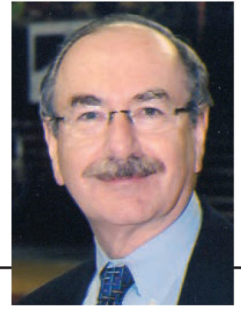


The History Professional

An Interview with Marc Rothenberg

Former SHFG President and National Science Foundation historian, Marc Rothenberg retired on Halloween 2014, having spent 40 years as a federal historian. Knowing that our “emeritis” members are often the busiest and hardest working historians in the field once they become free to pursue their own postponed projects, we were quick to secure an interview with him, asking him to reflect on his career and offer his insights and perspectives on federal history.



Interview by Suzanne Junod

Marc Rothenberg

How did you begin your career as a federal historian?

I began my career with a post-doc appointment working in the Joseph Henry Papers at the Smithsonian. Henry was the first Smithsonian Secretary, serving from 1846 to 1878. A prominent physicist with an international reputation, he was already well-respected when he took charge of the Smithsonian, shaping its work, and establishing it as a pre-eminent research institution. His papers were insightful and historically important, but also quite voluminous. Just before I began, a member of the editorial team left, and I was fortunate enough to be hired to fill the vacancy. The position I held had been funded by “soft” money through the National Endowment for the Humanities. By the mid-1970s, however, Congress had become unhappy with the NEH providing funding to federal agencies, primarily the National Park Service, but others as well, including the Smithsonian. Congress eventually agreed to fund seven NEH positions at the Smithsonian, and I was given one of the federal positions in 1978. I spent the next 28 years there.

The completion of the edited series of Henry papers was quite an achievement. The series was awarded the prestigious Eugene Ferguson Prize by the Society for the History of Technology (SHOT). From what I can tell, although the series is now out of print, it is still in high demand. [Ferguson was a founding member of SHOT, and the Eugene S. Ferguson Prize recognizes outstanding and original reference works that support future scholarship in the history of technology.]

The Henry series was awarded the Ferguson Prize in 2007, following the publication of the last of the 11-volume series. (The 12th volume is the cumulative index.) Nathan Reingold edited the first five volumes. When Nate gave up editorship of the series in 1985, I took his place and edited volumes 6–11. It does seem that over the years the Henry series volumes have proven their value academically.

How did you come to take the Historian’s position at the National Science Foundation?

In 2006, just as we were wrapping up volume 11 of the Henry Papers, it became clear that the Smithsonian was not going to continue funding my position. The National Science Foundation,

decade without one. Merton England had launched the history program at the NSF, and upon his retirement he was succeeded by George Mazuzan. After he retired, subsequent directors of the Office of Legislative and Public Affairs (OLPA), where the historian’s position was located, were either not enthusiasts of history or were preoccupied with other duties. But by 2006 there was both internal and external discussion about the need to restore the historian’s position. The twin challenges of relaunching a program and making the transition from doing the history of 19th-century science to doing that of the second half of the 20th century was irresistible.

What were your biggest challenges when you came to the National Science Foundation?

In the beginning, it was important for me to decide how to frame my work and set priorities. As federal historians repeatedly demonstrate, the scope of federal history can be very broad, but priorities are often determined by the federal agencies themselves. There is, however, usually some room for flexibility and creativity allowing the historian to frame the scope and content of work. Richard Hewlett, one of the founders of the SHFG, wrote convincingly about tensions and choices between two sides of federal history: writing a scholarly history or focusing on service to the agency employing them. My biggest challenge was to decide whether or not I should follow up with Merton England’s multivolume history of NSF. Obviously I had had experience with multivolume historical works. In the end, however, I decided to focus on becoming an agency resource rather than putting out volumes of Foundation history.

How did you address this issue at NSF?

I was totally overwhelmed at times responding to queries from all quarters. I began by revamping the history website to maintain a more public presence and allow people to orient themselves more generally to the agency’s history before coming to me. That worked only to a point, however. I continued to get external queries from a broad spectrum of individuals: scholars, History Day students, family members of past employees, and past award recipients. They all had questions that required

fielded questions from the press, which the public affairs side of the house supported and appreciated.

The staff, all the way up to the Director level, began to come to me asking about the “when, why, and how” of past NSF activities. The high staff turnover at the Foundation because of the use of temporary “rotators” made institutional memory all the more important to them, and a staple of my work soon became the preparation of one-page memos providing historical perspective and background information. I was also asked by the FOIA staff in the Office of the General Counsel to assist them in identifying documents that were being requested.

One of the more important activities I took on was to become involved in training program managers and senior staff on the history of the NSF in which I focused on interactions with the White House and Congress. Speaking both in the context of formal training sessions and at office meetings, I was able to get across the idea that most issues faced by the organization now had also been confronted in the past. I also tried to get, and was also fortunate enough to maintain, an internship program that was very good over the years and brought in some talented young workers.

After the absence of a historian at the agency for more than a decade, employees began to appear “out of the woodwork” with materials they had kept that they thought were of historic value. They were happy to share them with me, some for no other reason than to free up their file space, but others from an interest in the history of the Foundation. I found some really good and valuable materials in these early donations and soon found myself developing an archive.

What kind of support did you receive from the NSF and the Office of Legislative and Public Affairs when you made this determination?

The support was wonderful. The public affairs team was able to help me with visual work, including the revising of the website and, along with a consultant from the Smithsonian, in the creation of a wall exhibit on the history of NSF. I received adequate funds for archival supplies and other activities, two storage areas for my collections, and the freedom to decide the best way to meet my responsibilities.

What kinds of resources did you make available on the website?

The NSF had a very inadequate and unappealing timeline. With the assistance of the IT staff in OLPA, I was able to expand

the timeline and make it more interesting visually. I placed a selective bibliography on the site. We also have a variety of publications on the site, including material prepared for the 60th anniversary of the NSF in 2010.

All federal historians and offices are challenged by the records process and Records Management Schedules negotiated with Congress. Your background would make you a natural in handling and appreciating official records. How did this translate into activities related to records management at NSF?

The NSF’s Records Management Schedule is narrowly focused. I soon realized that the history of the Foundation encompassed far more than the award recipient jackets that the Schedule encompassed. Since the National Archives and Records Administration was not particularly interested in the same historic materials that I felt were important to me as the agency’s historian, I began to collect program-level papers from retiring office directors. I received a scattering of office diaries. I also located some old and rare documents. We can now document the day-to-day schedule of a few program offices. I also worked with the library to put together a master list of NSF publications, which had never been systematic or comprehensive, as well as to obtain a copy of every single official publication. The library was pleased to cooperate because they were challenged by the queries that required documents in the files of staff members.

Were you involved in conducting oral history interviews?

I began to interview a few selected candidates—past directors and current senior staff—but I soon discovered that the preparation involved in conducting an interview with a past Director, not to mention the post-interview work in reviewing and editing the transcription, was challenging and eating into time for other activities. I eventually switched to interviewing select program officers and support staff, so as to broaden our understanding of life at the NSF.

What “words of wisdom” might you have for other federal historians as well as other aspiring federal historians as you retire?

Trust in luck. While it is always important to have the requisite historical skills and credentials, and of course, drive, luck always seemed to play a role in my career. First, I think that I was very fortunate in that opportunities arose for me over my career. Vacancies for which I was qualified appeared when I was job hunting.

Second, I was very fortunate to have had superiors throughout my career who believed that I had the best ideas on how to run a history program. At NSF, in particular, I was left alone and I operated more or less independently with the understanding that I would be responsible and helpful, and meet deadlines. It was a perfect environment for me. ❖

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