

# The Best of Our Energies and Skills: Coordinated and Sustainable Preservation of Aerospace History

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## Introduction

Just as the nation responded to President John F. Kennedy's 1962 call to go to the Moon, not because it was easy, but because it was hard, those invested in preserving a historical record of the space age must also "organize and measure the best of our energies and skills."<sup>1</sup> Today, the challenges to preserve and make accessible records, ephemera, and memories of space flight are unprecedented not only due to the ubiquitous and dynamic nature of digital media but also to the proliferation of new agents as creators of records. A keyword in Kennedy's charge was "organize" and his call to organize and come together is just as critical to success today as we seek to preserve a broad record of the subject of space flight history. This presentation will suggest that in order to preserve a broad and representative corpus of archival materials, a more coordinated and collaborative effort rooted in a spirit of community and a sharing of knowledge and expertise, will be critical.

Established theory as well as best (and emerging) practices for archiving are well documented in archival science professional literature. Drawing from this body of knowledge, we will examine the nature of institutional archives and community archives including their strengths and challenges; suggest foundational best practices for collecting space history; and share models for diverse participation in documenting and preserving a subject area such as space flight.

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<sup>1</sup> The quote references John F. Kennedy's Moon Speech delivered at Rice University, September 12, 1962. The first section of the sentence from which the quote is taken is well known. The quote comes from the less familiar second part of the full sentence: "We choose to go to the moon in this decade and do the other things, not because they are easy, but because they are hard, because that goal will serve to organize and measure the best of our energies and skills, because that challenge is one that we are willing to accept, one we are unwilling to postpone, and one which we intend to win, and the others, too." Transcript retrieved: <https://www.jfklibrary.org/Asset-Viewer/MkATdOcdU06X5uNHbmqm1Q.aspx>

Our presentation will have three parts. The first will define how we are conceiving of Institutional Archives and Community Archives and briefly examine their strengths and challenges. The second part will outline foundational practices for collecting archives based upon the archival science practice and professional literature. The third part of our presentation will identify models for collaborative and participatory collecting.

## **Part 1. Institutional Archives and Community Archives**

For the purposes of this paper, we define “institutional archives” broadly as an archive or special collections research center, either public or private, with professional archivists on staff, dedicated budgets, and an administrative structure. The collecting of archival materials and organizational records by formal institutions such as governments, universities, large historical societies and research libraries proliferated during the twentieth-century. Community archives represent efforts by a particular community to document itself. While not all community archives are inspired by political or cultural identification, most community archival endeavours represent the need to offer an alternative representation of events, peoples, or experiences often not represented in mainstream archives or cultural heritage institutions (Finn, et al., 2009).

Institutional archives, while employing professional archivists and often operating within relatively stable infrastructures, do not, and can not, collect and preserve all of a history, rather they collect within established scopes. Community archives have become increasingly important for documenting aspects of human endeavor. Their challenges are tied to access to professional resources, learning best practices for managing an archive, providing access to archives, and sustainability. The professional archival literature increasingly acknowledges the growing need to find ways to merge the two models to benefit communities and records. We will explore the good reasons why such partnerships are beneficial to both.

## **Part 2. Foundational Practices for Collecting Archives**

Foundational practices developed by the archival profession can guide a best practices framework for the preservation of both analog and digital records of space history. We will discuss a framework from archival professional practice which outlines three phases of successful archival collection development: 1. Establishing a guiding mission, 2. Maintaining skills, tools, and standards through operational policies for the archive and 3. Sustaining the archive and its collections through an ever-changing funding and technology landscape.

We will suggest that these fundamental considerations for responsible collecting are sometimes difficult to meet for the most well-funded and staffed institutions; they are especially difficult for community archives and private collectors to meet.

## **Part 3. Models for Collaborative and Participatory Collecting**

Models exist for documenting a distributed subject area. We will examine ‘documentation strategy’--a methodology developed in the 1980s by archivists that “guides selection and assures retention of adequate information about a specific geographic area, a topic, a process, or an event that has been dispersed throughout society.” (Pearce-Moses, 2005). Models also exist for collaborative, interdisciplinary, and democratized or distributed archiving initiatives that do not solely rely on the "big" cultural heritage institutions but instead build upon the methodologies and standards developed and practiced there. We will also examine the United Kingdom’s Community Archives and Heritage Group (CAHG) as a model for collaborative and participatory archiving which builds on work done by professional archivists and seeks to distribute valuable knowledge to communities caring for and providing access to historical records. Localized efforts at collaborative and participatory archiving aerospace do exist, illustrating that institutional archives of all sizes can form partnerships. We will share an example of how Purdue University Archives and Special Collection collaborates with a regional aerospace history group.

## Conclusion

We believe this symposium is a beginning and that there is much work to do. This symposium is uniquely poised to begin to unite large institutions with the broader community of space archives creators and collectors around a space history collection strategy. We propose that going forward, models for collaborative and participatory efforts be explored and an effort for archiving of space history be organized.

## References

Finn, A., Stevens, M., Sheperd, E. (2009). Whose memories, whose archives? Independent community archives, autonomy and the mainstream. *Archival Science*, 9, 71-86. DOI 10.1007/s10502-009-9105-2

Pearce-Moses, R. (2015). *A Glossary of Archival and Records Terminology*. Society of American Archivists. Chicago, IL. Retrieved from <https://www2.archivists.org/glossary>