Pacific Northwest Cooperative Ecosystem Studies Unit

Final Report

Cooperative Agreement No. H8W07060001

Fort Vancouver / Portland State University

Archives Cataloging 2007-2010

Introduction

The vast majority of the museum archives at Fort Vancouver National Historic Site had never been cataloged. This project – the processing and cataloging of the archival materials as well as the creation of finding aids – made the documents and maps more available to researchers as a part of a larger effort to support public history and public archaeology efforts. In addition, it provided park staff with more easily accessible resource management documents for future planning and decision-making. Students were trained and closely supervised by the Curator, and gained valuable hands-on experience in the handling of museum collections.

Portland State University was selected because the faculty and students have an interest in promoting public history, the interpretation of history to a wide audience, and the preservation and use of historical documents that pertain to the Pacific Northwest.

Methodology

The initial training for this multi-year cataloging project began in June of 2007. The students became familiar with the spreadsheet templates used for cataloging into the Interior Museum Cataloging System (ICMS) and assisting the National Park Service in revising this template when necessary. Together with NPS staff, they developed written guidance and standardized terminology for archives cataloging, a subset of protocols for the park within the overall agency standards. In addition, the students were trained in the housing and encapsulation of archival documents, the creation of finding aids, and facilitation of research requests.

Schedule and Results

The first year, the project focused on the backlog of archaeological records: field notes, maps, and photos from over 60 years of excavations. This effort was completed during the second year, and the focus turned to the park's resource management records, another backlog dating back to 1948. During 2007, approximately 13,000 items were cataloged to federal standards; in 2008 9,520 items were cataloged; 91,520 were cataloged in 2009, and when the project wrapped up in 2010 42,800 were cataloged. The grand total of _156,840 items_ (or approximately 130 linear feet) cataloged represented 95% of the park's archival backlog and was considered as a great success!

Discussion

From a museum viewpoint, the project met expectations. The backlog was retired, the records entered into ICMS for greater intellectual control, and the archives made increasingly accessible to park staff and public researchers. In addition, vulnerable items have been protected with better housing.

For the most part the students were stellar partners, though one or two were inconsistent and unreliable. After the lessons of the first year, the NPS and PSU worked together to strengthen the application and review process for prospective students, which greatly increased performance during subsequent years.

The only significant negative aspect of the project involved accounting. Communication between the NPS and the university on issues such as billing/invoicing, tracking hours, and reconciling the schedules of the fiscal year, academic year, and milestones of the CESU agreement were difficult. For the NPS, it was challenging to determine the correct contact at PSU, as some details are handled by departmental secretaries and some by the contracting or budget offices. Several times, mistakes were made in payments to students. A greater amount of redundancy was established later in the project, where each partner tracked hours and expenditures as much as possible so that all had a better idea of the project's status at any given time.