

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. Arnita Jones has had a long and distinguished career as Executive Director of both the Organization of American Historians (1988–1999) and the American Historical Association (1999–2010) and was a founder of both the National Council on Public History (1979) and the International Federation for Public History (2010). Her work helped research and promote significant changes in history education and the historical profession, including in public history. She delivered the Trask Lecture on June 4, 2021.

In Pursuit of Public History

Arnita A. Jones

It is a great pleasure to have been selected by the Society for History in the Federal Government (SHFG) to be the recipient of the Roger R. Trask Award. While it is true that public history as a field of practice and teaching was named and developed in academic history departments in the 1970s, it is doubtful that it could have been successful without the example and experience of the many historians who, like Trask, served in the federal government for decades. In the over 40 years since the Society’s founding in 1979, their work has continued to inspire generations of students and practitioners.



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My own public history story began several decades ago—in the office of the chair of the history department at Emory University. It was my first year in the school’s graduate history program, and I was not sure I should stay, because it had become clear to me that the program was preparing students rather exclusively for becoming college professors of history. At that time, I had not really thought through my commitment to graduate study because I had been fortunate enough to win a prestigious fellowship from the Woodrow Wilson

Foundation, established at the end of World War II to address the shortage of faculty in liberal arts higher education. It provided two years of full funding for graduate school, and, even though at the age of 20 I was not sure what to do with my life, I cheerfully accepted it.

Vanderbilt University, where I was finishing my undergraduate degree in 1962, invited students who performed well in the introductory history survey courses to enroll in a special seminar focused on historical writing and research. In my freshman year there I was one of those selected, and, despite having had a mediocre experience with the history course taught by my high school's basketball coach, I signed up and found the seminar fascinating. It focused on something that was news to me: that historians differed in their interpretations of historical events. My interest was also piqued because the professor, Alexander Marchant, frequently rearranged our seminar schedule in order to fly off to attend what seemed to be important meetings in Washington, DC. I only learned much later that he had served more than a decade as a government historian, including at the Department of State (1941–1947) and had continued to be active in State Department affairs after coming to Vanderbilt. Without a clear career goal, deciding to be a history major with a concentration in modern European history seemed to me to be a reasonable and attractive choice and turned out well enough that during my senior year several professors in the history department encouraged me to enter the Woodrow Wilson fellowship competition, which could be used at a university of one's choosing. My memory of what the competition involved is a little murky, though I do recall clearly a rather alarming interview process during which I witnessed the previous candidate rushing out of her interview in tears.

In Professor Marchant's seminar I learned that advanced history doctoral training in the United States had begun in the late 19th century at Johns Hopkins University, which had adopted the research seminar method developed in German universities. I subsequently signed up to major in modern European history, with a minor in German, and began thinking seriously about going on to graduate school, so that when news came that I had won a Wilson fellowship I thought my immediate future seemed clear: accept the fellowship offer and enroll at Johns Hopkins.

I applied to the graduate school at Hopkins, which I thought would be perfunctory, but my application was declined. The rejection letter noted that while the Wilson fellowship paid for the first two years of graduate education, with the assumption that the university would then provide the remainder of

support through its doctorate program with teaching fellowships, women were not allowed to teach the exclusively male undergraduate courses. So, sorry, and welcome to the real world!

Late in the year I applied to several other schools, one of them being Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia, which was where I had grown up. Emory had recently opened its doors to undergraduate women and thus had no problem with my fellowship, and it later allowed me to teach as a graduate assistant. But after a few months of graduate school, I realized that maybe I wanted to do something other than become a professor. I visited Dr. Harvey Young, the department chair and a very successful scholar who eventually was to mentor more than one budding public historian. But in 1964 there were few role models for such an occupation. Scratching his head, he offered that maybe with an advanced degree I could go to New York and work as a “girl researcher” for *Time* magazine. Somewhat dismayed, I kept on with my graduate history program and made peace with the idea of a teaching career.

Time passed, first with the graduate program, then marriage, and finally a doctoral dissertation completed and defended, just before the birth of our first child. There were moves for my husband’s career back and forth between Louisville, Kentucky, and Washington, DC, as well as some part-time and full-time teaching for me here and there. It was in 1977, having relocated a second time to Washington, that I answered an ad for a position at the American Historical Association (AHA), which, with several other professional groups, was embarking on an effort to address the imbalance of supply between the production of doctorates in history and available jobs in higher education. The initiative was called the National Coordinating Committee for the Promotion of History, charged with the mission of figuring out what sort of institutions outside of academia might provide jobs that used the skills acquired in a graduate program in history—the very question I had asked of Harvey Young, at Emory. I sent in a letter of application, was invited for an interview with AHA director Mack Thompson, and was offered the job. Later, I came to understand that there may not have been many or any other applicants for this position, which lacked a specific job description. Rumor also had it that someone else had been hired earlier but left in despair. Intrigued, I enthusiastically accepted the job and commenced what turned out to be a life-changing experience.

So began my association with the National Coordinating Committee for the Promotion of History, eventually known as NCC. It was an effort housed at the

AHA headquarters in Washington, DC, and supported financially by the AHA, along with the Organization of American Historians, the American Association for State and Local History, the Southern Historical Association, the Western History Association, the New England Historical Association, and eventually a number of other groups. Resources for the new initiative included a list of names and telephone numbers of historians who were interested in helping out, and an office that was basically a renovated bathroom on the top floor of the AHA building on Capitol Hill. The initial impetus to establish the NCC was to identify professional positions for history doctorates in areas other than college and university teaching. But as some structure began to take shape in the form of Resource Groups, a more detailed mission statement did emerge—to promote historical studies generally, to broaden historical knowledge among the general public, to restore confidence in the discipline of history throughout society, and (most importantly) to educate employers in the public and private sectors to the value of employing professional historians. It was a big and bold statement, but much was lacking in the specifics.

The absence of an early and clear job description for the National Coordinating Committee may have been daunting, but when I think back on my early years in the historical profession—beginning teaching, finishing a dissertation, and starting a family—I had learned to be flexible and inventive. It was during those years that female historians began to examine the role of women in history as well as the circumstances in which they were pursuing their own careers. I was very much a part of that generation—looking to find ways to include the history of women in my own teaching and research, as well as becoming involved in several initiatives relating to the status of women historians in the profession at large. Most importantly I had joined the American Historical Association’s Coordinating Committee on Women in the Historical Profession, for a time regularly producing a *Research Bulletin* for the new field of women’s history. Because I was also working in the South, I was involved in organizing women members of the Southern Historical Association, an effort that led to the creation of the Southern Association of Women Historians.¹ In retrospect, these activities were particularly useful as I

¹ Smith, Hilda, Nupur Chaudhuru, and Gerda Lerner. *A History of the Coordinating Committee on Women in the Historical Profession*. Coordinating Committee on Women in the Historical Profession/Committee on Women Historians, 1989. See also Arnita Jones, “Women Historians and Women’s History: An Organization Guide,” *Women’s Studies Quarterly* V/1/2 (Winter/Spring, 1977): 11–13, and “Southern Association of Women Historians, 1971–2011,” website of the University of North Carolina Libraries, Southern Historical Collection Number 04152 at the website thesawh.org, and Constance B. Schulz, Elizabeth Hayes Turner, eds. *Clio’s Southern Sisters, Interviews with Leaders of the Southern Association for Women Historians* (University of Missouri Press, 2004).

began my effort with the NCC, for I had gained useful experience in organizing and communications, and also learned quite a bit about the workings of the major historical associations that were sponsoring the new effort.

Thus, I approached my new Washington job with substantial optimism. But as the Coordinating Committee had not developed a plan of action, except for the designation of several resource groups relating to potential employment areas for historians and a few state committees, I began my work by introducing myself to the historians appointed to chair the NCC resource groups. Though two or three of these resigned once I made contact, others were eager to get started, particularly Suellen Hoy of the Public Works Historical Society, who chaired the State and Local History Resource Group; Robert Pomeroy of the Inter-American Development Bank, who organized the Business History effort; Larry Tise of the North Carolina Division of Archives and History, who agreed to chair a Historic Preservation initiative; and Richard G. Hewlett of the Department of Energy for the Federal Government Resource Group.

Richard Hewlett was more than ready to begin and suggested that one of our first efforts should be a survey of federal historical programs. Federal historians were already somewhat loosely organized and gathered regularly with an annual luncheon. But the survey, and its subsequent product, a *Directory and Survey of Historical Offices and Programs in the Federal Government*, first published in February 1978, helped (I like to think) to create a closer community of federal historians and led eventually to the foundation of the Society for History in the Federal Government (SHFG). The *Directory* also provided in-depth information about the number of historians in the federal government and the scope of their work. Not very long after this project was completed, Hewlett retired from the Department of Energy and became one of the principals who joined Philip L. Cantelon in establishing a new consulting company that became known as History Associates Incorporated (HAI), an organization that has provided historical research and records management services to clients in business and government for several decades.

Anna Nelson, a scholar of U. S. foreign relations at George Washington University, was also a key player in NCC's efforts to help historians learn more about careers in government. As a part of the survey of government history programs that the NCC had undertaken, we had collected substantial information about how government offices addressed their needs for the collection and preservation of documents

and records, a subject on which Nelson had become an expert, by way of her service a few years earlier (1974–77) with the U.S. National Study Commission on Records and Documents of Federal Officials. In the course of this work, she had become familiar with a large number of government historical offices and their staffs over a number of years and was the go-to historian for information about federal government historical activities. Nelson’s review of the material collected in the survey of government agencies and the report she wrote from it, “History without Historians,” was widely distributed and made a major contribution to our understanding of the role that historians can and should—but did not always—play in government.²

While the NCC was getting organized, Harvard history department Chair Ernest R. May was beginning a new project supported by the Rockefeller Foundation called the “Careers in Business Program,” which offered a crash course in business management, followed by an internship with a company or corporation. This high-profile and well-funded program offered a kind of legitimacy to the notion of historians being employed in a distinctly nonacademic setting in general, and also provided a useful model and helpful information for the NCC Business Resource group, chaired by Robert Pomeroy of the Inter-American Development Bank. May continued his lifelong commitment to the practice of government and policy history with his *Lessons of the Past*, using case studies developed over years of teaching, and *Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decision-Makers*, co-authored with political scientist Richard Neustadt and published in 1986. His final work was as a senior advisor to the 9/11 Commission, which published its report in 2004. For many years, Ernest May served as a prime example and an important source of inspiration for historians looking to practice their profession outside the academy.

Fortunately, outside support from government and private foundations was available during the job crisis that precipitated the aforementioned efforts to change history education and define a wider range of careers for historians. During the latter 1970s, National Endowment for the Humanities Chair Joseph Duffey was eager to support what the agency called public programming—specific programs at a more local level through the State Humanities Councils and other specific projects. The Rockefeller Foundation, headed by historian Joel Colton, supported the development of the first graduate public history program at the University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB)—a new kind of graduate program in public

² Nelson, Anna K. “History Without Historians,” *AHA Newsletter*, No. 6 (February 1978): 10–11.

history that eventually became a model for numerous programs initiated at other universities. Later, Rockefeller also provided financial support for the journal *The Public Historian*, which began publication at UCSB in 1978, as well as the 1979 public history conference at Montecito, California, that provided the stimulus to organizing the National Conference on Public History.

By 1979, leadership at the National Endowment for the Humanities was becoming more interested in public history, particularly because its mandate from Congress included not only a Division of Public Programming but also an office responsible for the study of conditions in humanities education and employment. I was recruited for the position of Program Officer to lead a new NEH Planning and Assessment Studies program, which would support regular and ad hoc studies of education and employment in history and other humanities fields. The job was a great learning experience, not only from my colleagues at NEH but also those from other federal agencies with which we cooperated, in particular the National Science Foundation and the Department of Education. After a year or two, I began to think of myself as a career civil servant, but political reality intruded. When the Carter administration ended in 1981, it was clear that there would be new management at the top of the agency, and soon its mission was altered. Ultimately, the program I managed was dissolved, and I was transferred to a different job in another division.

My new situation at NEH might have worked out after the change in administration in Washington, but my husband by that time had taken an academic position with the U.S. Military Academy that required a weekly commute to West Point, New York. The situation was workable, but with two school-age children we ultimately decided that life in the Midwest might be better. Landis returned to the University of Louisville, which kept his professorship in the political science department open for him, and I decided to try to become a real public historian by taking a job offer from HAI, which was flourishing. I enjoyed the projects, including marketing, that I worked on over several years with the company.

But one day I received a telephone call from Joan Hoff Wilson, the Executive Secretary of the Organization of American Historians. The OAH, as it was routinely called, was located on the campus of Indiana University at Bloomington, Indiana, about two hours up I-65 from Louisville. Joan had been granted a sabbatical, which she badly wanted, to allow time for completion of her research on the Richard Nixon administration. But the OAH had no position of deputy Executive

Secretary, and Stan Katz, the Organization's president and also the chief executive at the American Council of Learned Societies, insisted that the sabbatical could only begin if there were to be an interim replacement. Wilson and Katz wondered if I might commute to Bloomington for a few months. In Louisville, I had missed Washington and the large community of public historians there, as well as the work with national membership organizations, so I eagerly said yes, since the temporary position did not have to be full-time and I could keep my connection with History Associates. Eventually, Joan Hoff Wilson decided not to return to Bloomington and OAH, and I became the full-time and permanent Executive Secretary. I continued the two-hour weekly commute between Bloomington and Louisville until 1999, when I became the Executive Director of the American Historical Association.

The History Wars

In retrospect, I am inclined to think of my years at the OAH and the AHA as two parts of the same position, since the two membership associations are alike in many ways, except the obvious, which is that the OAH members are exclusively practitioners of United States history (though a significant number of members are foreign scholars of U.S. history), while the larger AHA draws its membership from virtually all fields of history.

The 1990s were years of significant change for historical associations, with computers fully replacing clerical procedures and jobs in the departments of history as well as enabling organizations to provide publications and services to several thousand members. The electronic age also required more rapid and frequent communications between staff, officers, and especially, the public. These were also the years when what we came to call the "culture wars" began to play a role in the work of historians and their professional associations. Public consumption of "history" began to grow substantially, with the History Channel beginning broadcasting in 1995, and filmmakers discovering a wider market for lavishly produced historical films, such as Steven Spielberg's *Amistad* in 1997. But sometimes the public wanted to be its own historian. As the work of historians found new audiences, it also came under new public scrutiny, creating new headaches for associations representing historians.

A particularly heated debate occurred in 1995, for example, when the Smithsonian Institution's Air and Space Museum decided to exhibit the *Enola Gay*, the airplane that had dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima, creating hundreds of thousands of citizen casualties, but also hastening the end of World War II. The script for the museum exhibit called for a detailed discussion of the motivations of the Japanese

in starting the war with the attack on Pearl Harbor, as well as the considerations of American President Harry S. Truman and his advisors, who made the decision to use the world's first nuclear weapon. As details of the planned exhibit became available to the public, criticism of the exhibit grew so fierce that ultimately the Air and Space Museum had to drop its initial plans and display only the fuselage of the plane itself. (The fully restored plane, without interpretation, can still be seen at the Museum's Udvar Hazy Center near Dulles Airport in far suburban Virginia.)

The *Enola Gay* episode was only one of several highly prominent controversies about historical interpretation in the mid-1990s. Colonial Williamsburg, long a tourist mecca for commemorating the times and lifestyle of America's founding fathers and Colonial Americans, decided in 1994 to educate the public further about the viciousness of slavery by staging the performance of a mock slave auction. As plans were reported in the news media, both the public and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People were outraged.

Even more difficult to digest was new information confirming persistent rumors about the relationship between Thomas Jefferson and his slave Sally Hemings, rumors that the Jefferson family, historians, and much of the public had denied. Since the early 19th century, Jefferson had been suspected to be the father of Hemings's six children. But it was not until 1998, when Y chromosome DNA analysis brought the story back into the public limelight and confirmed President Jefferson's relationship to her children. The Hemings controversy, or "Sallygate," as some wags called it, occurred during the Clinton administration and his impeachment hearings. Ironically the Clinton White House had been particularly welcoming of historians, to the extent of holding a series of history lectures in the White House. The first lecture, to which a number of historians (myself included) were invited, was to be given by Pulitzer Prize-winning author, NEH Jefferson Lecturer, and former AHA President Bernard Bailyn of Harvard University. I do not recall much about what Professor Bailyn said that evening, but I have a clear memory of sitting about 20 feet from President William Jefferson Clinton and watching him smile ruefully and shift ever so slightly in his chair when Professor Bailyn answered a question from the audience about Thomas Jefferson's problems with personal character and morality.

Probably most difficult for historians and their organizations to contend with was the general misunderstanding and uproar over the development of National History Standards for the teaching of history in the nation's public schools. Gary Nash, OAH president in the 1990s and long-time UCLA professor, had accepted a grant in 1988 to establish a National Center for History in the Schools from the National Endowment

for the Humanities during the years that Lynne Cheney was NEH Chair (1986–1993). One important purpose of the center was to produce standards for teaching both U.S. and World history in the nation's public schools, but when the standards were published in 1994 (after the Clinton administration came to power and Cheney was no longer NEH chair) they were condemned widely by Cheney and others as “politically correct,” left-wing, and presenting students with a derogatory and gloomy information about the nation's past and its role in recent world history. Nash, his colleagues, and the major historical associations like the OAH and AHA did their best to defend the scholarship underlying the UCLA-produced standards, but in the end they were condemned 99–1 in the United State Senate in January 1995.

Drama over history teaching had lessened as a new Democratic administration under Bill Clinton came to power, but politics sometimes seems to be even-handed in creating problems for historians and their institutions. Fairly early in the Clinton administration there was an opening in the position of Archivist of the United States. This venerable institution, which the AHA had helped nurture into being during the Franklin D. Roosevelt administration, was intended to be managed by a professional historian or archivist, but Clinton insisted on naming a personal friend, John Carlin, a former Kansas governor who had no experience in archives or any historical research and whose career prior to his political career had been in dairy farming. The Archivist of the United States is a Senate-confirmed position, so I was among several historians who went to see in-person how the Senate would react to this nomination. As tradition held, Carlin was walked in by his fellow Kansan, Senator Robert Dole, who announced that “we know historians do not approve of this appointment but . . . history is too important to be left to historians.” Such are the challenges of public history.

International Public History

During my years at AHA (1999–2010) one of my duties was to represent the Association at the International Committee of Historical Sciences, or CISH (the acronym for the French spelling of the organizations: *Comite International des Sciences Historiques*) established in May of 1926 in Geneva, Switzerland, to begin to repair the strained relationships among scholars from nations that had been opponents in the First World War. For nearly a century now, CISH has served the purpose of providing a forum for the exchange of views and scholarship among historians internationally—through congresses that meet every five years and through smaller committees and special interest groups. Typically, CISH involves 53 countries and national committees and brings together more than 2,000 historians at its largest meetings every five years.



NCPH presidents at the 1988 Annual Meeting in Denver. *Left to right:* G. Wesley Johnson, UCSB; Larry Tise, the North Carolina Division of Archives and History; Noel Stowe, Arizona State University; Michael Scardaville, University of South Carolina; Arnita Jones, History Associates Incorporated and OAH; Barbara Howe, West Virginia University; and Ted Karamanski, Loyola University, Chicago.

The AHA Executive Director and a delegate chosen by AHA's Committee on Committees regularly represent United States historians at the larger congresses, committee meetings, and occasional smaller gatherings. Of course, at such meetings I was routinely asked the question historians always ask of each other: what is your field? "Public history," I would respond, usually to a look of confusion on the part of my foreign colleague. By the end of my AHA tenure, public history had begun to flourish in other English-speaking countries—Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom. I also soon discovered that Wesley Johnson had earlier left a large footprint in Europe—through a series of lectures on public history that had been supported by the Rockefeller Foundation back in the 1980s—and I met more than a few European historians over the years who had been mesmerized by his presentations.

It was also fortuitous that by 2009, just as I was preparing to retire from the AHA, the National Council on Public History established an Ad Hoc International Task Force with the mission of reinforcing "NCPH's connections with a growing number of public historians worldwide." Quite independently, a "Conference on Public History in Germany and the United States" had been convened in Berlin that year by the German Historical Institute in Washington, DC, and the Free

University of Berlin. Meanwhile, the NCPH effort to connect public historians in the United States with their colleagues in other countries had begun in earnest.

One of the missions of the International Congress was to encourage and facilitate the development of new fields in history by creating “internal commissions” to facilitate international networks among historians in new fields. At the same time, the NCPH Task Force led by Anna Adamek of the Canada Science and Technology Museum worked on a proposal to CISH for a new “internal commission” called the International Federation for Public History, and in 2010 I had the pleasure of presenting this proposal to the International Congress, where it was heartily accepted. The following year at the NCPH meeting in Pensacola, Florida, the CISH internal commission and the NCPH Task Force held a founding meeting of the new International Federation for Public History. Today the organization has its own journal, *International Public History*, published twice a year in cooperation with De Gruyter Oldenburg Press, a blog *Bridges*, and vimeo channel, and is planning a sixth annual international conference in Berlin in 2022.

So, what am I doing now? I continue to be involved in the larger organizations I have worked with in the past—OAH and AHA, as well as the several public history initiatives, but it was time to step aside for new and creative leadership. I am also trying to learn a new field: family history. Partly this effort is inspired by the normal inclination of retirees to reach back and try to figure out where they came from, and where they fit in the larger picture of family and community. In my case, I have been inspired by the work of my daughter Jessica Irons, who has mastered the tools of genealogical research so well that we have been able to solve more than one family mystery and understand better how our family fits into the larger picture of American history. We have learned that the family name of Jones, for example, should be Hobaugh, and we know much more about the Revolutionary War and Civil War service of several branches of the family tree. And, yes, there were slave-owners, not to mention one ancestor who fought on both sides of the Civil War. Mysteries remain. But one thing I have learned, for sure so far, is that many Americans, through their growing passion for finding their families’ history, have learned to appreciate the value of historical research and public history.

One of the great joys of helping nurture public history into a new field of history recognized both in and outside the academy has been the opportunity of working with the communities and leaders who made that possible. The established historical organizations like AHA and OAH welcomed the work of public historians in their journals and at their annual meetings, while individual history

departments in colleges and universities began to make room for new courses and programs in their curricula. Just as women and minorities had eventually been accepted into the historical profession in the later part of the 20th century, public history practitioners have also been included, and new relationships with archives, museums, historical societies, government agencies and others in public history institutions have enriched both teaching and practice. Nor is it any accident that the field's rapid growth and development took place in a time when the internet made possible rapid communication among historians in an increasing variety of institutions around the world, a particularly significant and welcome development at a time when the value and integrity of historical research are often questioned by many who would prefer not to recognize the lessons of the past.

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