

The Founding of the Friends of the DC Archives

According to the website of the organization, “the FDCA came together when group of individuals interested in DC government met at historic Ben's Chili Bowl on U Street, NW to share their deep concern that the physical and digital records of the Nation's Capital are at risk due to the poor physical conditions at the DC Archives and District-wide inattention to record keeping.” Although the particular website entry is not dated, the earliest document on the website is dated October 4, 2014, meeting notes.

<http://www.friendsofdcaarchives.org/about-fdca.html>

Further, there is a letter on the website, dated November 25, 2014, requesting a meeting with Mayor-elect Muriel Bowser to discuss DC Archives that is signed by William Brown, Andrew Cassidy-Amstutz and Fynnette Eaton (who is the current FDCA president).

The letterhead of the aforementioned letter states,

The Friends of the DC Archives is a volunteer organization that advocates for a strong D.C. Archives that will preserve and make accessible D.C. records in all formats to ensure the accountability of its public officials and promote understanding of the history of the nation's capital.

This is all very interesting and reasonable.

A brief pass through the historical records (archives), however, reveals an earlier and much more thorough effort at organizing a Friends group.

A concept paper drafted in anticipation of a requested meeting with the then DC archivist and acting public administrator of public records, Clarence Davis is not dated, but the initial meeting was scheduled on December 15, 2003 and scheduled to be held on December 17, 2003. This was in response to an article published in the Washington Post by Chan Sewell Chan on December 4, 2003, “City's Records Center Compiles a History of Neglect,” and the need for a support group outside of government to advocate on behalf of the then beleaguered Office of Public Records. Based on the archived files, that group researched other Friends groups of state archives and came up with the outline of a concept paper.

Additionally, there is evidence in the file of collaboration with The Community Research and Learning Network of Washington (CoRaL) and the EOM Office of Boards and Commissions with a link to the Historical Records Advisory Board.

Early in 2004, a local citizen, Catherine Briggs, a medical professional and AIDS activist, reached out to the Mr. Davis with an idea to solicit public members and to organize a Friends group. She provided two documents to Mr. Davis. One was a summary of information she put together on Friends of groups of archives in U.S. cities and states and Canadian cities and provinces. The second document, perhaps equally significant, was an overview of the stages of strategic planning for small and medium-sized groups.

The documentation trail drops off for the rest of 2004, but picks up in earnest in early 2005 with an exchange between Dr. Jesse Bemley, a local historian and professor, and Mona McKenzie a student at UDC David Clarke School of Law connected to the legal clinic there, detailing the specifics of establishing a Friends group as a non-profit entity. An attachment to that correspondence is a Friends of DC Archives Research Memo draft to her UDC law professor, Laurie Morin, concluding that the Friends group would be best organized as a nonprofit organization vice a private foundation or public charity organization. Mona McKenzie completed her cycle in the law clinic and passed the project to new students. The document trail goes cold again.

There was a flurry of activity by mid-2005. Organization By-Laws were adopted in August, 2005, naming as chair, Dr. Jesse Bemley, Treasurer, Dr. Roger Davidson, Jr, and secretary, Mrs. Thomye Cave. In December, 2005, the IRS grants 501 (c)(3) status to the Friends of the DC Archives, Inc.

By May, 2006, UDC law student Debra Topor had taken over the account at the law clinic. At this point, the Friends had formed a Board of Directors, and in a letter to those board members, Topor outlined the progress to date: DC tax exemption as a nonprofit organization, notice of recognition, expedited home occupancy permit, Clean hands self certificate, and the combined business tax registration form (all under Enclosure 12).

There are no indications in our files of annual DC taxes being paid after 2006. I have reached by to Dr. Bemley to see if he has any records.

What is curious from the present perspective is 1) what happened to the original Friends efforts (2004-2006), and 2) why the 2014 group didn't avail themselves of all the groundwork that had previously been laid. One would expect some level of continuity between the original group of Friends, who have the tax certifications and business licenses to operate, and the new group that formed in 2014 at Ben's Chili Bowl. Also, there is no indication on the FDCA website that any of the legal and administrative groundwork for the organization has been completed. Actually, with the exception of the website and the documented connection to the administration, their efforts appear pretty much ad hoc.