

Community library preserves local history and appeases fire marshal

Aging newspaper collection goes from fire hazard to online treasures



Situation

Wissahickon Valley is an area in southeastern Pennsylvania that is both rich in history and natural beauty. Sharing the name is the community library that serves the residents of Ambler Borough and Whitpain and Lower Gwynedd Townships. Another resource for these and surrounding communities is the Fort Washington Historical Society, a small heritage center open only one day a week.

Previously, the two organizations had little contact. That all changed when David J. Roberts, director of the Wissahickon Valley Public Library, received a call from the president of the historical society. “Lew Keen called and said he had a collection he’d like to discuss with me,” said Roberts. “So I went over to take a look.”

What he saw both surprised and intrigued him. **It was the last known physical collection of the Ambler Gazette,** a local community newspaper still in publication. The newspapers dated back to 1897 and were still in active use. The only problem was that the collection was stored on wooden rods in a room that wasn’t climate-controlled. “It was literally deteriorating before our eyes,” said Roberts. And there was added pressure to do something. **“The local fire marshal said the papers were a fire hazard and had to go.”**

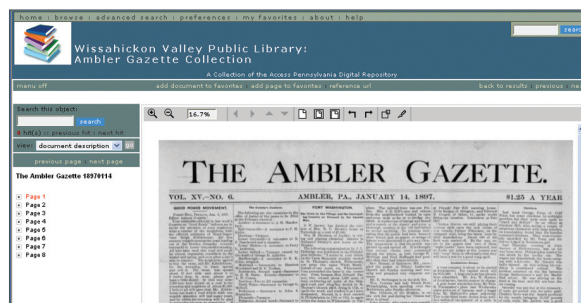
Solution

The first thing Roberts and Keen discussed was digitizing the collection. It seemed like the perfect solution except that neither had experience with digitization and weren’t sure where to begin. However, like any good librarian, Roberts started researching what to do.

AT A GLANCE

Wissahickon Valley Public Library, Blue Bell, Pennsylvania

- Ambler Gazette newspaper collection,
- 1897–1990
- www.wvpl.org



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“I spoke to the Philadelphia Academy of Natural Sciences that was doing a large digitization project,” he said. “I also went to local conferences and a national one in Denver.” He decided they needed a feasibility study to create a plan.

He contacted OCLC Preservation Service Centers and, with funding from a local Friends of the Library group, had a study conducted. “The study laid out the project specifics, what standards we should use, and why microfilm first and then digital files.” It offered the details he needed to submit for a Library Services and Technology Act grant (which he previously had been denied). “We were awarded the grant the second time around and with additional support from local groups, we had enough money to digitize the first 25 years of the collection,” said Roberts.

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Continued



Results

The digitization project started in May 2006 and by December, the first three years were ready. By March 2007, the next five were complete. Under the tender care of OCLC preservation experts, the papers are repaired and collated for filming. From there, the digitization process is completed and the files are enhanced with metadata to improve user access. As for the originals, they are sent to a new home in the state archive—something the local fire marshal is pleased to see.

Today the Ambler Gazette is available online via CONTENTdm® and the library's Web site: www.wvpl.org.

"This was a bonus for us," said Roberts. "Access PA (a statewide library consortium) purchased a CONTENTdm license and we are able to use it for free." That allowed Roberts and Keen to steer funds to digitizing more papers.

"Our goal is to have all the papers up to 1990 available online," he added. **"Now that we have something more tangible to show supporters, we've been able to raise more money.** We have a long way to go, though." But with the process and OCLC team in place, he's confident they'll get there with successful results.

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For more information about OCLC's Digitization services, visit www.oclc.org/preservation/digitizing/, call 1-800-773-7222, or send e-mail to presres@oclc.org.

For more about CONTENTdm, visit www.oclc.org/contentdm/, call 1-800-848-5878, ext. 4301, or e-mail contentdm@oclc.org.