A statement from Jennifer Kilmer, Director, Washington State Historical Society, regarding the closure of the National Archives and Records Administration in Seattle

The recent proposal to close the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) in Seattle has been approved by the Office of Management and Budget. This is a matter of utmost concern to the heritage community. The Washington State Historical Society’s mission is to partner with our communities to explore how history connects us all. The loss of this valuable resource will significantly impact our community and institutions like ours.

NARA’s Pacific Alaska Region facility holds over 56,000 cubic feet of archives for the Pacific Northwest: photographs, documents, maps, and architectural drawings that date from the 1850s to the 1980s. This resource represents an incredible breadth of history of our region and its loss will greatly impact the people who live here. Transferring these materials to locations as distant as California and Missouri (as proposed) creates immediate barriers to accessibility; the resources required to travel and view these materials will limit access to a privileged few.

As history professionals whose mission and practice it is to collect, preserve, and interpret historical artifacts, objects, documents, photographs, and ephemera, we know first-hand the research value that lies in the authentic article – something that cannot be replicated in a digital facsimile. We also recognize the imperative nature of proximity and accessibility. It is for these reasons that we make this statement opposing the planned closure of and relocation of records located within the NARA site.

As educators, we have seen the value of the National Archives for students. The Society has partnered with Archives staff to share historical resources with teachers, classrooms, and the public. NARA resources range from providing tours of the archives and access to those materials, to connecting people with their past in a personal, meaningful way through genealogy and access to documents and photographs of their ancestors. For many individuals, their first interaction with historical resources is at NARA.

As curators and collectors, we appreciate the rarity of NARA’s holdings and the deep significance for individuals who seek connections that cannot be found elsewhere. NARA holds documents relating not only to the triumphs of American history but also to its tragedies, including materials on topics as broad as documentation of Native American tribal affairs, to federal prison records, to archives regarding the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. In many cases, the records held by the Archives are the only remaining documentation of individuals who have been erased or unreported in history. For their descendants, a signature on a page may be the only thing left to them of their ancestors. Nothing can replace the opportunity to see these documents in person and experience that tangible connection to the past.
We are working with our heritage colleagues along with our congressional delegation to determine how best to address the decision to close NARA’s Seattle facility. We hope to carve a path forward which allows these important resources to stay in Washington State, accessible to our community.

For interviews:
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About The Washington State Historical Society
The Washington State Historical Society partners with our communities to explore how history connects us all. The Society’s most visible activity, the Washington State History Museum (WSHM) is located in downtown Tacoma on Pacific Avenue among a thriving cultural scene. The museum features interactive permanent exhibitions about Washington’s past in the Great Hall, unique rotating exhibitions highlighting the Society’s collections, and dynamic feature exhibitions.

Address: 1911 Pacific Avenue, Tacoma, WA 98402
Hours: 10:00 AM–5:00 PM Tues.-Sun. Third Thursday of each month, 10:00 AM–8:00 PM.
Admission: Free for members; Adults $14; seniors (age 65+), students (age 6-17) and military (with ID) $11; free for children 5 and under; family rate $40 (up to two adults and four children under age 18). Patrons with a Washington Quest card and licensed Washington Foster Parents can attend for $1 per person or $2 per family.