

*The Roger R. Trask Award and Fund was established by the 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 the SHFG's mission. J. Samuel Walker served as historian of the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission, 1986–2010, and is a founding member of the SHFG. He delivered the Trask Lecture at the Society's annual conference in Washington, DC, on April 13, 2017.*

## **Why We Write: Another Look at the Value of Federal History**

J. Samuel Walker

**I**t is a great honor to receive this award and to present the Trask Lecture for 2017. It is also a great pleasure to be here at the National Archives. The theme of the conference this year, “Return to the Archives,” applies not only to the Society but also to me personally. I began my professional career as an archivist in this building more years ago than I care to remember and worked here for over three and a half years before moving to the Nuclear Regulatory Commission.



I am especially pleased to give this lecture this morning because it provides me the opportunity to honor the man for whom the award is named. Roger Trask was a very close friend of mine, and one of my proudest achievements as a member of the Society since 1979 was to serve on the committee that created this award in recognition of Roger's contributions to the SHFG and to federal history. Roger had a distinguished career as an academic historian before deciding he'd like to do something different. In 1978 he was appointed the first historian of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC), which had been established three years earlier, and which soon recognized the importance of having an agency historian. Unfortunately for Roger, his tour of duty at the NRC was not what he had hoped for, and, after a year or so, he decided to return to academe. Roger's departure had a very good outcome for me. When Roger was historian of the NRC, he hired George Mazuzan as associate historian. George moved up when Roger left, and he

hired me as associate historian. My tour of duty at the agency was much longer and more pleasant than Roger's, and I always thanked him for leaving because it made my career at the NRC possible.

Despite his disappointing experience at the NRC, Roger had been bitten by Potomac fever, and after a brief return to academe, he came back to Washington in the early 1980s as deputy historian of the Office of the Secretary of Defense. He moved from there to establish the historical program at what was then called the General Accounting Office, and he spent the rest of his career as historian of the GAO.

After his return to the government, Roger became an active member of the SHFG. Within a short time, he decided that the Society's by-laws were in need of improvement, and he set about to do that, pretty much by himself. The by-laws were originally drafted by a group of 25 or 30 "founding members," and, as one who attended many seemingly endless meetings, I can tell you that the birth of this Society was a painful process. The pain produced a happy outcome—we succeeded in launching the Society. But it was apparent by the mid-1980s that revisions in the by-laws were needed, and Roger played a vital role in making it happen. At about the same time, he was nominated to run for president, and he must have done a poor job with the by-laws because he didn't find a way to "fix" the election, which he lost. Although he lost, he refused to be discouraged or to diminish his commitment to serving and strengthening the Society. Roger was nominated again within a short time, and he served as president in 1990–91.

You might think that at this point, Roger would take a rest, but you would be wrong. He agreed to serve as program co-chair for the 1993 annual meeting, which then as now was a big job, except that at that time we had a two-day meeting, held here at the National Archives. I can personally attest to how much work went into planning and arranging that meeting, which included a dinner after the first day, because Roger roped me into being his co-chair. My most vivid memory of that meeting was that one of our members complained vociferously and incessantly about the room to which his session was assigned. He hounded Roger about it all day, which made us regret that we did not assign him to the loading dock. I recall this episode vividly because it was one of the few times I ever saw Roger extremely and outspokenly angry. The only other time I saw him so incensed was on the golf course, and this ranked right up there with shanking a shot into a water hazard.

After that experience, you might think Roger was ready for a breather. But you would be wrong—again. He began to float the idea of an SHFG journal, which was met with considerable skepticism, including from the co-chair of the 1993 annual meeting. But Roger persisted, played a major role in founding what was then called “Occasional Papers,” and edited the first three issues. In those ways, he laid the foundations for *Federal History*, the journal that we all benefit from and can take pride in. It is in no small measure a tribute to Roger’s efforts. As a model for all of us in his commitment to recognizing and publicizing the importance of federal history, I hope you can understand why giving the Roger R. Trask Lecture this year is such a special privilege for me, both personally and professionally.



In my talk today, I want to reflect on the value of federal history to the agencies for which we work and the public that we serve. I should make clear that my title, “Why We Write,” does not mean in any way to understate the importance of the myriad ways in which federal historians make contributions, including but not limited to research, writing, editing, conducting oral history interviews, planning and presenting exhibits, preserving and making available federal records, answering questions from staff and the public, responding to media inquiries, and giving talks to agency staff members and public audiences. In focusing on the value of federal history, I am returning to a topic that my good friend Ray Smock addressed as the Trask lecturer a few years ago.<sup>1</sup> I want to build on Ray’s insights, because the topic remains vitally important, especially at a time when facts and reflection on what those facts mean do not appear to be held in the highest regard at the top levels of the government. I will draw largely from my experiences and observations as a historian with the NRC for more than 30 years.

The critical question we need to answer is: what is the value of what we do, in all those functions and duties we perform as federal historians? Why do agencies pay us for the work we do as professional historians?

We don’t get a lot of help in answering this question from the history profession or our academic colleagues. It is my theory, which I confess is not based on empirical

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<sup>1</sup> Raymond W. Smock, “The Value of Federal History,” *Federal History*, Issue 5 (January 2013): 1–14. Other worthy discussions of the value of government history include Ronald H. Spector, “An Improbable Success Story: Official Military Histories in the Twentieth Century,” *Public Historian*, 12 (Winter 1990): 25–30; and Joseph P. Harahan, “History Is a Central Form of Knowledge . . .,” *The Federalist*, 18 (Summer 1997): 1, 3–4.

evidence but is based on my experiences as a federal historian, that many of our academic colleagues, if asked, “What is the practical value of history?” would not give an especially good answer. I suspect that many would offer assurances that history helps us to understand the human condition or appreciate the ideals of American democracy or something equally hazy.<sup>2</sup> Such explanations are true enough—there are many good reasons to study history—but I think it is safe to assume that federal agencies do not support history programs for such vague purposes.

Of course, at least in my experience, many academic historians find the answer to the question of why agencies hire historians to be simple and obvious. They are convinced that agencies hire historians for the primary if not the sole purpose of making the agency look good. I can’t count the number of times I have been asked by academic historians if the books and articles that I published were my own work. Too many of our academic colleagues seem to assume that federal historians are inherently dishonest, or at least unduly influenced, in the work we do. This attitude is, of course, summarized in the epithet, “court history.” Those who are guilty of this misconception apparently fail to recognize the benefits of accurate and thorough historical knowledge for government agencies. In that way, they undervalue by monumental proportions the importance of their own profession.<sup>3</sup>

One “grass-roots” professional group that calls itself “History Relevance” does much better. It has recently taken a stab at the question of the “value of history,” and the reasons it cites have won the endorsement of the Organization of American Historians and other professional groups. It has published a statement that lists seven ways in which the study of history is essential. They include nurturing personal identity, teaching critical skills, building strong communities, encouraging economic development, providing role models and inspiration for leaders, preserving democracy, and crafting better solutions to current problems.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> For two excellent examples of articles that outline the importance of history in thoughtful and clearly articulated ways, see Paul Gagnon, “Why Study History?” *The Atlantic Monthly*, 262 (November 1988): 43–65; and Michael Olmert, “Why History? An Essay,” *Colonial Williamsburg*, 26 (Summer 2004): 82–86. I am not arguing against the point that history is invaluable in any number of ways that are beneficial to society, but rather that many of the advantages of historical study and knowledge do not explain why government agencies hire staff historians.

<sup>3</sup> I have elaborated on this point in “Now, Is This Your Own Work, Or . . . ? Reflections on the Value of History,” *Passport: The Newsletter of the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations*, 39 (September 2008): 39–40.

<sup>4</sup> History Relevance, “The Value of History: Statement,” <https://www.historyrelevance.com/value-history-statement/> (accessed, March 22, 2017).

I think all of those reasons are valid, but the one that best explains why agencies value history is the one I mentioned last—providing historical background on issues of current and ongoing interest to agencies. In my experience at the NRC and my knowledge of other programs from conversations with federal historians through the years, I am convinced that agencies hire historians for the immensely practical reason that careful, honest, and sound history provides invaluable information and insights. Historians explain the reasons behind decisions, actions, and procedures, along with historical context that is enormously—and uniquely—useful in understanding what is going on in the present. In other words, good history is essential for making informed and, we hope, wise policy decisions, though it does not, of course, guarantee a good outcome.

Perhaps the most important thing I learned in my 30 years at the NRC is that people outside the history profession value the information and the insights that history provides. For most of my career at the NRC, I was the one and only agency historian (George Mazuzan left in 1986 to become historian of the National Science Foundation.). I was always impressed, and at first a little surprised, at how much scientists, engineers, lawyers, and other staff members appreciated history. One example was a message I received about my book on the history of radioactive waste disposal from a former NRC office director who has served on many prestigious scientific panels that have studied the problem. He said that he found the book to be a “treasure” because it “captured the sequence of events and the spirit of the time.”<sup>5</sup> A physics Ph.D. who described himself as “merely” an engineer, he emphasized that he was impressed by what historians are able to do by examining primary sources and making sense of them. In other words, doing what we are trained to do leads to products that are useful and very much appreciated by professionals far removed from the field of history.

The best example of how the NRC valued my work as agency historian was the response to my book on the Three Mile Island accident. Three Mile Island is the most important event in the history of the NRC, and my book received the most attention by far, both inside and outside the agency, of my publications as NRC historian. It was published by the University of California Press in 2004, just before the 25th anniversary of the accident, under the catchy title of *Three Mile Island*.<sup>6</sup> Three Mile Island was not exactly a glorious moment in the history of the

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<sup>5</sup> J. Samuel Walker, *The Road to Yucca Mountain: The Development of Radioactive Waste Policy in the United States* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).

<sup>6</sup> J. Samuel Walker, *Three Mile Island: A Nuclear Crisis in Historical Perspective* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

NRC, but my book received high praise from people within the agency because it explained what had happened a quarter of a century earlier. Many members of the NRC staff had joined the agency after Three Mile Island and knew little about the causes and consequences of the accident. Some officials who played critical roles during five days of acute tension also told me that they learned things from my book that they did not know at the time and that were important to have on the record. Those who made these comments included Richard Thornburgh, governor of Pennsylvania; Joseph Hendrie, chairman of the NRC; and Harold Denton, who was the director of the NRC staff at the plant site and President Carter's personal representative during the crisis.

When my book came out, I was asked to give a lecture about the accident to the entire agency, and NRC staff filled the auditorium. One of the five commissioners who head the agency made this comment after my talk: "We are very lucky as an agency to . . . have a resident historian. Some outside the agency, in the government and elsewhere, might think this is an unnecessary luxury," he said. "But I think anyone who has read Sam's book recognizes that this is a valuable investment in understanding our past and helping us to make a better future."

Another of the most gratifying moments I experienced during my NRC tenure came from a comment by Harold Denton, the nuclear engineer who became a hero to Governor Thornburgh and to the residents of central Pennsylvania during the Three Mile Island crisis. At an agency-wide meeting that the NRC held in 2009 to mark the 30th anniversary of the accident, Denton, Thornburgh, Jessica Mathews, from the Carter White House, and other veterans of Three Mile Island reflected on their experiences. During a luncheon that day, Denton commented that he had opposed the establishment of an NRC history program in 1978 because he thought that the slot could be better filled by a reactor inspector or other technical person. Then he went on to say that he was wrong in taking that position because he had come to realize what a "great asset" the history program was to the agency.

I enjoyed that moment, of course. But I wish to emphasize that Denton did not make that comment because I was uncritical of the NRC's policies and programs. Indeed, some of the most favorable reviews of my book on Three Mile Island were written by long-time critics of nuclear power and the NRC. Rather, Denton and others at the NRC seemed to recognize that a history program is a "great asset" to an agency only if its histories are written in accordance with high professional standards and if they tell the story with "warts and all." That is why I insist that honest history that separates

lore, myth, and faulty memories from fact is essential for any agency or institution. It is also why I insist that the charge of “court history” is so ill-founded and ill-informed about the value of historical knowledge beyond teaching and other academic pursuits.

Writing and publishing books on the history of the NRC was my primary, but far from my only, duty as the agency historian. One of those duties, at least for a while, was to write background papers on topics of current interest or concern to the commissioners and staff of the NRC. In the early 1990s, a new NRC chairman was appointed who had limited background in or knowledge of the issues the NRC was dealing with. He quickly decided that he would like a series of background papers that explained the history of those issues. You might think that as the agency historian, I stepped up to volunteer to write the papers. But you would be wrong again. Despite my best efforts to hide, I was soon, to my regret, writing background papers on various topics.

The papers started off as short sketches, but I soon realized that they needed to be more detailed. As a result, they grew in length to 20 or 30 pages. Eventually, one of the topics on which I wrote was a history of radiation protection standards, which goes to the heart of what the NRC does. This paper reached a length of 160 pages, and I realized that I had the basis for a book. After I added some additional material, it became a book on the history of radiation protection in the 20th century that was published in the year 2000.<sup>7</sup> In that regard, the background papers had an exceedingly favorable outcome for me.

But the more important aspect of this story is that people at the NRC found the papers very useful. The chairman called me the “Hemingway of science writers,” which might have been a *slight* exaggeration. He appreciated the papers because they helped him to understand the complexities of and the controversies surrounding the issues the NRC was facing. The papers were also favorably received by the other commissioners and the NRC staff. Despite my unhappiness with having to do them, the papers provided me with visibility and credibility that were very good for my program and my stature within the agency. Nevertheless, I was glad when this assignment ended.

Among the other duties I performed as NRC historian, like many of you, was responding to queries from the public, the media, and the agency staff. I won't

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<sup>7</sup> J. Samuel Walker, *Permissible Dose: A History of Radiation Protection in the Twentieth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

go into detail except to mention one example of the practical value of historical information. At one point in my tenure, I was called by a lawyer in the NRC's general counsel's office. The NRC was involved in a court case with a company based in St. Louis, and the company wanted the proceedings to be held in St. Louis rather than in Maryland. It claimed that the NRC was not headquartered in Maryland at the time of the alleged violation, which had occurred when the NRC's predecessor, the Atomic Energy Commission, was responsible for nuclear safety. The NRC lawyer asked me if the AEC's regulatory staff had its offices in Maryland at that time, and I quickly affirmed that it did. I offered to provide evidence if the judge wanted it. The lawyer called back a short time later to tell me that no evidence was necessary—the judge had said that the word of the NRC historian was good enough for him. This was a beneficial outcome for the NRC, but what particularly interested me was that the judge was willing to put his confidence in the word of a professional historian. And this seemed to me to be an excellent example of the value, in this case avoiding potentially considerable expenses, of having a historian on the agency staff.

I hope that my experiences with the NRC underscore the fact that federal historians perform a variety of functions that have great practical value. We do it without sacrificing professional integrity and in accordance with high professional standards. Our work goes far beyond addressing and conversing with other historians—we don't have that luxury. By necessity, our work has to be accessible and useful to a wide array of audiences who draw on our expertise and skills to better understand the problems they face or answer the questions they have. In an age of so-called "fake news" and "alternative facts," what we do is more important than ever, and the duties we perform are more essential than ever. The need for honest, accurate, and accessible history for federal agencies and the public we serve has never been greater, and the practical worth of what we do should receive a ringing affirmation from all those who place a high value on facts, accuracy, context, and considered judgment.

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