

Archival Preservation at the Historical Society

by Debi Murray
Director of Research and Archives

Although the Historical Society of Palm Beach County has been collecting archival materials since its founding in 1937, the collection has never been fully catalogued. For the most part, the material was organized by subject: agriculture, business, sports, etc. So, if you were looking for information or photographs about fishing for example, we would be able to find it under Sports/Fishing. And while we had a listing of the categories and sub-categories, there has never been a comprehensive and systematic, full-blown description of the collections. As the first step in creating what is a detailed finding guide, the Historical Society purchased a collection management software program called PastPerfect several years ago.

When a new archival accession is processed, we examine it to determine the best storage first. Most materials have to be re-housed into acid-free, lignin-free protective sleeves, folders, and/or boxes. That is considered the first line of preservation. While this is being accomplished, we are learning as much as we can about the collection, the who, what, where, when, and why that is buried in the material which will then be used to write a scope and abstract (S&A) which in turn will help researchers decide whether to examine the materials in detail. The S&A can be a few words, a few paragraphs, or several pages generally describing the collection's content as well as its context in the scope of history. The next step is to use the database to reference specific materials so that the records are keyword searchable. A number of factors go into deciding just how detailed the cataloging will be. Some institutions catalogue each and every photograph and piece of paper. At the Historical Society we determine the level of description on the size of the collection. If it is massive, we describe at the box or folder level. For instance, a collection may contain a series of brochures, so we list the name, dates of publication, and volumes that are contained in a box. On the other hand, we would describe a series of letters or photographs at the folder level, with a description of the material, the subject(s), people, and creation dates. If an accession contains only a few items, they are described at the item level. As we are cataloguing

these materials, we determine which should be scanned. Each PastPerfect record has the ability to hold up to ninety-nine images. While not every item can be scanned at this time, we choose representative images to attach digitally to the records. At the same time, we are slowly organizing, re-housing, and preparing our older collections for cataloguing. Over the next few years, we will be putting some of these records online and such access is only useful with detailed records.



This work can only be accomplished with the help of trained, dedicated volunteers. Currently there are twelve archival volunteers working on various collections. Each has a particular project they are working on so they can come in and get right to the job without having to wait for direction, although sometimes we have to pull them off their major project to help with short-term projects (stuffing envelopes, for example). Re-housing and cataloguing is very four to six hours per week, projects can be extended for months, if not years. For instance, we have been



Archival storage at HSPBC.

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cataloguing our library for nearly three years. We are down to the end thanks to summer intern Jennifer Brown, for which volunteer and project leader Sharon Freidheim is very thankful, as she can now take on a new project. It is also much easier to find one book out of the nearly 4,000 on the shelves. The end result of this cataloguing will be better public access. If you think this kind of work sounds intriguing, know basic computer skills, and have a few hours once a week to volunteer in the archives, please call Debi Murray at 561-832-4164, ext 105.

Debi Murray is a native of Palm Beach County, Florida, and has been Director of Research & Archives

at the Historical Society of Palm Beach County since 1999. She attended Florida Atlantic University where she graduated *magna cum laude* and eventually received her Master of Arts in history. Murray was the point person for the Historical Society's most recent project, the Richard and Pat Johnson Palm Beach County History Museum. She is co-author of *Palm Beach* (Arcadia Publishing, 2009); co-author of *Palm Beach County at 100: Our History; Our Home* (*The Palm Beach Post*, 2009); and executive producer and co-writer of the Historical Society's one-hour documentary "Puddle Jumpers of Lantana: The History of the Civil Air Patrol's Coastal Patrol 3" (2007).

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database were completed: the data entry of donor information and accession transactions.

Over the seventy-two year history of the Historical Society of Palm Beach County, the organization currently has accessioned over two thousand donations. These donations total over an estimated two million individual items.

Steven Erdmann is Curator of Collections and

Exhibits. He holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in cultural anthropology and an Master of Arts in museum studies. Erdmann has worked with museum collections, both in the private sector and non-profit world, for over twenty years. He joined the Historical Society staff in 2006. Erdmann was previously with the Museum of Northern Arizona.

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Ancient People of South Florida trunk. Teachers completed training in October 2009 and the traveling trunks were turned over to the schools on long-term loan from the Historical Society. Four Pioneer trunks have also been developed and are now available for loan.

Richard A. Marconi is Curator of Education and has been on staff with the Historical Society since 2002. In 2001 he graduated *summa cum laude* from Florida

Atlantic University with a Bachelor of Arts degree in history. Marconi is co-author of the Arcadia Publishing's Images of American series: *West Palm Beach 1893-1950* (2006) and *Palm Beach* (2009); co-author of *Palm Beach County at 100: Our History; Our Home* (*The Palm Beach Post*, 2009); and producer and co-writer of the Historical Society's documentary "Puddle Jumpers of Lantana: The History of the Civil Air Patrol's Coastal Patrol 3" (2007).

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applications. I started to go through them in 2004, but ran out of time. These forms provide the name of the office, the postmaster applying, and hand-drawn maps showing exactly where the new office would be in relation to others in the area. I made copies of the applications for local offices that I could find, but there are more to be unearthed. In addition, there may be other sources available and any clue could lead the way to more information.

Compiled from the Geer Family file; Post Office File in the HSPBC archive.

Printed Sources:

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Robinson, Tim. *A Tropical Frontier: Pioneers and Settlers of Southeast Florida, 1800-1890*. Port Salerno, FL: Port Sun Publishing, 2005.