

U.S. NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS ADMINISTRATION
Transcript of National Archives History Office Oral History Interview
Subject: Steven Rhodes
Interviewer: Richard Green
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Richard Green: Okay. Thank you for participating in the National Archives Oral History Project. We are documenting the history of the agency by preserving firsthand accounts of events. My name is Richard Green. I'm based out of Archives II in College Park, MD, and I am assisting the agency historian, Jessie Kratz, with this interview. Today is Wednesday, March 19, 2025, and I'm speaking with Steven Rhodes, who works in Appraisal Team 4, in the Office of the Chief Records Officer. All right. Okay, Steve. So, to get us started, can you please tell me a little bit about where you are from and your educational background?

Steven Rhodes: Okay. I was born in Alexandria, VA. Except for four years in Germany, I grew up in Springfield, VA, subdivision Edsall Park. I graduated from Thomas Jefferson High School, which is interesting because when I went there, it was the smallest high school in Fairfax County, and it ultimately became the magnet school for geniuses and high-performing students. So, when I tell people I went to Thomas Jefferson High School, they assume I'm a lot smarter than I actually am. I went to Virginia Commonwealth University [VCU] as an undergraduate, originally to get into commercial art and journalism. In between my applications and starting to attend, I decided I wanted to go into pre-med. Then, I went into psychology. Then, I was in mass communications and, at one point, I interviewed for a position as a student editor on a newspaper. I didn't get it because there were more qualified candidates, but the editor said I had real talent. But he said, if you want to learn how to write, you should just be a history major. And as it happened, I was getting all A's in history, so I switched over to a history major. I got a BA [bachelor of arts] in history from VCU in 1979, and then I attended graduate school at Virginia Tech in Blacksburg [VA], which was a big change, because I loved Richmond [VA] and Blacksburg is in a valley surrounded by mountains.

Because of my background, I was assigned to be a teaching assistant to James I. Robertson, who was one of the leading scholars of the Civil War. At that point, I was actually looking to do a thesis on Vietnam military aspects, but I couldn't find a professor who was willing to let me pursue that as a thesis, because this was 1980. So, you know, we're not that far removed from Vietnam, and the general position was that if it's less than 10 years old, it's not history, it's journalism. So I ended up doing my thesis on Jeremy Gilmer, who was the Chief of the Confederate Engineers. And one of the reasons I did that was, when I was in Richmond, I had an internship with the National Park Service, and later I worked for the Park Service as a living history interpreter. So, I had some background [knowledge] about the fortifications around Richmond. So anyway, I wrote my thesis, it was a long one, and I got my degree. Other than my family, no one was particularly impressed that I had a master's in history.

So, when I was at VCU, I had a job with James Branch Cabell Library, which is VCU's library. So, I applied for an opening at Carol Newman Library at Virginia Tech, and I got a job with a salary of \$8,000 a year. And even if you adjust for inflation, that's still not very much. But, to make a long story short, I gradually rose until I was a library assistant, which is a supervisor, but you don't have your MLS [master's of library science]. It was pretty grueling work. And I would have 8 to 12 people that I was supervising. And ultimately, I decided that I should get a library degree, but I was thinking that I would eventually work for the National Archives.

So, Bebbie and I were living in—that's my wife—we were living in Roanoke [VA]. My parents were also living in Roanoke. And we had a house. We sold the house and moved up to Maryland. And I went to the University of Maryland, and my course advisor was Frank Burke, who was the former Acting Archivist of the United States. The first time I met with him, he said, "What do you want to do?" I said, "Well, I'm kind of leaning towards working for the National Archives." And he said, "You know, you don't need an MLS to work for the National Archives. I could probably get you into the Archives now." And I said, "Well, we've already paid for the courses, so I may as well get the degree." So I did get the degree, and [when I graduated] there weren't any archival jobs open and certainly nothing in the National Archives.

So I ended up being at a law library with McKenna, Connor, and Cuneo as primarily a cataloger, but I was also a legal reference librarian, which was a learning experience because I didn't take any law library classes. But I learned and had a lot of interaction with government agencies. But it was a very stressful kind of job and I really wanted to get more into something historical. So, I applied for and got a job as the Assistant Director of the DAR [Daughters of the American Revolution] Library, which had a staff of about 26. And my supervisor, the library director, Eric Grundset, was frequently off on conventions. He was a popular speaker and so on. So, [frequently] I was actually running the library day-to-day, which was fun. But, I still, all of this time, while I'm at the law library, while I'm at DAR, I was applying to the National Archives for a position. And I'd gotten to the point where I was considering it more of a hobby than something that would work out for me. [Then] after 15 years, I got a call from Judy Barnes at the Washington National Records Center [WNRC], and she asked me if I was interested in a position as an archivist and could I come out to WNRC and have an interview? And I did, and Judy hired me. I was one of four archivists hired at the time [Addie Compton, Tom Eisenger, Steven Rhodes, Lynn Stewart].

Rich: Wow. So, I guess I'm curious. So, you have a storied history before you even got here. How did all of these positions and work experiences lead you to feel prepared for working at the National Archives?

Steve: Well . . .

Rich: Or did they not? That's fair as well.

Steve: Because I did a master's thesis, I had actually gone to what's now Archives I to look at records. And that was an experience because, at the time—we're talking 1981, 1982—when

you came in the front doors, there was a desk, and they would ask you what you were interested in. Why did you come to the Archives? And they would direct you to—what would they call it?—the subject matter expert. So, they sent me to the office of a guy named Mike Musick. He specialized in “old Army,” and he was wearing, like, a polo shirt and khaki pants, and he had a nice big desk and an office with a window. And he questioned me about what I was interested in, and he put his feet up on his desk, and he just rattled off the record groups for me to look at. So, I had some minor experience working with the National Archives as a researcher. Then, when I was at the DAR, we had a lot of research files. They have files on the people who participated in the American Revolution and there was a team of three [ladies] that responded to questions from the public—research questions. Some of them were, you know, pretty well thought out, and some requests were not as good as . . . The one that I remember best is we received a photograph of a woman from the 1920s, and the request was, “Is this the sister or the mother of John Smith?” So, I was directly in charge of those three researchers.

I [liked] the idea of responding to the public on research questions because, when I was applying for the National Archives, I was ultimately thinking that I would be a subject matter expert like Mike Musick. That never happened. [laughs] But, I was comfortable in the position at WNRC because I was an archivist. We did a lot of data entry work with NARS-5, which was the recordkeeping system for the records held at the WNRC. And I had had quite a bit of experience on the technical positions in libraries. So, I had that. And one of the things we were supposed to be doing was, when boxes came into WNRC, we were supposed to inspect the boxes and make sure that the permanent materials had a box list and so on. The volume of that kind of precluded any success. But we tried for a while. But anyway, the things that I was working on at WNRC were things that I was familiar with and not—this is more records management than it is what I was thinking of archival work, where you're dealing with the public.

Rich: And so when you started working at the National Archives, this was what? Do you recall what year this was?

Steve: That was 2004. I remember it because I started in May, and I started right before my 20th wedding anniversary.

Rich: Okay.

Steve: In fact, I gave the DAR, once I got the job offer, a month's notice. And I tried to stretch it out to where I would be off on my anniversary. But Anne Brown, who was the administrative assistant at WNRC, called me, and I talked to her about it and said, “You know, maybe I could delay for another week.” And she said, “Do you want the job or not?” [laughs] And I said, “I will be in.” [laughs]

Rich: Yes. You said yes, right?

Steve: Yes.

Rich: So, you talked about your past and that you kept applying and applying and applying and applying, and then you finally got it. So, you finally got here in 2004. Any first, initial impressions of the National Archives when you first started?

Steve: Well, if you're familiar with [the WNRC in] Suitland [MD], it's a bustling kind of place. I mean, I would compare it to a train station at rush hour because there's forklifts all around. People are piling boxes on pallets. There's people retrieving boxes. There's people shelving boxes. You've got trucks coming in the loading bay that are getting unloaded, and we're going down to the loading bay and opening up boxes and looking at it. And it's an enormous place. It's sort of like—Archives II doesn't look like it's that big, but if you're standing in a particular spot, it's a very large building. And the same thing with WNRC. Each of the bays where records are kept are the length of a football field. There was a story at the end of *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, where the Ark of the Covenant is being wheeled off to storage, that somehow somebody on Steven Spielberg's staff had visited WNRC, and that's what that scene was based off of.

Rich: Is there any truth to that?

Steve: Not that I know of, but it's a good story.

Rich: [laughs] It's a good story, though. I'm glad it's noted in the record.

Steve: Yeah.

Rich: Okay. And so you talked a little bit about, you know, your first position there. So you were at Suitland. You were at WNRC. What were some of your responsibilities in that role, in your first job here?

Steve: A lot of it had to do with receiving [Standard Form] 135s and checking them to make sure that everything was correct. And I guess I should say that Standard Form 135 was a request to transfer records to WNRC. So, in that capacity, I was frequently calling records managers or records officers who were submitting the 135s. And that worked very neatly with my experiences at McKenna, Conner, and Cuneo, where I was calling up contacts at FDA [U.S. Food and Drug Administration] or the State Department or so on. So, I wasn't unfamiliar with the process.

Rich: Right. Gotcha. Okay. And any other major projects or issues you encountered while you were at WNRC?

Steve: Well, I should mention that the building, which was opened when Lyndon Johnson was President, had leaks. The first time we—the archivists—encountered this was a leak from the roof dripped onto some Navy records. This was within a few months of starting at WNRC. What we did was we set up drying racks in one of the unused rooms near the loading docks and we laid out the records on the drying racks with fans going to dry out the records. I should mention

that these particular records were case files from NCIS [Naval Criminal Investigative Service] and they included photographs. I can't mention the subject matters, but it wasn't pretty and we had to lay out each page so we saw everything. Then, just after the July 4 weekend in 2006, I came back to work after being off and there was virtually no one in the office. I'd been off for over a week. My family went down to New Orleans, so my wife could attend ALA [American Library Association]. It was the first conference in New Orleans after Katrina and half the population of the city was still gone. Those that were still there were really excited about the conference. Everyone was friendly and welcoming. It was a great time. Anyway, I came back to WNRC and like I said, hardly anyone was in the office. So I asked where is everybody? It turned out that over the holiday weekend, a pipe had burst and flooded one of the stacks. It was all hands on deck. Tom Eisinger, who by that time had transferred to legislative downtown, even returned to assist. So for over a week we worked at getting the records out of the flooded stacks. I remember that at one point we five archivists were walking together like Earps going to the OK Corral and someone said "Look, it's the Fifth Dimension" because it was Janet [Kennelly], Addie, Lynn, Tom and I. WNRC contracted with a vendor who provided freezer trucks. The records would be frozen and then dried at someplace in Texas, I think Austin, and returned to us, maybe not as good as new, but definitely not ruined and lost. At one point, I supervised the loading on one truck which consisted of me saying "Great job, guys" because the shelvees knew what to do. In December 2005, we—the archivists at WNRC—received an Archivist Achievement Award for dealing with recovery of records affected by the leaks.

We were also responsible for the permanent transfer each year as well as destruction of temporary records at WNRC. We were assigned agencies to contact—mine included Navy and NRC [Nuclear Regulatory Commission] and Air Force—as to whether or not they wanted to destroy or transfer records. We had a form letter we sent to the agency records officers and a form they had to sign to transfer or destroy records. If the agency didn't sign off on the form, NARA would not destroy or transfer the records and they would stay at WNRC. Surprisingly, every year some ROs would not respond one way or the other. So the records would languish at WNRC. The agency would still pay for storage. Anyway, that wasn't all that I did.

Alan Kramer was the director of WNRC, and he had a friend named Dottie. I can't remember her last name. But anyway, Dottie would commute, to some extent, with Alan. Alan would drop her off at a metro station, and then he would drive to Suitland. Dottie worked for the Department of Labor. And Labor had, at one point, acquired the records for the National Skills Standard Board [NSSB], which was a temporary commission or board, if you will, that at sunset—they had sunsetted unexpectedly and pretty rapidly because their mission was to develop standards for particular positions and, in actuality, in looking over their records, they spent a lot of time—the members of the board—doing field trips to, say, Sweden or Scotland or so on, and looking at positions, but they didn't seem to be working that hard at it. And when the board would meet, they would meet at golf resorts that were extremely expensive, and they'd make it a long weekend and so on. So, ultimately, NSSB got notification that they were shutting down on, like, a Thursday, and their office was closed on a Friday.

Well, Labor's problem through Dottie was that they'd assumed control of all of NSSB's records, but they didn't have any idea what was in the boxes. And Dottie asked Alan if they could send the records to WNRC and could have the WNRC do an inventory of the boxes. So Alan agreed. And once the boxes arrived, they decided that one of the five archivists, including myself, should do the inventory down in the basement. I was chosen because nobody else wanted to do it. [laughs] For this particular project, I reported to Ray Whitelock, who was the Assistant Director of the WNRC, and Ray had a reputation among the people at WNRC as being something of a curmudgeon. And he called me into his office. He told me what the project was, and he had been looking at my resume, and he told me so. He said, "I've been looking at your resume." And he said, "My God, you've done a lot of stuff." [I said] "Well, thank you." So, there was a room down in the basement, and I went through the records box by box and did an inventory, and they assigned one of the shelvers to come down and type up my notes and so on. And so, I was spending, like, most of my day down in the basement, and it was a little creepy because there wasn't a lot of traffic in the basement. And I remember one day, I was kneeling down. I was going through a box, and this guy appeared at the door and he said, "Are you down here all by yourself?" I said, "Yes," and he said, "Huh. How about that?" [laughs] And then he left. [laughs]

Rich: All kinds of strange things happen in the stack, sometimes, huh?

Steve: Yeah. So, thankfully, I did a good job, and Alan was thinking in terms of—WNRC used to have an agency assistance program—and he was thinking of starting it up again. And as it happened, NHTSA, the National Highway Traffic Safety [Administration], had asked the WNRC if they could provide support to NHTSA, because NHTSA, like most of the Department of Transportation, was moving from their headquarters at L'Enfant Plaza down to where the Nationals Park is now, off of M Street. And there was virtually nothing there other than the Navy Yard. It was pretty desolate. So a group of us went to NHTSA and, by this time, I had gotten used to not wearing a tie every day. And everybody else, the males, were wearing a tie and our NHTSA [was in a suit], and I wasn't. And I said to Alan, "Oh my God. I should have worn a tie." And Alan said, "That's okay. You're an archivist. They expect you to be eccentric."

Rich: [laughs] Yeah. I don't know if I consider archivists eccentric, but I'll take it. Why not?

Steve So, WNRC and NHTSA agreed on terms, and I was assigned to do it. That involved initially doing an inventory of all the offices in NHTSA. And then it was educating them on records management principles. I had a number of small talks with different offices. And I boxed things up. I did everything you could think of. And at the same time, a couple of floors down from NHTSA, was the Federal Highway Administration. And their records officer, Victor Wagher, had worked at WNRC, and he got wind of what I was doing at NHTSA. So, he asked WNRC if somebody could do the same thing for Federal Highway. So, I started doing the same thing for Federal Highway. I was down at L'Enfant Plaza three days a week: Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday, and at WNRC on Mondays and Fridays. And I got to be kind of a fixture around Federal Highway and NHTSA, and people would recognize me. And there were a couple of people who would, when they'd see me in the hall, say, "Hey, Records Dude." [laughs]

Rich: Yeah. There are worse nicknames than Records Dude, I think.

Steve: That lasted until 2007. And then I also was involved in initiating projects for OFHEO [Office of Federal Housing Enterprise Oversight], Peace Corps, Rural Development, and a couple of other agencies. And it got to the point that this was becoming fairly lucrative for WNRC, so it wasn't just me anymore. It was Lynn Stewart as well. Then they hired a woman named Valerie Garrett. So, Valerie and I teamed on a couple of projects, and then it ended up that Lynn became the supervisor of the archivists, as previously Judy was the supervisor of the archivists, but they decided it would be more appropriate to have a separate supervisor. Lynn Stewart became the supervisor for the archivists, and she and Valerie were taking the lead on doing these outreach projects along with Addie and Janet to some extent.

So my duties shifted. One of the other archivists referred to me facetiously as the "King of the [SF] 135s." Nobody really wanted to do the 135s. So, I was doing the bulk of them. And then, we're talking in about 2007 or so, I asked for a rotation with the appraisal archivists [at Archives II]. So, I applied, and it was approved. So, I was working out of College Park for three months, and it was as my ultimate supervisor, Jerry Nashorn, once said, "It's a long process learning to be an appraisal archivist." So, I didn't really work on schedules that much during the rotation. I was doing a lot of reading, answering questions, and so on. And what schedules I was working on, I had somebody working with me, either Sue Elter, who was the team lead, or Sam Welsh. And at the end of the rotation, I went back to WNRC and went back to working on 135s. But I had enjoyed working as an appraisal archivist and a position came up, so I applied for a transfer, and I got it.

Rich: I'm glad you did. So, when did you leave WNRC to come to appraisal? Do you recall what year that is?

Steve: I think it's 2008. It was in the summer. I'm pretty sure.

Rich: Okay.

Steve: I want to say July.

Rich: Okay. And you've been there ever since?

Steve: Yes.

Rich: All right. And I guess maybe I should mention, I guess for the record, I am also Steve's supervisor. I'm also in appraisal. And I jumped at the opportunity to interview Steve, to pick his brain and capture his knowledge about all these things. So, all of that to be said, I do think all of your experience, like, gosh, makes you just the perfect appraisal archivist, between your pre-NARA experience and then, you know, doing the box lists and working on the agency systems team. You were, like, crafted in an appraisal archivist laboratory.

Steve: Yes. [laughs]

Rich: [You were] just meant to be an appraisal archivist. So, all that to be said, can you tell me a little bit more, kind of from your perspective, about the role of appraisal, kind of what you foresee or what you see the mission as, and maybe just some of the things you've been working on?

Steve: Well, at the base is the mission is to make sure that the records that are transferred to the National Archives by agencies are permanent. They're actually permanent. And that'll start with the descriptions that you get from the schedules that are submitted by the agencies.

Rich: And I've always viewed it as we have a big impact on the broader historical narrative. You, Steve Rhodes, are determining what comes to the National Archives. Granted, it's not up to you. But, you know, a lot of it is, as the appraisal archivist. I've always viewed it as a really unique and important part of the National Archives, if I do say so myself.

Steve: Yeah, it's the people who aren't familiar with records management, it's difficult to explain it.

Rich: Yeah.

Steve: After I started, I think about a year after I started as an appraisal archivist, I brought home a copy of an old schedule that had been approved. And it was like a Friday evening, and both of my sons were home. I don't even think they were teenagers yet. They probably were. Anyway, before we had dinner, I explained to my wife, my two sons, and a friend of my sons, what it was I did, showing them the features of the schedule and what I was doing and so on. But, you know, I've actually had members of the public who have called me, and they see the word appraisal and they'll say, "Is this like *Antique Roadshow*, where you can let me know how much something is worth?" I said, "No." [laughs]

Rich: Right. Yeah. I've had those kinds of questions as well. Okay. So, we'll delve into some of these in a little more detail. But anything off the bat as far as some of your biggest accomplishments or highlights since your time as appraisal? Anything that stands out?

Steve: Well, when I came back, I was replacing Mike Waesche, who had been on Team 4, or the Military Appraisal Team, as they referred to themselves. And Mike had worked out at WNRC—I knew him—and he wanted to go back to WNRC, and that's why there was an opening for me. So, there's a bit of a transition period. And Mike took me to—he had a visit planned with the American Battle Monuments Commission [ABMC], and it was just a general kind of meeting. So, Mike brought me along and introduced me as his replacement. We met with, not the commissioners, but the upper management at ABMC, including a guy named Steve Koll who was the records officer for ABMC, but he was also, more importantly, head of HR [Human Resources] for ABMC. So, in the midst of this meeting, Steve said, "You know what we could

really use is for somebody from NARA to go over to France and Italy and look at the records that are held by the cemeteries," because that's what ABMC does. They're responsible for American military cemeteries and monuments outside the continental U.S. So, they made the proposal that I, as their appraisal archivist, go over to Europe and do an inventory of the records at select cemeteries. I agreed, [but] I felt bad because he didn't get to go on the trip and I apologized to Mike. I said, "I'm sorry." He goes, "It's alright. You know, I didn't know." [laughs] He didn't know it was going to happen. So, subsequently, Steve [Koll] sent out emails to all of the superintendents of the cemeteries in France, Belgium, and Italy saying, "Our appraisal archivist is available to come and visit your cemetery and inspect your records. Is anyone interested?" And, to a person, the superintendents said, "No. No, thank you. We're good. No." [laughs] Yeah.

So, ultimately, Steve ended up choosing cemeteries in France and in Italy for me to visit. And also, I was to go to ABMC's European headquarters in Garches [France], which is on the outskirts of Paris. So, that was the fall of 2008, I think. But I should mention that ABMC was paying [the expenses] for me to go. So, I got permission to go, and I visited Garches, which the locals thought it—it's a gated manor house—I was told by the ABMC staffers there that the locals assumed they were CIA [Central Intelligence Agency]. I went to Garches. I went to the Aisne-Marne Cemetery and the Oise-Aisne Cemetery in France. And then I inspected the monument to Chateau-Thierry, because within the monument—and it was an enormous monument—within the monument, there were rooms where they were storing records.

Rich: Wow.

Steve: Now, they were storing records on basically dirt floors [laughs]. But, fortunately, it wasn't anything permanent. And in Italy, I went to the Rome offices of ABMC and to Florence and to Nettuno, where the dead from Anzio were buried, which Nettuno is a seaside town, but, in appearance, it's, I would say, like Beltsville, MD, by the sea.

Rich: [laughs] They've always said that, haven't they?

Steve: Yeah. So, that was very interesting, because I saw all manner of things. You know, glass plate negatives. I saw the original plans and plots for cemeteries. That was in Garches. But, at the same time, none of the superintendents wanted me there. And whenever I went to a cemetery, the superintendent didn't show up, or at least they weren't there to greet me. The first cemetery I visited, other than a very small one in Paris, was Aisne-Marne. We had paid for my wife to go with me and ABMC Europe made all of the arrangements for hotels and so on. So, for Aisne-Marne Cemetery, we were in this enormous hotel on a hillside in the Marne Valley. And the restaurant in the hotel had Michelin stars, and the chief gardener for the Aisne-Marne Cemetery was going to come to the hotel and pick me up. And so, he showed up around 7–7:30 and drove me to the cemetery. And that was an experience, because he drove very fast and, in fact, on the way to the cemetery, he passed an ambulance that had its lights flashing. [laughs]

Rich: [laughs] Okay.

Steve: He dropped me off at the superintendent's house, and there was no one there. And after about half an hour of wandering around, this very pregnant woman shows up, and she turned out to be the assistant superintendent of the cemetery. And she says, "What do you want?" And so I told her what I was there for, and she said, "I've never heard of this. I'll have to call the superintendent." And he affirmed that, yeah, I was supposed to be there. And so all of their records were in the basement of the superintendent's house or headquarters or what have you. So, I went down there and I was pulling boxes off and so on. Around noon, the assistant superintendent said, "I am going to lunch. I can lock you in the building, or you can leave." And I said, "Well, you know, I'll just walk around the cemetery." [laughs]

Rich: Okay.

Steve: So, she left. She eventually came back. But while I was walking around, and this really doesn't have anything to do with the Archives, but I thought it was fascinating. Each cemetery has a chapel, and the chapel at the Aisne-Marne Cemetery is on a hillside. So, I went into the chapel, and there were some locked doors. And, of course, I was thinking, well, maybe they've got records here and so on. So, I tried the doors. They're locked. So, I went around the back of the cemetery chapel, and there was a staircase going up the hillside. So, I climbed the hillside, and I got up to the top and there's a nice gravel path and so on. And I'm looking on either side of the path, and I see that there's a major depression on both sides of the gravel. And I thought, "Huh. That's interesting." I kept walking a little ways and then I would see off the sides huge divots, if you will, in the earth. And I'm like, "Huh." And I walked a little bit further, and I saw this ruined building. And on the building was a plaque for a particular American division from World War I. And then it dawned on me that what I was seeing were shell holes and the remains of the trench.

Rich: Wow.

Steve: And I walked a little bit further and found a concrete block house.

Rich: Wow.

Steve: So, yeah, it gave me chills.

Rich: Yeah. I mean, it's got to be one of the most interesting appraisal visits that anyone has been on. Yeah. It's really interesting though. So, do you have any sense of if some of those records were permanent and if they ended up—did any of the ones that you saw, any sense of if they ended up here? Did we get them? How does the story end?

Steve: We should have.

Rich: Okay.

Steve: Because, well, let's see. In 2023, Lisa Crunk, who's the current records officer for the American Battle Monuments Commission, submitted, I think, 10 schedules that would cover all of the records produced by ABMC, because ABMC has traditionally kept NARA at arm's length, and particularly the cemeteries. The superintendents and the assistant superintendents are basically little fiefdoms. They're still, as far as I know, if they're living in a particular country and they get married, they have to marry someone from the country that they're in. So, like the one that I remember was at the Oise-Aisne Cemetery. His name was Jeff Arnio. And they were in France, and his wife was French.

Rich: Wow.

Steve: So, I assume the same thing was true with the cemeteries in Italy. Generally, my reception was like the superintendent of the Nettuno cemetery, who ultimately showed up late in the afternoon. I was in an open office, and there were like five or six desks. And the superintendent, the assistant superintendent, and the chief gardener were talking while I was looking through records. They were talking in Italian because they have to be fluent in that particular language, but they were talking in Italian. And after a break in the conversation, the superintendent said, "So, what now? You're going to come over with a bunch of people from NARA and seize our records and take them back?" And I said, "No, you're going to box them up and send them to us." [laughs] And that didn't happen. But yeah, looking at things in each place, it would be pretty obvious that, you know, what was permanent. Like in the Aisne-Marne Cemetery, they had original glass plate photography of the building of the Chateau-Thierry monument back in the 1920s. So, like I said, you know, cemetery plots, the original plots in Garches, they were in these enormous cabinets and they were hanging from wooden rods. And these are things that, you know, they weren't 100 years old at the time, but they were pretty close. And they claimed they were digitizing all of these things. And there was actually a French engineer who was working for ABMC who said he was in charge of the digitization project. But I never saw any evidence of that. In fact, there's one particular room that had a lot of books and some records shelved and so on. One day I was standing up and I was looking for boxes, and the engineer came in and he said, "You can sit at the desk over here." And I said, "No, I'm fine." And he says, "I can bring you a chair." And I said, "No, I don't need a chair." And he goes, [French accent] "Oh, well. Do as you will!" [laughs]

Rich: [laughs]

Steve: So anyway, I think I got a little off [topic]. [laughs]

Rich: That's okay. [laughs] It was a fascinating story regardless.

Steve: Yes. There's a lot of stuff that was old. And there was one series—and I'll tell you this—it should have been permanent. It should have been. But it's not going to be destroyed. And that's the guest ledgers for the cemeteries. And bear in mind that these cemeteries opened in the early 1920s. And at the Aisne-Marne Cemetery, they had ledgers going back to the

beginning, of who the visitors were. A lot of the initial visitors were what were called "Gold Star Mothers." Those are women whose sons were killed during the war. And then you would have just regular American tourists, and there was a lot of French traffic. So, I'm leafing through the ledgers, and in June, 1940, all of a sudden, all the visitors who signed in were German.

Rich: Wow.

Steve: Enlisted men and officers. And it would stay that way with a mixture of some French until, say, July 1944. And then all of a sudden, all the visitors were American soldiers.

Rich: So, were Germans—I guess, why do you think that is, I suppose?

Steve: The Germans, from my experience living in Germany, have a reverence for cemeteries, for one thing. And these are all soldiers, and they were paying their respects to fellow soldiers who were killed in the line of duty.

Rich: Wow. That's fascinating.

Steve: So, like I said, because they were ledgers, they wouldn't be considered a permanent item based on the GRS [General Records Schedules]. Although, at this point, you could probably make an argument for intrinsic value, but—

Rich: Yeah. I'd say so.

Steve: —to the cemeteries, they're like important permanent artifacts. It's their history. So, I was happy with it. They weren't getting destroyed. But anyway, I think your original question was, are they sending stuff over? And according to Lisa [Crunk], she did get the cemeteries to box things up and send them to ABMC headquarters in Arlington [VA].

Rich: Okay.

Steve: So, they were coming.

Rich: That's great. No, I'm happy to hear that. And, I don't know, I feel like it's a great story. One, just all of the interesting side stories involved, but it also shows, you know, one appraiser's work. You know, you went out there and looked at the stuff and said it was permanent. And, eventually, it comes to the National Archives. And I feel like it's exactly how the process should work in theory and, I don't know, it's indicative of your career that you reviewed such an interesting collection and navigated all these issues, and hopefully this stuff is with us now or will be soon. And you can come back in retirement and do some research. So, anyway. Well, I'm glad you brought that up, because I wanted to at least ask you about it. I knew about this visit. I don't know if I knew all the details. So, I'm glad you brought it up. I was going to ask about it regardless.

Changing gears just a bit here, obviously you're still in appraisal. Notably, you are the appraiser for the Navy and have been the appraiser for the Navy since you pretty much been here? How long have you been the appraiser for the Navy?

Steve: I think since the beginning of 2009.

Rich: Okay.

Steve: I ended up with the Navy and the Department of Energy because my reputation is that I'm a nice guy who can work with anybody. And the appraisal archivist who was my predecessor was having difficulty with the then-records manager for Navy, [name redacted], and his supervisor, [name redacted]. Their personalities clashed, and they weren't getting anywhere. So, my team lead, Sue Elter, asked me if I would be interested in taking Navy on as their appraisal archivist. So, I did. I've been the appraisal archivist for the Navy for now, I guess, 16 years. And the same is true with the Department of Energy [DOE] and the Nuclear Regulatory Commission and the National Guard Bureau. It was like, you know, Steve can work with anybody. He'll be able to work with these people. [laughs]

Rich: Yeah. I mean, well, I can also attest to the "nice guy, can work with anybody" mentality. I would certainly agree with that. So obviously, since 2009, not only are you the appraisal archivist for Navy and Energy, I think you've also built a reputation around the National Archives as a subject matter expert for Navy records and Energy records. I know staff in Research Services come and ask you questions and even forward you probably requests from researchers and certainly questions from agencies. Throughout this time, is there anything that stands out either as major projects you've worked on or maybe even major changes throughout the years as it pertains to, I guess, whatever you want to talk about, either Navy or Energy.

Steve: Well, the Navy has always been interesting. We have had some difficulties in the last few years with the Navy records officers. I still have been able to work with them, but they're not as forthcoming with records and schedules as they once were. Energy has had an interesting number of people as their records officers. When I took over at Energy, their records officer was John Davenport, who had formerly worked in the General Counsel's Office here at NARA, and he had a staff of about seven. But, like most of the people that followed him—DOE is a vast agency, and they're big, and they have lots of different offices—John couldn't exercise any control over them. And he was followed by Troy Manigault, who I believe was retired military. He also tried to make sure that the various components of Energy answered to him on questions and records management, and he had limited success. And then after him was—and there were acting along the way, but they were never in place for very long. Maria Levesque was the last records officer that I worked with. She recently retired. She, interestingly, was not trained in records management. She was an IT [information technology] professional. So, I was able to assist her on that. And she took NARA courses and so on. She proved to be quite good. They don't—the components of Energy have never had a problem with contacting me directly. They usually don't go through the records officer. And even now, the schedules that DOE are producing are done by two ladies in Ohio that work for DOE. As far as a project with DOE, Andy

Smith, former archivist with the National Archives, and I were asked to look at the records center created by the Office of Legacy Management [OLM] of DOE, which is in West Virginia. And the town escapes me right at the moment [Morgantown]. But anyway, the Office of Legacy Management, it sounds like, you know, legacy management, dealing with history, important stuff. OLM is the component of DOE that cleans up toxic spills and deals with nuclear waste. So, they invited NARA to come and inspect their new facility that they built. It was a totally green building. And I think the place was so clean you could eat off the floors. And the bulk of what they had there were records relating to Yucca Mountain.

Rich: Interesting.

Steve: So, it was a very successful visit. And Andy and I agreed that it was a great—they had a great program. And because of what we wrote, the building got some sort of green award. But anyway, that was a major project for DOE. And I've said to you, you know, this is all part of my nuclear experience because I, you know, know more about nuclear weapons than I ever wanted [laughs] and nuclear energy.

Rich: Right? Yeah. So you mentioned your experience with DOE. And I won't assume, but how does that compare to your experience with the Navy? So, you mentioned all the different components of DOE kind of work with you directly. It strikes me that that may not be the same from different departments. Is that right?

Steve: It's not. When I took over for the Navy, as I mentioned, [name redacted] was in charge and was essentially the records officer for the Navy. And under [name redacted] was [name redacted], a former Master Chief Petty Officer, who was the records manager for the Navy. And the other component of that team was [name redacted], who was the records manager for the Marine Corps. And both [name redacted] and [name redacted] could have a temper if the situation warranted, I guess, or even when it didn't. But they worked relatively well with the Marine Corps, and they worked well with me. There was a conflict then between [name redacted] and the Marines and [name redacted], as her supervisor, in that [name redacted] insisted that the records management program for the Marines be independent of Navy supervision. And that annoyed [name redacted] to no end. And not long after I took over the Navy, we used to have a thing called, NARA would have a conference called RACO [Records Administration Conference]. And I can't remember exactly what the acronym stands for, but we don't do it anymore. But it was a day-long conference for agencies run by NARA. And there would be, you know, midday, there would be a luncheon. At that luncheon, agencies were recognized for excellence in records management. And it wasn't every agency. It would be a select few. And you actually had to submit an application for consideration.

I was notified by one of the supervisors in what was then NWML [Life Cycle Management Division], Wilda Logan. Wilda contacted me and said that the Marine Corps Records Management Program had submitted their paperwork to be considered for this archival award. And she said, "Does [name redacted] know about this?" And I said, "I don't know. It's the first I'm hearing about it." So I called [name redacted], and he did not know that [the Marines] had

sent in that paperwork, and he was not pleased. And he did some shouting and some cursing. And then he said, "Well, you have to turn them down." And I said, "You know, that's not up to me." He said, "Well, you need to pass the word up. And NARA should just tear up those applications. You shouldn't even consider it." I'm paraphrasing the conversation. Well, as it happened, much to [name redacted]'s disappointment, the Marines did get an award that year, and it was handed over to [name redacted] by the Archivist of the United States at the end of the luncheon.

So, after that—and I would say that Matt Staden, of all of the Navy records managers or officers—I think he was the best, because he worked to get records to the National Archives, and he worked to get things scheduled. [name redacted] left to become head of the [name redacted]. He was actually a pretty good friend of [Archivist of the United States] David Ferriero. When [name redacted] left, [name redacted] applied for his position and was turned down. So, at that point, [name redacted] decided to leave the Navy and go to the Veterans Administration as a records officer. Their replacements were James Wilson Quayle, who—James replaced [name redacted], but the title changed. He was no longer the records officer. Joel Westphal replaced [name redacted]. And once Joel was in place, the position was changed in title to records officer. And Joel went from being a [GS-]13 to a 14, which [name redacted] told me later, "If I'd known they were going to make it a 14, I would have stayed."

But the key to this is Joel Westphal became the records officer. The Marine Corps records manager stayed a records manager, and the understanding was that they would be subordinate to Joel, which didn't go over well. At the same time, I had had a pretty open relationship with the records managers for the various Navy components to where they would contact me if they had questions, and they could arrange to have their own agency assistance projects with NARA and so on. Once Joel and James had their positions, they requested that NARA withdraw all of the Navy components' names and contact information from our website. And NARA agreed to do that. And I was barred from communicating with any records manager of any component in the Navy. So, as of right now, of all of the Navy components I know, I know who the records officer is for the Naval Academy and, within the last few months, I've spoken with the NAVFAC [Naval Facilities Engineering Systems Command] records manager, who's new. But otherwise, we haven't had any contact [with the other components]. And, like I said, that continued when Joel, I think, went to the [Gerald R.] Ford [Presidential] Library as assistant director and James maintained his position, although I can't recall his title exactly. But he was director of something having to do with administration and records and so on.

Then James got a promotion, and his place was filled by Helena Gilbert, and Joel Westphal was replaced by Maurice King. And initially, I didn't get on well with Maurice. Then, he did a two-year rotation at the Naval War College, and when he came back, he seemed a lot more open and friendly to me. But we still, you know, can't contact the records managers for the components. And after a recent NARA inspection of the Navy Records Management Program, both Maurice and Helena left the Navy.

And the new Navy Records Officer is [name redacted]. And she's maintained the stance of Maurice and Joel, even to the point where she called me and yelled at me over the phone when I let the Marine Corps know that their Capstone submission had been approved, which, you know, to me, was just kind of a courtesy. But [name redacted] didn't see it that way. Well, most of this was going on up until shortly before the pandemic. Jill Glenewinkel, who was a former appraisal archivist was the Marine Corps records manager, but she and [name redacted] didn't get along well. But she stayed until [name redacted] and XXXX both left. And she was still in place when James Wilson Quayle took over. And then, she retired.

She was replaced by a woman named Kim Enright-Lamere, who had maybe about five or six people in her staff. Under Kim, the Marine Corps was producing a lot of schedules. Her team was working really well. [But] there were some things I didn't much care for. When they were initiating a schedule for a record series that had been identified, the Marine Corps Records Management [Program] would send a questionnaire to the program office asking them to fill out the pertinent information. Then, the schedule would be based off of that. Well, the program officer, whomever was assigned to fill the form out, usually didn't have any idea of how records management worked. So, it would usually be filled with bureaucratic language that said nothing. And the way that I got around that was, if I had, say, a system that the Marine Corps wanted to schedule, and the schedule didn't have any particularly pertinent information to it, I did a search on the internet. And, in almost every instance, there would be a PowerPoint presentation that the Marine Corps had posted somewhere that said in great detail what the system did and how it worked and why it was important and all the information that I needed. So, I would just rewrite the Marine Corps schedule.

Rich: And just hearing you talk about all this, it strikes me that one of the things that I think makes our jobs in appraisal unique is, you know, we're dealing with all of the traditional archival components, dealing with different formats, and, you know, making these decisions on what should come to the National Archives and all that good stuff. You're also dealing with all these different personalities and different cultures of the different agencies. And I think one thing, if you don't mind me saying that you do exceptionally well is just, you know, you have all this institutional knowledge, you know how things have evolved over the years, and you just take your archival knowledge and just navigate the personal issues very well. And it's just a very tricky part of the job and, you know, I don't know, something that you really bring to the table and something, at least, I will certainly miss once you leave. So first of all, thanks for everything you do. I did want to touch on just a little bit, so you've been with appraisal since 2008. At a higher level, can you tell me a little bit about how it's changed and maybe how it's stayed the same?

Steve: Well, the basic part of the job appraising the records hasn't changed. We do have a much better training program for new appraisers than we did when I took over, because my training consisted of—I got two large three-ring binders full of information, and my instructions were, "Read this over." And then Sam Welsh was sort of my mentor. Sue Elter asked him to do that, but I don't think Sam's heart was really in it. And his main advice to me was, "Pay

attention to the regulations." So eventually I, you know, learned how to do it. But I said Sue said it, and Jerry Nashorn, who was my supervisor, said it: The learning curve is long.

Rich: Yeah.

Steve: So, those two binders were basically our SOPs [Standard Operating Procedures], and now our SOPs have expanded that it would probably account for about 10 three-ring binders.

Rich: We do like our SOPs here in appraisal, don't we?

Steve: Yeah.

Rich: How about the change, you know, towards a more electronic environment? Have you noticed that in your work at all?

Steve: Yeah, it's been gradual, but yeah. We've gone from—and I've been going through old files and so on, and old emails—and we go from the point where the files were all paper, and then we had a hybrid where some of the stuff was being done electronically, but it was still basically paper, like the SHU [Stakeholder Unit] forms that we sent out to the stakeholders. You would keep a blank copy of it in PDF and fill it out when you had a new schedule. But then you would print it out, and you would send that to the stakeholder, and then they would physically return it to you. And that evolved to where it was all electronic, where we would send it in an email, because I remember sending them to SHUs in interdepartmental envelopes. And then we evolved to, it was an attachment on an email, and now it's all done in ERA [Electronic Records Archives]. And I was going through, you know, trying to compile schedules that I've done. And there's a point where, and it was about the beginning of the pandemic, where I'd say it actually was the pandemic, where there are no paper copies of anything. But I don't have any files, paper files, from like 2019 forward. They're all electronic now. I can print it out if I wanted to, but they're all electronic.

Rich: Yeah. And even since I've been here, since 2019, there's been a change, as well you know. Well, I'm glad we're heading towards a more electronic system here at the National Archives as we comply with our own memorandum, right? Okay. And then, so just a few, I guess, a couple other high-level questions for you. What do you regard as the most significant challenge facing appraisal and the Office of the Chief Records Officer?

Steve: Well, getting the agencies to submit schedules and maintaining contact with the agencies, because right now, we're not getting much traffic with the agencies. And that's not only because of the current situation, but it has been something that's, I think, is agencies are sort of doing their own thing and not involving NARA as much as they should. I think it's been a trend for a while.

Rich: Yeah, I think that's fair. Do you have any suggestions of how we can improve either that specific aspect of appraisal or anything else, either at an appraisal level or a NARA level?

Steve: You know, appraisers could reach out to their agency records officers. I participated a little bit with the latest training for new appraisers, and the one bit of advice that I gave them was get to know your records officers. Try to stay on their good side. Because if you do that, if you develop a sense of trust, they will contact you—

Rich: Right.

Steve: —if they have any kind of questions. Maurice at Navy and Maria at the Department of Energy would call me on a fairly regular basis with questions.

Rich: That's great advice. [cross-talking] No, I think it's great advice, and then when you go to have conversations about permanent records and which ones they need to transfer to the National Archives, I'm sure it makes that conversation a little easier if you've already developed the trust and experience and all that. No, that's really great. So all that to be said, you are retiring at the end of this month, in March 2025, after more than 20 years of federal service.

Steve: Yes.

Rich: These are more miscellaneous questions. Without getting political, how have you been navigating all the recent news affecting federal employee resignations, RIFs [Reduction in Force] and so on?

Steve: It's been a source of anxiety. I mean, that is one reason why I'm retiring. But, yeah, it's uncertain times.

Rich: Yeah. Agreed. And you've been around the block a while. Is this unprecedented? Is this compared to any other thing you've gone through?

Steve: Yes. I know before I was—during the Clinton administration, which was before I worked for the federal government—I know there were RIFs. But it seems to me, there are ways that you can reduce the federal workforce through study and seeing what people do and how they do it, rather than using terror to reduce the federal workforce.

Rich: Yeah, I don't disagree. On a more positive note, what accomplishment from your time at NARA are you most proud of?

Steve: Well, I've done a lot of schedules. I feel like I've helped a lot of people—records officers for the main part. But doing the schedules, looking at the records, the stand-out visits like the one to Europe and the one to West Virginia, various inspections, you know, being invited to come out and take a look at some records at, say, the National Marine Intelligence Center—which is the headquarters for Navy Intelligence—and just, to some extent, exploring the records that we do have.

Rich: Yeah. For sure.

Steve: You know, when we used to have access to the stacks, one of the other appraisal archivists said to me, "Well, you ought to go in the stack. There are some ledgers there that you might find interesting." And those particular ledgers were of courts martial in World War I, and it listed the individuals by name, rank, what their offense was, whether or not they were court-martialed, when they were court-martialed, and what their sentence was. And it was fascinating. Of course, I couldn't spend all day looking at it. But just to know that they're there is fascinating, that they survived that many years. And there's other things, like when we had Saturday hours. I came a couple of times to look up if there were any records for my dad's unit from World War II, because he had always said he was in Bastogne during the siege, and the 101st Airborne gets all the credit for the Siege of Bastogne. But dad was with an anti-aircraft weapons battalion, and he would, you know, periodically say stuff on Christmas like, "Christmas 1944 was the best Christmas I had had up to that point." And I'd say, "Why?" And he'd say, "Because the skies opened up and they could fly in and drop supplies to us." So, we have the dailies for his unit, which is where they are and what they're doing and so on. And I looked through them and sure enough, like December 20, 21, 1944, it says in the dailies, "Unit is in Bastogne. Contact broken."

Rich: Wow.

Steve: And that's pretty cool.

Rich: Yeah. I mean, personally, I've always enjoyed how people can make personal connections to our holdings and, obviously, [unclear] that as well. Any plans for after retirement?

Steve: I'm working on it. [laughs]

Rich: [laughs] Fair enough. Fair enough.

Steve: Yeah.

Rich: Or the research room, maybe.

Steve: Yeah. I've always enjoyed doing research, right? So, that is one thing. And several people have pointed out to me that there's a number of historical organizations in the area that I could volunteer with. And one of my sons said, "Dad, you could volunteer with the National Park Service up in Gettysburg [PA] or Antietam [MD]."

Rich: Yeah. Yeah.

Steve: So, we'll see.

Rich: You'll have plenty of time to decide, I'm sure. All right. Anything you'd like to add to the interview, either anecdotes, words of wisdom? Anything else we missed?

Steve: No, we've hit the more colorful parts of my career, I think.

Rich: Well, it's a long and storied career, and you've, gosh, even just in the short time, all the different people that you've worked with and agencies you've helped. It's quite impressive, I will say. If nothing else, thank you so much for your time. It's been an honor to partake in this myself. I'm really glad that we got to do that. So, thank you. Thank you for the interview and also for everything you've done for the National Archives.

Steve: Thank you.

Rich: All right. I will end the recording.

[END RECORDING]