What is a Presidential Record?
"[D]ocumentary materials... created or received by the President, the President's immediate staff, or a unit or individual of the Executive Office of the President whose function is to advise or assist... in the course of conducting activities which relate to or have an effect upon the carrying out of the constitutional, statutory, or other official or ceremonial duties"

Presidential Recordkeeping
Like other aspects of the presidency, precedent originally guided presidential recordkeeping. Perceptions and custodians have changed over time.

Key Institutions
White House
During an administration, the White House maintains official communications from the President & staff.

Government Publishing Office (GPO) & Federal Depository Library Program (FDLP)
Published presidential materials are released to U.S. libraries through the FDLP. Documents like budget materials, economic reports, public schedules, and public speeches are distributed regularly. They are released in print and/or digitally under call numbers AE, GS, PR, and PREX. Search the USU Catalog for materials.

National Archives (NARA)
By law, NARA is the custodian of all presidential records since 1978 and the Nixon Presidential Materials. By donation/deed, it is the custodian of all presidential records since 1929. Materials are stored at various locations in presidential libraries (Pres. Lib.). Some materials are available digitally.

Presidential Foundations
Presidential Foundations are private non-governmental entities that help fund and operate presidential museums and other facilities associated with Pres. Lib.

Library of Congress (LOC)
Prior to an official presidential record system, the Library of Congress Manuscript Division purchased collections from 23 presidents. They received funding to preserve and distribute microfilm copies of the collections. Many collections are now available digitally.

History & Timeline
1797 President Washington Leaves Office*
Washington takes his papers with him, intending to organize them at Mount Vernon, his personal estate. He does not complete the task before his death. He establishes the precedent of presidential papers as personal material.

1903 President T. Roosevelt transfers records from State Dept; LOC procures 1st presidential collection*

1916 Rutherford B. Hayes Presidential Library & Museum Opens
The 1st presidential library (Pres. Lib.), it predates the presidential library system. Established as a memorial/research center it is funded through donations and annual appropriations from the State of Ohio.

1941 Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library Opens
FDR's donation of papers & property creates the 1st NARA presidential library. Subsequent presidents follow.

1955 Presidential Libraries Act
Established the presidential library system; encouraged presidents to donate their papers to the government to provide access to the American people. Set up the deed of gift model followed from Hoover to Carter.

1957 Microfilm Preservation of LOC Presidential Collections Authorized*
Congress authorized LOC to microfilm their presidential collections for sale/distribution to libraries across the U.S.

1974 Presidential Recordings & Materials Preservation Act (PRMPA)*
Following President Nixon’s resignation, Congress placed the Nixon presidential materials (including tape recordings) in federal custody. The associated events changed the perception of presidential materials from private to public.

1978 Presidential Records Act (PRA)
Defined the term “Presidential Record” (see left). Established “public ownership” and automatic transfer to NARA. Materials are not accessible for 5 years after an administration. Begins with Reagan administration materials.

Required funding linked to the size of a Pres. Lib. and set limits on federal amounts. Allowed affiliated research centers.

2004 Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library & Museum Opens
This independent Pres. Lib. was created from Illinois State Historical Library collections. Run by the State of Illinois.

2013 George W. Bush Presidential Library & Museum Opens
Most recent NARA Pres. Lib. dedicated. An affiliated research center is situated at Southern Methodist University.

2022 Obama Presidential Records Will Open
Subject to FOIA requests. Will be the first digital presidential library. A privately operated, non-profit presidential center is being planned for Chicago, IL. The presidential center will not be affiliated with the National Archives.

Research Using Presidential Records
Research using presidential records can be quite complex. Presidential records are mix of public and private materials, and are located in a variety of archival, library, and museum settings. Published materials are public information. Archives preserve records of activity and may be subject to access restrictions. Museums provide curated views of historical events.

To fulfill its mission of public access, GPO publishes contemporary public documents produced by the Office of the President. Access to Executive Branch materials varies by administration and may be subject to the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA).

Historically, presidential records were placed in private hands and eventually donated to archives. NARA now manages transitions between administrations and provides oversight for an array of materials. Understanding a little bit about the history of presidential records helps researchers understand where they can find information about the topics they seek to understand or explain.

Where to Find Presidential Records
See Presidential Records Links on the brochure rack
- Presidential Materials LibGuide
- National Archives Presidential Research
- Connecting Presidential Collections
- Govinfo.gov Executive Branch Collections

Not sure where to start? Want to learn more?
- Ask the Gov Info Librarian!
Jen Kirk, jen.kirk@usu.edu

References


- On Display

Locations of Presidential Records
- NARA Presidential Libraries
- Independent Presidential Libraries
- Archival Collections

Note: Locations are approximate