

Surfacing Pacific Northwest History at the Washington State Library

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Abstract:

The Washington State Library, a division of the Office of the Secretary of State, is the first territorial library in the Pacific Northwest, established in 1853, with funding from the U.S. Congress. Located in Olympia, the library's newspaper collection holds over 6,500 newspaper titles, including over 125 titles in print, 52,000 reels of microfilm, and over 85 titles in digital formats. The library's Washington Digital Newspapers (WDN) program provides free public access to the territory's earliest newspaper publications documenting the growth of Pacific Northwest communities and expeditions into territorial Alaska.

The WDN program has grown to include over 500,000 pages, developed with experience gained from the National Digital Newspaper Program and strong partnerships with Washington universities, regional libraries, museums, and publishers. Increased access to online collections has encouraged the development of new educational programs, online exhibits, and greater opportunities for research. This paper will describe the library's role in newspaper preservation and innovative ways researchers have navigated a sea of information found in its extensive newspaper collections. A description of the *Primarily Washington* website will show how newspapers are used as a primary educational resource and an interview with a local museum director will show how local newspapers and publishers inspired an entire exhibit.

Keywords: newspapers, museums, libraries, research, history.

I. Introduction

The Washington State Library, a division of the Office of the Secretary of State, is located in Olympia, Washington, and provides a unique collection of Pacific Northwest publications reflecting the regional, federal, and state history of Alaska, Washington, Oregon, Idaho, and western Montana. Situated on the lands of the Coast Salish tribes, it also reflects a shared history with the province of British Columbia, Canada. As the first territorial library in the

region, established in 1853, it holds early expedition charts, legal resources required for territorial government, and primary documentation of Native American tribal agreements. It is a repository for federal and state publications covering a variety of subjects, which are important resources for state employees and legislators as well as researchers, genealogists, and enthusiastic readers of regional fiction and non-fiction.

II. The Washington Territory

The Pacific Northwest region of North America spans the western province of British Columbia in Canada and the states of Alaska, Washington, and Oregon in the United States. These jurisdictions share the coastline of the Pacific Ocean. With the exception of Alaska, they also share the Cascade Range with some of the tallest mountains on the continent. The earliest inhabitants of these lands are descended from more than 50 nations of Coast Salish people whose ancestors have lived there since time immemorial. They know the Pacific Ocean as the Salish Sea and their land extends from lower British Columbia down to the mouth of the great Columbia and Willamette Rivers in Oregon. We gratefully acknowledge the sacrifice the Salish peoples and their contributions to the land upon which the Washington State Library is located.

The abundance of marine life and evergreen forests drew many European settlers to the region in the mid-1800s. Settlers from Sweden, Norway, France, England, and Germany came out for the fishing and timber industries. Soon rumors of the gold rush in Alaska and British Columbia drove fortune seekers from across North America and China to pick up supplies in Seattle and head north. As communities grew, the need for railroads, timber, and minerals drove economic growth and brought immigrants from China, Croatia, Ireland, Japan, and the Philippines to find new opportunities.

As the population grew, bankers, land developers, politicians, and publishers also came to the Pacific Northwest to influence economic progress, infrastructure development, and voice their opinions in their desire for self-government. Many editors and publishers in the mid-to-late 1800s were advocates for statehood and active voices in economic development. Throughout the decades, these advocates provided essential services for their communities. Legal notices, election results, land claims, vital statistics were not available elsewhere to the average citizen and these “newspapers of record” were the only way to advertise local businesses, events and social activities. Today, these same newspapers have become essential information for different reasons, linking past events and people to the understanding of our own heritage and present environment.

III. WSL’s Role in Newspaper Preservation

In 2022, the Washington State Library continues its role as historic record keeper under the Revised Code of Washington, [RCW 27.04.045\(8\)](#). This legal mandate requires the state librarian and staff to preserve community newspapers of record across the state “Serving as the depository for newspapers published in the state of Washington thus providing a central location for a valuable historical record for scholarly, personal, and commercial reference and circulation.” The library maintains subscriptions to as many newspapers across the state as budget allows, keeping print issues for approximately 10 years before preserving issues on microfilm. The physical newspaper collection includes over 6,500 newspaper titles and more than 52,000 reels of microfilm, which makes it one of the largest collections of Washington newspapers in the state. In the early 1990s, the U.S. Newspaper Program (USNP), in partnership with the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) and the Library of

Congress (LoC), provided funding for microfilm preservation of at-risk newspapers. Master negatives created for the program are stored offsite at its sister agency, the Washington State Archives.

In 2005, the library began a digital newspaper program with focus on the earliest publications from the Washington territorial period. In 2008, the library was awarded the first of four National Digital Newspaper Program (NDNP) grants, also funded in partnership with NEH and LoC. Through this digitization program, the library contributed over 400,000 pages of historic newspapers, with standardized metadata, to the [Chronicling America](#) website.

Starting in 2015, the [Washington Digital Newspapers](#) (WDN) program shifted to meet the needs of regional museums and historical organizations by using the experience and standards learned from NDNP. A newspaper preservation and digitization consulting service provides assistance to libraries, museums, and other heritage organizations under the Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA), funded by the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS). Libraries and museum organizations who wish to digitize their community paper receive free consulting and hosting services, with guidance on copyright issues, digitization, and preservation standards. In 2019, WDN implemented a new hosting platform, using Veridian software created by DL Consulting specifically for newspapers. The new website provides a stable hosting service and is easy for users to view pages and perform simple keyword and full-text search of the newspapers. The new site also improves accessibility and can easily hold the online collection, which has surpassed over half a million pages in 2022.

To prepare for a new production workflow and the collection of born digital content, a new long-term Microsoft Azure cloud storage system will be installed in 2022. A recent agreement with Newspapers.com will double production and allow WDN staff to respond to increasing requests for digitization and create new outreach programs. The larger storage space will allow WDN to develop intermediate and long-term workflows to hold restricted content before it can be released for upload to the public website and protect the collection for disaster recovery.

IV. Navigating an Ocean of Newspapers In Person and Online

Visitors to the library can access newspaper microfilm reels in the library's Reading Room in Olympia or by requesting the film through interlibrary loan to view at their regional library. Many visitors travel from out of state to search family history and use the on-site newspaper databases by appointment. A few, frequently requested titles, such as the capital city's *Olympian* newspaper have been indexed so that specific articles can be requested through the library's AskALibrarian program if specific dates, event, or person names are known.

Since August of 2021, when the facility re-opened with COVID-19 safety measures in place, nearly 600 visitors have returned to the Reading Room for research. Approximately two-thirds of these visitors are estimated to be using microfilm resources at the library. Newspaper microfilm statistics from July 1, 2021 through June 15, 2022 indicate that there were over 1,100 requests for newspapers on microfilm by in-house customers, staff, and through Ask-A-Librarian chat forums. At least 278 reels were shared to libraries via Interlibrary Loan services.

The library subscribes to 125 daily and weekly print newspapers that can be viewed in the Reading Room. There are 12 online databases exclusive to state library cardholders. Library cards are freely available to Washington State residents, but visitors can also access these databases free in the Reading Room. The library maintains a list of current newspaper websites and six indexes to Pacific Northwest newspapers.

Genealogists are frequent visitors to the Reading Room and many researchers travel from California, Idaho, and beyond. COVID-19 public health concerns prevented genealogists from visiting for a few months, but groups such as the Sons of Norway or Daughters of the American Revolution are back to trace their roots through the newspapers on microfilm once the building re-opened. Occasionally journalists and lobbyists stop to research the provenance of a state regulation or the history of a bill. Contextual information is not contained in the "*Legislative Digest and History of Bills of the Senate and House of Representatives*," also known as the "Bill Books." Recent editions of these "Bill Books" are now online, but the oldest editions are only available in print. Reference librarians will regularly direct researchers to the historic newspapers to find information about the primary supporters and the passage of bills submitted in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

The library regularly hosts several historians who use the physical and online newspaper collections to write history publications on a variety of subjects. One such researcher is Jennifer Crooks, who has written articles for online publications such as [Thurston Talk](#), a Thurston County oriented news & activity website that regularly features articles on local history. She has also given lectures and written the book "*Washington State Capitol Campus*." In her recent 2022 article "[Read All About It: May Munyan and Dupont's \[SIC\] First Newspaper 'The Villager'](#)," Crooks describes the life of May Munyan, editor of the first newspaper in the small town of DuPont, Washington. Crooks holds a bachelor's and master's degree in American history and can frequently be seen in the Reading Room researching alongside her father, Drew Crooks, also an historian and author.

V. Surfacing Primary Resources to Meet User needs

The [Primarily Washington](#) website is a collaboration between the Washington State Archives, Legacy Washington, and the Washington State Library to share primary resources from their respective collections with K-12 educators and history enthusiasts. It was designed as an educational portal for teachers and students to freely access lesson plans and study guides, regardless of their enrollment in public, private or home school programs to meet Washington State social studies requirements. The open source Omeka database and publishing platform contain digitized maps, books, photos, and newspaper articles. Library staff worked with local educators to design easy-to-use digital “packages” that focus on specific subjects of state history and meet educational requirements in Washington’s K-12 school system.



A chart of lesson plans and grade levels guides teachers to the appropriate plans for their students, which link directly to the learning plans, activities, and objectives for classroom discussion. Students can browse collections of primary resources, browse curated exhibits, or review a list of newspaper articles on the “[Newspaper - Moments in History](#)” tab. This list of events and references links to newspaper articles selected to engage students in further discussion on topics and perspectives of the time-period. Many of the articles show insight to difficult topics and the strained relationships of the territorial era, pointing to the conflicts between native peoples, immigrants, and settlers. Connections between past events and today’s issues can be discussed in the context of immigration, women’s suffrage, native rights, and early statehood, among other subjects.

VI. Anacortes Museum's Online Exhibit

The city of Anacortes is a small maritime community along the north coast of the Puget Sound. It is an essential port for the international ferry crossing between the U.S. and Victoria, British Columbia, as well as primary access to Washington's San Juan Island communities. The *Anacortes American* newspaper, established in 1890, frequently reported on the community's Scandinavian heritage, fishing, and agriculture activities.

The City of Anacortes Museum maintains physical collections of artifacts and historic objects to show the lifestyles of settlers and native peoples. It holds a collection of nautical charts, maps, and a photograph collection of over 50,000 prints. It also contains the Wallie Funk photo collection of over 100,000 photos, documenting the city's history from the 1880s through the 2002. These photos were collected by Wallie Funk, publisher of the *Anacortes American* newspaper from 1950-1964, to preserve the history of his hometown. The museum also tracks a number oral histories, films, memorial sites, and murals, sharing the local history with the public through in-person and interactive exhibits to highlight the community's heritage.

In 2016, museum staff reached out to the Washington State Library inquiring about digitization practices for their extensive *Anacortes American* print newspaper collection. With the support of the current publisher of the newspaper, the library began work to digitize nearly 70,000 newspaper pages for public access via the WDN website. The project is nearing completion and will be finalized by the end of 2022.

In an interview with Museum Director, Bret Lunsford, about the use of newspapers in their daily work, he described newspapers as a "super-power" in their search for historic content. He addressed the convenience of accessing newspapers online and compared past efforts to seeking a "needle in a haystack." "It's a place that I turn to with a lot of trust" though he acknowledges that there may be bias in the articles, he can learn the context of events that had occurred in the past and verify the related names of people and places. He would find that sometimes a story would "ripple out" into another publication, and, by living in a city with a unique name like Anacortes, more information on a person or event can easily be found.

The museum staff use the online WDN collection daily to identify and catalog subjects in their photo database. People, place names, dates, and related events that previously had little to no information can be searched to find the additional metadata needed to enrich their own collection. The staff, and members of the public, can also use a "text correction" feature on the WDN site where they can correct sections of text results missed or misinterpreted by the Optical Character Recognition (OCR) software used in the digitization process. This increases the accuracy of WDN website search results, so the research and text corrections become a mutual benefit for the museum, library, and future researchers. As a promoter of the museum's activities, Lunsford considers this an opportunity to engage local residents and use the online newspaper collection as a "first step" to building a community encyclopaedia.

In 2019, the museum curated one of its first online exhibits to honor the heritage and influence of publishers past and present in the community. Museum curator, Elain Walker, used the WDN collection to research early publications and tell the story of the city's development through the stories in the newspapers. Historical notes and contextual information were added to a collage of articles and photos, pulling the stories together and noting how perspectives of the times may be different from present attitudes. At the bottom

of the exhibit page, “Open Forum” prompts invite readers to engage in discussion by sharing their own stories and experiences.



From Anacortes Museum Exhibit: “Extra! Extra! The Early Years of Anacortes Newspapers” 2019.

The museum also plans to create smartphone mural tours with podcasts and videos to tell visitors about the numerous murals installed throughout the city blocks. Newspaper research will support stories about local artist, Bill Mitchell, who created over 150 painted murals depicting prominent citizens of the past. These podcasts will feature subject biographies, obituaries, and timelines found in newspapers to bring this outdoor exhibit to life.

VII. Sailing Toward Future Outcomes

Since its inception, the WDN program has been a small department of one or two staff members primarily focused on the production and upload of content. With the new workflow, some of the burden of production will be lifted to allow staff to focus more on outreach, educational resources, and consulting. Through the exhibits and discussions with the Anacortes Museum and Primarily Washington educational staff, we are inspired to create new resources for our newspaper readers and heritage organizations. We look forward to our next opportunities to promote our newspaper collections and share the creative ways people are already using them. New tools with augmented reality, history tours on mobile devices and podcasts with stories from our early newspapers are a few of the inspirations that we have received from our newspaper researchers. These we will share with our colleagues in libraries, museums and research.

New projects will also encourage participation by library and information school students to utilize newspaper data in their capstone and directed fieldwork projects. The volume of newspaper content provides unique opportunities to study topical data across the state in the areas of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI), image identification and search and language usage among other endless opportunities based on student interest.

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