How NEH Got Its Start

On September 29, 1965, President Lyndon Johnson signed the National Foundation on the Arts and the Humanities Act into law. The act called for the creation of the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) and the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) as separate, independent agencies. The Washington Post called the creation of the endowments "a momentous step."

More than two hundred people filled the Rose Garden for the bill signing ceremony. The guest list included actor Gregory Peck, historian Dumas Malone, photographer Ansel Adams, writer Ralph Ellison, architect Walter Gropius, and philanthropist Paul Mellon. The ceremony marked the highpoint of a day devoted to celebrating culture. Vice President Hubert Humphrey hosted the Rose Garden reception and Harkness Ballet performed that evening in the East Room of the White House.

The bill they gathered to celebrate was the culmination of a movement calling for the federal government to invest in culture, just as it had with science. As Glenn Seaborg, the head of the Atomic Energy Commission, told a Senate committee: "We cannot afford to drift physically, morally, or esthetically in a world in which the current moves so rapidly perhaps toward an abyss. Science and technology are providing us with the means to travel swiftly. But what course do we take? This is the question that no computer can answer."

The groundswell that led to the bill began in 1963, when three scholarly and educational organizations -- the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS), the Council of Graduate Schools in America, and the United Chapters of Phi Beta Kappa -- joined together to establish the National Commission on the Humanities. They instructed the commission to conduct a study of the "the state of the humanities in America." In June 1964, the commission released its report. It found that the emphasis placed on science endangered the study of the humanities from elementary schools through postgraduate programs. In order to correct the balance, it recommended "the establishment by the President and the Congress of the United States of a National Humanities Foundation."

Politicians in Washington heeded the commission's advice. In August 1964, Congressman William Moorhead of Pennsylvania proposed legislation to implement the commission's recommendations. Support from the White House followed in September, when President Johnson lent his endorsement during a speech at Brown University.

In March 1965, the White House took the lead on the issue, proposing the establishment the National Foundation on the Arts and Humanities and requesting $20 million in startup funds. The commission's report had generated other proposals, but the White House's comprehensive approach eclipsed them. It called not only for the creation of two separate agencies -- one devoted to arts and one devoted to humanities -- but also for each agency to be advised by a governing body comprised of leaders in their field.

Senator Claiborne Pell of Rhode Island and Representative Frank Thompson, Jr., of New Jersey introduced the bill to their respective Houses, where they immediately found co-sponsors. Pell told reporters that that bill represented "the first time in our history" that "a President of the United States has given his administration support to such a comprehensive measure which combines the two areas most significant to our nation's cultural advancement and to the full growth of a truly great society." In mid-September 1965, Congress passed the bill, paving the way for the Rose Garden ceremony.
National Foundation on the Arts and the Humanities Act of 1965  
(P.L. 89-209)

AN ACT To provide for the establishment of the National Foundation on the Arts and the Humanities to promote progress and scholarship in the humanities and the arts in the United States, and for other purposes.

Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled,

SHORT TITLE

Section 1. This Act may be cited as the "National Foundation on the Arts and Humanities Act of 1965".

DECLARATION OF FINDINGS AND PURPOSES

SEC. 2. The Congress finds and declares the following:

(1) The arts and the humanities belong to all the people of the United States.

(2) The encouragement and support of national progress and scholarship in the humanities and the arts, while primarily a matter for private and local initiative, are also appropriate matters of concern to the Federal Government.

(3) An advanced civilization must not limit its efforts to science and technology alone, but must give full value and support to the other great branches of scholarly and cultural activity in order to achieve a better understanding of the past, a better analysis of the present, and a better view of the future.

(4) Democracy demands wisdom and vision in its citizens. It must therefore foster and support a form of education, and access to the arts and the humanities, designed to make people of all backgrounds and wherever located masters of their technology and not its unthinking servants.

(5) It is necessary and appropriate for the Federal Government to complement, assist, and add to programs for the advancement of the humanities and the arts by local, State, regional, and private agencies and their organizations. In doing so, the Government must be sensitive to the nature of public sponsorship. Public funding of the arts and humanities is subject to the conditions that traditionally govern the use of public money. Such funding should contribute to public support and confidence in the use of taxpayer funds. Public funds provided by the Federal Government must ultimately serve public purposes the Congress defines.

(6) The arts and the humanities reflect the high place accorded by the American people to the nation's rich cultural heritage and to the fostering of mutual respect for the diverse beliefs and values of all persons and groups.

(7) The practice of art and the study of the humanities require constant dedication and devotion. While no government can call a great artist or scholar into existence, it is necessary and appropriate for the Federal Government to help create and sustain not only a climate encouraging freedom of thought, imagination, and inquiry but also the material conditions facilitating the release of this creative talent.

(8) The world leadership which has come to the United States cannot rest solely upon superior power, wealth, and technology, but must be solidly founded upon worldwide respect and admiration for the Nation's high qualities as a leader in the realm of ideas and of the spirit.

(9) Americans should receive in school, background and preparation in the arts and humanities to enable them to recognize and appreciate the aesthetic dimensions of our lives, the diversity of excellence that comprises our cultural heritage, and artistic and scholarly expression.

(10) It is vital to democracy to honor and preserve its multicultural artistic heritage as well as support new ideas, and therefore it is essential to provide financial assistance to its artists and the organizations that support their work.

(11) To fulfill its educational mission, achieve an orderly continuation of free society, and provide models of excellence to the American people, the Federal Government must transmit the achievement and values of civilization from the past via the present to the future, and make widely available the greatest achievements of art.

(12) In order to implement these findings and purposes, it is desirable to Establish a National Foundation on the Arts and the Humanities.