

The US National Archives to close facilities in San Francisco and Chicago

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The US National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) will close its branches in San Francisco and Chicago, creating new and significant burdens for historical research and historic preservation.

While news of the closures only reached a major national news outlet last month, with an August 12 article published by NBC news, the pending shutdowns have been under way since at least late June. It was then that NARA Chief Operating Officer Jay Trainer announced the closures in an email to NARA staff. In the email, Trainer told staff that the closures would “support the long-term financial health and viability of the Federal Records Centers Program’s revolving fund, reduce expenses for the Operating Expense (OE) fund, and reduce our real estate portfolio in alignment with the administration’s priorities.”

The Trump administration has made its attitude toward history and the institutions responsible for communicating historical knowledge to the public abundantly clear. Since returning to office, the Trump administration has waged an all-out assault on history educators and institutions in the name of replacing current curricula with “patriotic education,” a euphemism for the right-wing nationalist distortion of American history.

The administration’s 1776 Commission has led the way in forcing this patriotic education into classrooms and demonizing educators whose lessons do not conform to the glorifying nationalism demanded by the government. With Executive Order 14253, titled “Restoring Truth and Sanity to American History,” issued by Trump in March 2025, the administration began a campaign to purge “improper ideology” from the history exhibited by the Smithsonian Institution and the National Park Service. The “Saving America’s Story” report, issued on July 4, 2026, further attacked the Smithsonian for “anti-white activism” and “illegal alien activism.” Trump has even called for signs to be placed outside the National Museum of American History warning patrons of the alleged inaccuracies inside.

The administration’s budgeting priorities are similarly clear. The Trump administration demands upwards of \$1.5 trillion for the US war machine, to be paid for in part with dramatic cuts to social services, cultural and educational programs, and

institutions like the Institution of Museum and Library Services and the National Archives. To speak, as Trainer does, of closing NARA facilities to suit the administration’s war-bound bottom line is not fiscal responsibility but a capitulation to Trump’s fascistic assault on public education and commitment to war.

The stated purpose of the National Archives is to “preserve, protect, and share the historical records of the United States to promote public inquiry and strengthen democratic participation.” Shutting down the NARA facilities in San Francisco and Chicago betrays that mission.

The San Francisco branch of the National Archives, actually located in San Bruno, California, holds the records of federal agencies and courts from a vast geographic territory including California, Nevada, Hawaii, American Samoa, and Guam. Documents held in San Francisco are essential for researching the anti-immigrant regime of the United States during the Chinese Exclusion era, the internment of Japanese Americans during the Second World War, and the expansion of U.S. imperialism into the Pacific, including the annexation of Hawaii in 1898.

Perhaps the most famous of the archive’s many holdings, having special political relevance today, are the records of the *United States v. Wong Kim Ark*, the 1898 U.S. Supreme Court case that affirmed the principle of birthright citizenship in the United States. With the Trump administration’s ongoing efforts to overturn this fundamental democratic principle, closing the home facility of these records and forcing their relocation amounts to tampering with historical evidence.

It also removes the evidence from the scene of the crime. A visit to the archives in San Bruno places researchers within reach of many of the locations referenced in archive documents. There is San Francisco’s historic immigration station at Angel Island, where US authorities detained many thousands of Chinese immigrants during the first half of the twentieth century. There is also San Francisco’s Chinatown, where a mural dedicated to Wong Kim Ark is prominently displayed on Grant Avenue, a vivid reminder that Wong’s story and birthright citizenship is history with living importance worth defending today.

The National Archives at Chicago holds federal records from

Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio and Wisconsin. Among these are records of the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), the federal agency founded in 1824 to oversee relations between the United States and Indigenous Americans. The BIA records reveal a history of dispossession, forced removals and forced assimilation.

Many of the well-known records held at the Chicago NARA facility concern the US government's suppression of dissent. This includes the records of the *United States v. Eugene V. Debs*, the case which saw socialist leader Eugene Debs convicted under the Espionage Act of 1917 and the Sedition Act of 1918 after making his famous anti-war speech in Canton, Ohio. Documents of the 1968 Democratic National Convention and the trial of the Chicago 7, as well as documents relating to the Kent State shooting of 1970 are all held in Chicago.

The accessibility of these records following the closure of facilities in San Francisco and Chicago remains unclear. An email sent by the Immigration and Ethnic History Society to its membership in July warned that the records would be sent "to a site in Missouri with no research facilities." The Organization of American Historians has also warned that the records will be consolidated at "a storage-only site with no research room." A post buried on the National Archives web site in August suggests the records will be scattered among facilities in California, Colorado, Maryland, Texas, Georgia, Missouri and Massachusetts.

In addition to the obstacle these closures and relocations create for scholarship by professional historians, they present a significant burden to the public currently served by the San Francisco and Chicago locations. Should the records even be accessible to the public, those whose family histories are intimately bound up with the historic crimes of Chinese Exclusion, Japanese internment or the Indian Removal Act, and who lack the financial support of universities and academic associations available to professional researchers, would now be forced to travel across the country at great expense or forgo their research entirely.

The NARA closures have been protested by scholars whose work has relied heavily on research materials held at the targeted facilities. In a statement published in the journal *California History*, historian Erika Lee, who has written extensively on immigration and Asian American history, called the NARA closures part of a "politically motivated war on American history and the historical profession," which poses "an enormous threat to historical research and to the teaching and learning of history."

W. Caleb McDaniel, who won the Pulitzer Prize in 2020 for his book *Sweet Taste of Liberty: A True Story of Slavery and Restitution in America*, has stressed the importance of archive staff who will likely lose their jobs if the closures go through. McDaniel wrote on his website that his experience working with staff at NARA's Chicago location showed what it actually

takes to uncover the many, many stories about the nation's past that are not yet known. It requires researchers to go in person to archives whose managers are not always aware of all the treasures they hold. And it requires expert, professional staff who understand those archives better than anyone and can troubleshoot problems when a researcher requests a file.

Historian David A. Chang, who specializes in Native American and Native Hawaiian history, told Hawaii Public Radio in August that most of the materials held at NARA San Francisco are "not available online. They've not been printed. There's millions and millions of pages, and you can't get to them unless you go there." Chang added, the archive "should be close. It should be free. It should be publicly available. These are our records. They belong to the citizens of the United States. They must be available to them. And they're making it harder to get to them or, for all we know, impossible. And we object to that."

Thus far the campaign to defend the National Archives and public access to these important documents has been confined to letter-writing initiatives launched by academic associations or alliances of non-profit and community organizations like Save Our National Archives (SONA). These campaigns have encouraged opponents of the closures to appeal to their Congressional representatives for support. Democratic Congressman Kevin Mullin recently responded by introducing a bill, the "National Archives Protection Act," that would prevent NARA from closing facilities without first acquiring Congressional approval.

However well-intentioned these letter-writing campaigns may be, no confidence should be placed in the US Congress to halt the closure of National Archives facilities. The ultimate guardians of these institutions must be the working class, and it is to the working class and not Congress that appeals must be directed.

The closure of the archives is not an isolated policy or budgeting question to be solved by Congressional oversight. The American oligarchy has committed itself to the dismantling of public education, whether in schools, museums or other institutions of learning, along with the looting of social programs and public institutions to pay for war. The working class is the only social force capable of overcoming this crisis by reorganizing society on the basis of social need, including the defense and expansion of the access to public education and culture that workers fought to achieve in an earlier period.



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