

The History Professional *An Interview with Cynthia C. Kelly*

Cynthia C. Kelly is the founder and President of the Atomic Heritage Foundation. Before creating the Foundation, she served over twenty years as a senior executive with the Department of Energy and Environmental Protection Agency, receiving the Distinguished Career Service Award for her time at both agencies. She graduated with a bachelor degree in history from Wellesley College, earned a master's degree from Yale University, and taught history before her career with the Federal government.



Cynthia C. Kelly

Interview by Thomas Faith

When you founded the Atomic Heritage Foundation (AHF) in 2002, what did you hope you would be able to accomplish?

In February 2002, my immediate objective was to raise a little over a million dollars. In the late 1990s, the White House initiated the Save America's Treasures program and invited Federal agencies to apply for the grants to commemorate the millennium. The Department of Energy (DOE) where I was working received two grants.

One was for a cluster of dilapidated Manhattan Project properties at Los Alamos that had been slated for demolition. Hidden from public view, few people realized they existed. At my instigation, the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation agreed to see them. One architectural historian declared them "monumental in their lack of monumentality." A National Park Service official said they were "National Historic Landmark" and possibly "World Heritage Site" caliber.

When the DOE received two Save America's Treasures grants in 1999, the Catch-22 was that the grant funds had to be matched with non-Federal funds. That challenge propelled me to leave the Federal government and found the Atomic Heritage Foundation.

In the spring of 2002, AHF received a \$250,000 grant to write a report for Congress analyzing how best to deal with the Department of Energy's remaining Manhattan Project properties. With this mandate, AHF launched a national effort to develop a strategy to preserve the Manhattan Project heritage. Exactly what would come of AHF's initiative was unclear but at least there was serious Congressional interest.

What aspect of your personal or professional experiences do you think most influences your approach to directing AHF?

I am a generalist who has spent many years immersed in technical fields. Working at the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), I was responsible for regulating the chemical industry under the Toxic Substances Control Act. Chemists, physicists, and engineers inside EPA and from industry and environmental groups provided the expertise essential to crafting the regulations.

With this background, I became comfortable dealing with complex scientific issues and learning from technical experts.

The Manhattan Project began with fundamental discoveries of nuclear fission followed by a myriad of inventions. The Atomic Heritage Foundation has sought to capture the accounts of the inventors as well as the managers, construction workers, military police and others whose stories contribute to understanding the Manhattan Project.

What role did AHF play in the establishment of Manhattan Project National Historical Park?

The Atomic Heritage Foundation (AHF) led the efforts to create a Manhattan Project National Historical Park. In 2003, AHF convened public meetings in each of the three major Manhattan Project sites: Los Alamos, NM, Oak Ridge, TN, and Hanford, WA. At each site, AHF invited the National Park Service to participate and explain what the implications of creating a Manhattan Project national historical park were for the communities. This was the first time such a possibility had been publicly raised.

AHF briefed Congressional staff on the costs and benefits of a Manhattan Project National Historical Park. Then AHF helped draft the legislation and testified before Congress. In 2004, Congress passed legislation directing the National Park Service to study the feasibility of creating a Manhattan Project National Historical Park.

Over the next decade, AHF cultivated bipartisan support at all three sites and led a national coalition for the park. The National Trust for Historic Preservation and the National Parks and Conservation Association were important allies.

While it was touch-and-go, Congress agreed to an omnibus park amendment as part of the National Defense Authorization Act at the end December 2014. Responsible for jointly administering the new park, the Departments of Interior and Energy signed an agreement establishing the Manhattan Project National Historical Park in November 2015. With very limited funds available, the park is "open" but will be a work in progress for many years.

What online projects has AHF undertaken?

AHF has undertaken three major online projects. The first is the Atomic Heritage Foundation's main website at www.atomicheritage.org. This site has become a major resource for students with its detailed timeline and hundreds of articles on

different aspects of the history. One of the most popular features is the 14,000 profiles of Manhattan Project participants.

The “Ranger in Your Pocket” website (www.rangerinyourpocket.org) contains hundreds of short audio/visual vignettes that can be accessed on smartphones or home computers. These programs incorporate interviews with Manhattan Project participants who describe their work or what life was like in the top-secret project.

The “Voices of the Manhattan Project” website (www.manhattanprojectvoices.org) has over 600 oral histories. About half of these were taken by journalists between 1965 and 1995. These include interviews with the top-echelon scientists and military leaders. Other interviews were taken between 2002 and 2019 of younger participants whose stories are not usually told in official histories. These include members of the Special Engineer Detachment, women, African Americans, Hispanos, and Native Americans.

AHF’s websites are on track to have 2.4 million visitors in 2019, with the number increasing by nearly 50 percent each year. Over half of viewers are under 35 with the majority of these being students. Another 15 to 20 percent are international audiences.

What considerations do you make when conducting oral history interviews of scientific figures?

Over the past two decades, AHF has focused on collecting oral histories from a broad spectrum of participants. By 2005, most of the top-echelon scientists were no longer alive. Instead, AHF successfully worked to make available hundreds of interviews that were in university and private archives. This usually involved digitizing recordings made on older media, transcribing and publishing them online.

In addition, AHF conducted hundreds of interviews with Manhattan Project participants whose stories have generally not been told in official histories. AHF worked with local historical societies, national organizations and others to identify people who would be good interviewees. As a result, AHF traveled across the country to interview men and women who worked on the Manhattan Project. These interviews included African Americans, Hispanos, and Native Americans who either worked on the Manhattan Project themselves or whose lives were impacted by it.

What considerations do you make when helping a public audience interpret the history of atomic weapons?

The first question that people ask is whether the United States should have dropped the atomic bombs on Japan. Far removed from World War II and six horrific years of war, audiences are hard pressed to understand why President Truman agreed to use the new weapon.

AHF’s goal is to educate audiences about World War II and help them appreciate the difficulties of decision-making in the “fog of war.” Were the Japanese ready to surrender? What were Stalin and the USSR’s ambitions? What did President Truman know about radiation or the likely consequences of the atomic bomb?

These issues will be debated for generations to come. AHF provides testimony of experts as well as the reflections of the Manhattan Project participants. Audiences are encouraged to think critically and draw their own conclusions.

How did the idea for your partnership with the National Museum of Nuclear Science & History originate?

AHF has worked informally with the National Museum of Nuclear Science & History over the last two decades, collaborating on several initiatives. The missions of the AHF and the Museum are very complementary.

At the time that AHF was exploring possible partnerships with other organizations, the Museum was developing a strategic plan. The plan that emerged is to expand their educational and online presence. AHF’s strength and resources mesh perfectly with this vision.

How will the partnership work in practice?

AHF is committed to working with the Museum and its staff over the next two or three years. During this time, the Museum needs to raise funds to build their capacity to manage the existing resources and expand upon what AHF has begun.

Fortunately, there is much that can be done in the short term. For example, the Museum is integrating AHF’s library and archival collections into its own impressive library and archival collections. The Museum also has extensive interpretive displays and educational programs. With additional funding, the Museum may incorporate some audio/visual programs using AHF’s resources.

The Museum will be able to learn from what AHF has done and take advantage of AHF’s online resources to attract younger audiences. The Museum is interested in expanding upon AHF’s oral history collections to include veterans of the Cold War and other aspects of the Manhattan Project’s legacy.

What plans does the AHF have for the future?

AHF is committed to working with the National Museum of Nuclear Science & History and its staff over the next two or three years to ensure a smooth and successful transition. Among other things, AHF and the Museum plan to upgrade and integrate their respective websites and maintain an active presence on social media to reach new audiences.

This fall, AHF is publishing the third edition of its popular guidebook to the Manhattan Project in New Mexico. For the 75th anniversary of the Manhattan Project in 2020, AHF will be publishing a new edition of its well-received anthology, *The Manhattan Project: The Birth of the Atomic Bomb in the Words of Its Creators, Eyewitnesses, and Historians* (2007).

In addition, AHF will continue to work on interpreting the Manhattan Project from multiple perspectives and encouraging audiences to think critically when considering this complex and controversial history. The Manhattan Project left an indelible legacy. Understanding the history and reflecting upon its lessons will be essential for generations to come.