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September 6, 2006

Allen Weinstein  
National Archives and Records Administration  
8601 Adelphi Road  
College Park, MD 20740

Dear Dr. Weinstein,

It is good to know that the National Archives and Records Administration welcomes comment on the proposed cuts to reading room hours.

I write now on behalf of the American Historical Association to convey our deep dismay at the prospect of the reduction of access to the nation's archives. In the weeks since the cuts were announced, I have been contacted by historians from all over the country, who are located on a wide range of sites where history is practiced—graduate students, professors, teachers and independent scholars and researchers—who are deeply worried about what this move would mean to the work they do.

We know you understand that the time of those who visit the Archives from outside the Washington area is always at a premium. It's an expensive city in which to find accommodations, and so virtually everyone must work to maximize their productivity when there. Graduate students rarely have much in the way of financial resources; more senior historians may have more money but the time pressures on them can be even more severe. So researchers both junior and senior come early to the reading rooms and stay late, and they work on Saturdays. Those of us who teach graduate students are acutely aware of how many books and articles written by the next generation of historians are deeply dependent on the resources of the Archives.

The National Archives mission is to preserve the records of our nation. But once preserved, the millions of pages of records in the National Archives hold their secrets, waiting for their readers. In what they choose to read, historians and others who put these resources to use can be said to open the Archives. Interpretation gives life to these documents. The mute papers speak only if they are read and interpreted. To do that requires extensive reading room hours.

Nor need I emphasize the necessary reliance of researchers on the professional staff at the Archives. The impossibility of calendaring large record groups means that the Archives is the home of mysteries, and the researcher is dependent on the knowledgeable archivist in ways that the reader of a published book, with its reliable index, need not be. Sufficient professional staff to make the rich resources available is also indispensable to NARA's mission.

I and my colleagues in the AHA will be conveying our concern for robust funding for NARA to members of Congress. Meanwhile, we urge you to maintain full access and revise the draconian cutbacks projected in the interim rules announced last month.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Linda K. Kerber".

Linda K. Kerber  
President, American Historical Association  
May Brodbeck Professor in the Liberal Arts & Sciences  
The University of Iowa

LKK/RBT