

January 19, 2020

The Honorable David S. Ferriero
Archivist of the United States
National Archives and Records Administration
700 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20408

Dear Mr. Ferriero:

I write regarding the recent furor over the indefensible decision by NARA to substantively alter a photograph as part of the exhibition "Rightfully Hers: American Women and the Vote." The American Historical Association acknowledges and applauds your apology and admission that it was "wrong to alter the image." But the incident itself is disturbing: modifying a document on exhibition and thereby distorting the historical record. This lapse in professional ethics must be addressed as NARA reconsiders the policies and procedures that resulted in this serious error.

We recognize that exhibitions staff make choices about what historical artifacts to display and how to contextualize them. Once an object is chosen for presentation, however, the professional standards of historians, archivists, librarians, and other keepers of the public trust forbid its alteration, with occasional allowance for minor, non-substantive cropping for publicity purposes. Visitors must have confidence that what they are seeing is authentic. For the National Archives, the custodian of the official public record of the United States, to make such a decision is as inexcusable as it is unthinkable.

We also note, as NARA has pointed out, that the original photograph at Getty Images is available and remains unaltered. While we appreciate that the integrity of the original source remains unaffected, however, it is contrary to standards of historical scholarship to present an altered document as if it were historically accurate. There was no explanatory note to indicate what had been changed and why.

As historians we rely on the National Archives to adhere to—indeed to model—the highest standards for ensuring document preservation, provenance, integrity, and historical validity. Scholars, teachers, researchers, and genealogists trust the National Archives, and for good reason. But that trust crumbles if the documentary record appears to have been altered to sanitize or whitewash history. NARA has taken an admirable initial step in assuring this trust by admitting error and promising a reconsideration of policies. Such admission seems to be rare these days in so many environments, and affirms our confidence in the integrity of NARA staff.

The AHA stands ready to be helpful as NARA reconsiders its exhibition policies and procedures to make sure that its exhibitions maintain the standards of accuracy and integrity that we have come to expect from the agency.

Sincerely,



James Grossman
Executive Director