

Presidential Archivist: A Memoir. By David E. Alsobrook. Mercer, GA: Mercer University Press, 2020. 275 pp. Hardcover. \$29.00. ISBN 978-0881467635.

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In *Presidential Archivist: A Memoir*, David E. Alsobrook (1946–2021) traces his archival career featuring—but not limited to—presidential libraries.¹ Alsobrook was the first director of the George H.W. Bush and William J. Clinton Presidential Libraries and the first supervisory archivist at the Jimmy Carter Presidential Library (p. xiv). He worked in presidential libraries during a period of change. When the author was a junior federal employee, Congress passed the Presidential Records Act (PRA) of 1978.² Later, Alsobrook saw the administrative reorganization of the National Archives and Records Service (NARS), which had consequences beyond a simple name change (p. 153).³ Highlighting the public service role of archivists, this memoir complements the body of work available on the history of the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) and its Office of Presidential Libraries. The late archivist’s story is especially relevant today as presidential records have made the news. Although its title is *Presidential Archivist*, the book includes information about other types of repositories. Alsobrook combines self-reflection with historical writing, sharing glimpses of his emotional life and personality with readers.

In chapter 1, Alsobrook reflects on his education, particularly his archival training. He earned a master’s degree in United States history from West Virginia University and then enrolled in Auburn University’s graduate archival administration program. He compares two major academic pathways for archivists—the master’s degree in library science and the advanced degree in history—and concludes that no matter the degree, archival students require “a basic grounding in historical knowledge, research, writing, and practical experience in the archival field” (pp. 41–42). A pivotal experience was his summer internship at the Federal Archives and Records Center in East Point, Georgia. Alsobrook found “digging into” federal records that scholars had not yet used to be exciting, sparking an interest in presidential papers (p. 36). Throughout the chapter, Alsobrook draws on interviews with colleagues. The chapter serves as relevant reading for both aspiring archivists and those who study the history of the profession.

Alsobrook’s first job as a professional archivist was at the Alabama Department of Archives and History (ADAH). Chapter 2 provides a fascinating administrative history of the first state archives in the nation, founded in 1901. A few years after he left the agency, Alsobrook was asked to share recommendations for ADAH’s future with legislators and others in state government. He publicly voiced support “for sweeping, innovative changes in the archives’ management and future direction,” including the need “finally [to] solicit personal papers and memorabilia of African Americans and other minorities who played pivotal roles in

Alabama history” (pp. 59, 58). His statement emphasized the value of traditional historic preservation—which is generally popular and not overtly political—as he called on politicians and the public to support the state archives.

In chapter 3, Alsobrook recalls his fellowship at the National Archives, which prepared him to work in presidential libraries. His peers were mostly other white men in their thirties and forties, although Alsobrook was the only member of his class from the Deep South. At the fellowship’s end, Alsobrook stayed in Washington, DC, to become liaison archivist for NARS’s presidential papers staff, discussed in chapter 4. This new office oversaw records disposition, led an oral history program, and helped the White House plan a future presidential library. Alsobrook highlights office automation in the White House during this time, particularly the use of a computerized index that facilitated records management and reference services.

Of the three presidential libraries he helped launch, Alsobrook writes the most about the Jimmy Carter Presidential Library, where he worked the longest. In chapter 5, “Building ‘Presidential Pyramids’: The Carter Presidential Materials Project,” he explains his role in the review of classified information during archival processing, demystifying a workflow poorly understood outside of certain repositories. He also mentions the introduction of computers into the archives at the Carter Library. He does not elaborate further, however, leaving me with unanswered questions about the automation of presidential libraries during this period. Following a brief return to Washington, DC, Alsobrook headed to Texas to launch the project phase for the George H.W. Bush Library. In chapter 6, he considers the relationship between presidents and presidential library directors, sharing recollections about Carter’s, Bush’s, and Clinton’s work styles when engaging with presidential materials.

Chapter 7, “My Fall from Grace: A Cautionary Tale of Redemption and Second Chances,” is about a challenging time for the author. In 1999, Alsobrook received notice to leave the Bush Library, and he describes the stress of not knowing if he would find future employment in the federal government. He notes that presidential library directors have “many masters”—the federal government, the former president and his associates, boards, and others (pp. 197–198). Anyone who has struggled in the office, particularly with managing competing interests, may identify with him. Eventually, Alsobrook was named the director of the Clinton Presidential Library, and he was grateful for the chance to move to Little Rock, Arkansas.

Alsobrook did not intend to write a standard historical work on the presidency or presidential libraries (p. xiv). Rather, *Presidential Archivist: A Memoir* offers the unique perspective of an individual who climbed the ranks of the National Archives, working in libraries for three US presidents of diverse political backgrounds. For additional information about NARA, presidential libraries, and the Presidential Records Act, I found it necessary to consult other resources, such as those listed in this review’s endnotes. The book’s strengths are in the author’s interpretive analysis of his career and other topics of personal significance: the impact of the Vietnam War on his generation, his southern accent, and financial and family issues. It is an extremely well-sourced memoir, with citations to primary sources— journals, emails, contemporaneous notes, manuscript

collections, and oral histories—and secondary scholarly sources. I hope this work inspires others to share their archival journeys through memoir, media, art, or other forms of expression. There are many ways to communicate about a lived experience, and archivists have stories worth preserving.

Notes

¹ Presidential libraries are not traditional libraries (Office of Presidential Libraries, 2021, “Office of Presidential Libraries,” last modified January 26, 2021, <https://www.archives.gov/presidential-libraries/about/office.html>). They are more accurately described as presidential museums and archives (U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, 2021, “Learn about Presidential Libraries,” last modified January 20, 2021, <https://www.archives.gov/presidential-libraries/about>). The presidential library is an evolving institution. For example, in a new arrangement, the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) will manage and provide access to President Barack Obama’s records from an independent facility. NARA will also manage loans of museum objects to a privately supported Obama Presidential Center for exhibits (Barack Obama Presidential Library, n.d., “About the Library,” accessed August 23, 2023, <https://www.obamalibrary.gov/about-us>). Historically, presidential libraries have come under fire, seen by critics as deferential “shrines” that fail in offering legitimate interpretations of history (p. 123). Some of this opposition has existed within NARA, the Office of Presidential Libraries’ parent agency (p. 187).

² This post-Watergate reform mandated that all presidential historical materials created after January 20, 1981, would be public property. Before the PRA, American presidents assumed ownership of their papers after leaving office. The PRA also stipulated that presidential records would be subject to Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests five years after the end of an administration (p. 99). While these laws broadened access to presidential records, they also impacted workflows for frontline archivists, as FOIA requests began shaping processing and reference priorities (p. 139).

³ The National Archives and Records Service (NARS) was part of the General Services Administration (GSA). In 1985, it became an independent agency led by a presidential appointee, the Archivist of the United States, and was renamed the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA). As noted by Trudy Huskamp Peterson in a panel presentation, reporting to GSA became a problem after President Nixon’s administration because negotiations about opening his papers were overseen by the head of GSA, who was not an archivist (American Historical Association, “History Behind the Headlines: The Presidential Records Act,” *YouTube*, April 4, 2023, video, 15:41 to 16:23, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d6z0a2rxtHg>).