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Military soon to start moving Obama's papers to Hoffman Estates

By: Katherine Skiba

Air Force Lt. Col. Vianesa Vargas is a logistics specialist overseeing the military personnel who are helping move the Obama presidential archives to Illinois beginning Wednesday, Oct. 26, 2016. (Katherine Skiba / Chicago Tribune)

Though President Barack Obama has three months left in office, some of the White House papers bound for his future library will leave the capital for Illinois beginning Oct. 26, officials said. Commercial trucks will be used to carry the material to a temporary storage facility in Hoffman Estates, and they will be transporting history: documents, artifacts and gifts amassed over Obama's eight years in office.

The heavy lifting for the move falls to the military.

More than two dozen troops in the capital will take materials now stored at the National Archives and Records Administration and load them onto semitractor-trailers for the 700-mile trip, said Lt. Col.

Vianesa Vargas, the Air Force logistician overseeing the move. Once the cargo reaches Hoffman Estates, about 40 sailors from Naval Station Great Lakes will offload it, she said.

"We're the muscle," Vargas said of the military's role.

It's expected that 53-foot-long trucks will make 24 trips between now and February, she said, with about a dozen trips completed by Christmas.

The early shipments are materials the National Archives is holding under a "courtesy storage" arrangement.

Technically, the archives won't have legal custody of the material until 12:01 p.m. on Jan. 20 when the new president is sworn in.

The papers in the Oval Office probably won't be cleared out until Inauguration Day.

The shipments to Hoffman Estates are expected to end in February, when aircraft will be used for the final deliveries, Vargas said.

The temporary suburban facility is an old Plunkett Home Furnishings store on Golf Road, where Obama's paper and electronic trail will be processed before his library opens in 2021 in Jackson Park on Chicago's South Side.

In the coming years archivists will be working to organize, digitize and preserve the materials.

Vargas is a native of Sacramento, Calif. Her 18-year military career included time in Iraq in 2006, when from Balad Air Base she worked on a "spoke-and-wheel" system that shipped equipment on trucks to outlying U.S. installations.

She said her mission with the Obama papers has her "coming full circle."

Vargas, who is African-American, said her father and grandfather were enlisted men. She was a military assistant to Susan Rice during Obama's first inauguration festivities in 2009. Rice then was about to become the country's permanent representative to the United Nations

Vargas said her grandfather, who attended segregated schools and

in the late 1950s was a radar mechanic in the Army, "cried on the phone" when she told him she'd play a part in the inauguration of the nation's first black president. Her grandfather was 73 at the time.

"My grandfather would talk constantly during the campaign: 'There's no way America would elect a black president,'" she said.

Inside the Capitol, Vargas watched Obama before he stepped out in front of an estimated 1.8 million people to take the oath. Beforehand he drew a deep breath, she said, as if to say, "This is really happening."

She's never met him, though. And don't bother asking her what's in his papers. Despite her top-secret clearance, Vargas can't take a peek inside any of the boxes the military will ship. Nor can the troops doing the loading and unloading.

"We don't get to look in any of the boxes," she said. "We move the boxes. We move the crates. We fulfill the mission."

Someday Vargas hopes to glimpse some of the history she'll hasten onto America's highways. Already she, her husband and their two sons anticipate a visit to Obama's presidential library.

"The day after it opens, that would be awesome," she said. At Naval Station Great Lakes, spokesman John Sheppard said its sailors are "excited" to help move the presidential records. "It's a pretty simple, little mission. It's different," he said. "Happy to do it."