

Creating an e-History of the Board

Gathering and displaying governance documents and photos online can help educate the public, promote transparency, and preserve historical artifacts.

THOMAS JEFFERSON WROTE that “it is the duty of every good citizen to use all the opportunities which occur to him for preserving documents relating to the history of our country.”

To suggest the same sentiment holds true for the preservation of college and university histories is not a stretch. And no department has more primary documents and access to more firsthand knowledge of major institutional decisions than the office that supports the governing board.

The problem is, higher education boards face so many complicated, critical, and timely issues that the supporting office often has time and energy to meet only the most pressing needs, such as producing conventional minutes of meetings. Most consider the history of the board to be of only passing interest, which is why staff time and expertise are seldom devoted to systematically organizing board history.

Except in Texas. Under the leadership of a board chair with lifelong interest in history

• BY FRANCIE A. FREDERICK AND RHONDA HANKINS •

and great respect for the historical record, the Office of the Board of Regents of the University of Texas System has discovered that understanding the history of the board and making historical documents widely available serves both practical and scholarly purposes. Such documents might be considered a road map to landmark decisions in the development of the University of Texas System. They clearly document the architectural history of the campuses and offer insights into recurring issues system leaders faced.

What's more, providing greater access to unpublished and unofficial materials, following careful review, contributes to the transparency of the board and complements the spirit of the sunshine laws that apply to most public universities. What follows is a description of how the Texas system board archives has blossomed in recent years.

In-House Display. In 2004, when James R. Huffines was elected chair of the University of Texas System Board of Regents, he brought with him an enthusiasm for history, especially Texas history and the history of the University of Texas.

With his encouragement, the board office staff began culling files to make photographs and original documents more accessible; organizing historical presentations to be delivered at board meetings; and arranging celebrations of significant board events. The files offered a virtual gold mine of photographs, primary documents, clippings, telegrams, and handwritten notes dating to the board's founding in 1881.

One of the first historical projects involved framing the group photos of regents. More than 50 photos of different boards now hang in the office suite, in the chair's office, and in the office reserved for regents when they work in Austin. Easels allow these photos to be displayed on tabletops during board meetings or special events.

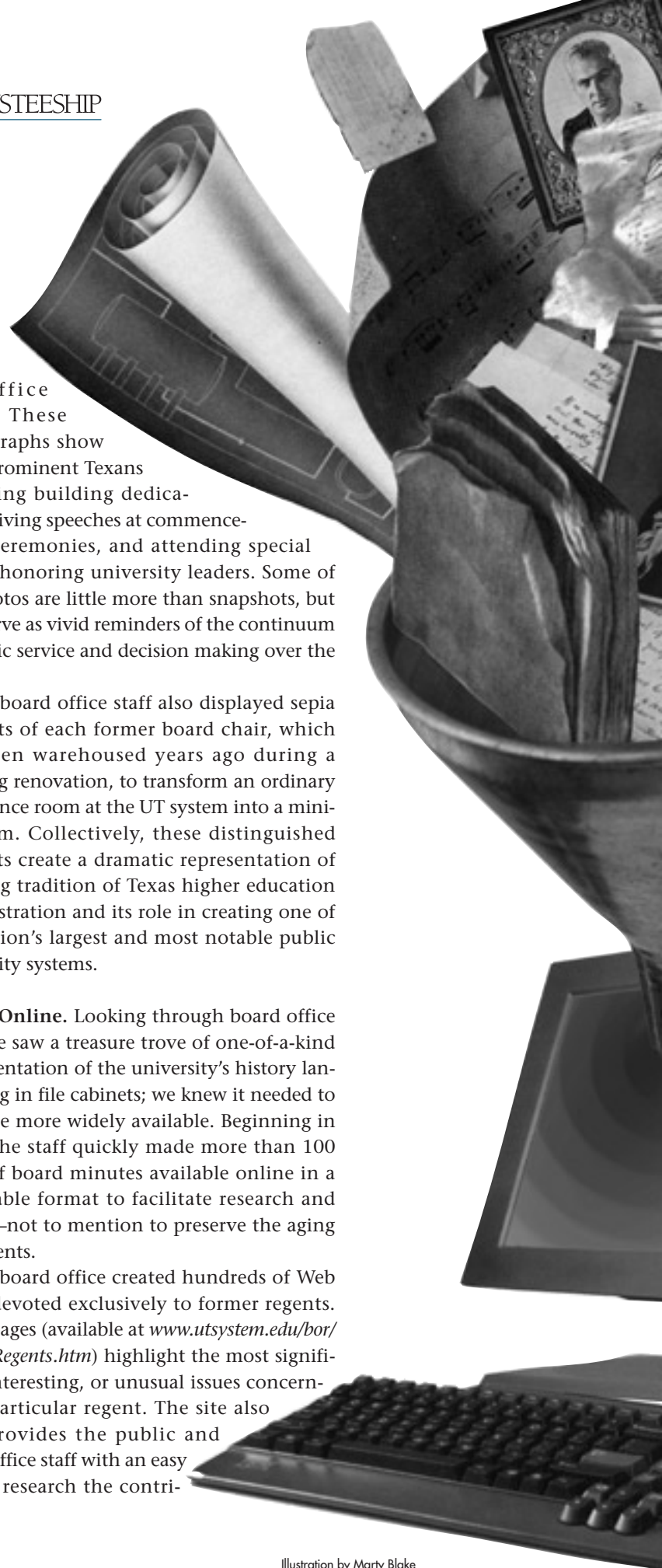
Additional photographs of regents attending various events over the years were retrieved from the files and preserved in archival-quality photograph albums kept on a coffee table in

the office lobby. These photographs show some prominent Texans attending building dedications, giving speeches at commencement ceremonies, and attending special events honoring university leaders. Some of the photos are little more than snapshots, but they serve as vivid reminders of the continuum of public service and decision making over the years.

The board office staff also displayed sepia portraits of each former board chair, which had been warehoused years ago during a building renovation, to transform an ordinary conference room at the UT system into a mini-museum. Collectively, these distinguished portraits create a dramatic representation of the long tradition of Texas higher education administration and its role in creating one of the nation's largest and most notable public university systems.

Going Online. Looking through board office files, we saw a treasure trove of one-of-a-kind documentation of the university's history languishing in file cabinets; we knew it needed to be made more widely available. Beginning in 2006, the staff quickly made more than 100 years of board minutes available online in a searchable format to facilitate research and access—not to mention to preserve the aging documents.

The board office created hundreds of Web pages devoted exclusively to former regents. These pages (available at www.utsystem.edu/bor/FormerRegents.htm) highlight the most significant, interesting, or unusual issues concerning a particular regent. The site also now provides the public and board office staff with an easy way to research the contri-



A collage of historical documents, a portrait of a man, and a computer monitor and keyboard. The documents are scattered and overlapping, with some showing text and others showing images. The portrait is a black and white photograph of a man in a suit. The computer monitor and keyboard are in the foreground, suggesting a digital archive or website.

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butions and accomplishments of past regents. Some highlights:

- The reproduction of a handwritten letter from regent Thomas Dudley Wooten, M.D., to fellow regent Thomas Harwood, dated October 20, 1893, is believed to be the earliest known document referring to the establishment of a law library at the University of Texas at Austin.
- A transcript of remarks by former regent Lady Bird Johnson, the former first lady, reveals her passionate support for the National Endowment for the Arts and her belief that speaking up was an important catalyst for change.
- A link to the postcard collection donated to the UT Arlington library by former regent Jenkins Garrett and the link to the Americana Collection at UT San Antonio donated by former regent John Peace reflect some of the personal connections of former regents to particular institutions.

The Web site provides the public and board office staff with an easy way to research the contributions and accomplishments of past regents.

The Web pages are liberally sprinkled with scanned photographs of regents at work during board meetings, on campus tours, or attending student events, giving viewers a sense of the regents' various responsibilities. The Web pages also link to bibliographies of works by and about regents.

Another part of the effort has involved scanning significant historical documents into a sophisticated yet user-friendly electronic content management system. This secure, searchable environment makes documents instantly accessible and easily managed. An automated content management system saves the original documents from excessive handling, and thus aids in preservation, while allowing extensive cross-referencing without requiring additional physical space.

These digitization efforts will continue so that our online archive will emerge as a valuable research tool for scholars, students, or interested members of the public. It also ensures compliance with state laws related to the retention period for documents and gives staff an opportunity to review paperwork to screen out confidential information, such as Social Security numbers.

Historical Highlights. The centerpiece of the UT system's board office exhibit is an authentic reproduction of the original handwritten 1881 board minutes, which were reproduced by UT Austin Printing. The expertise of various staff members of the conservation program at that institution's Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center made it possible to authentically recreate these seminal minutes. A Digi-Book—acquired specifically to scan UT Austin's rare books and manuscripts without damaging the materials—allowed safe digitization.

A pristine electronic copy of the 1881 minutes was then passed on to UT's printing facility, where experts selected appropriate paper and binder covers to make four copies almost identical to the original. While the reproductions look exactly like the original, the experts used a sturdier paper so the pages can be handled without the risk of accidental tears or spills destroying the paper.

The result is a beautiful bound volume that can be perused by visitors who might enjoy seeing a list of the salaries of the first faculty members in 1883, a summary of the classes first offered at UT Austin, and a description of agenda items considered by the original regents in the late 19th century. As an added bonus, a high-quality scan of the 1881 minutes is available on CD.

A historical display case custom-made by a UT Austin Physical Plant team showcases the reproduction of the original minutes and allows exhibition of meaningful physical objects, such as original volumes of *The University Record*, that detail the system's policies and rules. A sample bronze medallion given to regents at the start of their terms reflects the

weight of their responsibilities.

Also on display is a limited-edition book given to special honorees and various gavels regents have used over the years—one of which is made from the wood of UT Austin's Old Main Building, which was razed in 1934, and another gavel from the rig timber of the original oil well that in 1923 produced the first gusher for our Permanent University Fund.

Past and Future. At the strategic level, the history of the governing body of a higher education institution builds a sense of shared culture among board members and professionals, even as it helps them make sense of the current university structure and policies.

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But as Lewis Carroll noted, "It's a poor sort of memory that only works backward." A better appreciation of the record and decisions of boards can teach many lessons on how to move forward most strategically. The deeper understanding of the university that results is sure to contribute to a greater appreciation for all that has been accomplished and a better future for individual campuses and for the university system as a whole. ♦

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T'SHIP LINKS: Neal C. Johnson and Edward J. Finkel, "E-Boards Emerging," November/December 2005. James C. Hearn, Michael K. McLendon, and Leigh Z. Gilchrist, "The Mixed Blessings of Sunshine Laws," May/June 2004.