

Case Study

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Using Volunteers for Special-Project Staffing at the National Air and Space Museum Archives

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Abstract: The archives at the National Air and Space Museum (NASM) of the Smithsonian Institution has developed and utilized a program for performing collection maintenance activities on archival collections using large groups of volunteers for short periods of time. The author describes the first three successful offerings of the Smithsonian National Associates Program Research Expedition in the NASM Archives and recommends considerations for other repositories that may decide to establish similar programs.

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ARCHIVES AND MANUSCRIPTS REPOSITORIES around the nation always have more responsibilities than resources and are perpetually understaffed. The existing staff often can barely keep up with day-to-day reference and collection management responsibilities. The processing needs of some collections may demand such a large commitment of staff time and resources that they are rarely addressed in the normal course of work planning. Attention to these major projects could potentially eliminate progress on every other ongoing project. Large projects may languish as work proceeds year after year on a "time-available" basis with staff turnover and other priorities precluding consistency in the performance of project work.

The National Air and Space Museum Archives (NASM) of the Smithsonian Institution has experienced these frustrations as it seeks to document the history of aviation and space exploration and technology. The archives is housed in two locations. The administrative office, film archives, photo archives, photograph videodisc production unit, and ready-reference branch are located at the museum on the National Capitol Mall in Washington, DC. The majority of the collections are housed at the Archival Support Center in a records center environment at the NASM's Paul E. Garber Preservation, Restoration and Storage Facility in Suitland, Maryland (eight miles from the museum). The archives staff consists of approximately fourteen full-time employees, four located at the Archival Support Center and ten at the museum. Even with the assistance of numerous volunteers and student interns, the NASM Archives has been unable to undertake and complete a number of major projects needed to establish control of the some 10,000 cubic feet of manuscripts, records, and technical materials.

The Research Expedition: "Archival Treasures of the National Air and Space Museum"

In an effort to address the need for additional staff to undertake large projects, the NASM Archives developed a means of using volunteers without disrupting ongoing archival collection management and reference work. The volunteer-staffing program in the archives was developed in conjunction with the Smithsonian's Research Expedition program. That program is a part of the Smithsonian National Associates Program (SNAP), which was established in 1970 to provide activities and educational opportunities for members and a source of unrestricted private-fund income for the institution. The Research Expedition Program was intended to provide selected bureaus of the institution with staffing and funding for special projects while allowing the general public to participate in scientific field research such as archaeological digs and volcano watching.¹

In November 1987, the Collections Management Department of the National Air and Space Museum responded to an invitation to sponsor a session for the new Research Expedition Program. The Archives Division of that department agreed to sponsor a two-week summer Research Expedition entitled "Archival Treasures of

¹The Smithsonian National Associates Program (SNAP) includes the following sections: Contributing Membership Program; Corporate Associate Program; Lecture and Seminar Program; Research Expedition Program; and Associates Travel Program. The Research Expedition Program, first offered in 1988, has proven successful throughout the Smithsonian Institution. In 1989, the institution-wide program produced \$100,000 worth of income to the institution and provided 65,000 hours of volunteer labor contributed by 94 participants. In 1990, 160 individuals participated in Research Expeditions, contributing more than \$200,000 and providing more than 100,000 volunteer hours. Source of statistics: *Smithsonian Year 1989* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1990): 169; *Smithsonian Year 1990* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991): 173.

the National Air and Space Museum” for a maximum of sixteen people. The SNAP Lectures and Seminars staff and the NASM Archives staff shared planning and decision-making responsibilities. From 1988 to 1990 the program completed three successful expeditions with plans to continue in future years.

Research Expedition participants make a specified monetary contribution (ranging from \$975 to \$1,200 during the three years) to cover local university dormitory housing, some meals, transportation, and insurance. All funds remaining after payment of these program expenses go to the archives for project expenses and the purchase of supplies. The archives received an average of \$1,600 for each of the three years.

The NASM accepted applicants on a first-come, first-served basis, filling all sixteen openings each year with a waiting list the first two years. Participants ranged in age from twenty-nine to seventy-four and came from all over the United States. Three returned for a second expedition. Although there was no selection or screening based on qualifications and no participants had any archival experience, the majority (from eleven to thirteen out of sixteen) had an aviation background.

Space limitations at each of the two sites forced the archives to split the group in half for the two-week period. Eight of the participants went first to the Archival Support Center and eight to the archives in the museum building. The two groups worked one week in each location, switching locations for the second week.

Orientation and training. About a month before their two-week expedition, participants received a packet containing information on housing, appropriate clothing, free-time activities, emergency contacts, schedules, project outlines, and vitae of participating archives staff. Each Research Expedition opened with a Sunday evening dinner that enabled the staff and participants

to meet before the work schedule began. Participants were generally excited about working behind the scenes at one of the world’s most popular museums and were anxious to talk about what they would be doing.

The next morning participants attended an orientation session before splitting into groups to receive training on their assigned projects. They were provided with background on the types of materials with which they would work, an overview of the project, and an explanation of how their project fit into the overall work of the archives. The staff stressed the anticipated contribution of the Research Expedition group to the work of the archives. For example, training at the Archival Support Center consisted of a brief overview of paper chemistry and the inherent preservation problems of scrapbooks. Staff instructed participants in appropriate methods of handling scrapbooks, identification of preservation/conservation needs on a checklist, preparing accession worksheets and narrative descriptions, and rehousing items in acid-free containers. Participants working on the Technical Files (a vertical file collection, located in the museum building, that is a mainstay of the NASM ready-reference operation) received instruction in sorting and rehousing materials by media type, labeling folders, and anticipating possible filing errors.

Program description. Following specific project instruction, program participants began their work, continuing on a regular schedule at their assigned location throughout the first week. The work schedule consisted of an approximately seven-hour day, with a thirty- to forty-five-minute lunch break, depending on the location of the workers. Participants at the museum location generally worked in teams on various projects. All workers at the Archival Support Center worked on the same project and each worked at his or her own pace. Project materials were made available at a

staging area where participants would turn in completed materials and pick up new assignments. Special activities scheduled during the week included a tour of the aircraft storage buildings at the Garber Facility and presentations by members of the curatorial staff.

The participants switched to the opposite location at the beginning of the second week, and the work and activity schedule was repeated. Throughout the program, archives staff members remained available to answer questions and supervise work closely. Interestingly, they had difficulty getting people away from the project work at lunchtime and at the end of the day. After about two days of close supervision most participants required only occasional assistance, and some staff members were able to return to their regular duties for part of each day.

Each Research Expedition closed with a formal dinner for staff and participants, providing a final opportunity to show appreciation for the work accomplished. Participants received light-hearted "awards" and mementos such as an acid-free folder, a single white cotton glove, a pencil for archival note-taking, and a certificate of participation. The program has always ended on a high note, and the participants have frequently discussed their new understanding of the scope of archival work.

Work projects. Research Expedition participants in the museum worked in various project areas within the Archives Division. Two workers per week were assigned to review captions, verify videodiscs, and rehouse photos and negatives for the USAF Still Photo Collection. This project was essentially completed during 1990 after three two-week sessions of work by SNAP participants. In the Film Archives two workers per week labeled and sorted films and wrote descriptions of films and videotapes for the catalog. Four workers assigned to the Technical Files sorted and rehoused materials by topic and media type for improved

access and preservation. The Film Archives work and the Technical Files project are ongoing, with plans for future SNAP program involvement.

Workers assigned to the Archival Support Center all worked on the same project. In 1988, this project included inventorying, accessioning, describing, and rehousing the archives' scrapbook collection, acquired over many years (with minimal documentation) and maintained by the museum's Aeronautics Department until it was transferred to the newly established archives storage facility in 1982. Prior to this project, the scrapbooks were undescribed and inaccessible for research use. In 1989, workers in the Archival Support Center started a major multi-year project to review, rehouse, label, and inventory the aircraft technical manuals collection (approximately 1,100 boxes). The work resulted in neatly rehoused and labeled documents as well as annotated computer index listings that could be edited later by the staff. Future SNAP expeditions will continue work on this project.

In addition, workers at the Archival Support Center could sign up for two-hour shifts on additional projects to experience some other aspects of archival work, including computer data entry, reference-request research, indexing of aircraft drawings, and arrangement and description of the Wright Field Technical Library document collection. Staff members planned these alternate projects, not with the expectation that a great deal of work would be accomplished, but so that participants would have the opportunity to try different things. This also offered participants a break from the tedious aspects of the main project for part of each day. The workers seem to enjoy the alternate projects, and enough work has been accomplished in each project area to justify the extra staff effort.

Evaluation. The archives scheduled an evaluation time for staff and participants on

the final day of each two-week session. These discussions have been beneficial in reviewing both positive and negative aspects of the program. Participants also received a written evaluation form to be completed after they returned home. These verbal and written evaluations have resulted in improved planning, scheduling, and training for each subsequent program. A few weeks after each expedition, when written evaluations had been received from the participants, the staff met to review the problems and accomplishments of the program, to plan for desired adjustments, and to set the dates for the next program.

In each year of the program, a significant amount of work has been accomplished in every host department (see figure 1). The archives staff truly believe in the potential of such a program and after each session have supported the scheduling of a program for the following year. During 1990, the NASM Archives staff also successfully convinced a newly-arrived department head of the program's value. They decided to reduce the number of participants for 1991 to a maximum of ten due to the growing size of the permanent staff, the growth of the collections, and the consequent limitations on workspace. In some parts of the department, the type of projects that lend themselves to intensive work by a large group of people have been completed, and these areas will not utilize Research Expedition participants until such time as an appropriate new project presents itself.

During the first year of the program the staff was uncertain about what to expect, beyond a major upheaval in normal operations. Although the SNAP program required almost total attention of some of the staff members for its duration, they found they were able to accomplish other work as well. Two of four full-time staff at the Archival Support Center and four of the eight-to-ten full-time staff at the Museum location were committed to full-time supervision of Research Expedition partici-

**“Archival Treasures of the National
Air and Space Museum”
1988-90 Research Expeditions
Work Accomplished**

Photo Archives

- Review, check captions, and re-jacket nearly 4,200 color negatives (three-year project)

Film Archives

- Master inventory of 3,300 films and videocassettes
- Reorganize entire film collection by size of container
- Rehouse films as needed
- Relabel 750 videocassettes
- Review and catalog 180 films and videocassettes (18-week project for the film archivist, working alone)
- Enter film and videocassette descriptions on computer

Technical Files

- Sort and refolder seven four-drawer lateral file cabinets containing Space History Files (1989 project)

Scrapbooks

- Accession, describe, assess physical condition, rehouse, label, shelve, and enter descriptive data for 160 individual or sets of scrapbooks (1988 project)

Technical Manuals

- Refolder, label, sort, check against existing listing of 275 cubic feet of technical manuals (1989, 1990 project)

Figure 1

pants. Other Archives staff assisted intermittently. Those who assisted with the training and supervision of participants found that, following orientation and basic training, participants became fairly self-assured in performing the work after about two days. For the remainder of the week, periodic checks of participants' work were suffi-

cient to assure appropriate performance. The interruption to regular operations that did occur was not unacceptable in comparison with the amount of work accomplished.

Advance planning is the key to the successful completion of projects such as the Research Expedition. The major difference between the first and subsequent offerings of the program has been the preparedness of the NASM staff. Members outlined all activities and the daily schedule in some detail before the program began. In some cases they even did a sample study of the project work to estimate the likely rate of progress and the adequacy of training information. The staff found they were somewhat optimistic in their projections of how much work could be completed. They had based their estimates on the work of various staff members and student interns who were familiar with the basic formats and numbering systems. The schedule did not allow time, over and above the actual steps of the project work, for the participants to familiarize themselves with the various numbering and nomenclature systems. On the other hand, the film archivist found he had not scheduled enough work and was sent scrambling to keep workers busy at times.

Staff also found it important to emphasize that the participants were to concentrate on project work rather than recreational activities and to perform the project work according to instructions. Most workers were very happy to follow instructions and ask questions as necessary. A few participants wanted to perform tasks in a nonarchival manner. Close supervision and quiet suppression of inappropriate activity usually took care of such situations. For example, archives staff had to be quietly insistent when program participants suggested taking scrapbooks apart, taping torn documents, or using excessive amounts of packing materials to support archival scrapbooks in boxes. The participants' suggestions, although well-intentioned, were based on lack of understanding of the appropriate

archival methods; an explanation of policy generally was well-received and produced the desired result.

A daily and hourly schedule of work, travel, meals, and extracurricular activities was important. The second and third expeditions at the Archival Support Center also benefitted from a set of written project instructions and an example packet that were distributed and explained in detail during project training. These detailed instructions and examples of potential situations provided participants with ready answers to routine procedural questions. However, some workers seemed intimidated by the instructions, preferring to ask a staff member the same questions that were covered in the packet. Instructional materials for subsequent expeditions may be revised and the number of task steps performed by the participants may be reduced because staff members are able to complete some phases of the projects more quickly and efficiently themselves.

Following the first session in 1988, the staff agreed to schedule a less expensive nonsummer program for local-area residents. People who lived in the area or who had alternate local housing had frequently requested such an option during the first application year. Due to program commitments for university housing, the first two summer SNAP programs could not honor these requests. That program was designed to admit a maximum of eight local participants for a period of two weeks, with the entire group spending one week at each location, thereby reducing the impact on the staff in each location to one week. However, two months before the scheduled March 1989 session, the staff cancelled the program due to lack of applicants. Apparently most potential participants are able to make a commitment to a two-week program only during the summer months. The archives staff could not support an additional expedition in the summer, due to preparation time involved and the presence

of student interns in most departments of the archives. In addition, the archives staff believes that local residents might be even more subject to distraction by family and business responsibilities than out-of-town participants have been, thus rendering their expedition less productive. Therefore, unless a significant demand becomes evident, the archives will not consider reinstating a program specifically for local participants.

Recommendations for Similar Programs

Based on the positive experience with the Research Expedition Program, the NASM Archives would like to share information and encourage other archives to consider creating such a program on either a one-time or periodic basis. The sponsoring agency could establish the program according to any set of parameters desired, including time of year, length of program, number of participants, local or nonlocal participation, and type of project. Although the applicants will most likely have an interest in the topical area of the research collection (most of the NASM participants had either a professional background or a personal interest in aviation), some may lack any background in the field and most, if not all, will have no formal training in archives or historic preservation. In the case of the NASM Research Expedition, those who did not have a background in the aviation field applied simply to have a new and different experience. Selection of the type of project should take this factor into account. The project training should include all information necessary to perform the assigned tasks and must emphasize the importance of protecting the materials and maintaining original order where appropriate. Simple projects and clear instructions will always produce the best results.

The types of projects that lend themselves to staffing by multiple, untrained volunteers tend to be relatively simple ones.

These projects should permit the same set of steps to be applied to many items or groups of items. Preparation of a set of written instructions that outline the complete set of steps, including how to handle exceptional materials, will aid the repository staff in defining the entire project clearly and in anticipating potential problems. Staff should provide a training session for all participants and review all the training materials during this session. Staff must also provide close supervision for several hours following training. The need for constant supervision will decrease as volunteers proceed with the work.

The NASM Archives identified the following projects as appropriate for special volunteer staff: sorting, filing, labeling, rehousing, listing and item indexing, writing photo captions, entering item descriptions and captions on computer, narrative description of discrete items (scrapbooks, films, videos), and using a checklist of possibilities to determine preservation needs.

Certain types of projects should be avoided: any project where archival materials are fragile and require specialized care and handling; any project that requires training and archival experience to make value judgements regarding housing, handling, and historical value; and projects where there is so much inconsistency in the desired handling of individual items that standardized instructions are rendered useless.

A prior expectation of the work to be accomplished may only result in frustration. The repository staff should provide the best possible training and assistance and allow the project to proceed at its own pace, given the abilities and background of the individuals involved. Any amount of work accomplished contributes to the desired goal. Of course, the desire to accomplish an entire project within the session will require more careful estimation of production rates.

Depending on the length and type of program established, sponsors should consider various means of attracting and rewarding

participants. The NASM Archives provided various types of perquisites including: complimentary group photos, a canvas tote bag imprinted with the NASM logo, specially made for the group; complimentary passes to the NASM Planetarium and IMAX Theater; behind-the-scenes tours and lectures; formal and informal group dinners; and schedules of cultural events in Washington and information on how to take advantage of them during free time.

The staff who work with such a program should be committed to it for its duration and should be willing to go the extra mile to help create a spirit of cooperation and good will. NASM Archives staff were quick to provide assistance and express appreciation to participants for their efforts. Many of the participants commented during the evaluation process that they felt a genuine sense of acceptance and respect from the staff.

The Research Expedition program has had both positive and negative results. Negative results include the disruption to the regular work of the archives and problem participants. The program requires a good deal of planning and preparation, especially in its first cycle. The NASM staff believes the results of the program have shown the investment in planning time and effort to be worthwhile because the projects addressed might never otherwise have been started. Although the NASM Archives undertook large long-term projects, other repositories might have smaller projects that can be completed in a shorter time. Any repository considering such a program should recognize the need for planning prior to beginning the program and should weigh that requirement against the anticipated benefits of the program.

Problem participants are more difficult to anticipate. As previously stated, NASM has not screened applicants. The repository planning a program must consider the project and training materials from the perspective of the general public and assume that some applicants may be unable to grasp

the concepts or perform the work. They will require special assistance and supervision. Again, careful selection of the project and clear instruction is important.

On the positive side, the archives has experienced a strong feeling of good will and accomplishment through the Research Expedition Program. Nearly all participants reported having a positive experience and left with a sense of accomplishment and a better understanding of the archives and the museum. Some participants have returned for another expedition; others volunteer on a drop-in basis when they are visiting in the area; still others have subsequently donated or directed materials to the archives. It is gratifying to see work proceeding on certain major projects that simply cannot be performed by regular staff in the course of normal operations. Participants benefit from information on how to provide better care for their personal records and memorabilia. The success of the program has placed the archives in a positive light within the National Air and Space Museum and the Smithsonian Institution, resulting in increased opportunities for contacts and information-sharing with colleagues.

Ultimately, the SNAP Research Expedition program, "Archival Treasures of the National Air and Space Museum," has achieved its dual goal. The program provided the archives with additional volunteer staffing for intensive work on selected projects and offered an opportunity for interested persons to contribute to the historic preservation of national treasures while experiencing a behind-the-scenes look at a world-famous museum. Everyone who has participated in the NASM program has benefitted and has been enthusiastic about the program and its results. The staff of the NASM Archives recommends that other archival agencies consider such a program for assistance with the never-ending work of managing the nation's documentary treasures.