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Presidential Libraries

How many presidential libraries are there? When was the first one established?

People interested in the presidency ask, "What character or personality traits are common to our presidents?" There are more than a dozen traits that most presidents possessed (discussed in another query to Ask Gleaves). One of them is how much they loved books; many of our chief executives collected thousands of books in their lifetime -- even those who lived before mass trade books were available at an affordable price. Presidents and books and libraries -- they are a natural together.



But to nail down the first presidential library that was not just an interesting private collection but was also publicly significant -- that is not so easy. Following George Washington's precedent, most of our early presidents simply took their personal papers, files, and books home with them when they left office. All such material was considered the private property of the president -- there was no systematic approach to preserving the public record of an administration. Presidential historian Michael Nelson offers:

"Over the years, their [the presidents'] descendants usually ended up selling or donating the papers to the Library of Congress, but not before doing them a great deal of damage through carelessness, greed, or bowdlerization. As Don W. Wilson, a former archivist of the United States, records, 'presidential papers were systematically purged, mutilated by autograph collectors and souvenir hunters, wasted by widows, burned in barns and barrels, and carried off by marauding troops.'^[1]

What changed? When were presidential papers and files regarded as a part of the public record of the United States? When was it considered important for there to be access to a president's documents and books? Would the institution that housed an administration's record be a *research library* that restricted access to scholars ... or a comprehensive *library-archive-museum* that reached out to the public and gathered as much material about the president and his associates as possible. However the answers to these questions evolved, presidential libraries signified a new type of institution, one considered crucial to a self-governing republic.

1815. Some scholars argue that Thomas Jefferson possessed the first publicly significant presidential library in our nation's history. After 1770, when he lost his personal library in a fire, Jefferson amassed perhaps the largest personal collection of books in the U.S. In 1814 the British burned much of Washington, DC, and Congress's library with it. One year later Jefferson sold his collection of 6,487 books to the Library of Congress for \$23,950. The books, however, did not revolve around his experience as the nation's third president, but around his intellectual interests. Although another fire on Christmas Eve 1851 destroyed nearly two thirds of the Jefferson volumes Congress had purchased, the Jefferson precedent remained significant to the idea of making a president's books accessible to the public.

1850s. President Millard Fillmore and First Lady Abigail Fillmore can also claim a first. Before the Fillmore administration (1850-53), there were books but no permanent library in the White House. At his wife's urging, the 13th president prevailed upon Congress to fund the purchase of enough books to start a significant White House library for future presidents and their families and staff to enjoy. It is on the ground floor. To be sure, this is a different presidential library than that which usually comes to mind; it serves as the setting for numerous White House social gatherings and can be toured by the public.

1870. Other scholars would give the descendants of John Adams credit for establishing the first presidential library, per se. The collection that was started by John Adams was added to by his son, John Quincy Adams, and built up by two more generations of Adamses. To house this impressive collection, the family had the Stone Library, in Quincy, Massachusetts, built in 1870, adjacent to the Adams estate called Peacefield. Perhaps it was the fate of the Jefferson collection (the majority of which was destroyed by fire in 1851) that prompted the Adamses to build their library away from the kitchen or any other source of fire in the main house. The Stone Library contains 14,000 volumes that revolve not around the administrations of John and John Quincy Adams, but around their intellectual pursuits. It is maintained by the National Park Service.

1885. Still other historians maintain that James Garfield's wife should get the credit for establishing the first presidential library. In 1885, four years after her husband's assassination, Lucretia ("Crete") Garfield added the Memorial Library to the family home (Lawnfield) in Mentor, Ohio. The library housed the books that were used and treasured by the 20th president, as well as a fire-proof vault that stored valuable papers and letters. This library set the precedent for a president having a library built in his honor. It is administered by the National Park Service.

1916. Along come friends and descendants of Rutherford B. Hayes to claim they established the first true presidential library on the grounds of the Hayes estate, Spiegel Grove, in Fremont, Ohio. The stately edifice houses 70,000 books, including Hayes's 12,000-volume personal library. Included is considerable archival material from his military and political career, with a focus on his presidency (1877-1881). The Hayes library is not run by the federal government but is administered by the Hayes Presidential Center and State of Ohio.

1941. Franklin Delano Roosevelt can make the most credible claim for establishing the presidential library system as a federally-run network. Early in his presidency he had been mulling over where to leave his papers and considered the Library of Congress. By 1937 his administration -- more activist and generating more documents than any previous administration in U.S. history -- decided on a new approach that would revolutionize the way presidential history is preserved and interpreted. After consulting with the Archivist of the United States and Congressional leaders, he decided to seek private donations to build a library on his family estate, Springwood, in the Hudson River Valley near the village of Hyde Park. He would then donate the library to the federal government, to be run by the relatively new National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) and maintained by the National Park Service. That is precisely what happened when the library opened in 1941.

That is how FDR could claim that he opened the first presidential library. He even had a working office in the library, located on his family estate in Hyde Park in the Hudson River valley, where he spent time as president; that was indeed a first -- no other sitting president had an office in a library open to the public. We know, for example, that FDR delivered three fireside chats on the radio from the study. The library-museum-archive, housed in a Dutch colonial style building, contains 17 million pages of documents and 45,000 books, 15,000 of which were in FDR's private collection of books and pamphlets.

Michael Nelson tells of the next step: "A 1955 law, the Presidential Libraries Act, extended Roosevelt's arrangement to all living ex-presidents and future presidents. During the next 15 years they each took the deal. Libraries, with accompanying museums, sprang up wherever the former presidents wanted them."

Any drawbacks to this arrangement? Nelson writes: "Presidential libraries have been lambasted for their cost and extravagance, for dispersing important documents to inconvenient locations, and for reifying a president-centered approach to American history. Although none of these criticisms lack merit, we -- scholars and the public alike -- are better off having presidential libraries than not."^[2]

In any case, while friends of Hayes created the way the presidential library-museum-archive looks to the public, FDR created the federal structure that governs most of the others. By most counts, there are at least ten such institutions under the NARA umbrella. They are dedicated to Herbert Hoover (West Branch, IA), Harry S. Truman (Independence, MO), Dwight D. Eisenhower (Abilene, KS), John F. Kennedy (Columbia Point in Boston), Lyndon B. Johnson (on the University of Texas campus in Austin), Gerald R. Ford (library on the University of Michigan campus in Ann Arbor; museum in Grand Rapids), Jimmy Carter (Atlanta), Ronald Reagan (Simi Valley, CA), George H. W. Bush (on the Texas A&M campus in College Station), and William Jefferson Clinton (Little Rock, AK). All of these libraries-museums are administered by NARA.

Note that Herbert Hoover was the only president prior to FDR who had what became a NARA library. Therein lies a tale. As the two men had run against each other in 1932, there was an intense rivalry between them. While president, Hoover had dedicated the National Archives. FDR couldn't match that august event, but he could create a new institution -- the NARA presidential library system -- and start by building his own. Not to be left behind, Hoover used the same process that launched the FDR Library to build one of his own.

One other library-museum-archive that must be mentioned is dedicated to the public career of Richard M. Nixon (Yorba Linda, CA). It is an

outstanding institution that is privately run, and not administered by NARA. Yet even the Nixon provides an interesting chapter to the story. As Nelson observes:

"A problem arose when Richard Nixon resigned in disgrace in 1974. Unless the law was changed, Nixon's presidential papers -- including all of his White House tapes -- would belong to him, to do with as he saw fit. Congress stepped quickly into the breach, declaring that the records of Nixon's presidency were public property.

"In 1978 Congress followed up by passing the Presidential Records Act, extending the principles of public ownership to the papers of all future presidents. Starting with Ronald Reagan, the first president to be covered, the bulk of each president's official records would have to be made available for public scrutiny five years after the president left office. The extent of public access -- whether personal or political -- would still be up to the president, who also could restrict access for 12 years to certain categories of official papers, such as those relating to appointments and national security."^[3]

The Clinton Library that opened on November 18, 2004, is sprawling -- 150,000 square feet that house the archives, museum, foundation, and University of Arkansas's Clinton School. Among its unusual design features is a full-scale replica of the Oval Office that is illuminated by natural light.

One can assume that George W. Bush will also have a library-museum-archive dedicated to his public life and presidency, probably in or near Dallas, Texas, where First Lady Laura Bush went to college (Southern Methodist University) and where he owned the Texas Rangers baseball team.

(Question from Molly R. of Grand Rapids, MI)

^[1] Michael Nelson, "Presidential Libraries Are Valuable Reflections of Their Eras," *Chronicle of Higher Education* 51 (November 12, 2004), B15.

^[2] Nelson, "Presidential Libraries," B15.

^[3] Nelson, "Presidential Libraries," B16.