

Flavels: ‘I want to humanize them’

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Goodenberger will dip his hand in a box and grab an assortment of papers.

Some aren't completely legible. Some even have pigeon droppings and mold on them.

“You have to go through everything because sometimes there’s some real jewels packed in there,” he said.

Goodenberger sees an artistic quality in the papers that are hard to read.

“The letter literally becomes more toxic as it goes and it just kind of dis-integrates and I really like that and I think that’s kind of art in its own way,” he said. “And seeing those things really helps tell the story of the decline.”

He uses a spreadsheet to organize the documents.

The real treasure chest came in the form of a black box that Chelsea Vaughn, the curator for the historical society, found. The box contained about 200 documents, some going back to 1849. It was likely stolen from the Flavel home and brought in anonymously.

Goodenberger said some letters help him understand characters to watch for and clarify preconceived ideas.

“My belief is that we really need to get all of this out into the air just so that people can stop the rumors ... because I think the gossip doesn’t do us any good. It takes away. You don’t need to make things up for this story, it is so interesting.”

Goodenberger works on the project nearly every day.

He keeps a clipboard with a notepad next to his bed for when thoughts come to him.

“I found that it’s just easier to write it down rather than keep thinking about it and not getting sleep,” he said.

But he isn’t working on the project alone.

Along with help from the historical society, he’s received assistance from Sheila Nolan in completing a family tree; intern Brooke Willoughby spent time completing an initial sift of the papers; and Eric Williams is assisting him in research.

Willoughby said the papers show a more raw and uncensored look at the family, especially later generations, including Mary Louise Flavel, Harry Sherman Flavel and Florence Flavel.

“I think people have this idea of what the Flavels are, especially that generation, and since it’s a rare, extensive collection I hope that it can be more of an honest and just raw history of the family,” she said.

The project was born out of a conversation between Jeff Newenhof, the owner of City Lumber, and McAndrew Burns, the executive director of the historical society, on how to honor Newenhof’s brother, Greg, who bought the Flavel home and died suddenly while he was restoring it.

“Greg became a really good friend of the historical society because he had so many interests and questions about the Flavel family history, and I said all too often I didn’t have an answer for him,” Burns said. “And he’d say why not, and I’d say well because we just don’t know, and somewhere in the middle of that conversation, we said let’s get the book written that he would have wanted, the user’s manual for owning that house, and there’s only one guy that can write that book, it’s John Goodenberger.”

‘Bloodsucker’

Goodenberger recently finished a chapter titled “Bloodsucker.” It focuses on Capt. George Flavel, whose home became the famous Flavel House Museum.

“(Bloodsucker) is an insult that was supposedly said to the captain by a particular person and that insult went generation after generation,” he said.

But he doesn’t even



Jonathan Williams/The Astorian

John Goodenberger works in the basement of the Clatsop County Historical Society.



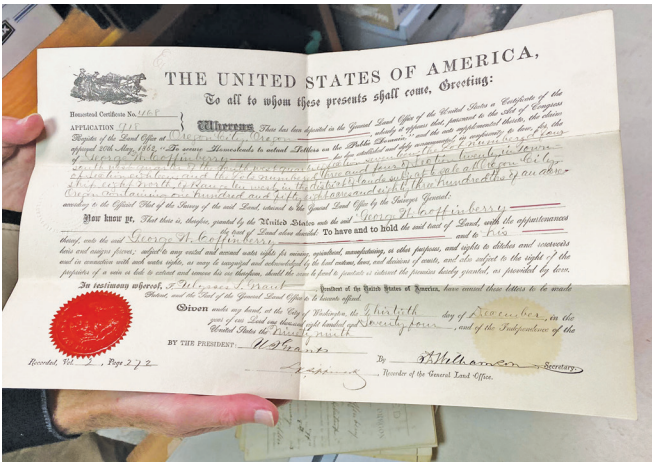
Hailey Hoffman/The Astorian

John Goodenberger flips through his binder filled with research on the Flavels.



Jonathan Williams/The Astorian

The black box an anonymous person brought to the Clatsop County Historical Society containing documents of the Flavels reaching back to the 1850s.



Jonathan Williams/The Astorian

A document of Capt. George Flavel’s signed by President Ulysses S. Grant.

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Brooke Willoughby | intern

know if it is true.

“I’m kind of documenting that. I don’t know it’s true and certainly whether or not he said it. I can find an account in a newspaper of him being called that, but it wasn’t him, it wasn’t the person who’s been blamed all these years for saying it,” he said. “So again, I want that kind of rumor and all that trouble through this, but in the end I want to be able to clear up some of that.”

Goodenberger wants the letters to lead the story.

“You’re getting an account from that period. So you may want to shun what they say because you know we have different opinions today, but we’re getting an account from that period as close to a source as possible.”

The book is divided into three segments.

The first covers Capt. Flavel from 1870 to 1893; the following covers the next generation from 1880

to 1970; the last segment

continues through the 1970s to the present.

“While I may not hit on all of the greatest hits so to speak, I’m hoping that what I do hit, what I do create, speaks to those other stories, so it’s giving you an example of those other lives,” he said.

He tries to choose letters that are clear and dynamic.

He’s using a diary entry from Nellie Flavel during the 1906 San Francisco earthquake.

“She said to herself, ‘This is an important moment and I need to record it,’ and so she sat down and wrote this. And the way that she wrote it was so beautiful, she’s an excellent writer,” he said.

Goodenberger also hopes to show different perspectives of the family.

By using receipts, he hopes to show how instrumental Mary Christina Flavel, Capt. Flavel’s wife, was in helping build the Queen Anne-style Flavel house.

One thing that surprised Goodenberger was the

bluntness in the letters.

“The Flavels, in general, at least publicly, are tight-lipped, but here in their letters they have things to say to each other, and I find that really interesting,” he said.

One letter from Florence Flavel to her husband says to “please burn this letter” after reading. He didn’t follow her instructions.

Showing their humanity

On a recent day, Goodenberger’s word count stood at 82,404 words — equivalent to about 200 pages.

He speaks with a passion for and weariness of the expansive nature of the Flavel story.

“I really like the people. That’s my big deal. I like the human element of it,” he said.

“One of the things that I really hope to show is that the Flavels really did lead pretty incredible lives,” he said. “So I want it (to) raise them up a little bit in that way in peoples’ eyes.”

“I want to humanize them ... and take them away from being cardboard cut-outs, cartoon characters, and make them fuller people,” he said. “You may not like them in the end. That’s your choice. But at least you can appreciate them as flesh and blood people.”

Goodenberger’s background as a distance runner and cross-country coach helps him break the project into pieces.

Conversations with friends also help.

To feel like he’s done something, he puts a finished draft of a chapter in a Word document and adds pictures. “I make it look nice,” he said.

He takes his laptop and works on the project around town.

“I’m able to sit on the waterfront and basically do stream of consciousness. I can do a quick draft just to get something done,” he said. “I get to walk, I do a lot of walking and a lot of thinking and trying to create during those walks.”

While Goodenberger is a historic preservation professor, his goal is to not sound too academic.

“I want it to sound natural, and so I kind of have to work at that,” he said.

He sees the project as a jumping off point for scholars to focus on certain parts of the Flavels.

“I feel that the work I’m doing is for future scholars. I’m taking that skeleton and I’m trying to add flesh to it and make those connections in that way so that others can skip that step,” he said.

He also realizes research on the Flavels will never be totally complete.

“It has the opportunity for someone just to say, ‘I’m only going to focus on the WWI period,’ and they have some resources to go in there.”

There are still many boxes Goodenberger hasn’t sorted though yet. “I get exhausted,” he said.

When will it be done? “Not anytime soon,” Goodenberger said. “I have so many things yet to explore.”

Politics: Academic freedom policy leaves room for interpretation

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promote a variety of messages, from Trump 2020 and Biden 2020 to Black Lives Matter and Thin Blue Line.

“There’s been a little bit of all of that,” Jackson said.

While there is a certain level of political activity and discussion among students during every presidential election, Jackson saw a marked increase in the 2016 election and now again this year.

Messages and comments from students were most intense at the start of the school year and seemed to be more prevalent among the younger classes at the high school, Jackson said. He believes students were testing the platform and their teacher’s ability to respond.

The disruptive political expressions appear to be dying down. But with another month to go before the election and the likelihood of continued political tensions in the aftermath, Jackson expects the issue could flare up again.

It’s one thing to address a political outburst in a normal classroom. It is an entirely different challenge when that classroom is virtual. The Astoria School District opted for an online-only start to the school year after the coronavirus pandemic shut down in-person instruction in March.

In a virtual classroom, a teacher can mute or hide a student, or even remove a student from the classroom if they are being disruptive. More often, Vargas’ son saw teachers type a reminder: “No politics.”

Jackson said teachers and administrators try to address any issues with a student through reminders and warnings first.

“Obviously removing a student is not something we want to utilize as a first step for intervention,” he said. “We want our students present ... engaged but, at the same time, respectful.”

Parents were told that while teachers could discourage political discussions in the classroom chats, there was little they could do about a student who chose a campaign sign as their backdrop or icon.

The school board’s academic freedom policy intentionally leaves room for interpretation where it touches on when and how students express certain opinions.



Hailey Hoffman/The Astorian

The presidential election has brought politics into online classes.

“Students may support causes by orderly means which do not disrupt other individuals or the operation of the school,” the policy states, adding, “In the classroom, students are free to examine views offered in any course of study, provided such examination is expressed in a responsible manner.”

It would be clearly inappropriate for a student to shout out “Trump 2020” or “Biden 2020” during a math class when a teacher had posed a question about the Pythagorean theorem, for example, Jackson said.

In a political science class or a home room situation, though, there is more freedom to talk about politics.

Jackson sent out discussion and education points to his staff around these topics to help them as they guide student interactions and classroom conversations and help the students understand proper school etiquette.

Vargas wishes there was a more concrete answer, however.

While she and her family openly discuss politics and express their opinions at home, she tries to discourage her children from talking about politics when they are in public.

She tells them: “You don’t know how it makes someone feel.”

Unless the discussion is happening in a current events or political science class, “I personally don’t think politics belong in school,” she said.

For now, she tells her son to try and ignore students who are intent on making any kind of political statement during class.



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