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ONE SMALL STEP? COLLECTION STRATEGIES FOR LIBRARIES, ARCHIVES, AND MUSEUMS
IN THE SPACE AGE

Abstract

In 1969, man first set foot on the moon and achieved a significant milestone in human history. Just 50 years earlier, Robert Goddard suggested that modern rockets might one day reach the moon and was lampooned in the press, as much of humanity saw space travel as a dreamy futuristic venture. Recognizing the immense challenge facing NASA, John F. Kennedy proclaimed in 1962 that “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.” The Saturn program turned these dreams and well laid plans into reality. Today we look back at 1969 with nostalgia, as fifty years have passed and the moon landing is for many a distant memory. Sadly, a number of the individuals involved in the Gemini and Apollo initiatives are no longer with us to give us insight into their actions. While we would like to think this era is well documented, the historical record is often far from complete and many stories are left untold. Libraries, Archives, and Museums (LAM’s) can and should develop a collaborative approach to collecting space history and ensure that acquisition and preservation of these materials goes beyond one small step and instead is one giant leap.

This paper will seek to answer the following questions: First, how successful have we been in documenting space history? Using case study examples from the University of Alabama in Huntsville Special Collections and Archives, we will briefly examine the past and present of documenting space history of the Apollo era. In 1969, acquisition was on the cutting edge as the university worked under a NASA grant to accumulate documentation for the Saturn V program, yet we still struggle to offer the complete picture. Second, how can libraries, archives, and museums (LAM’s) prepare themselves to document the next fifty years of space history? At the 2018 “To Boldly Preserve: Archiving for the Next Half-Century of Space Flight” a group of archivists, collectors, historians, librarians, museum curators, and space enthusiasts gathered to ponder this question. Sharing a list of suggestions which came out of this conference is important to ensure that we understand the challenges of collecting 21st Century space history so those writing historical monographs, visiting museums, or utilizing primary sources in the classroom in 2069 have the resources they need to interpret the past.