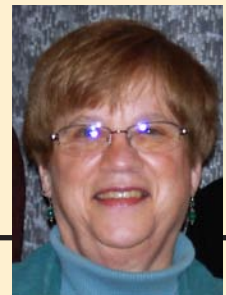


## THE HISTORY PROFESSIONAL

*Charlene Bangs Bickford is Director of the First Federal Congress Project (FFCP) at George Washington University (GWU), where she has worked on all 20 of the published volumes of the Documentary History of the First Federal Congress, 1789–1791 (DHFFC). She has lectured and published articles on the First Federal Congress (FFC) and advocated for historical/archival causes and promoted documentary editing through leadership roles in several historical associations and as an instructor at George Mason University and GWU. She has also co-produced two volumes: Birth of a Nation: The First Federal Congress, 1789–1791, and Creating the Bill of Rights: The Documentary Record from the First Federal Congress: 1789–1791. She has served as president of SHFG, 1990–92.*



*Interview by Benjamin Guterman*

*Charlene Bangs Bickford*

**Congratulations to your editorial team for receiving SHFG's Thomas Jefferson Prize for Volumes XVIII–XX, Correspondence of the Second Session. What do you think makes the series so noteworthy?**

This is the third time that volumes of the DHFFC have been chosen for the Thomas Jefferson Prize, and I think that recognition has come because of the essential importance of both this Congress and its documentary record to the history of our federal government. The members themselves recognized their unique role in implementing the new Constitution and ensuring the ultimate success of this untested governmental experiment. The editorial method for the correspondence series allows us to provide every bit of known extant documentary evidence about the work of Congress, as well as the private and social lives of its members. The fact that we excerpt or calendar many of the documents makes these volumes very dense with information and new revelations about the early history of the federal government.

That said, there are many great projects out there publishing book or digital editions of material related to the history of the Federal Government, and I hope that editors on those projects or their presses will submit their latest products for the 2014 prize. This is one of only two prizes given for documentary editions, and I'd like to see a strong field of nominees for the prize.

**How did you get started on the First Federal Congress Project?**

I often say "almost accidentally." I was in graduate school at GWU and working part time for the old Civil Service Commission when I was told that I had scored too high on the Civil Service exam to stay in the position that I then held. I turned down a position as a claims examiner and headed down Constitution Ave. visiting personnel offices armed with my new GS-7 rating. A personnel officer at the IRS sent me to the personnel director at the National Archives. After some difficulty getting past her receptionist, I managed to gain access to the personnel director, and she sent me to Dr. Oliver W. Holmes, Jr., Executive Direc-

tor of the NHPC. He offered me a position with the Ratification of the Constitution Project, where part of my job was to distribute copies of documents located in a joint search to the FFCP at GWU and the First Federal Elections Project at the University of Wisconsin. I had been there about four months when Dr. Linda Grant DePauw, then the director of the FFCP, came to visit the office on the 20th (stack elevator) floor of National Archives to offer me a job. Free tuition was part of the deal, and I immediately said yes. Dr. DePauw believed in delegating, and I was soon managing the FFCP.

**Are the editorial guidelines and methodologies you use different in some ways from other major documentary projects? And how have evolving digital capabilities affected the work?**

Most documentary editions are organized by straight chronological order, while some are done topically. The DHFFC is structured primarily by document type and in three series: official (vols. 1–8), debates (vols. 9–14), and correspondence (vols. 15–22). The DHFFC was envisioned as comprehensive, so document selection has been relatively easy, which sets us apart from many projects. The chronological charts tracing the progress of legislation through the two houses in volumes 4–6 (*Legislative Histories*) are the most innovative annotation that we have developed. We started producing electronic text (Wang) coded for typesetting in the early 1980s, and have been using computer programs for indexing since the mid '80s. We were participants in the first Model Editions Partnership sponsored by the NHPRC, and the results of that project—a mini-edition of most of the FFC documents relating to the creation of the first three executive departments—is on our website, <http://www.gwu.edu/~ffcp/>, along with an online version of an exhibit on the FFC we produced in 1989 and a teacher's guide to using the exhibit. I'm currently working with a graduate student and web designer to add to the site so that we can leave a more robust electronic legacy. The Johns Hopkins University Press has put the entire DHFFC online as a subscription database. We're

currently doing a follow-up search using the amazing electronic resources now available—it's a far cry from the days when we had to go to repositories and request every collection with documents dated between 1789 and 1791.

**You have a very capable editorial team. How are the duties divided or shared?**

The four of us have worked together for decades, and we have developed a common vision for the volumes and series. We also each have our own areas of expertise. We make decisions about content of the volumes, editorial method, and other larger questions together. Ken Bowling and Chuck diGiacomantonio do preliminary selection, making decisions on whether to print in full, excerpt, or calendar an item. They also draft the annotation, including the biographical gazetteers, which are primarily diGiacomantonio's job. Helen Veit is responsible for creating the draft text through transcription of the documents, putting calendars into the proper format, asking questions, catching mistakes, putting in the headings and notes, and creating the text in final coded form. She also is our resident British history expert. I review selection decisions and the "final" text, asking questions, making suggestions and corrections. Though we each have our individual areas of responsibility, we also check one another's work.

**Can you describe two or three interesting historical "finds" or new insights that you've experienced over the years?**

Senator William Maclay of Pennsylvania kept a diary while serving in the FFC. Since the Senate met in secret, this diary is an extremely important primary resource. Historians, including J. Franklin Jameson, had doubted Vice President John Adams' note to himself "see Maclay's notes" because all they knew about was Edgar S. Maclay's 1927 publication of his ancestor's diary. They couldn't imagine Maclay showing the document that formed the basis for this publication to his colleagues because of all the

negative comments he makes in the document about fellow Senators. The original of Maclay's handwritten diary is in the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress. We transcribed the diary using a Xerox copy made from a microfilm of the manuscript diary as the source. We then spent weeks in the Manuscript Division proofreading our transcript against the original. During this process we discovered a loose page of notes that was not on the film. These notes simply recorded the day's happenings. We then realized that Maclay took accurate notes on the proceedings, something that his colleagues were well aware of, and then went back to his boarding house and used and expanded these notes to write his diary entries full of often caustic commentary.

Another revelation was that most of the members of the FFC saw the amendments to the Constitution that we call the Bill of Rights as unnecessary because rights were protected in state constitutions. It is clear that the primary motivation for passing the amendments was to convince North Carolina and Rhode Island to join the Union.

The most exciting thing that we have been involved in is helping North Carolina recover its original of the Bill of Rights—but there has been a fascinating book written about that (David Howard, *Lost Rights: The Misadventures of a Stolen American Relic*).

**The online exhibit you curated, "Birth of a Nation," states that the First Federal Congress was a "virtual second sitting" of the Constitutional Convention. How so?**

While the Constitutional Convention established the bare bones framework of the new Federal Government, it was Congress that was responsible for fleshing out that framework. The Constitution is quite specific about the powers and duties of the legislature, but the executive and judicial branches are left mostly undefined except for the presidential powers and establishing that there would be a Supreme Court. The FFC counted the electoral votes for

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SHFG recently launched Facebook ([facebook.com/SHFGHistorians](https://www.facebook.com/SHFGHistorians)) and Twitter ([@SHFGHistorians](https://twitter.com/SHFGHistorians)) pages in addition to our YouTube Channel ([youtube.com/user/SHFGHistorians](https://www.youtube.com/user/SHFGHistorians)). These are part of an effort to improve outreach to members and potential members. While social media features will not replace the E-Bulletin, *The Federalist*, or the SHFG web site as sources of news and information, they will act as supplements for items of interest. The Twitter and Facebook pages also serve as a forum for members to share noteworthy information and interact with one another. Please "Like" or "Follow" us and share your links, news, images, and other media.

President, inaugurated George Washington, passed the legislation that established the first three executive departments (War, State, and Treasury), and passed what has become known as the “Bill of Rights,” thus fixing a flaw in the Constitution that had threatened its ratification.

**The first congressmen must have felt great pressure and urgency to establish the federal framework. Is that evident in the documents, and, in general, how did they overcome partisanship to be so productive?**

The members clearly understood that they had a full and pressing agenda before them and that the future of their new nation depended upon them. While there were serious debates during its first session that revealed sectional and other divisions, as well as differing interpretations of the Constitution, the Congress managed to work through issues quite harmoniously and productively. For example, there were four different constitutional interpretations brought up in the House debate relating to who had the power to remove executive officials. Some members argued that impeachment was the only constitutional method of removal, while others contended that the President could remove an executive official only with the consent of the Senate. Others believed that the Congress should grant this power to the President in legislation. Interestingly, the final legislation is silent on this issue, signaling that the Congress accepted the interpretation that this power was implied in the powers of the executive.

**In your promotion of documentary editing outside of the FFCP, through other organizations, what have been some of your professional causes or concerns?**

I first became involved in advocacy for federal history in 1979 as a member of the Emergency Committee to Preserve the National Archives—a subversive cell that met in Pete Daniel’s basement apartment on Capitol Hill—see: <http://www.oah.org/pubs/nl/2008may/smock.html>. We successfully opposed the effort by the then-GSA Administrator, retired admiral Rowland Freeman III, to disperse many of the records held in the National Archives building to records centers around the nation. With the advent of the Reagan Administration and the across-the-board attempts to eliminate or seriously cut federal programs that support history, I was one of the founders of an ad hoc group called the Coalition to Save Our Documentary Heritage, which eventually had a membership of over 50 historical and archival organizations. We sent out mailed alerts every week and waged a constant battle to save the NHPRC, which was zeroed out. After the National Archives budget was cut, fighting those cuts was added to the agenda. Eventually we added independence to the Coalition’s goals, and by the mid 1980s, the NHPRC’s grants program had survived, and NARA was a newly independent agency.

**As an instructor in documentary editing, what primary skills and responsibilities do you emphasize?**

One of the central goals of documentary editors is to present the historical record as completely and accurately as possible. Every step of the process from planning the project to final publication needs to be done very carefully with much attention to detail. I always stress that working in teams and checking and rechecking each other is ideal. It’s not a profession for those who expect things to be done at lightning speed. I think that the patience and perseverance that editors need in order to follow up on every single detail and not be discouraged by dead ends is of primary importance.

**Could you explain the Project Center’s services for researchers?**

During office hours, all the resources in our office are open to anyone doing serious research on the FFC, its members, and related topics. We answer researchers’ questions, point them to resources they should explore, and generally share what we know. We have assisted everyone from an 11-year-old working on a film for National History Day project, to reporters looking for historical background, to attorneys working on briefs for federal cases, to prize-winning historian Jack Rakove. The research issue that I’ve been most involved with is the somewhat contentious debate over whether or not George Washington added “So help me God” to the constitutional oath of office. This is a myth that got started 50 years after his inauguration, and there is no proof that he or any President before Chester A. Arthur added the phrase.

**The Project has published 20 volumes. How many more are projected, and what topics will they cover?**

Two volumes remain to be published. Volume 21, *Correspondence: Third Session*, which will be sent to the press this year, covers the letters, newspaper articles, etc. relating to the final session of the FFC, which passed legislation establishing the first national bank and the excise tax on domestically produced distilled spirits, and also ratified George Washington’s choice for the location of the Federal Seat of Government (today’s District of Columbia). It also expanded the federal military establishment to combat Indian hostilities in the Northwest Territory and made valiant, though ultimately unsuccessful, attempts to establish a uniform militia throughout the United States and officially establish the post offices and post roads. Volume 22 will include a major section on the Second Federal Election, which occurred during the FFC and involved most of its members; post-March 1791 documents that contain information about the FFC’s actions; and additions and corrections to the entire series.