

March 31, 2015

Dear members of the Midwestern History Association and Society of American Archivists,

On behalf of the Save Iowa History Coalition, this letter is in response to Iowa State Archivist Anthony Jahn's message of March 27 (see below) to the Midwestern History Association, in which he comments on the "Save Iowa History" online [petition](#). This petition currently has gathered 2,550 signatures.

Mr. Jahn disagrees with the petition's insistence that reduced funding has created a crisis for research collections at the State Historical Society of Iowa (SHSI). It is encouraging to learn that the SHSI will not have its overall budget cut in FY 2015 or FY 2016. But the fact remains that resources allocated to the research collections have been drastically reduced at both the Des Moines and Iowa City SHSI libraries and archives. Signs indicate further reductions and ultimately the tragic closure of the Iowa City facility.

Appropriations from the General Fund for the Historical Division of the Iowa Department of Cultural Affairs (DCA), which oversees the SHSI, fell from \$3,796,919 in FY 2009 to \$2,767,701 in FY 2013, a decline of 27 percent. The appropriation for FY 2014 increased to \$3,167,701, but this was for "enhanced museum exhibits and additional staffing," according to Iowa's Democratic Senate Staff. The DCA has continued to starve the research collections. The Iowa City library and archives dropped from seven full-time employees in FY 2012 to three as of July 1, 2015 (only two of those will be professional staff). Hours for researchers have been reduced to three days a week, Thursday-Saturday. There is no support staff beyond a group of dedicated volunteers. The SHSI libraries and archives are being defunded, and access to Iowa history for citizens, students, and scholars is being restricted. This alarms us.

Mr. Jahn's assertion that the collections are not "under any physical threat" is incorrect. Spending on preserving, processing, and curating records has dwindled. For many decades, part of the library budget went to newspaper preservation, with about \$30,000 annually covering microfilming. In 2009, the DCA ended this 50-year practice, and now the budget for preserving newspapers is zero. Meanwhile, the budget for acquiring new materials peaked in the early 2000s at \$82,000 per year and then fell off until it was eliminated in 2009. The Iowa City Centennial Building, which houses some of the most valuable historical materials in the state, can barely open its doors to operate, let alone manage the collections with the attention and care required of a professional library or archival service.

Fragile materials are endangered. There is no funding to have a paper conservator stabilize documents. Requests to bind books have been ignored. Microfilm that is deteriorating due to acid problems cannot be treated. The reduction of public service hours has forced the closing of the Special Collections reading room on the second floor of the Centennial Building, which for forty years provided additional security for rare archival materials. Retrieval times are limited, and all materials now must be examined in the downstairs library. Not only is this a disservice to researchers, it also places these materials at risk.

SHSI library and archives collections are frozen in 2009. There is a moratorium on acquisitions. Subscriptions have lapsed, and there are no plans to renew them. The SHSI may even discontinue its subscription to the Online Computer Library Center (OCLC), which is used by nearly every reputable library and archive in the world and links the SHSI collections to the University of Iowa's online catalog, in favor of an impractical plan to develop a collection management system of its own. The OCLC is an indispensable source of reliable bibliographic and catalog records. It is essential to a library's inventory control system, helping to describe and track holdings and making possible the lending and borrowing of microfilm. Taking the SHSI libraries out of the OCLC system will gut the SHSI's professional reputation as a serious research library.

The DCA and State Archivist assert that their assessment is ongoing and that no decisions about the SHSI collections have been made. The DCA, however, is already in the process of hiring a construction manager for the renovation of the Iowa State Historical Building in Des Moines. The proposal to invest \$93 million in this project is not reassuring unless it comes with a guarantee about preserving and ensuring access to collections and resuming acquisition of new materials. Mr. Jahn claims that 35 percent, or \$32 million, of the total \$93 million investment "will address long overdue collection needs." But those numbers are contradicted by the DCA's "State Historical Building Capital Project - DRAFT Milestone [Schedule](#)" of February 10, 2015, which allocates only \$7.5 million, or 8 percent, to "Collections Processing, Digitization, Move & Rehousing." Not only is this a tiny percentage for collections overall, but it also appears that the money will be used primarily for downsizing, removing, and digitizing them.

Reports by the DCA's consultant provide further evidence of such a plan. The April 2012 "Facility Strategy" for the Des Moines building, prepared by the Canadian consulting firm Lord Cultural Resources, calls for reducing collections storage, expanding exhibit and program space, and providing "outdoor areas for gathering and organizing groups in order to leverage views of the Capitol" (p. 16). Renovation for such areas would be on the east side of the building, and may require, as a July 2014 engineering and architecture report notes, demolishing the East Wing, where the archival collections currently reside.

The 2012 Lord report disconcertingly recommends “considering changes to collecting mandates and scopes and de-accessioning items that are not in line with the collecting strategy” (p. 12). The same firm’s June 2014 “Research Report” for the DCA mentions libraries and archives only in passing, as “ancillary” to the SHSI (pp. 3, 71, 165). The library and archival collections are not ancillary; they have been the heart of the SHSI mission since 1857. The report recommends a “downward streamlining” of the “State Archives program,” referring to both the State Archives and the SHSI libraries and archives. It also urges elimination of “any duplication of efforts by consolidating the two research centers of the state library collection, thereby freeing staff, resources, and space for other program needs, such as building a website with services that the public can use at any time” (p. 190).

Although digitizing some library materials and posting them to a website is desirable, it would be prohibitively expensive to digitize more than a fraction of the SHSI collections. Furthermore, the nuances related to individual sources and their organization are lost in digitization; digital access is fine for some purposes, but researchers require physical access to materials and the assistance of trained archivists. Notably, Lord Cultural Resources’ 37-member team includes not a single person with archival training; two have advanced degrees in history, but the rest are museum planners, architects, “cultural engineers,” interpretive planners, and visual artists (per Lord Cultural Resources [website](#)).

Taken together, the shocking neglect of collections, the proposal for an expensive remodeling of the Des Moines building with few resources devoted to those collections, and Lord Cultural Resource’s short-sighted recommendations justify our fears for the future of SHSI’s libraries and archives in Des Moines and in Iowa City. We hope that the DCA will change course to place a high priority on all SHSI and Iowa State Archives collections and to keep both SHSI research centers fully open, sufficiently staffed, and their preservation needs and efforts appropriately funded.

Save Iowa History Coalition

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March 27, 2015

Dear MHA Members,

This message is sent on behalf of Anthony Jahn of the State Historical Society of Iowa, and is in response to the message sent out earlier today about signing a petition on change.org.

Good afternoon Joe & the Midwestern History Association,

Leo Landis with the State Historical Society of Iowa brought to my attention your advocacy alert.

Over the last few days information has come to pass about the State Historical Society of Iowa's organizational strategy and collections management efforts that is incorrectly grounded on conjecture and wild speculation. Please know...

The State Historical Society of Iowa:

- **Did not cut** its budget in FY 2015
- **Is not facing** any budget cuts for FY2016

- **Nor** are our collections under any physical threat.

In fact, as I write, a bill is moving through the Iowa State General Assembly to revitalize the State Historical Building. The Iowa Department of Cultural Affairs (agency that oversees the State Historical Society of Iowa) is extremely fortunate that Governor Terry Branstad proposed a \$65 million investment, and if passed, there is the potential for monetary impact up to \$93 million with additional funds coming from future private/public partnership. 65% of the allocation will be addressing capital building needs (including collection storage upgrades) while the remaining 35% will address long overdue collections needs (preservation, access, organization, etc.) and a visitor experience revitalization which would better showcase the collection. The outcome of this legislation will not impact our current general fund allocation either way.

Historic collections are the lifeblood of the State Historical Society of Iowa. For more than 157 years our organization has and continues to be a leader in collecting, preserving and making accessible Iowa's past. We have an ongoing Strategic Planning process, and as it nears completion we look forward to continuing the conversation with Iowans and other interested parties detailing how our unprecedented initiative to improve history in Iowa will:

- **Preserve** our collections for all Iowans.
- **Engage** Iowans across all 99 Iowa counties through improved collection accessibility, preservation and sustainability.
- **Inspire** all Iowans to connect with their past for a brighter present and future.

Thank you for consideration and please share with your colleagues and other concerned Iowans their advocacy efforts would be very impactful if they were focused on the capital funding bill currently being considered, and why the State Historical Society of Iowa could generally benefit from an increased budget.

History is a shared responsibility and thank you for being an integral part of the preservation of the Iowa story.