THE JOHN F. KENNEDY ASSASSINATION & OTHER TRAGEDIES: WHOSE EXPERIENCES SHOULD WE REMEMBER?

Stacey Chandler / Reference Archivist / John F. Kennedy Presidential Library
National Archives / College Park MD: Federal assassination-related records (mandated by the Presidential Assassination Records Collection Act)

Sixth Floor Museum / Dallas TX: Non-federal records re: events of November 22 1963 & JFK’s legacy

John F. Kennedy Library / Boston MA: Planning for TX trip, funeral, memorials; reactions & oral histories; condolence mail
Over 1.5 million letters received [1,570 linear feet]

Volunteers sorted letters by rough type: children/adult letters, art, poems, cards, music, mass cards, VIP, foreign, etc.

January 14 1964: Mrs. Kennedy promised “your letters will be placed with his papers in the library to be erected in his name.”

1965: Collection officially deeded to JFK Library

“Mrs. Kennedy is reluctant to throw things away. She feels it all came from the heart, and who is to know in the future how much any letter or poem or painting will show about how people felt?”

Pam Turnure to New York Times, 1966
“Their messages constitute a remarkable record, full of personal anguish and revelation as well as profound meditations on grief, loss, and the human condition.”

Ellen Fitzpatrick, Letters to Jackie
“I believe that it is not essential to save the whole lot in order to preserve an understanding of the phenomenon.”

JFK Library Chief Archivist, 1983
“On November 23 1963 my partner was on Ustica, the tiny Italian island just north of Sicily. When news of Kennedy's death reached the island, residents came to him, the only American there, with condolences ... the town staged a state funeral and mass for and signed a guest book which they sent to the American Embassy in Rome, a gesture of love and respect for this extraordinary man, a sign of their profound grief at the death of this figure held in such high esteem around the world. I am wondering if this guest book found its way into your archives.”

“I assigned a poetry project on the assassination to my class... the results were so good that we decided to compile the poems into a book. Someday I want to visit the Library and see it once again!”

“'When I was 14 years old, I wrote a letter to Jackie Kennedy expressing my condolences for the death of her husband. I received a card that had black border on it, stating that my letter would be in the John F. Kennedy library. I even remember what I said. Hate to never pass that on.'

"In November, 1963, I was 9 years old and living with my parents and 4 siblings in San Jose, CA. President Kennedy's death was marked by much grief and pray in my childhood... Would there be any chance of seeing my original condolence letter to Mrs. Kennedy?"

"When I was 5 years old my father died. Just a couple of years later President Kennedy was assassinated, and I remember writing a letter to Caroline, expressing my sympathy as someone who had also lost their father suddenly. Is it possible that my letter is in this collection that you have?"

"Is there any way to determine if the condolence card and letter I sent to Mrs. Kennedy in late 1963 is a part of your collection? My father had just passed away five days before the President and as an 11 year old I felt especially for her children."

"Is there a way to search the letters to see if you have one by a certain person? My husband's mother wrote a letter to Jackie after the assassination. His mother then passed away of breast cancer several years later. I was wondering if you might have her letter in your archives as he would be most excited to see it if you did."

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“'I was sitting in my class in Brooklyn when the announcement came over the PA of the president's death. Both my sister and myself were profoundly sad so we sat down and wrote letters of condolence...I have no doubt it was bad, rambling babble, but here fifty years later, I'm still wondering, and I thought perhaps you might find a copy of it if it was saved.'

"I know that my grand aunts wrote one of these letters because I have found Mrs. Kennedy's answer letter. It is amazing to know how two sisters from a rural town in Europe in the 1960s, when Spain was run by a dictatorship and women had a very secondary role in politics, felt so upset by Mr. Kennedy's passing that they decided to write to Mrs. Kennedy."

"You don't know how much this means to my family and me. It's an honor to our family to know this exists and is included in the collection.'"
HONORING & RESPONDING TO EMOTIONAL CONNECTIONS

“Preservation Week” at the JFK Library:

- 9 total days
- 14 interns
- Rough alpha sort of 105 cubic ft
- Final alpha sort of 20.16 cubic ft
- A-C in alpha order & ready for use!
SUCCESS STORIES: HURRAY!

Letter from Karl Wombacher (PCV, West Cameroon) to the Editor of Time

November 25, 1963

Dear Sir:

Perhaps the thought is vain, but I can't help thinking that Peace Corps Volunteers around the world feel somewhat closer to President Kennedy than most citizens. He was more than our President; he was the Churchman, the very symbol of the Peace Corps and what it is trying to do.

To many people here in West Cameroon the words "Peace Corps" and "Kennedy" are almost synonymous. The mention of one suggests the other. Often, when riding through some of the villages in our town, we hear small children yelling "Peace Corps" after us as we pass. Many of them also call the President's name. The leaders of the world may express their admiration more eloquently, but I can't think of a finer tribute to the men and what he stood for.

Sincerely,

Karl Wombacher
Karl Wombacher-PCV
P.O. Box 65
Bam, West Cameroon
West Africa

Letter from 18-year-old David Ferriero (current Archivist of the United States)

March 9, 1964

Dear Mrs. Kennedy,

I have tried to write this letter several times, but now that my thoughts are clear, I try again.

You have suffered a deep and lasting tragedy and our country has suffered an irreparable grievance. I wish that it were only a dream.

This is not the most ordered letter - I am just putting my thoughts onto paper.

I am looking over an old purchase of newspapers, scanned with newspaper clippings. I began collecting them during the Democratic National Convention when your husband was nominated for the highest office in our land. The clippings go through the campaign, the famous television debates, and the election and
Dear Mr. Kennedy,

Why do we feel such a desperate sense of loss and loneliness.

You say we shall lose his life again.

"When those who have never met us weep when we die, we are truly loved."

Mr. John F. Kennedy
Mr. Robert Kennedy
The White House
Washington, D.C.

Honorable Mr. Kennedy:

We the people of the United States cannot form a more perfect union as long as we have Federal Judges who will not give us court justice and a Justice Department with limited power under the control of these racist Federal Judges in the state of Mississippi. Sixty-nine people who were serving time in the State and County farms were guilty only of wanting to be first class citizens.

I feel that as every American citizen has the right to register and vote, so we have the Constitutional right to give assistance to any applicant for voter registration. We will continue to assist in every possible way the true existence of Democracy, which cannot exist when a constant attempt is made to stop or slow down the registration of local citizens.

We cannot justify the acts of the South by any criteria offered by the South, which has misuse Democratic principle to further and protect the evils of segregation. When faced with democracy in disguise, we must pinpoint our objectives and search for truth in order to realize our American dreams. We must be quite sure that there will never be another election like that of 1967. We must campaign for public awareness and participation in the fight for democracy and equality.

I personally, strongly agree that an American Peace Corps should be organized and sent to America to help civilize the people in those United States, especially the militant whites in the state of Mississippi.

Today we are not only trying to make the world safer for democracy, but we are also trying to make democracy safe for the world.

Yours truly,

Sam Block
Field Secretary for the Student Non-Violent Co-ordinating Committee
EMBRACING THE EMOTIONAL IN THE ARCHIVES

Not everyone liked JFK’s idea. Some felt there were more pressing issues than a moon landing - like desegregation.

Civil rights leader Dorothy Height served on Women’s Commission & advocated for women of color #WHM #POTUSChat

Discovering LGBTQ History

He also began to write to numerous policymakers. His correspondence includes this 1964 letter to President Kennedy:

“Dear Mr. President,

I often wonder whether you have ever thought about the moral implications of the space race. We have the greatest of all opportunities to demonstrate that the United States is a good and decent nation, but we must begin to say no to our enemies and yes to ourselves.

Sincerely,

[Name]

U.S. National Archives

“The long siege” was what Thurgood Marshall called the stalled process for his confirmation as the Kennedy Administration’s nominee for the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit.

It was a hard fought battle to come over Marshall’s nomination to the Supreme Court.

How can you face your God, your country, your children, Thurgood?”