

Statement of Significance and Impact of Project

In July 2003, *Papers of the War Department 1784-1800* was honored in its selection by the NEH as a "We the People" project -- acknowledging the project as one of those efforts "that explore significant events and themes in our nation's history and culture and that advance knowledge of the principles that define America." The War Office records are indeed uniquely significant for in the 1790s more than seventy percent of the federal budget (debt service excepted) passed through the hands of the Secretary of War. Had the official records of the War Office not been lost in a fire in 1800, they would have long since provided historians with valuable insights into the affairs of the founding era. For over two hundred years, however, that unfortunate fire was the end of the story.

Now, by an exhaustive search and an innovative editorial process, *Papers of the War Department 1784-1800* is reconstituting these records. The War Office had the broadest reach of any of the contemporary executive departments. It did business with commercial firms all across the nation; it was the country's largest single consumer of clothing, shoes, food, medicine, weapons and utensils of all kinds. In addition, it began an ambitious program of coastal defense and naval construction. All the while, it provided for the nation's defense and furnished internal security and governance on the vast frontier. It shaped relations with Native Americans. It also operated the nation's only social welfare program, providing veterans' benefits, including payments for widows and orphans, to thousands of beneficiaries. "Follow the money," it is said, and in the early Republic that money trail usually led to the War Department.

Now these War Department papers will be made available everywhere to students and scholars of this country's early history. The project, at East Stroudsburg University of Pennsylvania, is restoring this important and long missing segment of the nation's documentary heritage. Scholars will finally be able to use this vast store of material to reassess earlier interpretations of this era. This project, currently supported in part by the NEH and the NHPRC, is preparing to publish over 45,000 documents in electronic format. The great majority of these have never before been seen by scholars outside the project.

With no official War Department records available, historians, until now, had only that small portion that is available in the *American State Papers*, the *Territorial Papers*, the *Papers of the Continental Congress*, the published papers of a few of the nation's founding fathers, and a limited number of important manuscript collections. *Papers of the War Department 1784-1800*, however, has cast a much wider net. It examined more than 3,000 collections in over 200 repositories in 31 states, Canada, United Kingdom, and France -- an effort consumed more than seven researcher-years. Some 700 other repositories were contacted by mail; a number of these provided us with documents.

Papers of the War Department 1784-1800 will publish, in an electronic format, digital images accessible through key word searches of both bibliographic data (date, author, recipient, etc) and content entries (people, places, things, events, ideas and issues mentioned). As we write, the project is discussing a formal agreement with the University of Virginia's Electronic Text Center that will allow that group to mount the project's documents on their web site. This is an ideal marriage. The E-Text Center at Virginia offers free online access to the documents, texts and downloadable e-books on its site, and is one of the foremost such sites in the country with over a million visitors per month.

By the beginning of the grant period (the spring of 2004), the searching, copying, scanning, and vast majority of the image processing and initial data input will be complete. We will, by then, also be well into the last of the project's major tasks -- drawing from each document the keywords and phrases that will allow users a near-full-text search capability. This part of the work is labor-intensive, and there are no shortcuts. Still, we believe that the budget and plan presented herein will, if fully funded, allow us to finish by the spring of 2006-- providing a unique and valuable new window onto the early years of the new Republic.