

To Boldly Collect: Hagley Library's Experience with Collecting the History of American Business, Technology, and Industrial Design since 1961

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A key distinction between the current era of space exploration and that of the Space Age half a century ago is the greater independence and leadership of private, nongovernmental organizations. A consequence of this shift toward the private sector is that the documentation that will allow future generations to engage with the legacy of the current era of space exploration is at risk. When governmental organizations had managed space programs, citizens could rely on the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) to preserve the documentation of this important chapter of American innovation and its broader impact. This is no longer the case.

To ensure that future generations can learn from current space exploration activities, it is imperative that private organizations preserve their historic records. With the burden of preservation shifted to innovative firms, some of them start-ups, the risk that these organizations will fail to preserve their history is non-trivial. After all, firms and trade associations are focused on current and future operations; their resources and appetite for preserving historical documentation over the long term, beyond what is mandated for legal and tax reasons, is typically low. Although not opposed to preservation, such activities are typically not a core competency of most businesses, especially start-ups. The newer challenges of preserving electronic (“born-digital”) records has only complicated this problem.

For over five decades, Hagley Library has provided an alternative to “going it alone” for our corporate and trade association partners. As a 501(c)3 organization committed to preserving and sharing the history of American enterprise and innovation, Hagley has provided a sustainable means for selected firms and trade associations to preserve and access their heritage, whether in analog or digital formats. We also conduct oral history interviews that capture information, nuance, and perspective that documents do not.

How Hagley developed its method of preserving the records of living businesses and trade associations, along the way becoming the predominant research library in the history of American business, technology, and industrial design, is the topic of this paper. The discussion I hope to inspire focuses on alternative means of archiving contemporary developments in space exploration and travel that have become increasingly privatized. The complexities confronting organizations in the current space industry, including the documentation their activities across a proliferation of new digital formats, need not put the historical memory of this enterprise at risk.