiced exhibits, the trusting public deserves to know them, and is entitled to transparency in the process of building presidential libraries and museums. Right now, foundations are not obligated to reveal the names of donors, even though, as historian Lynn Scott Cochrane indicates, “The museum and educational functions are supported with private money and are

114 Nagourney.
118 Fawcett, 31.
subject to the influences that accompany such funding.”  

And while the cost of presidential libraries and museums has long been a target of taxpayer criticism, the presidential museums offer a special opportunity for visitors—beyond the researching scholars—to engage with NARA resources. Despite this, museums continue to rely on non-federal sources of funding, including Truman’s honoraria for speaking engagements and proceeds from Johnson’s memoirs. Instead, presidential libraries might be better served by existing on public money, thereby (hypothetically) ensuring greater control by the museum director and Office of Presidential Libraries, rather than by the boards of directors, who rely on the attractiveness of exhibits to draw capital.

The 2011 charter of the Advisory Committee on Presidential Library-Foundation Partnerships indicates that its responsibilities include managing relationships between the foundations and NARA, regarding “programs, objectives, funding, and the legal authorities.” Such an organization is necessary to overcome some of the structural deficiencies that confound objectivity in the museums. While there are archival issues, such as delayed access to papers and Freedom of Information Act request backlogs, the presidential library system was created in order to predictably collect and catalog an administration’s papers, in order to spare them from willful and accidental destruction and to make them accessible to researchers. Federally, the priority has always been with the archival function, which is why all of the enforceable laws have focused on paper ownership (presidents used to be able to claim tax credits for donating their papers) and accessibility or on funding obligation, seldom on quality control for the museum functions. Unless measures are put in place to both support and hold accountable the foundations—such as job security for the museum directors, enforcing a ratio of scholars to family members and former employees on the boards, veto power of exhibit content by an oversight board, and sustainable public funding—the museums can continue to delay unbiased interpretations of events, and continue to be forces to cater to the local market by hosting exhibits and events that entertain much more than they edify.

“In providing a focus for public memory…” Bennett posits, “the presidential library helps to set the academic and public agenda.” While the agendas have ranged from the selectively truthful to the overtly deceptive, all need not be lost for the presidential museums. Balanced museum exhibits not only avoid insulting their patrons, but provide a model for other presidential museums to replicate. Admitting the hard truth that even well considered decisions are often controversial—or outright condemnable—spurs authentic learning, not just in the modular “classrooms of democracy” but also in the formation of character. “Many will use these documents. Some will seek only to support one or the other side of controversies, to attack or to defend, to magnify or to belittle, and such users will be too often content to lift passages from their context and to distort their meaning,” commented Leland at a 1951 ceremony at the Roosevelt Museum, “but the use of these collections to add valid and enduring knowledge will be the work of those who, competent in the patient and careful methods of research, have one purpose only—to know the truth.” Leland was addressing those interested in archival functions, but, sixty years later, it remains an apt admonition to the museum directors and boards.

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122 Geselbracht, 55.
123 Porterfield.
125 Bennett, 24.
126 Leland, 29.
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