

The History of the Air Force History and Museums Program

The leadership of the United States Air Force (USAF) and its predecessor organizations valued the force's history and heritage from the early days of military aviation in the United States, believing that the study of the past was a valuable tool for planning and operations and that the preservation of heritage fostered pride and discipline. However, the system for recording and maintaining that history and heritage evolved over time as the structure and needs of the developing service changed.

In accordance with the policies of the American Expeditionary Forces (AEF) during World War I, the chief of the AEF Air Service appointed Capt. Ernest L. Jones, the head of the Air Service Information Section, as Air Service Historian on May 11, 1918. Regulations required each component organization to prepare a history and forward it to Captain Jones. On December 4, 1918, Gen. Mason M. Patrick, Chief of the Air Service, directed one of his assistants, Col. Edgar S. Gorrell, to assemble the collected documents into a history of the AEF Air Service. This product, known as *Gorrell's History of the American Expeditionary Forces Air Service 1917-1919*, was never completed, but by the time the project was cancelled for lack of funds in 1921, it contained 282 volumes of historical reports and documents in 18 series.¹

In 1923, the foundations of the future National Museum of the United States Air Force were laid when a collection of World War I airplanes and equipment opened at McCook Field near downtown Dayton, Ohio. In 1935, the collection, already burgeoning into a museum, moved into a permanent home at Wright Field, on the outskirts of Dayton, funded by the Works Progress Administration. When the United States entered World War II, the museum collection went into storage, where it remained for the next five years.²

In June 1942, the chief of the Air Staff of the U.S. Army Air Forces, the successor organization of the Air Service, directed that the USAAF engage a professional historian to chronicle action in all military theaters, and in July, the War Department directed that the USAAF Headquarters appoint a historian in accordance with President Franklin D. Roosevelt's desire for an administrative history of all U.S. governmental organizations engaged in the war. The Historical Division, established that summer with responsibility for both operational and organizational history, fulfilled the two mandates. From September 1942, it was headed by Col. Clanton W. Williams, whose title evolved during the conflict from Professional Executive to Chief of the Historical Division to AAF Historian.³ A number of professionally trained historians who joined the USAAF during the war worked in the Historical Division. They produced studies and reports, many of them classified, during and after the war that became one of the foundations of historical understanding of air power during World War II. Their efforts culminated in *The Army Air Forces in World War II*, a seven-volume work edited by Wesley Frank Craven and James Lea Cate and produced between 1948 and 1958.⁴

With the creation of the U.S. Air Force in 1947, the Air Force Museum was reestablished in Dayton, Ohio. Originally available only by appointment, the collection was opened to the public in 1955. It was joined in preservation of Air Force heritage by numerous museums and collections throughout the country focusing on specific aspects of the force's history. In 2004, the Air Force Museum was redesignated the National Museum of the U.S. Air Force, placing it on the same institutional footing as the Smithsonian museums. It is the world's largest and oldest military aviation museum, with more than one million visitors each year.⁵

In the two decades after the Air Force's creation, the history program changed names and organizational homes, at various times being part of the intelligence, information, and operations functions. It also alternated headquarters between Washington, DC, and Maxwell Air Force Base in Montgomery, Alabama.⁶ In 1969, a panel chaired by I. B. Holley, a professor of history at Duke University and Reserve brigadier general, recommended the creation of an Office of Air Force History reporting to the chief of staff of the Air Force. This office transformed into the Air Force History and Museums Program (AFHMP), with overall responsibility for Air Force history, museum, and heritage functions, in 1991.⁷ A further evolution of the history and museums program came with the 2003 decision to eliminate the Air Force's active duty history component, which had supplied full-time uniformed historians, mainly at the wing level, for 34 years. At the time of the decision, the active-duty component included 114 enlisted and 6 officer billets. Beginning in 2005, the history program, already employing more than 100 civilian historians, transitioned to all civilians with the exception of some remaining Reserve billets.⁸

As of 2019, the central functions of the Air Force History and Museums Program include the Air Force History Office and associated Air Force Historical Support Division located in Washington, DC, and the Air Force Historical Research Agency, housing the service's archives, located at Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama. Its field program includes history offices established at the major command, numbered air force, wing, and operating agency level, as well as historians deployed to contingency theaters.

¹ *Gorrell's History of the American Expeditionary Forces Air Service 1917–1919*, National Archives Microfilm Publications, Washington, DC, 1975, pp. 1–4.

² “History of the National Museum of the US Air Force,” US Air Force, National Museum of the US Air Force, June 21, 2013, <https://www.nationalmuseum.af.mil/Visit/Museum-Exhibits/Fact-Sheets/Display/Article/195668/history-of-the-national-museum-of-the-us-air-force/>, accessed March 27, 2019.

³ Wesley Frank Craven and James Lea Cate, eds, *The Army Air Forces in World War II, Volume I: Plans and Early Operations, January 1939 to August 1942* (Washington, DC: Office of Air Force History, 1983 [New Imprint]), p.ix.

⁴ Jacob Neufeld, “History Makes You Smart—Heritage Makes You Proud,” *Air Power History* (Spring 2010), pp. 44–47.

⁵ “History of the National Museum of the US Air Force,” US Air Force, National Museum of the US Air Force, June 21, 2013, <https://www.nationalmuseum.af.mil/Visit/Museum-Exhibits/Fact-Sheets/Display/Article/195668/history-of-the-national-museum-of-the-us-air-force/>, accessed March 27, 2019.

⁶ Jacob Neufeld, “History Makes You Smart—Heritage Makes You Proud,” *Air Power History* (Spring 2010), pp. 44–47.

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⁸ Jennifer H. Svan, “Air Force to replace enlisted historians with civilians,” *Stars and Stripes*, October 22, 2003, <https://www.stripes.com/news/air-force-to-replace-enlisted-historians-with-civilians-1.12842>, accessed March 27, 2019.