

JFK library opens 1st online presidential archive

The Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) -- Caroline Kennedy unveiled the nation's first online presidential archive Thursday, a \$10 million project to digitize the most important papers, photographs and recordings of President John F. Kennedy's days in office.

Users can sort through the drafts of Kennedy's "Ask not what your country can do for you," speech and see how he tinkered with the words of that most famous line from his inauguration. Or they can listen to his personal phone calls and read his letters.

In advance of the 50th anniversary of Kennedy's inauguration Jan. 20, Caroline Kennedy visited the National Archives, saying it reminded her the nation was built on words and ideas - and that her father's call to service was more relevant than ever.

"His time is becoming part of history, not living memory, and we need to reach across the generations in new ways," Caroline Kennedy said, noting many young people are disillusioned with politics. "He inspired a generation who inspired their children. They transformed America, and that's why 50 years later, his legacy still resonates."

Kennedy himself broached the idea of making his records available to the masses in 1961.

At a news conference, a reporter asked if he would consider putting his papers in Washington, rather than his hometown, to make them more accessible to scholars.

"Through scientific means of reproduction ... and this will certainly be increased as time goes on, we will find it possible to reproduce the key documents so that they will be commonly available," the president responded.

After four years of work, the Kennedy Presidential Library in Boston has made that a reality. Archivists digitized over 200,000 pages, 1,200 recordings and 300 museum artifacts, as well as reels of film and hundreds of photographs.

Library Director Tom Putnam said they started with all of Kennedy's Oval Office files - everything that went across his desk - along with his personal papers, official White House photos, audio of all his public remarks, video of his famous speeches, and home movies. Archivists knew the most requested items in their research room in Boston and used them as a guide.

Private partners - including AT&T, EMC Corp., Raytheon Co. and Iron Mountain Corp. - contributed \$6.5 million in equipment and technical services to digitize thousands of records. Iron Mountain will store backup copies of all the digital files about 200

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Published on Electronic Component News (<http://www.ecnmag.com>)

feet below ground at its facility in western Pennsylvania.

Original files will remain accessible at the Kennedy Library, Putnam said. The digital records, though, will help preserve the originals because they will be handled less frequently, he said.

The library will continue digitizing about 100,000 pages a year, along with thousands of photos and recordings. At that rate, it would still take more than 100 years to digitize all records from the Kennedy administration.

For students across the country, the online archive will mean access to primary documents for school research. They could examine Kennedy's correspondence with Martin Luther King Jr. from the time they first met to the time King was jailed in Birmingham, Ala.

Drafts of Kennedy's speeches show how he was writing and editing along with speechwriter Theodore Sorensen, giving people a sense of the president's power as a writer, Putnam said.

"It truly democratizes history," Putnam said. "We're really hopeful it can work both for a young person and for the most serious scholar."

Also Thursday, cable carrier Comcast announced it will offer free on-demand video of Kennedy's speeches, debates, campaign commercials, documentaries and films to mark the 50th anniversary of his inauguration. That content, in partnership with the Kennedy Library, will be available beginning Friday through Feb. 25.

Only the George W. Bush and William J. Clinton presidential libraries have extensive records that were "born digital" in the computer age. The Kennedy Library's archive will be the largest collection available online to the public.

David Ferriero, archivist of the United States, said it will serve as a prototype for other presidential libraries.

"In the past 50 years since President Kennedy took office, the scope and scale of presidential records has escalated, as have expectations of access to those records," he said. "For students today, if it isn't online, it doesn't exist."

Online:

John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum: <http://www.jfklibrary.org/> [1]

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Source URL (retrieved on 09/19/2014 - 1:00pm):

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