

Pennsylvania Libraries: *Research & Practice*

Interview

In the PaLRaP Spotlight: Wendi Blewett

Museum Collections Manager

*Delaware & Lehigh National Heritage Corridor, National Canal Museum,
Easton, PA*



Interview by Stephanie Campbell

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Tell us a little about your background, what led you to the National Canal Museum?

Two years ago, my coworker sent me an email with a job posting from the National Canal Museum (NCM). Although it was a temporary position an hour from where I lived, I was immediately intrigued. My great great-

grandfather, Charles McWilliams, was employed by the Morris Canal in New Jersey and I live near Plane 3 East, where he was the plane tender. (Plane tenders are responsible for the inclined planes that raised and lowered canal boats between different water levels.) My parents instilled a love of learning, history, and museums, so I appreciate having that connection to my ancestors. I had been working for over a decade as a library assistant at an academic library and had spent a few years as a part-time reference librarian at a public library. I had earned my MLIS two years prior and had no intention of leaving my full-time job, but I figured I would apply and see what happened. Several weeks later, I was at the museum for an interview. When they showed me their collections, my eyes lit up. It felt like the right place for me. The historian showed me a postcard, and I knew the person it had been sent to – she went to my church, lived up the street from me, and made the best applesauce I have ever had (sorry, Grandma). In December 2021, I was hired by NCM as the Inventory Coordinator for the Museum Support Center. I became the Museum Collections Manager in September 2022. I guess I have my ancestors to thank for putting me on this trajectory!

According to the website, <https://canals.org/>, the National Canal Museum documents the history of America’s canals and navigable rivers, as well as canal-related industries in the Lehigh Valley. It also interprets the historic structures and sites within the 260 acres that comprise Hugh Moore Park, a National Register Historic District in Easton. For the uninitiated, the American Canal Society <https://americancanalsociety.org/> is a good resource to grasp the breadth and depth of canal history across the United States and around the world.

Describe the collections, programs, and services of the National Canal Museum.

Gosh, how much space do I get? There’s a lot of variety in our collections. To start off with, we have two locations: an archives at our main building, and an offsite Museum Support Center. We began as custodians of the Pennsylvania Canal Society’s collection. Over the years that expanded to include other topics: other American canals, some foreign canals (like the Panama Canal), anthracite mining, canal- or coal-related industries, and transportation, to name a few. In the 2010s, the National Canal Museum merged with and became a signature program of the Delaware & Lehigh National Heritage Corridor (DNLHC), so we also focus on preserving the history of the area encompassed by the DNLHC. We have collections related to the cultural and industrial heritage of the counties of Luzerne, Carbon, Lehigh, Northampton, and Bucks. The collections team offers research appointments, answers local media questions, handles archival requests for research, provides staff support for other DNLHC projects, and creates social media content. Recently, we had a college class visit so they could see different types of primary sources.

The museum is on the first floor – there are historical objects and information, but also a lot of interactive exhibits to teach people about canals, simple machines, and industry. You can even take a ride aboard the Josiah White II, a canal boat towed by our mules, Hank and George! There are educational programs like our school/kid’s groups field trips, Immersion days, and Tales on the Towpath curriculum. There are dinner cruises, Health & Heritage walks, bike rides, trail-related activities, history, and author talks. I’m not involved with much of the programming, but I sometimes help with research or design. Working with our collections keeps me busy enough!

Describe your role at the National Canal Museum.

As the Museum Collections Manager, I'm responsible for the historical and research collections, which means I manage all archival activities: accepting, accessioning, processing, cataloging, inventorying, organizing, loaning, caring for, researching, providing access to, deaccessioning, and rehoming materials – and anything else you can think of! We have a new Inventory Coordinator, so, for now, I'm overseeing the inventory at our Museum Support Center. I supervise the collections interns and volunteers as well. Our Historian, Inventory Coordinator, and I create social media content about our collections and the history of the corridor. Having an undergraduate degree in art, I also offer my artistic services where I can. I came into this job worrying that it might start to feel monotonous, but every day is different!

The National Canal Museum appears to be funded primarily through memberships plus the fares from the mule-drawn canal boat rides.

As a signature program of the DLNHC, our funding comes from a variety of sources. There's income generated from the museum, memberships, and museum programs, but there are also grants, state and federal funding, and fundraisers. In fact, my original position as Inventory Coordinator was made possible by an Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) grant.

Describe the physical building, your day-to-day tasks, and of course the mules!

The National Canal Museum and Delaware & Lehigh National Heritage Corridor are in a building called the Emrick Technology Center (ETC) in Hugh Moore Park, right beside the Lehigh Canal. I'm part of the collections team, a subset of the Museum & Education Department. As part of the DLNHC, I often work with Trails & Conservation, Communications, Finance, Advancement, and Facilities. The DLNHC works to preserve the historic pathway of the Lehigh and Delaware Canals, which carried anthracite coal and iron from Wilkes-Barre to Bristol. We're all about connecting people to whatever they're interested in, whether it be to the industrial heritage of the area, to nature and health through the Delaware & Lehigh Trail or conservation efforts, or to economic development within the Corridor. DLNHC offices are located on the second floor of the ETC, and the museum is on the ground floor. On any given day, you can find me researching for an archival request, organizing our archives, reviewing our records management system (PastPerfect), creating a #WayBackWednesday post, or putting my artistic skills to use for an interdepartmental project. Sadly, I don't interact with our mules too much. Hank and George aren't house-trained, so they're definitely not allowed into the archives. Mules might seem like an odd addition to a museum, but canal boats were powered by mules, so that's one way we give visitors a historical experience. Plus, they're probably the most adorable and beloved employees of the DLNHC, hands down.

Finally, can you tell us why you do what you do?

I grew up with a love of history, and now I get to help preserve it for the future. I love to learn, and now I get to research and discover new things – plus I get to share my knowledge with others. Doing this makes me happy. It doesn't get much better than that!