

The Roger R. Trask Award and Fund was established by SHFG to honor the memory and distinguished career of the late SHFG president and longtime federal history pioneer and mentor Roger R. Trask. The award is presented to persons whose careers and achievements reflect a commitment to, and an understanding of, the unique importance of federal history work and SHFG's mission. William P. Barry served in the U.S. Air Force for 22 years, and then worked at National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) in its international relations office and as the NASA European Representative at the U.S. Embassy in Paris (2007–2010). He then became the agency's sixth Chief Historian, serving until his retirement in 2020. Facing budgetary and other challenges, he promoted the agency's archival, digital, and publication programs. He delivered the Trask Lecture on June 2, 2023.

Do Not Be Afraid: Leading History Programs in Challenging Times

William P. Barry

It was a Monday morning this March, when an email from SHFG President Joel Christenson landed in my inbox with the subject line “SHFG 2023 Roger R. Trask Award.” I remember thinking that it seemed a bit earlier than usual to be announcing the SHFG annual awards. It was quite a surprise to read that the Society was inviting me to give the Trask Lecture this year. After all, I'd been to most of the 14 Trask lectures so far, and the honorees were all people with lengthy careers as historians—most of them worked closely with Roger Trask, including in the founding and development of this Society.



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Frankly, I felt that I would be a bit of an interloper in such august company. After all, I was just starting my first federal career as a pilot in the U.S. Air Force when the Society was founded. I had relatively little to do with SHFG until I became the Chief Historian at NASA in 2010. Although, I will note that I attended my first annual meeting 26 years ago, in April 1997. That led to my one relatively brief, but very pleasant, encounter with Roger Trask. This all happened at the urging of

my friend and predecessor at NASA, and the first Trask Lecturer Roger Launius, who encouraged me to present a paper on the start of the Space Race based on my recently finished doctoral dissertation. Roger Trask wanted to include that paper in the first of the Society's "Occasional Papers," a project on which he served as editor. I don't remember much about working with Roger other than an impression of someone with seemingly boundless energy and enthusiasm, and thankfully, a very gentle editorial hand. I am sorry that by the time I had a compelling reason to get more involved with the Society, Roger had passed on. But when I stepped into the Chief Historian's office at NASA in 2010, I found the SHFG to be the same welcoming and supportive organization that I had known over a decade earlier. Roger Trask's positive influence clearly lived, and lives on here.

Our Annual Meeting topic this year is "Rethinking Methods and Approaches in the Wake of the Pandemic," and this is a very important topic. Unfortunately, I'm afraid that I'm not particularly well qualified to address the pandemic part of that because I retired from NASA in the summer of 2020, just five months into the COVID crisis. While I may have little insight into how your lives and work have been impacted over the last three years, perhaps I can touch on how we faced some of the challenges of the 2010s at NASA History. Hopefully, there are some methods and approaches in this story that you might find of use as we leave this annual meeting and get back to our regular work in federal history.

Let me begin by acknowledging that not all federal history programs are created equal. NASA's history program has been particularly blessed in its 60-plus years. The primary government organization that NASA was built on, the National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics (the NACA), did not have a history program. However, the first NASA administrator, T. Keith Glennan, was quick to establish one. Glennan came to NASA in 1958 from the presidency of Case Institute of Technology. Melvin Kranzberg, one of the leading proponents of the history of technology, was a professor at Case at the time. Legend has it that Dr. Kranzberg buttonholed Glennan and convinced him that NASA would likely be making a lot of history, and that a well-managed history program could help NASA achieve its very ambitious goals. Professor Kranzberg was, apparently, pretty convincing because within a year Administrator Glennan had hired a Chief Historian, and the history program got off to a great start under Gene Emme.

Gene started work in November 1959, and the initial charter for the history program was issued on July 19, 1960, as NASA Circular Number 88. At just two pages long, Circular Number 88 assigned three tasks to the history program:

1) Preparing official histories; 2) Establishing guidelines for document collections; and 3) Reaching out to government offices, professional academic organizations, and individuals. Although many functions and projects have been added to that list over the decades it remains a pretty tidy summary of the underlying focus of NASA's history program through the years.

The success of NASA, especially in its first decade, has been another significant advantage for the history program. While the early efforts of NASA's history program may have been criticized for being too focused on those successes—especially in the human spaceflight program—and too focused on the technology, there was certainly no shortage of work for the history program and there was a keen interest both within the agency and in the public in that work. The old saw about success breeding success certainly applies here. Winning the race to the Moon (and there was a race, though that is a story for another day) made it easy to attract brilliant and energetic people to work at NASA and with the history program. This included the authors who wrote the majority of NASA history publications under contract. But it also applied to many others—from graduate student assistants, and interns, to NASA history fellows—many of whom have gone on to long and distinguished careers.

The level of public enthusiasm for NASA is remarkable. Sure, you will find people wearing T-shirts with the logos of the various military branches of service, and on the assorted gift trailers parked on the National Mall outside I've seen FBI and CIA T-shirts. But NASA seems to be in a Federal Agency "brand" category of its own. In fact, when I moved back to Massachusetts three years ago, even I was surprised to find multiple racks of NASA logo-wear in the local Target. Last week, Senator (and former astronaut) Mark Kelly said that NASA is the "Dolly Parton of Government Agencies. Everybody loves Dolly Parton." This sort of adulation can be problematic for us historians, but NASA and its history program have benefited tremendously from it. While you may not enjoy the same level of public interest and commitment at your agency, let me urge you to consider the advantages of making more use of volunteers.

There are things that you do that are inherently governmental and are not suitable for volunteer work. However, I am also pretty sure that none of you feel that your history or archival efforts are overstaffed. As for the NASA History Program, it is probably smaller than you think. At Headquarters over the last couple of decades the program has been authorized about five civil service positions and three to four contractors. Due to budget and Human Relations issues, some of these slots stood vacant for long periods of time. And there were several points in the 2010s when we

were down to half-staffing. I will note here that despite knowing my plans to retire months in advance, NASA did not get around to appointing a replacement for over two years. This is, sadly, pretty typical. (Although, NASA did make a great selection in appointing Brian Odom as Chief Historian.) Filling support positions was simply not a priority, and the process—particularly in the era of sequestration—was slow, convoluted, and easily thrown off track by budget cuts. Beyond the Beltway, there are also NASA historians and archivists working at some of NASA's 10 field centers. But, until very recently, those folks worked for various local organizations, and coordination with the History Office at Headquarters was largely informal. In addition, the staffing levels at the centers were highly variable. For example, Johnson Space Center, the home of NASA's oral history experts, had a fairly robust staff with a civil service archivist and two to three contract historians. But, in my decade as Chief Historian, Johnson's history program faced at least two serious threats of elimination due to budget conflicts. Most of the rest of NASA's field centers had either an archivist or a historian, and in some cases those positions were part-time, with secondary responsibilities. One of NASA's centers had no history or archival program at all. My point here is not to complain about budget and staffing, but to emphasize that for all the success of NASA's history program, it has faced staffing shortfalls and budget problems not unlike those that many of you face.

My five predecessors as Chief Historian dealt with their staffing and budget challenges, in part, by cleverly and energetically embracing the use of volunteers. This required substantial investments of their time and energy in creating and administering things like graduate student projects, internships, and publicly produced web content. Our first Chief Historian, Gene Emme, began using graduate student assistants in the 1960s. One of them was John Logsdon, who later founded the Space Policy Institute at George Washington University, and has had a long, productive, and distinguished career. His work in the NASA History Office is one of many investments in "volunteer" work that paid huge dividends. Several decades later, when Roger Launius served as NASA's fourth Chief Historian and the Internet was new, he saw the tremendous potential in putting history online. He had plenty of material in the form of dozens of NASA history books, but no easy way to post the content to the new *history.nasa.gov* website. Out of this need arose a small army of volunteers who converted the print books into lengthy html pages. In the process, *history.nasa.gov* became the go-to place in those early days of the Internet for space history information. This work, of course, required the investment of considerable time in managing the volunteers and coordinating with NASA's IT staff, but it was worth the effort.

Once space enthusiasts got involved in building *history.nasa.gov* the process seemed to gain momentum. One group of enthusiastic volunteers, led by Eric Jones, decided to create a set of annotated versions of the transcripts of the communications between the *Apollo* astronauts on the Moon and Mission Control in Houston. As it grew into so much more than just transcripts, the *Apollo* Lunar Surface Journal turned into a huge Web-based catalog of material in need of some big servers—and the NASA History Office agreed to host it. Just a couple of years later, a fellow in Scotland named David Woods, thought that the annotated transcript concept could be extended to cover the parts of the *Apollo* missions that were not covered by the Lunar Surface Journal—in other words, the balance of the 11 *Apollo* flights with crews onboard. Thus, was born the *Apollo* Flight Journal—another project that grew into an international team of volunteers whose work is hosted online by NASA.

My predecessors at NASA were also incredibly creative in partnering with other organizations to advance a variety of ambitious objectives. For example, NASA's third Chief Historian, Sylvia Fries, negotiated an arrangement with the American Historical Association (AHA) to create the Fellowship in Aerospace History. Under this agreement, the History Office would fund the fellowship every year, and the AHA would provide all the administrative support needed to operate the annual fellowship aimed at providing support to graduate students pursuing scholarly research in aerospace history. Thirty-seven NASA-AHA Aerospace Fellowships have been awarded to students since the late 1980s. While I certainly do not claim that a \$20,000 fellowship can alter the course of history, it has proved to be a wise investment in the careers of many people who have had a significant impact on the field—like Margaret Weitekamp, chair of the Space History Department at the National Air and Space Museum, or Asif Siddiqi, professor at Fordham University and the leading western scholar on Soviet and Russian space history. This fellowship was such a good idea that NASA's fifth Chief Historian, Steve Dick, expanded the program to offer similar fellowships through the Society for the History of Technology and the History of Science Society. With three fellowships each year, NASA has been able to encourage and, I think, improve the study of air and space history with little more effort than doing the paperwork needed to transfer the funds. (Well, there is also the issue of the time spent in defending the fellowships during the last decade, but that is another story.)

My point in this recounting of exploits of my predecessors is not to simply rehash some interesting history, but to point out that the tradition of creative and even

ambitious leadership had been well established before I arrived on the scene in 2010. As I have noted elsewhere, my initial goal for the NASA History Program was not to mess up the great program built by my five predecessors as Chief Historian. The history office at Headquarters was a small, but very productive team, and I saw my primary function as making their jobs easier, making some improvements around the margins, and doing some historical research and writing of my own. Those of you who have been in this business since 2010 will remember that things got very interesting for civil servants over the next few years. The continuing failure of our political leaders to pass a federal budget in a timely fashion plays havoc with implementing any program, but the implementation of sequestration (mandatory, across-the-board reductions in federal agency budgets) in 2013 and 2014 had devastating impacts. In an engineering-focused agency like NASA the effects were disproportionate on support functions. While the budgetary crisis eased somewhat later in the decade, the election of 2016 brought with it elected officials and political appointees openly hostile to federal employees. In a time when “alternative facts” were a favorite political weapon, the keepers of the actual facts—records managers, archivists, and historians—frequently found themselves *persona non grata* in Washington. In that kind of climate, I drew inspiration from my predecessors’ creativity, and it finally dawned on me that improvements around the margins, and especially my own interest in doing historical research and writing, were luxuries that we couldn’t afford. In retrospect, it is now very clear to me that my priority had to be preserving and promoting the history program. At the time, though, it felt like I was stumbling along from one crisis to another. Although it was clear to me then, as now, that what we do as federal historians is important.

So, in the spirit of rethinking methods and approaches in Federal History, let me touch on a couple of the challenges that the NASA history program faced in my decade at the helm and how we found our way through them. I will start with the revolution in publishing. We all know that PDF files are practically the standard way that Federal agencies publish everything now, including history books. In 2010, NASA’s History Program was still accustomed to a print run of 4,000–5,000 of each of the four to five books we issued each year. Fortunately for us, the forward-thinking folks in NASA’s printing and design office were already creating e-book and PDF versions of everything that they did for us. I am a big fan of print books, and I was wary of depending on electronic formats, especially, since I found myself unable to open the files from my dissertation that had been written in Microsoft Word 1.0 and stored on floppy disks just a dozen

years earlier. But then, in an ill-conceived application of cost center management principles the NASA Headquarters central printing budget was slashed, with the expectation that organizations that needed something as outdated as printing services would pay for them out of their own budget. Unfortunately, this did not account for the fact that our relatively small history office budget had always been based on the Headquarters support budget paying for a number of services, like printing. Absorbing this cost would have consumed half of the history program budget. We slashed print runs to the minimum that made economic sense (which, by the way, we found is about 2,000 copies—below that the per copy price gets untenable), we deferred a number of releases, and I got out my tin cup and went around to various NASA officials who might be interested in a particular book and asked them to cover the printing cost. Surprisingly, the tin cup approach was mostly effective, in part because, like me, the people I approached wanted a paper copy of the book to read. Another surprise (to me, though not my colleagues at the NASA printing and design office) is that the free availability of our books in PDF and the two major eBook formats proved very popular. Downloads from the NASA eBook site numbered in the tens of thousands for most of our books. While I thought that the cuts to the printing budget were going to end our history book production, the actual upshot was that many, many more people now have an opportunity to read NASA History books and monographs—for free—without having to track down one of the few thousand print copies.

Now that all new NASA history books were available for download, we realized that our back catalog—the one that I mentioned had been recreated in html by volunteers in the 1990s—was not suited to folks who were accessing the Internet on their tablet or phones. There were no electronic files for us to upload, even for books published as recently as 2007. We did have duplicate hard copies of most of the books and a fair amount of staff time since our travel budget had been zeroed out. Much as it pains me to admit it, we put one of our interns to work disassembling print books and scanning them to create hi-res PDFs of our entire backlist and several other NASA publications created outside the history program that are of historical interest. As the project progressed, we came up with some end-of-year funds that we used to hire that intern, Andres Almeida, as a full-time contractor to finish the job. Our website was still stuck in the 1990s, and because the funding for modernizing it had disappeared during sequestration, it was going to stay there for a while, but at least our back catalog of books was more accessible.

People fascinated with NASA history continued to surprise me throughout the 2010s. In one case, a Canadian named Ben Feist contacted us about a project he had done for fun in his spare time. Ben worked in IT in Ottawa, and was a fan of the *Apollo* Lunar Surface Journal and *Apollo* Flight Journals, but he thought that the text-only presentation could be much improved with some multimedia integration. For the 45th anniversary of the *Apollo 17* mission, he had created *Apollo 17* in Real Time. It was a very intuitive Web portal that fused transcripts, audio, digitized film and pictures (plus assorted science and background information) and would effectively play back the entire *Apollo 17* mission—from launch to landing—in “real time” over the course of the anniversary. And, the site could also be used to scroll around the mission at any time. Ben was hoping that NASA History could provide some support to improve the site and expand it for other *Apollo* missions. It was clear to me that this was a powerful new tool for telling the story of *Apollo* to a new generation.

With the 50th anniversary of the *Apollo 11* mission coming up, I saw this as a golden opportunity. Sadly, my supervisor in the Office of Communications just didn't see it. He was dealing with budget crises of his own, and at that point the *Apollo 11* anniversary was still a couple of years in the future. This total focus on the daily news cycle and the belief that they can spin anything at the last minute is one of the many reasons why your history office should never be controlled by the public affairs or communications office. Meanwhile, Ben assembled his own international team of volunteers to build out *Apollo-in-Real-Time*, and it became a sensation with the public. And it also turned into a bit of a sensation within NASA. The folks working on plans for the *Artemis* missions back to the Moon were wowed by Ben's design and saw its potential for use in actual real-time—for handling the huge streams of electronic data that will be coming back to Earth when we return to the Moon later this decade. It strikes me as poetic justice that Ben, and some of the *Apollo-in-Real-Time* team, now have jobs at Johnson Space Center working on Project Artemis.

There is one other aspect of the work of the NASA history office in the 2010s that I would like to touch on today, and that is our involvement in movies. While we had tremendous success in collaboration on the 2017 movie *Hidden Figures* and the 2019 IMAX documentary *Apollo 11*, I found that even successful movie collaborations can be problematic— and not just in the ways you might expect. When a federal agency works with moviemakers it has very little leverage over the project once it agrees to help. Fortunately, NASA has a very experienced and savvy movie liaison in the person of Bert Ulrich, but even that has not prevented friction

with moviemakers, especially those working on feature films. After all, movies, even documentaries, are not made for purely altruistic, historical storytelling purposes. They must make money. To do that, they have to be entertaining enough and short enough to get people to part with their hard-earned cash to view them. So, even documentaries are bound to simplify historical facts and add at least some things designed to entertain an audience—things that professional historians have been trained not to do. Careful review of the script is critical, but movie scripts will change dozens of times in the course of filming, and filming usually happens after you've already agreed to collaborate with the producers in the first place. In my limited experience, the only reliable indicator of a happy film collaboration is whether the filmmakers are open to honest dialogue and respect your judgment as the historical expert. But that can be a very difficult thing to figure out.

Fortunately, I got very lucky on the first feature film that I was involved with: *Hidden Figures*. Director Ted Melfi was truly curious and open, and fanatical about getting the historical details as correct as he could. But he is also a brilliant filmmaker who knows what the audience will enjoy. We had lots of respectful disagreements about things like whether an employee was likely to wander into a wind tunnel, in high heels, and find herself in mortal danger. But those discussions prepared me to respond to a lot of questions of fact when the movie was released. For example, did Katherine Johnson actually have to run to other buildings to use the “colored” restroom? No, she didn't, but other African American computers did. Did Al Harrison (the character played by Kevin Costner) really take a crowbar to a “colored” restroom sign? No, Al Harrison was a character invented for the movie, and the segregated facilities at Langley Research Center had all been quietly integrated by 1958. Moreover, despite the uplifting conclusion to the movie, gender and racial discrimination at NASA did not instantly end in early 1962. The close and collegial partnership on *Hidden Figures* left me and my NASA colleagues well prepared to deal with the intense media and public interest in the film.

Despite that, I was stunned by an email that I got from Rick Booth about eight months after the film came out. Rick was the resident historian at the John and Annie Glenn Museum in New Concord, Ohio. The museum is based in John Glenn's childhood home. The museum's displays pointed out, correctly, that Glenn's *Mercury* mission flew the intended three orbits before splashing down in the Atlantic Ocean. However, Rick found himself under significant pressure to change the displays because they didn't jibe with the movie *Hidden Figures*. In the movie, Glenn's mission appears to be planned for seven orbits around the Earth, and it is cut short after three orbits when a problem is detected with

the heat shield. After getting Rick's note, I dug out my (multiple) versions of the *Hidden Figures* script and found the early version where I noted (among dozens of other factual comments) that Glenn's mission was planned for only three orbits. I also found the email where the scriptwriters replied that the audio transcript clearly shows that Glenn was told shortly after launch that he was "go for at least seven orbits." (As I said, they were fanatical about getting the details right.) They also noted that the early termination of the mission had been depicted in the 1983 movie *The Right Stuff*. If I'd taken the time to dig up contemporary news reports I could have easily proven that *The Right Stuff* was wrong about the history—again. The plan was for only three orbits, and that transmission was just a way to tell astronaut Glenn that his trajectory was good enough that he could have made seven orbits. Unfortunately, I got busy with other questions about the script, and this error slipped through into the final film. Little did I imagine that this would lead to disputes about museum displays. But the simple fact is that many more people will see a feature film than will ever read a book about space history, so, the movie version becomes the history. This is one of the significant risks for us in working with feature, or even documentary, filmmakers. The agency's participation is often seen as a blanket endorsement that the movie is the "Truth" in ways large and small.

Even the most carefully made films about historical events can warp perceptions in some troubling ways. Take, for example, the most historically accurate of all films about the Apollo era, the 1995 film *Apollo 13*. The film has a well-deserved reputation for historical accuracy, so much so that among NASA employees there is a bit of a competition to find things that the movie got wrong. Yet, even the tagline for the movie . . . you know what it is, right? Yes, "Failure is not an option," was made up for the movie. I have heard legendary Flight Director Gene Kranz admit that the line is so good that he wished he had said it, but the first time those words were uttered about *Apollo 13* was in the movie. Now, it is permanently associated with the mission on mugs, hats, T-shirts, and even as the title of Gene Kranz's autobiography.

Recently, a more troubling corruption of the historical record regarding the movie *Apollo 13* has come to light. The folks behind Apollo-in-Real-Time, Ben Feist and his collaborators, are adding the 20-odd channels of internal Mission Control audio to their coverage of the missions. Now you can listen to every word on the communication "loops" (as they are known at NASA) during the missions. This includes lots of technical details that the people at various Mission Control

positions were discussing, and it also includes chats about sports, jokes, calls from home requesting that someone pick up a quart of milk, even—in at least one case—a male engineer trying to ask a female co-worker out for a date. (She turned him down.) In comparing this audio record to what people who participated in the events now say, it is clear that things depicted in the movie have “overwritten” some peoples’ memories of what actually happened. This is evident in many ways, but is perhaps most notable in the nail-biting final movie scene, where the minutes of the communications blackout tick slowly by with no indication whatever that the capsule survived reentry, until suddenly, the parachute opening appears on live TV. The more complicated reality is that Mission Control staff got positive indication that the capsule had survived and was in touch with the crew just about 90 seconds later than expected. This is something that seems scary enough, but apparently not for the movies. Yet, now some people who worked in Mission Control recount those events exactly as they appeared in the film. So the film can become reality, not just for the casual viewer, but also for what we might consider reliable witnesses. This should give us all pause—and, if you ever do get the opportunity to participate in a film project, I encourage you to be very attentive to the details.

Details and reality matter, and that means that what we do matters. Every member of this Society [The Society for History in the Federal Government]: archivists, historians, editors, curators, administrative staff, and all the other specialists who contribute to federal history programs play a critical role in making our society work. Our [U.S.] Constitution, that marvelous document on display upstairs [at the National Archives Building] that you and I have sworn to uphold and defend, only works when our citizenry knows the truth about how our government works, and why and how it doesn’t work. We are a critical link in the chain that allows law and policy to be based on actual facts, not “alternative” facts. I commend to your reading a book by Richard Ovenden, director of the Bodleian, the main library of the University of Oxford, entitled *Burning the Books: A History of the Deliberate Destruction of Knowledge*. Ovenden’s book is a bit quirky in spots, and focuses mainly on archives and libraries rather than history programs, but it is a sobering and useful read. The good news for those of you, who like me, have a too-tall pile of books we want to read, is that he summarizes his thesis in a concise final chapter that is subtitled, “Why We Will Always Need Libraries and Archives.” In it, he makes a clear and compelling case that libraries, archives, and clearly history programs are vital to free societies. The next time your supervisors suggest that your agency needs to replace the air conditioners or computers more than it needs

a history program you might note that, among other things, your agency's history program (to paraphrase Ovenden) "provide[s] a fixed reference point, allowing truth and falsehood to be judged through transparency, verification, citation and reproducibility." Such things are as important to our Republic as the air we breathe and the tools we use to do our work. So, I urge you to continue to do excellent work, and do not be afraid to stand up for that work, and fight for robust history programs in every federal agency.

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