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# Save National Archives at Seattle, a link from past to present

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Susan Karren, director of the National Archives at Seattle, looks through documents in one of the aisles of the archival stacks in 2009. (Greg Gilbert / The Seattle Times)

By [Trish Hackett Nicola](#)

*Special to The Times*

On Jan. 13, the staff at the National Archives at Seattle received notification that within the next four years, the facility will be closed, and the records will be transferred to the National Archive and Records Administration facilities in Missouri or Riverside, California.

There was no advance notice of this [decision](#). Neither the staff nor the public was notified that public hearings were held in Washington, D.C.; Laguna Niguel, California; and Denver, Colorado, in June and July of last year. No meetings were held in the Pacific Northwest.

The National Archives at Seattle hold 58,000 cubic feet of historic records from the Pacific Northwest for Washington, Idaho, Oregon and Alaska. These

records belong in the Pacific Northwest. People here need access. These records should not be stored a thousand miles away.

When the Alaska regional facility of NARA was closed in 2014 and the records transferred to Seattle, the residents of Alaska were promised that the records would stay in the Pacific Northwest in perpetuity. Tribal members use these files to establish or keep membership in tribes. Proof of tribal citizenship is used to obtain education funds. Tribal records have been used for retaining fishing rights, as in the Boldt Decision. Native school records from Alaska and Oregon are included in the NARA collections.

These historic records are used for research by students at the University of Washington and other local colleges and include federal court cases for more than 100 years (from 1890 to 2000), and naturalization records. There are 50,000 case files from the Chinese Exclusion Act about Chinese who entered the U.S. through the ports of Seattle, Portland, Sumas, Port Townsend and Vancouver, B.C., from 1882 to 1943.

Genealogists and historians rely on these records. They're the basis for scores of books and articles. Among the many authors who have used the collection are Lorraine McConaghy, Eric Liu, Jennifer Ott, Knute Berger, Karen Abbott, Bennet Bronson, Chuimei Ho and Marie Rose Wong. Countless stories about the 1909 Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition, the 1962 Seattle World's Fair and the building of the Ballard Locks could never have been written without NARA's documents.

It is a myth that all records are or can be digitized. Records are being digitized as quickly as possible,

but it takes time, money, and staff to do this overwhelming job. Archivists add important metadata to enable researchers to find the material they are seeking. Digitization is a goal, but it is far from reality at this point.

Nothing can replace the feeling of holding an original, historical record of your ancestor. These original documents connect you directly to your ancestor.

If the National Archives is closed and moved from the Pacific Northwest, the vast institutional knowledge of the staff will be lost. The National Archives depends on volunteers to help make records accessible to researchers. If these records are moved 1,000 miles away, this valuable work will end.

Closing the National Archives at Seattle and moving the records to Missouri or California does not reflect the mission and values of the National Archives.

And please, if you care about Northwest history, call your senators and congressional representatives, and anyone interested in access to the past.

#### ABOUT THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES

#### **The Seattle Archive is a treasure trove of Northwest history**

The National Archives holds historical documents of the U.S. government (federal, congressional, and presidential records) on behalf of the American public so citizens, public servants, Congress and the courts can obtain the information they need to exercise their rights and responsibilities. Public access to government records strengthens democracy by allowing Americans to claim their rights of citizenship, hold their government accountable and understand their history so they

can participate more effectively in their government. Learn more online:  
[archives.gov](https://www.archives.gov)

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