Environmental Scan

Pack Memorial Library: The North Carolina Room
Asheville, NC

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Library Webpage:
https://ncroom.buncombecounty.org/Presto/home/home.aspx

Asheville Pack Library: The North Carolina Room
Collection Plan & Environmental Scan

Introduction

The Pack Memorial Library serves as a place for Asheville and Buncombe County residents to meet their research and recreational needs. The North Carolina Room provides Pack Memorial Library with special collections pertaining to the history of the area and its residents. Attracting users to engage with the collection involves molding the library into a place that welcomes users and shows them that the North Carolina Room holds information that reflects their diverse community.

Library Mission

The North Carolina Room upholds equity, diversity, and inclusion standards by providing equal access to its special collections. As a public library in Buncombe County, the mission statement aligns with the mission of the county government. Specifically, the mission statement reflects these statements from the county government: "We promote a healthy, safe, well-educated, and thriving community with a sustainable quality of life… We deliver needed service through a responsive workforce committed to excellence, integrity, and teamwork" (2020, p. 5, Buncombe County Budget Office). The library's North Carolina Room promotes such attributes by providing an open, inclusive space that welcomes people with all backgrounds and social identifiers to research. The staff strive to offer research and recreational services by gathering and showcasing collections that interest and reflect Buncombe's diverse community. The staff also exhibit behavior that embraces and respects the library's diverse patronage while actively encouraging user engagement with the special collections.

According to an interview with Pack Memorial's North Carolina Room Collections Manager, Katherine Calhoun Cutshall, conducted for this project, the archive's mission statement underwent changes last year to promote inclusivity. The NC Room's current statement, which was adapted from their old mission statement, is "The North Carolina Room at Pack Memorial Library is dedicated to actively collecting, preserving, promoting and providing equal access to the history of every person and community in Asheville, Buncombe County and the surrounding area. We are proud of our historic resources and are committed to preserving them for the future through correct archival preservation, digitization, and making them easily accessible to the public." Cutshall said that the phrase "actively promoting equal access" more explicitly states the archive's commitment to ensuring that all users, especially those in marginalized groups, possess the means to engage with the special collection. Cutshall also

stated that the staff meet to discuss changing the library's outdated mission. She shared plans to change the name of the collection as well. The "North Carolina Room" fails to capture the collection's cultural materials outside of North Carolina, which denotes a failure to fulfill the mission's objective of presenting a diverse collection to the public. Buncombe County's history, according to Cutshall, includes influences from Georgia and Knoxville, TN, which means the archive's name should forgo "North Carolina" in favor of a label that emphasizes the county. Consequently, Cutshall said the "Buncombe County Special Collection" is a more accurate name.

Cutshall's interview also revealed another way the North Carolina Room seeks to attract users: renovation. Cutshal said that the North Carolina Room's location in the basement of the library in an area that looks like a loading dock causes users to believe that the area must only be meant for employees. As a result, the physical design acts as a barrier to user access. She said that the department is working towards redesigning the area into a "friendly, coworking space" to remove this barrier.

Library Objectives

The NC Room's main objectives are as follows:
1) Collect the history of Asheville, Buncombe County, and Western North Carolina.
2) Create accessible resources using the NC Room's diverse collection for patrons to learn about the history of Buncombe County.
3) Preserve the personal collection of Foster Alexander Sondley (the nucleus of the collection).
4) Host community archives.
5) Provide patrons with events that foster interest and excitement in Buncombe County history. These events might be: walking tours, collection tours, zoom events, and hosting guest speakers.

Design of the facility

The facility is currently designed as a fairly conventional archival space. It is located in the basement of the Pack Memorial Library, near the Juvenile Department. A detailed floorplan is not available online, so this description is based on personal experience. The public room of the archive is set up with several bookshelves of general North Carolina and Western North Carolina-related books, maps and periodicals, as well as a reference desk and several small exhibits. The room also contains several computer terminals for research, as well as microfilm newspaper archives and microfilm readers. It is approximately 500 square feet.

Connected by a door to this front room is the manuscript section of the archive, which is approximately the same size as the public portion. It is climate-controlled and contains the bulk of the archive's manuscript, ephemera, and physical newspaper collections, as well as workspaces and a scanner. The public is not currently allowed to enter the manuscript room.

However, as will be addressed later, the NC Room is planning on completely redesigning its space in the very near future in order to project a more welcoming, more diverse, and "generally less stuffy" space (K. Cutshall, personal communication, September 11, 2020). They are going to remodel the public portion to encourage users to browse and spend time in the space, as well as working with a community-based library organization to paint a mural on the walls that will center Black, Indigenous, and queer voices (Cutshall, 2020). They will remove two bookshelves and move some of their manuscript materials to another local archive with a better capacity to house them, as well as giving the NC Room more visibility within Pack Memorial Library as a whole.

Defining Users

The Pack Memorial Library serves a county with a population estimate of 261,191 people. Users 65-years-old and older account for 20.5% of the population while people younger than 18 years of age constitute 18.2%. Females narrowly outnumber males in Buncombe County as 52.1% of the population. The majority of people in the area, 83.4%, identify as White, non-Latinx. Latinx is the next largest group at 6.8%, followed by Blacks at 6.3%, Biracial and multiracial at 2.2%, Asians at 1.4%, American Indian and Alaska Native at .5%, and Native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islanders at .2%. The average number of people in Buncombe's 107,093 households is 2.31. The median household income in 2018 dollars equals $50,668. 11.5% of people live in poverty. 87.5% of households have computers while 80.9% reported to hold a broadband Internet subscription. 91% of Buncombe's population who are 25-years-old and older acquired a high school diploma or higher while 39.2% of that population earned a bachelor's degree or higher. 9.2% of people 65 and younger reported having a disability (2019, US Census). These figures suggest that library users predominantly look like White, middle-class adults.

The Asheville Chamber of Commerce identified population trends that further illustrate the kinds of patrons using the North Carolina Room. The Asheville MSA projected the following population growths between 2017 and 2037: Whites by 89,700 people; Hispanics by 26,300 people; and Blacks by 500 people. However, projections specific to Buncombe county show a decline in the Black population by 5%, which amounts to about 14,900 people (2018, p. 1). The median age in Asheville is projected to be 46 with the numbers of millennials declining from 19% to 17% between 2017 and 2037. Meanwhile, people aged 60 and older are projected to

grow from 26% to 30% between 2017 and 2037. The median household income in Asheville is projected to grow from $50,360 to $55,620 between 2018 and 2023. However, "the greatest growth (in total number) is projected among households that make between $100,000 - $149,999 a year (by 5,816)" (2018, p. 2). The chamber of commerce also reported a trend of residents being "priced-out" for housing with costs amounting to 5.78 times average incomes in Asheville (2018, p. 4).

Government resources have been used to portray the user population, because, according to Cutshall, the library does not use any population metric to analyze users. She said this issue stems from the library's stance on applying "color blindness" in relation to analyzing users in addition to protecting users' privacy. As a result, Cutshall said cardholder data is not analyzed. However, she stated that she explored bars in the area to ask staff there about their check-in software -- a possible tool the library could use to obtain population metrics.

Collections

North Carolina Collection

The North Carolina collection covers materials related to history, literature, and life in western North Carolina, particularly Asheville and Buncombe County. Historic photographs, documents, and oral histories from the collections are partially digitized and available in an online database.

The collection offers a wide variety of materials, including:

- Book collection from the personal library of F. A. Sondley covering western North Carolina history and culture, as well as reference guides to the entire state.
- Over 12,000 photographs and 4,000 postcards dating back to the 1800s.
- Local manuscript and records collection focused on the historical development of western NC.
- More than 500 maps of western NC dating back to 1709.
- The Thomas Wolfe Collection, featuring first editions of Wolfe's books and documents primarily related to Wolfe's life in Asheville. It also features correspondence and recordings from his family describing his life and relation to west Asheville.
- Genealogical resources (covered under "unique resources" below).
- An architectural drawing collection featuring prominent early 20th century Asheville architects.
- Asheville City Directories dating back to 1883.
- Microfilm of the Asheville Citizen-Times and other newspapers dating back to 1844.

- Newspaper clipping files, indexed and arranged by subject.
- Arts and crafts, and artisans, of western NC.
- Local oral histories.
- Index of Asheville photographers.
- Index of Asheville historical buildings.
- Index of Asheville architects and their buildings.

Community Archives

- Asheville Gay Community Project: Oral histories of gay commnity members in Asheville
- Southside Community Project: Ephemera and oral histories of life in Southside, Asheville
- Black Asheville Communities Project: Oral histories of black Asheville residents with a focus in the Southside area
- Stephens-Lee Alumni Project: Index of notable alumni from Stephens-Lee High School
- North Asheville Community Archives Project: Photographs and oral histories of life in North Asheville
- Fairview Community Archives Project: Photographs and oral histories of life in Fairview with a focus in the 19th century.

A closer look at the Black Asheville History Project

The Black Asheville History Project is an initiative aimed at collaborating with African American community members to build a more inclusive collection of materials related to local African American history. The project began in 2019 and will continue through 2025 or until the library meets their goal of ensuring that at least 25 percent of the NC Room's collection relates to African American history in western North Carolina. The library plans to accomplish this through actively engaging community members in the collection process, by inviting the community into the library for training sessions on oral history interview and archival digital preservation techniques. Currently, there are only 1,224 records in the NC Room database under the subject heading "African American," approximately 2 percent of the entire collection, so there is quite a bit of room for improvement.

Services

Online access

While the NC Room's North Carolina collection is not yet fully digitized, a significant portion of collected materials, especially photographs and postcards, is available to patrons remotely in an online database.

Local history programs

The NC Room hosts a variety of speakers on local history for people of all ages. Right now, there are no upcoming events in this series due to the pandemic, but the most recent was an update on the Black Asheville History Project with the Buncombe County Community Engagement Team covering recent additions to the African American archives.

Virtual programming

Since May, the NC Room has been hosting virtual programming to give the community access to the NC Room while maintaining safe social distancing. There are currently no upcoming events, and the most recent online event was held in July. Previous events included Zoom sessions with NC Room librarians, a presentation on Asheville's first Black public school teachers, a book talk with an author of a book about Appalachian trail backcountry shelters, a presentation on the songs and guitar style of Jimmie Rodgers, a talk on the Buncombe County Moonlight Schools, and a virtual walking tour of the collection called "Scrolling through history."

The NC Room also has a YouTube channel where they upload videos of library programming for digital access.

Research tools

The NC Room webpage has a section devoted to research tools, but it isn't particularly helpful for someone who might be new to research. It includes a list of genealogical resources on the right side of the page, none of which are linked to any information about how to use them, and a list of general resources on the left side, only some of which are linked. Presumably the linked resources are to the collection areas that have been digitized, while the unlinked resources are not available digitally, but a little more guidance here would be helpful to users.

Unique Resources

Genealogical

The genealogical resources at the NC Room include census, family, and county records. Users can find digitized newspapers and photographs through the collections' online database. However, the remaining resources can only be accessed in person.

HeardTell

Heardtell is the NC Room's blog with sporadic posts featuring events and new discoveries in the collection. Recent posts include virtual programming on Zoom, photographs, oral histories, and research on notable Asheville individuals. The blog includes several sections detailing its history and its collections. On occasion, features long-term endeavors including 52 Weeks/52 Communities," a year-long project detailing the 52 communities of Buncombe County.

Strolling Through History

This program is hosted in the NC Room annually. The collection invites interns to research and write tours. These tours are for specific sections of Asheville. These programs encourage the public to interact with the NC Room and to ask any questions they might have about their local communities.

Community-Based Archives

The NC Room invites users to create their own archives. If approved, they are then housed within the collection. These collections primarily consist of oral histories. Users can contribute by volunteering to conduct oral histories. The community archives can be accessed using the NC Room's online database like any of the rooms' collections.

Library Budget and Collection Goals

The NC Room is currently undergoing a major overhaul of its mission, collection goals, and plan for the future. As mentioned above, the manager, Katherine Calhoun Cutshall, is planning on completely redesigning the space and making it actively inclusive and, in her words, "aggressively enthusiastic." The library budget for the full library system is more than $6 million, while Pack Memorial Library's budget is nearly a fifth of that (Buncombe County Budget Office, 2020); Buncombe County, n.d.-a). The NC Room's full budget is not available online, but the archive has access to nearly a million dollars in trust fund form, as well as $4,500 yearly for supplies and some additional monies from the library budget as a whole (Cutshall, 2020). In the fiscal year to date, the NC Room has spent $212,000 on wages, office supply expenses and other related expenditures (Buncombe County, n.d.-a). The archive also has a special Friends of the North Carolina Room group, which fundraises and advocates for it.

In regard to a collection plan and goals, there is not currently an official plan for the NC Room. In addition, although the entire Buncombe County Library System has put together reports on operational status since the 1870s, these recent reports are unavailable to the public in digital format. When the NC Room was first formally created in 1990 as an expansion of the Sondley Collection, a list of objectives and a collections plan were set forth, but these have not been updated since the 1990s (Cutshall, 2020). The NC Room staff is currently in the process of reimagining its goals and a collection plan in order to reaffirm and reimagine its values. The collection plan in progress will also include a comprehensive history of the collection and lay out the collection's scope in the context of its new goals. The staff plans to ensure that the NC Room will, among other things:

1) Become more inclusive of the variety of people of Western North Carolina and the surrounding area and home in on their status as a community-centered archive
2) Enable and encourage greater access to the NC Room space by a truly diverse contingent of users
3) Focus more on the Southern Appalachian region and subjects relevant to the history and population of that area rather than the state of North Carolina as a whole
4) Reexamine its existing collections with an eye toward equity and social justice initiatives
5) Be transparent about the racist material in their collection and the ways in which racism is perpetuated in the cataloguing and existing practices of the archive
6) Facilitate open cooperation and sharing with other regional and relevant archives
7) Be innovative and non-traditional in order to better serve its community (Cutshall, 2020)

These goals align with, reaffirm and expand upon the NC Room's extant mission statement. They ensure that as Buncombe County and the surrounding area change, the archive will be able to change with it and continue to be integrated into the diversity of the community. In short, the NC Room is actively growing and evolving in order to better serve their local community as a whole.

Conclusion

Through support and interest of the local community, the Pack Library NC's Room continues to create resources that ignite a passion for Buncombe county's history. The NC Room continues to make its collection accessible so patrons will always have a space to learn about genealogy, Thomas Wolfe, Foster Sondley, North Carolina and the Southern Appalachians. These collections will create generations of keepers of Buncombe County's history so this region's memories will forever be preserved.

Bibliographic Section Assignments:

Butcher: Western NC labor history

Dunefsky: Promotion and outreach

Thacker: Civil rights in the Southern Appalachian area

Webb: Storytelling in Southern Appalachia

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