

Roger R. Trask Award Lecture, 2012

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. Raymond W. Smock, Director of the Robert C. Byrd Center for Legislative Studies, Shepherd University, delivered the Trask Lecture at the Society's annual conference at the National Archives at College Park, Maryland, March 21, 2012.

The Value of Federal History

Raymond W. Smock

I am truly honored to come before you to give a lecture named for Roger R. Trask, one of the finest federal historians it was my privilege to know and to work with over the years. His career demonstrates perfectly the title of my talk: The Value of Federal History. Where ever Roger worked in the federal government, at the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, at the Department of Defense, or at the General Accounting Office, he produced solid histories that are models of what federal historians do.

One of Benjamin Franklin's little stories that so charmed the ladies of the French court told of the ephemera fly that lived its whole life in a single day. The wise old fly who was seven hours old sat on a leaf by himself while younger flies sat nearby. The old fly said he could remember when the great orb in the sky first arose on the eastern horizon and



Raymond W. Smock

now it was close to disappearing in the west. My, all the things he had to tell the young flies.

I feel like that old fly. I became a historian before the great orb of public history appeared in the East. I was such a young fly then that I did not even know that my chosen profession contained people who had rewarding careers working for the federal government. Some became park rangers at historic sites across the nation, where they interpret for millions of Americans places as diverse as Independence Hall in Philadelphia, a Civil War battle site, or the Grand Canyon.

Others found places to ply their craft inside the U.S. military or in the many civilian agencies of the federal government. Still others found rewarding careers in state and local government and even in private industry. I certainly did not learn about these careers from any of my professors. They were busy as bees trying to make my generation of history majors into their image so that someday we would replace them in the classroom.

While professional historians have worked in the federal government for more than a century, a broader awareness of the work of federal historians took flight during World War II in military history and by the early 1970s in many other agencies. Robert Kelley, a historian at the University of California, Santa Barbara, was the first, or certainly among the first, to use the term Public History to differentiate a whole category of historians, most of whom plied their craft outside of academia.

Kelley believed that public historians served a vital role in the governing and decision-making process of government by providing policy makers, legislators, military leaders, business leaders, and the public with an understanding of issues set in their historical context. He was a great spokesman for the value of applying history to all aspects of human affairs, and especially to government, which makes policy and has the responsibility to be accountable to the public.

By 1978 the public history movement, as it was called, had its own journal, *The Public Historian*, and the following year the Society for History in the Federal Government (SHFG) began. In that first issue of *The Public Historian* Richard G. Hewlett, one of the great pioneers of public history and a founder of the SHFG, wrote an article on “The Practice of History in the Federal Government.” Hewlett wrote at a time of a crisis in the employment of historians, a job shortage, declining enrollments in history courses, and the decline of liberal arts in secondary education. Sounds familiar doesn’t it? That jobs crisis never went away.

Hewlett traced the early origins of historians who worked in the federal government and found a few notable pioneers before World War II, especially the highly

influential J. Franklin Jameson. In any talk about the value of federal history it would be impossible not to give a nod to Jameson. He was the first Ph.D. in history from Johns Hopkins who was at the founding meeting of the American Historical Association in 1884 and edited the *American Historical Review* from 1895 to 1928.

During most of those same years, he was director of the Department of Historical Research at the Carnegie Institution in Washington, DC. Jameson took the lead in creating the National Historical Publications Commission in 1934. At age 69 he became chief of the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress. He helped create the American Council of Learned Societies. He is largely responsible for pushing the passage of the bill to create the National Archives Building in Washington, DC.

In his spare time he secured a half-million dollars to launch the multivolume *Dictionary of American Biography*. Jameson died in 1937, a few months after being struck by a car on First Street, crossing between the Capitol and the Library of Congress. I always use extra caution when I cross that street, not wanting history to repeat itself.

In Hewlett's article, he described the expansion of federal history during World War II. It seems as though it takes a severe crisis before historians are recognized for what they can contribute to pressing needs of government. Plans had been underway after the First World War to write a comprehensive history of the Army's role in that conflict, but the plans were scuttled. Nobody expected another war on that scale any time soon. At the beginning of World War II, the U.S. military could have used a good multivolume study of its operations in World War I. The second time around the military did a much better job, and more than a dozen studies of military operations were prepared by civilian historians. The Center for Military History published more than 80 volumes on World War II, most of it completed within 15 years of the end of the war.

In addition to military historians, Hewlett identified several other types of federal historians who emerged during and after World War II. There were those like Jameson who were historian/archivists and others who were documentary editors like Clarence E. Carter, editor of the multivolume *Territorial Papers of the United States*, and Tyler Dennett who was the first professional historian to edit the State Department's *Foreign Relations Series*.

After Jameson's generation, federal historians continued to be active in the academic professional associations, but they found less in common with their

academic colleagues as time went on. Sometimes federal historians applied their craft in present-time political situations that did not fit with the academic model of scientific detachment and academic independence. Scholars in the academy picked their own topics for research rather than working for government administrators who often determined what historians worked on. Federal historians worked collaboratively with others, while academic historians prided themselves as lone independents.

As academic history grew more specialized in the 20th century, departments of history continued to train historians to become academic historians. Alternative careers in government service were seldom, if ever, considered. Academic historians and federal historians drifted apart.

I recall that Congressman Bill Frenzel of Minnesota used to stand on the floor of the House to complain about the fact that the House of Representatives had a historian. He said the Speaker's office needed a historian about as much as it needed a plumber or a golf pro. He wondered why the House needed a historian when there were all these academic historians out there who could study House history. He said the only reason the Speaker wanted a historian was because the Senate had one. I always wished at such times that I was a member of Congress. I would rise from my seat and ask the distinguished gentlemen from the great state of Minnesota to yield for a question. Frenzel would yield. And I would say: Would the distinguished gentlemen like to name one academic historian who is systematically researching the history of the House? If only he had known that academic historians had abandoned the study of the House and the Senate years before and had all but abandoned political history altogether.

History is not a perfect discipline. But neither is economics, nor political science, nor even the practice of law. But government service is filled with far more lawyers, economists, and those with political science degrees than those trained in history. The federal government, in all three branches, needs all of these professions and others to help it function well. The thing that historians bring to the table is context, or as Robert Kelley put it, the dimension of time. We also can bring, when we do our jobs well, a higher level of clarity when it comes to writing and editing. We can tell stories, not just write reports.

When Chief Justice Earl Warren was charged with heading the investigation of the assassination of President Kennedy he wanted a historian on the staff. Albert Goldberg, an Air Force historian at the time, was called in for an interview with the Chief Justice. Al asked him why he wanted a historian on the staff. Warren replied that

his commission had plenty of elected officials, more than a dozen lawyers, an ample number of investigators, but he didn't have a historian who could place the work in some context and write a narrative about it in plain English. Al became co-writer and co-editor of the 26-volume report. It was just one of his many contributions to federal history and to the public in his long and distinguished career.

At the turn of the last century, when J. Franklin Jameson, or men like Henry Adams were doing federal history without the label, the historical profession and the practice of federal history were in a different place, not only in time, but attitude. Two former presidents of the United States, Theodore Roosevelt (1912) and Woodrow Wilson (1924) served as presidents of the American Historical Association. Imagine any president of the United States assuming this role today.

Henry Adams moved to Washington in the 1870s to work as a journalist and historian. He was trained as a medievalist, but that did not stop him from writing a nine-volume history of the United States from 1801 to 1817. That work is still a gem. J. Franklin Jameson knew Henry Adams and considered him a great man—the successor to George Bancroft. He sought Adams's advice on what he should do with his career in 1884, the year he graduated from Hopkins, and Adams told him “the best work for the beginner was editing.”¹

Well that advice worked for me a hundred years later when I worked with another Hopkins graduate, my mentor and long-time friend Louis Harlan on the 14-volume *Booker T. Washington Papers*. What I discovered, however, was that editing was not just work for beginners in history, it is often the best work of the masters as well. Harlan's Pulitzer Prize-winning biography of Booker T. Washington benefited immensely from his total immersion in Washington's large collection at the Library of Congress. It took us nine years just to complete our initial reading of the material.

Harlan, like Jameson and Henry Adams before him, served as president of the American Historical Association, but Harlan also served as president of the Organization of American Historians and the Southern Historical Association all in the same year of 1989. Louis Harlan was a consummate academic historian, through and through. But he had the misfortune of having graduate students like me and Pete Daniel who would become federal historians. He also knew that his

¹ Jameson's Diary, Feb. 26, 1884. Morey Rothberg, et al., eds., *John Franklin Jameson and the Development of Humanistic Scholarship in America* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996), 2:109.

good friend and colleague Sam Merrill, the last of a generation of solid political historians, was turning out students at Maryland who wandered off the academic reservation and ended up in government service, people like Dick Baker and Don Ritchie, who created the magnificent Senate Historical Office. Sam Walker, one of my classmates, became historian of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission and gave the world the best account of the Three Mile Island disaster.

Louis Harlan became a convert to the value of federal historians and the important role of public history because of what he saw all around him. In his three presidential addresses before the major historical societies he was critical of academic historians for their excessive specialization. In his AHA address he said: “The unity of history, the synoptic view of human experience, has been sacrificed to the compartmentalization of the discipline into geographical and topical subspecialties.”² In that same address he said the historians who are best reaching the American people are public historians and popular writers like David McCullough and Barbara Tuchman.

The great orb of public history that this old fly has watched from the beginning of my career has indeed moved across the sky. But it is still a long way from the zenith. My generation of public historians may not see it reach that zenith. But when I ponder the future of federal history, I begin, like most historians, with a look backward. The dimension of Time is our best tool. It is time that our profession went back to the future.

Henry Adams is my touchstone with past historians and he helps me see the future. Henry Adams made sweeping assumptions about history. His approach was synoptic—the broad themes, and the overarching view that Harlan said was lacking in too many academic historians today.

In Adams’s case, there is no finer example than his seminal chapter in *The Education of Henry Adams*, called the “Virgin and the Dynamo.” The Virgin was the ultimate symbol of the medieval world—a world ordered around the church with the cathedral as the highest expression of humankind’s aspirations.

But along comes the Dynamo, this magnificent, powerful symbol of the future. The Dynamo was all about industrial power. It represented the age of science and engineering. Before

² Louis R. Harlan, “The Future of the American Historical Association,” *American Historical Review* 95, no. 1 (Feb. 1990): 1–8.

Adams died in 1918 he witnessed electricity, automobiles, airplanes, transcontinental radio telegraphy, skyscrapers, and a world at war, like no other.

Here we are a century beyond the world of Henry Adams. The really new thing is the Digital Revolution. Last month the *New York Times* declared we are now in the Age of Big Data.”³ It is not as symbolically dramatic as Adams’s Virgin or the Dynamo, but it is every bit as transformational. This revolution affects all of us, and it has powerful ramifications for federal historians.

There are many reasons why agencies of government and branches of government save records. Mostly it is because of legal requirements related to accountability. But some of the reasons, first stated by the Founders of this nation, still apply. Thomas Jefferson said it was the duty of government to preserve a history of what it had done. James Madison said that for the Republic to survive the public needed good, reliable information. If the United States is going to remain a great experiment in representative government, it must keep its important records and see that these records are explained in their historical context.

Federal historians, as regular users of government records, need to be prominent players in determining what gets saved in this digital age and how it is presented to policy makers and the public.

I remember a time when there were more historians on the staff of the National Archives and fewer records managers. There was a time when there were people who devoted their careers to knowing certain record groups, and scholars inside and outside the government would turn to these masters of the stacks to find what they needed. I remember when the National Archives was called the National Archives of the United States, a name that spoke to the preservation and dissemination of the memory of a great nation not a place where records are administered. But I am still very grateful for the historians that continue to work at the National Archives and can only say, may your tribe increase, for the benefit of us all.

In the Age of Big Data, federal historians often find themselves on the horns of the information dilemma. There are miles and miles and tons and tons of paper records and now archivists and federal historians are overwhelmed by terabytes of data that are born digitally, managed digitally, and accessed digitally. Digital

³ *New York Times*, Feb. 12, 2012. See also James Grossman’s commentary on “‘Big Data’: An Opportunity for Historians?” American Historical Association, *Perspectives on History* (Mar. 2012): 7.

records as a class of information have become the most problematic challenge to all federal agencies.

To the uninitiated, digital records appear easy to store, relatively speaking. George W. Bush's electronic records currently sit neatly on a couple of tables next to a desktop computer connected to several servers at the National Archives in a special vault awaiting transfer to the Bush Library in Texas. They just sit there, looking almost as peaceful and as compact as a typical set-up for your home computer. Except most of us do not have 78 terabytes of e-mail and other electronic communications. We cannot keep up with the accumulation of government records. House and Senate records alone constitute more than a half-billion pages, growing by about 10 million pages a year. Various legislative commissions, including the 9/11 Commission, add 20 terabytes of e-records to the congressional holdings. The Presidential libraries have a similar vast volume of paper and now digital records. All of it growing like Topsey.

The federal government has pumped more than \$500 million into an Electronic Records Archive, a major initiative within NARA.⁴ This is a very important project, but so far it is just a first step. The future is digital, for sure. But getting there is so monumental that a much higher level of commitment, funding, and human resources are going to be necessary in order for us to realize that future. If we don't make this commitment, we might as well invite the British to come back on the anniversary of the burning of Washington in 2014 and burn our federal records one more time.

Fifteen years ago, when Archivist of the United States John Carlin proposed that the National Archives devote a major part of its resources to figure out how to store and access electronic records, his plans included serious reductions in resources devoted to paper records. I wrote an op-ed in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*⁵ urging the Archivist not to sacrifice the records of the earlier history of the nation to the problems created by the new class of records.

I made a few archivists around the country mad because I cited J. Franklin Jameson, a historian and manuscripts curator who could at times be condescending toward his archivist colleagues.

⁴ For a description of the Electronic Records Archive, see <http://www.archives.gov/era/> (accessed Mar. 1, 2012).

⁵ Raymond W. Smock, "The Nation's Patrimony Should Not Be Sacrificed to Electronic Records," *Chronicle of Higher Education* (Feb. 14, 1997): B4-5.

Jameson, writing more than a half century before the digital revolution said:

the tendency of archivists, left to their own devices, is to give the foremost position to those classes of documents which have most occupied their attention, which usually means those which give them the most trouble, either because hardest to read or for some other reason not connected with primary historical values.⁶

There is no question that the records that are giving the National Archives fits these days are the digital ones. It is a problematic class of records regardless of the historical content they have. It is up to historians to make sure that the digital records that have historical value get more attention than those with less reason for long-term preservation. Right now, we seem more concerned with issues that have no direct bearing on the content of the digital files. How do we capture them? How do we store them? How do we access them? How do we keep up with technology that changes faster than policy makers and archivists can think?

One of the assumptions of the digital revolution is that government agencies and the public expect records to be readily and easily available online. Nobody wants to wait for information. Give it to me now on my home computer. And give it to me free of charge.

In recent years we have seen an explosion of online access to tremendous volumes of historical documents and government records. It wasn't that many years ago, three decades ago, to be exact, that a lot of this was pretty primitive stuff.

Michael Hart started Project Gutenberg in 1971, with the idea of creating an online library of classic books and documents. This was when the Internet was still ARPANET. His first digital document was the Declaration of Independence, which took great effort to transcribe and render in a digital format that could be transmitted on ARPANET. Today I can download a high-resolution image of the original Declaration in seconds. No transcription needed. E-books, a pipe dream of Michael Hart in 1971, are now everywhere.

This amazing digital transformation is a true hallmark of the 20th century. It is every bit as big as Henry Adam's *Dynamo* in defining an earlier age. The incredible technological advances of recent years have created a false impression in the minds

⁶ J. Franklin Jameson, "Documentary Historical Publication: What the United States Government Should Do," a paper delivered on Dec. 30, 1927. See Morey Rothberg et al., eds., *J. Franklin Jameson and the Development of Humanistic Scholarship in America* 1:348.

of many policy makers and in the minds of appropriators on Capitol Hill who have rushed to embrace the new technology because they think it means cheaper storage, cheaper access, and cheaper preservation. I remember when we thought of microfilm the same way.

Digitizing government records and placing them online seems to take care of the public's need for information and turns loose everyone to be his or her own historian. Who needs the historian? But the truth is that records of all kinds need to be analyzed, studied, placed in context, and explained before they are useful. This is a scholarly process that should not be dismissed in the rush to make raw documents available online.

The actual content of a record is more important than the problems of managing them as so many boxes on a shelf or so many terabytes of Big Data. This requires scholarship, not just records management. Historians need to be part of the decision making process when we decide what to save as our documentary heritage, what to digitize, and how to present the content of the records.

This nation has had a long tradition of documentary publications in traditional print form, many fostered and financially supported by the National Historical Publications and Records Commission. Now the pressure is on to seriously change the nature of this scholarly enterprise and convert everything to digital access. Footnotes will give way to metadata. Volumes containing alphabetical indexes will give way to global searches.

We need to beware of throwing the baby out with the bath water. The baby is scholarship, the bathwater is access. Documents can be thrown up on the Internet into the Great Cloud of Information without a thought of what the content is about.

But policy makers are not going to sit at their desks, open up a vast universe of documents and then figure out what they mean any more than they will roam the stacks of the National Archives. Schoolteachers do not need a universe of a million pages on the Civil War online. They need five documents for today's class. And they want to know which ones are the best ones for the lesson they are teaching. They expect to rely on historical experts to guide them. Journalists are not going to spend months looking through an online archive for a story they need to write on some agency of government when the story has a deadline and the story itself is limited to 800 words, the typical length of online reporting these days.

I like the idea of having a vast archive of American history and American government on my desktop or on my Kindle. I want to see it. But how will it be created and how will it be accessed? And how much will this cost? And who will pay for it? Today there are projects within government and in the private sector to digitize whole categories of federal archives.

This strikes me as the latest version of Project Gutenberg. To make these online documentary resources useful and accessible to end users is going to require the same level of scholarly expertise that can be found in the documentary editions of major historical figures or in multivolume documentary histories of wars, diplomacy, and other topics.

The historical research, analyses, and editorial apparatus necessary to make raw digital records useful will take time and money well beyond the basic cost of placing the raw material online. While some utopians see the future of information as free for everyone, it won't be. It will cost plenty to do it right. But doing it right will be cheaper than doing it wrong.

Here is my proposal. The government's responsibility to preserve and make available the records of its work should include permanent long-range efforts involving federal historians, archivists, curators, and academic historians to determine the records of most value in telling the story of the various components of the federal government. It should be the job of the government to require the equivalent of multivolume studies (in print, online, or both) of the history of each agency that are based on the actual records of the agency. These should be carefully researched, properly annotated, and contain sufficient metadata to make them easily searchable and accessible online.

When I was House Historian I promoted the idea that my office should be engaged in systematic, fundamental research in the records of the House that are housed at the Center for Legislative Archives under the able management of Richard Hunt and his fine staff. We have a scholarly model in the papers of the First Federal Congress, edited by Charlene Bickford, Ken Bowling, and others at George Washington University with funding from the National Historical Publications and Records Commission. This long-range project, now nearing completion, has published 20 volumes on the First Congress alone. But I am just as concerned with the records of the 111 Congresses since then.

There is so much we do not know about the House or the Senate over the 223 years of the history of Congress because we have not systematically studied the voluminous records. My plan for a highly selective, multivolume documentary history of the House was finally approved in 1994 by Speaker Tom Foley. Speaker Newt Gingrich, however, had other plans, and the rest is history. The new Speaker fired me, and the House abandoned the opportunity to launch this project.

What I am suggesting is that for federal history to be even more dynamic in the future and be even more useful to the policy makers and the public, a massive effort will be required to systematically research the existing records both on paper and in digital form, and tell the big stories about how government works. In doing this we will be in better shape to evaluate the historical value of the records, to determine which ones should become part of the growing online resources, and ultimately to make the decisions about our documentary heritage more efficient and cost-effective. We must quit pretending that we can simply digitize the records of government and leave it to others to figure out what it all means. This sounds easy and cheap, but it is neither.

To carry out this plan, we will need more federal historians, archivists, and documentary editors. I am not calling for a temporary jobs program for historians. This would miss the point. I am calling for an essential, long-range plan that will help fulfill the Jeffersonian and Madisonian mandates that it is the duty of the government and its citizens to preserve and disseminate good information about the nature of government. Anything less is a disservice to this Great Experiment we call the United States of America. I know it is difficult to go up to the Hill in the current climate of stalemate and retrenchment and sell the House and Senate on a new program to preserve and disseminate the records of government. But we need a bold plan if we are going to master the digital age before it buries us.

Back during the Bicentennial of the Constitution the Society for History in the Federal Government proposed that the President of the United States issue an executive order mandating the establishment of historical programs within every major federal agency. Our proposal included plans for the creation of a White House History Office. In 1991 President George H. W. Bush and some of his key staff members became interested in the plan. We learned that the President was ready to create a history office and that he was willing to consider the larger issue of the creation of history programs in all agencies that did not have them.

The President planned to take up the issue of expanded history programs after the next presidential election. Unfortunately, for our plan, he lost that election. We came very close.

Earlier, when President Franklin Roosevelt discovered how inadequately the government had prepared the history of how we conducted World War I, he issued a memorandum that by the stroke of a pen launched the government's modern military history program.

It is time for us to again call on the President of the United States to take the action necessary to place history programs in all major agencies of the executive branch and to do for the entire federal government what is now being done in only parts of it.

I was very proud to be a federal historian working for the House of Representatives. While I am no longer working for the government, I continue to study and research Congress and the U.S. Constitution at the Robert C. Byrd Center for Legislative Studies at Shepherd University. I am part of a network called the Association of Centers for the Study of Congress, more than 50 in number who are in the business of trying to preserve and research the private papers of former House and Senate leaders. As you know, the private papers of members of Congress are not part of the official record of committees that are preserved at the National Archives. We think these private records tell important stories too.

Just last year the Byrd Center published a two-volume revision of the classic study *Congress Investigates: A Critical History with Documents*, edited originally by Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., and a federal historian named Roger Bruns. For our new edition, I was able to enlist Roger's services as co-editor of the project, along with my colleague at the Byrd Center David Hostetter. We had a grand time together on this project. It involved the work of current and former federal historians, some academic historians, a journalist, and a former CIA agent. Senate Historian Don Ritchie, one of the original contributors, wrote a new essay on the Army-McCarthy hearings based in part on his editing of the five volumes of closed hearings that Senator McCarthy conducted.

There is so much good work going on. It would be even better and more productive if the agencies and the appropriators could realize that a systematic approach to selective, but comprehensive editions of the records of government would take us in the right direction, be more cost-effective in the long run, and better serve the

government and the citizens of this country. We started out to do this a century ago. I am not nostalgic for the past, but I am eager to learn its lessons and apply those lessons to the future.

My heartiest congratulations to the Society for History in the Federal Government for all you do to provide a vital network that makes the work of federal historians more efficient and that provides a place where we can share our collective experiences about the work of the federal government.