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Camelot's archives, available with the click of a mouse \$10m project to digitize JFK archives underway

By Joseph P. Kahn
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During a 1962 news conference, a reporter asked President John F. Kennedy if he'd consider locating his presidential library in Washington, D.C., after leaving the White House so scholars and historians would have the broadest possible access to it. No, he replied playfully, "I'm going to put it in Cambridge, Massachusetts."

Then Kennedy talked more seriously, and with uncanny foresight, about the future preservation and dissemination of his White House archives. "Through scientific means of reproduction, microfilms and all the rest," he said, "it's possible to make documents available" not only to scholars visiting his library but to anyone interested in presidential history.

A few weeks from now, Kennedy's prophecy will begin to come true, in a way he probably could not have imagined.

A four-year, \$10 million effort to digitize the JFK Library and Museum's archives, making hundreds of thousands of documents, photographs, and recordings available online, is nearing completion of its first phase. A formal announcement will come Jan. 13, one week before the 50th anniversary of JFK's inauguration, at a press conference in the nation's capitol.

"Access to a Legacy," as the project is called, marks the first time a presidential library established in the paper age has fully committed itself to the digital era. The amount of material to be posted online in January is huge — 200,000 pages of text, 1,500 photos, 1,250 files of audio recordings and moving images, and 340 phone conversations totaling 17 1/2 hours — but represents just a small portion of the collection.

Among the documents likely to draw intense interest is a draft, in JFK's handwriting, of his inaugural address ("Ask not what your country can do for you ..."). There are also notes, tapes, and maps made during the 1962 Cuban Missile Cri-

sis, and Oval Office phone conversations between Kennedy and other important historical figures, from foreign heads of state and former US presidents to key political allies and aides. Users will be able to print and copy material directly off the website, so they could download a personal note to JFK and make a copy for themselves.

A collaboration between library staffers and a group of corporate sponsors, the undertaking is generating excitement among archivists, historians, and other presidential libraries contemplating their own digital futures. Scholars are eager to gain remote access to JFK's archives, while ordinary citizens will be getting their first opportunity to burrow into this historical treasure trove.

"It's very innovative, something no other library has done on quite this scale," said library foundation president Caroline Kennedy, who was 3 years old when her father began his presidency. "It also perfectly fits the library's mission, which is to encourage the study of history and inspire young people to public service."

Kennedy will attend January's ceremonies, when a reconfigured library website will be unveiled. The 50th anniversary celebration and website introduction are a "happy coincidence," added Kennedy, whose husband, Ed Schlossberg, helped initiate the massive project.

The project was designed with five goals in mind, say library officials: online access; enhanced ability to search the collection; protection of assets through remote replication; archival preservation; and minimizing wear on materials whose

fragility increases with each passing year.

The revamped website will be more enticing and user-friendly, promises John Hawley, the library's director of Web development. A new search engine will allow visitors to enter the word "moon," for example, and pull up virtually every document, tape, and speech related to JFK's mission to land men on the moon.

Even as phase one ends, the library houses sufficient assets to keep scanners and catalogers busy for years: 8.4 million pages of JFK's personal papers, 40 million additional documents, 400,000 photos, 9,000 hours of audio recordings, 7.5 million feet of movie film, and 1,200 hours of video. The first phase focuses on categories including presidential office files, JFK's personal papers and correspondence, and the White House photograph and audio collections. Phase two, when funded, will, according to Schlossberg, likely concentrate on movie footage from what's widely considered to be the country's first television presidency.

Digitization of the entire archives — some materials may never appear online, either for national security reasons or out of respect for the family's privacy — could take years, even decades, depending upon the cost involved. Priority is being given to the materials most requested by educators, scholars, and historians, library officials say.

Beyond the archives' "greatest hits," though, are relics of Camelot seldom seen by the public. JFK's personal notes from the missile crisis, for example, include Caroline Kennedy's prekindergar-

ten handwriting, scrawled on the back. A telegram from Harpo Marx (“Do you need a harp player in your Cabinet”) captures the show-business touches of JFK’s 1960 campaign, while a pronunciation guide to his 1963 West Berlin speech (“Ish bin ein Bearleener”) demonstrates his attention to detail. One might find a personal letter from the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., sent in March 1961, requesting a meeting to discuss civil rights, or the bar tab from Robert F. Kennedy’s bachelor party, another small but precious piece of Kennedy family lore.

Items such as these “humanize history,” said Hawley.

Partners in huge project

Last Monday, the 47th anniversary of Kennedy’s assassination, marked another milestone in America’s enduring fascination with its 35th president. After his death, files from the Kennedy White House were moved to the nearby Executive Office Building, where sorting and processing first began. In 1965 they were shipped to Waltham, file cabinets and all, remaining there until the library opened in 1979. It now draws 200,000 visitors annually to its Columbia Point location.

Interest in the Kennedy presidency has never waned, spawning hundreds of books, films, documentaries, scholarly papers, and other studies, including an upcoming History Channel miniseries. Over the past year alone, 673 researchers visited the archives, library records show. By the early 2000s, its archives were already becoming “digital by default,” said James Roth, the library’s deputy director. Requests poured in for documents and images to be scanned and digitized, prompting the library to consider how to manage these assets.

“Nowadays, the easiest part is scanning the material,” Roth said. “The issue is, what do you do with all those images? That’s the cutting-edge part of what we’re doing now.”

Overtaxed, too, was a redesigned library website that went online in 2006 and averages 500,000 page views monthly. Enter Schlossberg, whose company oversaw a huge digitization project (22 million documents) for the Ellis Island visitors’ museum. He urged library of-

ficials to look into similar systems. Their search led to a subsidiary of Hopkinton-based EMC Corp., which soon signed on as a major supporting player.

In June 2006, Senator Edward Kennedy announced the digitization project in a speech at the library. Joining him were representatives of the US National Archives, which oversees all 13 presidential libraries, and EMC Corp., whose contribution would grow to include hardware, software, and technical support. The company also pledged to expand storage capacity significantly, the biggest obstacle facing any digitization project of this size, say library officials.

AT&T will run a hosting center for the new website, and Raytheon Corp. has contributed key system architecture and security safeguards to the project. A fourth partner, Boston-based Iron Mountain Corp., will provide secure storage for digitized copies of all materials at its underground facility in Pennsylvania. The company also scanned and digitized hundreds of videotapes, audio reels, and audio discs for the library. All told, corporate support has totaled more than \$6.5 million in equipment, services, and seed money.

Scanning and cataloging began three years ago, after the library had assembled a staff dedicated to that task. Every document and image has been scanned by hand, to protect the originals, at high resolution (600 dots per inch) to ensure that even pencil notes would be legible.

Recently at the library, metadata catalogers Rachel Searcy and Kelly Francis were adding descriptive material to files they had just been sent. Each has been working on the project for more than two years, going through as many as 30 folders per day. Searcy noted the importance of appending relevant data to each document. In JFK’s day, for instance, no staffer used the term “Cuban Missile Crisis.” That phrase must be embedded retroactively to make the relevant documents searchable.

For Searcy, personal highlights have included cataloging drafts of important speeches such as JFK’s 1962 Rice University address, in which he affirmed America’s commitment to win the

space race with the Soviets. Francis has particularly prized the doodles JFK once made in the margins of White House papers. Also anything in Jackie Kennedy’s handwriting, she added, along with JFK’s childhood correspondence and Harvard College report cards. “The Kennedys,” said a smiling Francis, “kept everything.”

A leader for libraries

To what extent other libraries are inspired by JFK’s vision remains to be seen. But officials at the National Archives hope they will start putting as much material online as possible. Archivists at the Johnson Library have already undertaken three major digitization projects, including posting 14,000 pages of LBJ’s diary online this September. The Reagan Library “hasn’t dived deeply into digitization,” said supervisory archivist Michael Duggan, but will look at the Kennedy library as a potential model. George H.W. Bush’s presidential library has digitized only about 1 percent of its assets, according to supervisory archivist Robert Holzweiss, but hopes to expand those efforts soon.

“It’s clear to me that, for students today, if it isn’t online it doesn’t exist,” said David Ferriero, archivist of the United States. “So I’m very excited about what the [JFK] library is doing.”

Presidential historian Robert Dallek, who has made liberal use of the Kennedy archives, said the primary payoff is reaching the largest possible international audience. “What this means is, people in Japan or Germany can have access to [JFK’s] office files, and that’s a splendid step forward.” Other presidential libraries will probably follow suit, he added, “because they don’t want to expire, so to speak. Plus, there’s still tremendous interest in subjects like World War II, Vietnam, and the New Deal.”

Replication and preservation should not be afterthoughts, either, say library officials. For years, they point out, JFK White House photographer Jacques Lowe stored almost all of his 40,000 negatives in a bank vault below New York’s World Trade Center. Virtually all were destroyed in the 9/11 terrorist attacks, leaving only Lowe’s prints on file at the JFK library as his photographic totems of Camelot.