

Roger R. Trask Award Lecture, 2011

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. Philip L. Cantelon, Chairman and Chief Executive Officer of History Associates Incorporated, delivered the Trask Lecture at the Society's annual conference at the National Archives at College Park, Maryland, March 31, 2011.

Crisis and Change: In the Company of Clio

Philip L. Cantelon

I could not be more pleased than to be the Society's recipient of the Roger Trask Award for 2011, especially in regard to the theme of this year's conference, "Federal History in Times of National Crisis and Change." The Society for History in the Federal Government is a good example of an organization formed in the crucible of crisis—the job shortage for trained historians in the 1970s—that changed the way federal history and federal history offices were viewed from outside the government and from within. Roger Trask personified those changes. He embraced the role as the Society's conscience and parliamentarian, prodding it to be more inclusive, more active in defending federal history programs even as department budget constraints, congressional inquiries, and executive indifference threatened several historical programs in the 1980s and 1990s.



Three decades ago federal historians and their allies effected change during a crisis—most notably in the creation of the Society and the victory for National Archives independence from the General Services Administration (GSA). Why some 30 years and a generation of historians ago? The fundamental answer lies in the unemployment crisis that led many historians to accept positions with the federal government, seen at that time as an employer of last resort for historians coming out of Ph.D. programs with few teaching prospects. That influx created a critical mass of disaffected underemployed professionals, who tapped into the existing discontent of

many federal historians provoked by the second-class professional status placed on them by academic historians. Out of that combination emerged what then seemed like a revolutionary idea: a professional organization of historians and archivists promoting and practicing federal history. There was opposition. Organizations like the Society and the National Council of Public History, founded at the same time by several of the same individuals, would “balkanize the profession,” detractors warned. Of course, that did not happen, and the historical profession, in my non-disinterested view as one present at both creations, has been greatly strengthened.

Yet the Society, too, became a scene of several skirmishes—not quite outright battles—between federal historians and those of us who worked as contractors—over some of those same status issues that divided academic and non-academic historians. Initially, there was considerable discussion about the new Society’s name. Some wished to be exclusive, proposing a society solely of federal historians. Others saw the organization as more inclusive, including—shudder—contractors. In the end, the idea prevailed in favor of an organization consisting of those who sought to promote federal history, generally, rather than just federal employees.

Roger Trask was keenly aware of that history. When an editor of *The Federalist* refused to print information about the federal work being done by History Associates, claiming that “the Society might lose its tax status” as a non-profit if such information were included, Trask invoked the founding documents and ended the self-imposed restrictive policy.

Nevertheless, while the sharp dichotomy in the historical profession among academics, federal historians, and professional practicing historians has eased, it has not disappeared. Faced today with another crisis, job or otherwise, how would the Society perform? Would it react, or would it lead? I don’t know the answer, but as a strong believer in generational history, I do know that the current generation of leadership will shape its own response. The incredible differences in communication methods—the Internet, social networking sites such as Twitter and Facebook, cell phones, and e-mail—ensure that crisis and change will be faster-paced, if nothing more. Compare the events of Iran and the return of Khomeini in 1979 with those of the uprisings of the Arab world over the past six months and you will see the combined impact of youth, unemployment, dissatisfaction, and rapid communications.

There are similarities with the creation of the Society in 1979. Most of the founders were in their mid-to-late-thirties and early forties. Many of us had endured the humbling experience of unemployment. We were frustrated with lack of interest and lack of

concern from the traditional professional organizations. Federal historians, operating largely in offices independent and detached from one another, suddenly found a voice. Importantly, most senior government historians did not oppose the movement. Leaders such as Richard Hewlett and Wayne Rasmussen encouraged, but did not lead. That was for younger historians. I think we were all amazed to see who showed up at the first conference in the fall of 1979, the number of historians who were working in federal history, many unknown to each other. Perhaps, this was our “aha” moment that something might be accomplished. Those were the first stirrings of change.

Indeed, looking back, change in the past five generations has been remarkable. So many uncommon things have become commonplace. Consider that my grandparents were born into a world lit only by fire. During my parents’ lifetime the automobile, telephone, penicillin, electricity—and with electrical power the radio, washing machine, vacuum cleaner, refrigerator—indoor plumbing, and typewriters became commonplace. My own generation witnessed the spread of television, polio vaccine, birth control pills, transistors, mainframe computers, then personal desktop computers, then portable computers, then laptop computers, touchtone phones, mobile phones, cell phones, the Internet, VCRs, CDs, and the beginnings of the digital age. You may remember the ballyhoo surrounding the arrival of the “paperless office?” Our children and grandchildren are growing up in an increasingly electronic milieu—electronic records, digital books, smart phones, and who knows what else. Technological change happens so fast it constantly tests our ability to keep up with it, to adjust our social patterns to use it rather than be abused by it as evidenced, for example, in our increasing concern with privacy in a world made more accessible by our technology.

Historians must embrace these changes. Yet ironically, historians, who make a career of studying change, are often the most reluctant to change themselves. To flourish we need to design valued and useful history and historical programs. The age of federal historical offices operating in isolated environments is coming to an end. Amidst shrinking federal resources, federal historians and their allies should explore new ways to communicate the value and uses of history throughout the government. In short, we should welcome rather than hide from the challenging opportunities to reinvent the Society so that it can play a positive and vital role in shaping the future of federal history.

* * * *

Although I did not realize it at the time, most of my professional life has been a product of adapting and changing the practice of history in periods of crisis. I was

a victim of the job crisis of the 70s, no tenure and no job; a failure in my chosen profession. I confess that standing in an unemployment line was personally both a change and a crisis.

My response was not planned. Rather, I stumbled into, for want of a better term, entrepreneurial history.

So let me turn to talk a bit about crisis and change as they relate to the creation and development of History Associates. You may or may not know about the company's evolution, but I believe that over the past three decades we have changed some of the ways historians approach and "do" history.

I was reminded by an article in *The Washington Post* a couple of weeks ago. Thirty-two years ago this week, the accident at Three Mile Island led to changes throughout the world's nuclear power industry. The events following the massive earthquake and tsunami in Fukushima, Japan, this month are poignant reminders of Three Mile Island and my transformation as an historian. Just as TMI changed the nuclear industry, so did it change the historical profession.

Let me explain. I had been back in this country for about six weeks, having just completed a year as a Fulbright Professor of American Civilization in Japan, when I received a call from Jack Holl, then Dick Hewlett's assistant in the History Division at the Department of Energy (DOE). Jack and I had been colleagues at Williams College, so he knew about my unemployment situation. "Would you be interested in writing a history of the Three Mile Island nuclear accident?" he asked. "We think it is one of the most important events in the history of nuclear energy. "A history?" I countered. "How can you write a history of a current event?" Jack brushed that aside. He said that he needed someone not committed to an academic schedule. The Energy Department required a finished product in a year, not six or seven. To meet that very timetable, he suggested a co-author, a former Williams colleague and friend, Robert Williams, a Russian historian at Washington University in St. Louis. Weighing my lack of other job options, I accepted. By late May I had moved to Washington, and began to research and write a history of the Department of Energy's response to Three Mile Island, an event that was essentially ongoing. My former Williams colleagues said I was no longer an historian. I had become a "presentist," they sneered. Sticks and stones; I was earning money.

And that's what changed nearly everything I had learned about history. First, I learned to work in contemporary records. That meant they had never seen the guiding hand of an archivist. They were stacked on tables, pinned on cork boards, and tossed in random boxes. There were charts, memos, photographs, handwritten notes, newspaper

clippings, documents of all sorts jumbled together. We simply swept them off the tables in the airport hanger in Middletown and took them back to Washington to sort through. That drill introduced me to the basics of archival processing and greatly increased my appreciation of the professionals who did it.

Second, I learned to work in a team. Nothing in my undergraduate or graduate training in history had introduced me to a team research and writing concept. Yet there was no other way to get the work done. We hired a research assistant. We conducted a series of 30 oral history interviews. We outlined the book as a team, wrote the chapters as a team, and did the editing as a team. A traditional academic approach to research and writing was an early casualty of Three Mile Island.

Third, I learned to do history in nuclear energy, an area that had absolutely no relation whatsoever to my formal training or interests. While teaching, I taught the same subjects and my students changed. In my new applied history career, subjects changed with each client. I learned to be intellectually flexible, ready to adjust to changes in topics and client requirements, prepared to explore new areas in which history could prove useful and valuable.

Another change was the switch to electronic media. While we drafted chapters on legal pads and Selectric typewriters, a DOE visiting scholar, Rodney Carlisle, volunteered to “key” our final manuscript on an Exxon-made computer called a Vydek. This early word processor looked like an airplane cockpit and was just as complex to operate. It stored information on 8½-inch floppy diskettes. To make the job more challenging, you had to save every page or lose it. Thoughtfully, the save key was placed next to delete, a situation that improved neither Rodney’s disposition nor his language as he keyed in the text.

In the meantime three other events occurred that would result in my staying in Washington. The first was overhearing someone in the next room at the National Archives asking the archivist to do some research for him. When the archivist said he could not do the work, I went into the room and suggested that I could and handed the man a business card. It was the first one I had given out to someone I didn’t know. “Meet me at my hotel tomorrow morning with a contract,” he drawled. I had never written up a contract and didn’t know who might do the work. But that evening I called Ruth Harris, who had been working on one of the Foreign Relations volumes at the State Department for David Trask, Roger’s brother. She agreed to do the research, which was on the changing coastline and land ownership of the San Padre Islands off the Texas coast. And I drafted a letter contract. The next morning the deal was signed.

The second was a new book project. With Rodney Carlisle, we landed a contract to do a history for the Bartlesville Energy Center. And the third was a contract to search government records relating to fallout from atmospheric weapons testing and to make those records available to litigants on all sides of the case. Professional historians, the attorneys agreed, could provide unbiased, disinterested research trusted by both plaintiffs and defendants. We didn't realize it at the time, but we were on our way to making a business of history, making Clio a company.

By the fall of 1980, the TMI book was ready and Dick Hewlett, who was retiring from the DOE, Bob, Rodney, and I had sketched out the broad outlines of a history company. We were not the first. That distinction goes to Darlene Roth who formed The History Group in Atlanta some years before. Our idea was to create a firm that would employ professional historians outside the academy and provide them with not only work, but office space and equipment, competitive salaries, and benefits, conditions similar to federal history offices but without the bureaucracy of universities or federal agencies. In addition, Dick insisted that the company and its individuals keep professionally active. He had long heard much unfounded criticism about "court historians" in response to his pioneering studies of the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC). As Vicky Harden recently reminded me, being attacked for "court history" or "history for hire" was a knee-jerk negative response, largely emanating from the academic world. Dick realized that for History Associates to achieve credibility, we had to deliver with the highest levels of professional integrity.

While Dick's name on the masthead gave us some immediate credibility, it was more than a decade before our work became widely accepted. I recall a discussion about the Three Mile Island book at the Center for Democratic Institutions in the early eighties. The first question I heard was, "How can your history be accurate? You got paid to write it." I asked if the man had read the book. "No," he said, not in the least bit concerned with his omission or total lack of understanding about the role or the standards of professional history. Change takes time. Not until 1997 or 1998 did professional recognition come to a History Associates project. Our history of the Argonne National Laboratory, written by Jack Holl with Ruth Harris and Dick Hewlett, won the Society's Henry Adams Prize. What we do try to do is produce high-quality professional history on time and within budget. I'm proud to add that none of our publications have ever been accused of "court history" in any peer reviewed journal.

History Associates incorporated on January 2, 1981, with a view of offering little beyond the traditional historical services of research, book writing, and drafting

special reports. In 1981 we had one major client—the Department of Energy, where we continued the earlier work of researching records relating to nuclear fallout from atmospheric weapons testing. We converted to computers. Our first was a DEC that cost nearly \$10,000. I believe today's smart phone carries more computing power than that early mini-computer. Hewlett favored portable computers, in his case a 17-plus-pound Chameleon with a four-inch screen in a box the size of a carry-on bag. I'd call it a "luggable." That was our view of cutting-edge history. By the spring of 1981, we boasted three full-time employees. At the end of its first year, HAI had gross contract sales of nearly \$130,000.

For a number of years we settled into the traditional mode of doing history: research. It was refreshing and a bit exciting to realize that there were people who valued history, saw ways to use it, and would actually pay to have it done professionally. In those first years we collected and declassified federal records relating to fallout from atmospheric weapons testing; wrote a history for the Navy Federal Credit Union; completed an archives/records project for the Family Liaison Action Group, or FLAG, which represented the families of the hostages in Iran; and drafted a corporate history for Texas Instruments.

But even the mundane task of document collection became an adventure. Sandia National Lab stored fallout records on Manzano Mountain in tunnels once used to store the nuclear weapons stockpile during the Cold War. We would drive to the appropriate storage tunnel, and our armed escort phoned the guard station to tell them that we would be opening the outside door. One day we were waiting in the van to go in as the escort made his call. There was a loud shot. He proudly held up a rattlesnake that apparently also wanted to make a call. He also suggested that when we opened the boxes, we clap our hands a few times over the folders. "It let's you know where the scorpions are," he explained. Scorpions were another new research experience.

By 1984 growth in contracts and personnel dictated the purchase of an office condo not far from the Shady Grove Metro stop. Those Reagan years were very good to History Associates. We expanded two new areas of work, archives and litigation research for government agencies. One afternoon I was speaking to the chairman of Texas Instruments and asked him about the records of a recently retired long-time employee and Board member. "Well, they're in his office, aren't they?" he asked. We headed down to see. The office was bare, not a paper in sight. The chairman was stunned, but decisive. On that day, History Associates entered the archives business. The State of New Mexico needed help in researching records regarding water rights and the Mescalero Apache reservation. With Ruth Harris,

a dogged and determined researcher on the case, HAI discovered that litigation research could be a fascinating and lucrative application of historical skills. By 1986 we were named to *Inc.* magazine's list of the 500 fastest growing companies in the country. Our contract sales were nearly \$1.5 million; six years later they had already doubled to a bit more than \$2.6 million. By 1992 HAI was probably the largest single employer of history graduates—including Ph.D.s, M.A.s, and B.A.s—in the country.

Then, as the Bible predicted, the fat years were followed by the lean. After all those years of success, we lost two large federal contracts in 1992–3, cutting revenues by nearly 50 percent. This time entrepreneurial risk took on a new meaning. For the first time we were forced to let people go. As a result, we re-evaluated our whole business model. For more than 10 years we had relied on federal work to provide a strong base for the company. With that gone, what were our alternatives? We had just received a major oral history and book project from MCI, the pioneering long-distance telephone company that changed the way Americans used the phone. The light went on. We would re-focus our contracting on the private sector. There were several other business avenues we tried around this time, many of which failed. One was to set up a division to do cultural resource management; we soon closed it, discovering there were many individuals in the field and with our wage schedule we were not competitive. Another was to establish offices outside of Washington. We met success on the West Coast, opening an office in the L.A. area run by Gabriele Carey, who gave up a secure archive job with Orange County to take a risky flyer on History Associates. The following year Orange County went bankrupt, and Gabriele still directs our Western Office today. But our attempts in the Middle West—Cleveland, Chicago, and Louisville—mostly failed. Only in Louisville, where Arnita Jones headed the office, did we meet any success at all. After she left to become executive director of the Organization of American Historians, we did not pursue satellite offices unless a specific contract made it imperative. Another area of frustration was museum work. We bid on the content work for a museum in Taiwan only to find we badly priced ourselves out of that market. When you hear “Money is no object,” don't believe it for a moment. Finally, we found a solution. Under Mike Reis, the immediate past president of the Society, History Associates re-invented our litigation division, moving from fallout to environmental issues. It was a simple strategy—move to where the money is—and for a number of years that division carried us financially.

Since then, we have largely succeeded, I believe, in clearing the paths for new directions of applied history. We have demonstrated that historians and museum

exhibits can go hand-in-hand, from our first venture into exhibits with the National Archives on World War II to the International Spy Museum, the museum at Woodstock (1969 for those who remember), to the Visitor Center at Normandy, to A Museum of the Mafia in Las Vegas, and, most recently, the National Museum of American Jewish History in Philadelphia. Our job is not the design or fabrication, but the text and illustrations and sounds that illuminate the history.

We have adapted to electronic records, not as much as I would like, but certainly ahead of much of the profession. In 1997 Jim Gardner, a Society member, and History Associates organized a conference, “Documenting the Digital Age” with sponsorship from the National Science Foundation, MCI, and Microsoft. I thought the conference was a terrific success, but the corporate, academic, and governmental interest was both tepid and timid. And we failed to follow up with any vigor, as well. It took more than a decade for the government to make an initial investment in this daunting and complex task. We have assisted the National Archives in the development of the non-technical aspects of an electronic records archives, that is, how could they be best designed to ingest (a horrible word, but I cannot find another) and preserve documents under current records management practices and researcher needs in the future.

The history we do is also going digital in both audio and video formats. My first oral histories were done with a reel-to-reel recorder. (Just try to find one of those devices today.) I switched to cassettes, but they, too, became obsolete. Now I rarely even see those I interview, recording digitally directly from my phone to computer, convert to MP3 files, and send electronically to a transcriber. While I bemoan the loss of direct contact with my interviewees, the cost of oral histories has dropped by a third. We also produce DVD histories—digital text, digital audio, and digital video—for clients in place of traditional illustrated books. During the past year we have been developing applications for smart phones to deliver a historian’s commentary on Civil War battle sites. All of these are far beyond anything I could have imagined the business of history being in 1979.

What about history in the Digital Age? From using the president’s e-mails to write the MCI history, the first use of e-mail as an historical source, I believe, I learned that we have so much unorganized and uncontrolled documentation that it has become an enormously time-consuming and arduous task to identify what is important and what is not. TMI is no longer Three Mile Island. Today it stands for Too Much Information. Will we come to rely on artificial intelligence, perhaps something like Watson, to do the archival processing and historical sifting

of the overwhelming numbers of raw records for us? If so, it will be a future with significant implications for both the archival and history professions.

So now, 30 years later, I believe that History Associates has retained our initial objectives in providing a professional setting for a professional staff. We have redefined and broadened the idea of a history professional to include researchers and archivists at several career levels. I should emphasize that we offer careers, not simply jobs, in history and archives.

But perhaps most importantly, History Associates has successfully transitioned to a next generation of management. For the past six years we have been implementing a carefully designed plan to transfer management responsibility and ownership to that generation. Brian Martin has replaced me as president, and he has assembled a superb team of senior managers who have expanded History Associates' business areas, learned to deal with their own crises—a down economy, budget squeezes, layoffs—and have emerged chastened, but strengthened by the experience. Recently the company has won several important multiyear contracts, enabling us to expand the number of employees by 20 percent over the past year. I am enormously proud of what the new team has accomplished. I would like to think that History Associates has helped make teaching the alternate career choice for professional historians. And perhaps, in another 50 years, university history departments will discover that the future lies down the entrepreneurial yellow brick road and not up in the ivory tower.

* * * * *

I could not leave you this morning without a few words about the future of the Society. While my speaking this morning may have brought out more of the old guard than is usual at a Society annual meeting, I am deeply grateful for all the new faces I see in here today. You are the next generation, the next group of leaders of federal history and of the Society for History in the Federal Government. Over the past few years the direction of the Society has been set by those who have made a different career journey than mine: people who have viewed their career as one outside the classroom, one of developing the applied role of historians in reaching a broad public. I note those younger people like recent past Presidents Lee Ann Potter and Mike Reis and incoming president Matt Wasniewski, and the current Executive Committee. It is up to these younger leaders to move the Society to another level. Several years ago we worked on getting a historical office into the legislation creating the Department of Homeland Security. Against all odds, with

the help of Bruce Craig and the National Coalition for History the successor to the National Coordinating Center for the Study of History, the legislation included the office. Last fall the Archivist of the United States announced the creation of a historical office at the National Archives. The experience of the House history office shows that once an office is created, it can go through difficult times, but then resurrected through the efforts of individuals and groups. All this is good news. But a word of caution. Change is neither immediate nor easy; witness recent events in the Middle East. Nevertheless, we should not shy away from risk or change. Each generation should keep its rendezvous with change and with history. The Society and its next generation of leaders should work with Lee White and the NCH to advocate more resources for federal history, with the Office of Management and Budget to convince it of the value and savings a history office can provide, and the Office of Personnel Management to upgrade the basic requirement for a federal historian to more than 18 hours of undergraduate history courses. You should work to restore Advisory Committees of prominent historians who understand the necessity for strong programs and powerful outside advocates for federal history offices. And if you feel really revolutionary, you should lobby the President of the United States to issue an Executive Order establishing history offices in every agency.

As the torch of federal history passes, don't be afraid of being burned a few times. You will learn more from the failures than the successes. Don't be timid. If you don't ask, you won't get. However you advance, I hope my generation has left you in the next generation a strong legacy upon which to build, or even reinvent if you will, the future of federal history.