How did you come to work at the Truman Library in 1993?

In spring 1993, I was a 26-year-old graduate student finishing my coursework for a Ph.D. in U.S. history at Ohio University. One day, I received an announcement of a job posting for an archivist position at the Harry S. Truman Library and Museum. Colleagues and professors were encouraging, and teaching and law school, other options that I considered as career paths, didn’t interest me as much as the prospect of working with historical collections as an archivist. One of my advisors at O.U. was Alonzo Hamby, a Truman scholar, who had done research at the Truman Library on numerous occasions. Dr. Hamby had glowing things to say about the Truman Library and its staff, and he graciously wrote me a letter of recommendation. Although I had no experience working at an archive, I was hired and enrolled in a National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) career development program in which I received on-the-job training as an archivist.

When you first transferred to the Nixon Presidential Materials Staff at College Park, Maryland, in 1997, what were your initial duties?

After four years as an archivist at the Truman Library, I moved to Maryland, where I reviewed Nixon White House tapes at the Nixon Presidential Materials Staff. Over the years, I also did reference work, conducted and transcribed oral history interviews, delivered public and outreach programs, and processed textual collections, including Henry Kissinger’s National Security Council (NSC) Files and transcripts of telephone calls that he made as President Nixon’s NSC advisor and secretary of state. I eventually became a subject-matter expert on the tapes.

It seems that the Nixon project team had to create and devise procedures for dealing with the extraordinary demands for records processing and declassification imposed by Congress, the courts, and the research public. Can you discuss that?

A few months after President Nixon resigned on August 9, 1974, he concluded an agreement with the head of the General Services Administration (GSA) that permitted the former president to destroy his tapes after a certain period of time. When Congress got wind of this agreement, it abrogated it and passed the Presidential Records and Materials Preservation Act (PRMPA), which seized Nixon’s tapes and papers and made them public property, and not Nixon’s personal property.

The PRMPA and its implementing regulations govern the work of the Nixon Staff (now Nixon Presidential Library). They spell out review guidelines and restrictions involving matters such as privacy and national security, as well as content on the tapes that had to be returned to President Nixon and, after his death in 1994, to his heirs because it was purely personal or purely political. In 2007 the Nixon Foundation and NARA agreed to release tapes about politics and certain personal conversations.

Since 1980, NARA has had 16 separate openings of Nixon tapes (a complete list is located at http://www.nixonlibrary.gov/forresearchers/find/tapes/releases.php). Tapes opening schedules were established as a result of an agreement in the early 1990s that had been worked out between NARA, the Nixon Estate, and Public Citizen and historian Stanley Kutler, who brought suit against NARA to seek faster openings of tapes. The Nixon Estate hired an onsite reviewer who listened to the tapes we proposed to open in order to make sure we were not opening segments that were, in his judgment, property of Nixon’s family.

What was it like working with the Nixon White House tapes?

It’s been said that the Nixon tapes are the gift that keeps on giving in terms of new revelations about our 37th president. Every day, I put on my headphones and was transported back in time to the years 1971–73, when the tapes captured 3,700 hours of recorded conversations in phone calls and meetings between Nixon and various people. The work was challenging, rewarding, and collegial—I was part of a team of reviewers that screened literally every second of tape. We had to determine if the federal government could retain a discussion because it involved Nixon’s constitutional and statutory duties as president, or whether we had to return it to the Nixon Estate because it was purely personal or purely political. From the tapes, I gained a greater understanding of Richard Nixon’s mind, his relationships with people, his management style, and the workings of the

**You then returned to the Truman Library in 2007. Could you generally describe the types and sources of records held at the library, aside from the Truman Executive Office records?**

The Truman Library is the repository for about 15 million pages of documents, about half of which are the Truman Papers. Harry Truman had a 50-year public career as a local judge (akin to a county commissioner), U.S. senator, vice president, president, and former president. Truman was a prolific writer, and the Truman Library’s collections contain a rich quantity of his official and personal correspondence (including about 1,300 “Dear Bess” letters he wrote to his wife), memorandums, and diary-like entries. We are fortunate to have so many of his letters to Bess. (Unfortunately, less than 200 of Bess’s letters to Harry survived.) Truman revealed his thoughts, feelings, and beliefs through his writings, which biographers over the years have mined to gain important insights and observations about Truman, his motivations, and his actions. The other roughly half of our collection consists of manuscript collections of over 500 family members, political associates, friends, and organizations that were associated with Truman, such as Dean Acheson, Secretary of State; Clark Clifford, Special Counsel to the President; and James Webb, who served as the director of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) from 1961 to 1968, an important time in the nation’s space program.

In addition to manuscripts, the Library’s archives contain over 126,000 photographs, 563 oral history interview transcripts, 83 collections of federal records, 460,800 feet of motion picture film, 1,650 hours of video tape, 800 hours of audio tape, and 525 hours of audio discs. Through the work of staff, volunteers, interns, NARA’s motion picture and sound labs, and vendors, we are working to preserve and make publicly available our collections, most of which are over 60 years old.

**With the ongoing declassification work at the Truman Library, what kinds of records and information have been released? How does that tie in with your participation in the Remote Archival Capture Program?**

Since 1995, the Truman Library has opened in full or in part about 50,000 pages of documents through systematic review by onsite staff, and by the Mandatory Review (MR) and Remote Archival Capture (RAC) programs, both of which are performed by federal agencies in Washington, DC. That may not seem like a lot of pages, but the Library’s classified documents contain various and complex equities that often require repeated declassification review by one or more agencies. Most of these documents came from the Truman Papers, especially the President’s Secretary’s Files, National Security Council Files, and the Psychological Strategy Board (PSB) Files. I traveled to Washington, DC, where I processed RAC returns at NARA’s “Archives I” building.

**Interestingly, the Truman Library still acquires or accessions new collections, including a recent gift of 176 Truman family letters. Can you describe that collection and its historical value?**

In December 2012, we were alerted about an upcoming Sotheby’s auction of original letters from Harry Truman to Bess W. Truman; letters from Bess Truman to her daughter, Margaret Truman; letters from Margaret to her father, Harry; letters from well-wishers to Margaret Truman as she embarked on a singing career; and other interesting items. There was a total of 176 letters and other items (e.g., clippings, postcards, telegrams, programs, greeting cards, and invitations), totaling approximately 450 pages. Almost all of these documents are dated 1940–1961.

Flora K. Bloom, president of Elliott Galleries of New York City, had purchased these materials at the estate sale of Margaret Truman Daniel, who died in 2008. Ms. Bloom agreed to donate these materials to us; for this, the Library is grateful. By amazing coincidence, as a child, Ms. Bloom had written a letter to President Truman, who responded to her. Among the interesting gems we found was an August 1946 letter in which Margaret Truman thanked her father for the “big piece of green lettuce” that she received upon graduating from George Washington University. A notation (perhaps by HST) about the $10,000 gift is on the envelope! We also found the oath of office that Harry Truman read when he was sworn in as president on April 12, 1945, and a letter that 8-year-old Bess Wallace wrote to her Aunt Maud in 1893.
With the popularity of Presidential libraries for visitors, what major public programs does the Truman Library offer?

To enhance our visitors’ experience, the Library offers public programs on the Second Saturday of every month. Dubbed “Talkin’ Truman,” these programs are given by archives staff and by non-NARA guests, who discuss various aspects of Truman’s life and career, and the community in which he lived, Independence, MO. For example, in January 2014, I gave a Talkin’ Truman program about spies during the early Cold War period.

The Library also cooperates with local partners to bring in prominent national speakers. More events are listed in our calendar at http://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/events/.

Your work with the City’s of Independence’s Heritage Commission sounds like a perfect way to apply historical work to public planning. What have you been able to contribute there?

I really enjoy my work on the Heritage Commission, on which I have served as the Truman Library’s ex officio representative since 2009. The Heritage Commission reviews requests for exterior alterations, new construction, relocations, and demolitions of historic homes and other properties located within designated historic or conservation districts in the City of Independence.

As a voting member, I have taken part in many interesting matters. I will mention two: the rewriting of the City’s Historic Preservation Design Guidelines and the expansion of the City’s National Historic Landmark (NHL) district. The design guidelines give direction to home, business, and other property owners on how to restore windows, doors, roofs, and other features of their properties. The City’s NHL district, which was established in 1971, was expanded from 216 structures, including the Truman Home, to 567 buildings. The expansion meant that more owners of commercial and residences could benefit from federal and state tax credits for renovations made to their properties. I am proud to have lent my support to that successful effort.

The Truman Library has provided impressive online access to its collections, with finding aids and selected digital scans, as for example in the Dean Acheson papers. What plans are there for expanding such access?

In 2013, we accomplished an important goal: the digitization of memoranda of conversations that Dean Acheson made while secretary of state, 1949–53. Memoranda documenting his meetings are now available online in a searchable database at http://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/study_collections/achesonmemos/index.php. The papers of many other Truman officials and associates have also been listed or posted online.

One of most important projects this year will be to provide online access to Harry Truman’s nearly 1,300 letters to Bess Truman. Almost two hundred letters are on our website at http://www.trumanlibrary.org/hstpap/fbpa.htm#subseries1-1.

In your experience over the years, what are some important insights you’ve gained into Truman the man and president?

The more I learn about Harry Truman, the more appreciation I gain for his greatness as a man and as a president. Truman emerged from humble origins to become one of this nation’s greatest presidents. In his nearly eight years as president, from 1945 to 1953, Truman created institutions such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, the Department of Defense, and the Central Intelligence Agency, that helped win the Cold War and that have endured to this day. Truman’s decisions concerning matters such as the end of World War II against Japan, the Middle East, and the Korean War reflected his integrity and his conviction that he was acting in the best interests of the United States.

Truman was fundamentally a decent man who enjoyed people, sympathized with their struggles, and did what he could to improve their communities, working conditions, and the world in which they lived. Although secure in himself and who he was, he had faults, made mistakes, and was capable of acts of greatness and pettiness. He was an interesting person, and he served as president during a pivotal time in American and world history.

From opening of the Bess Truman Papers and additional Harry Truman Papers, we have learned that the Trumans were quite well off financially. Truman never became rich as a farmer, as a businessman, or as a politician before becoming president. Truman’s financial records show, however, that he amassed considerable savings while president, made a lot of money from the sale of his family’s farm, and earned a modest $35,000 from his memoirs. On his income tax return from 1959, for example, the Trumans reported a gross net income of $160,566 (the equivalent to over $1.2 million in 2013). According to a memo that Harry Truman wrote by hand in late 1953, the ex-president estimated his worth to be about $750,000 (over $6 million in 2013).