

# Breathing New Life Into Dying Museums

---

Faith Walker

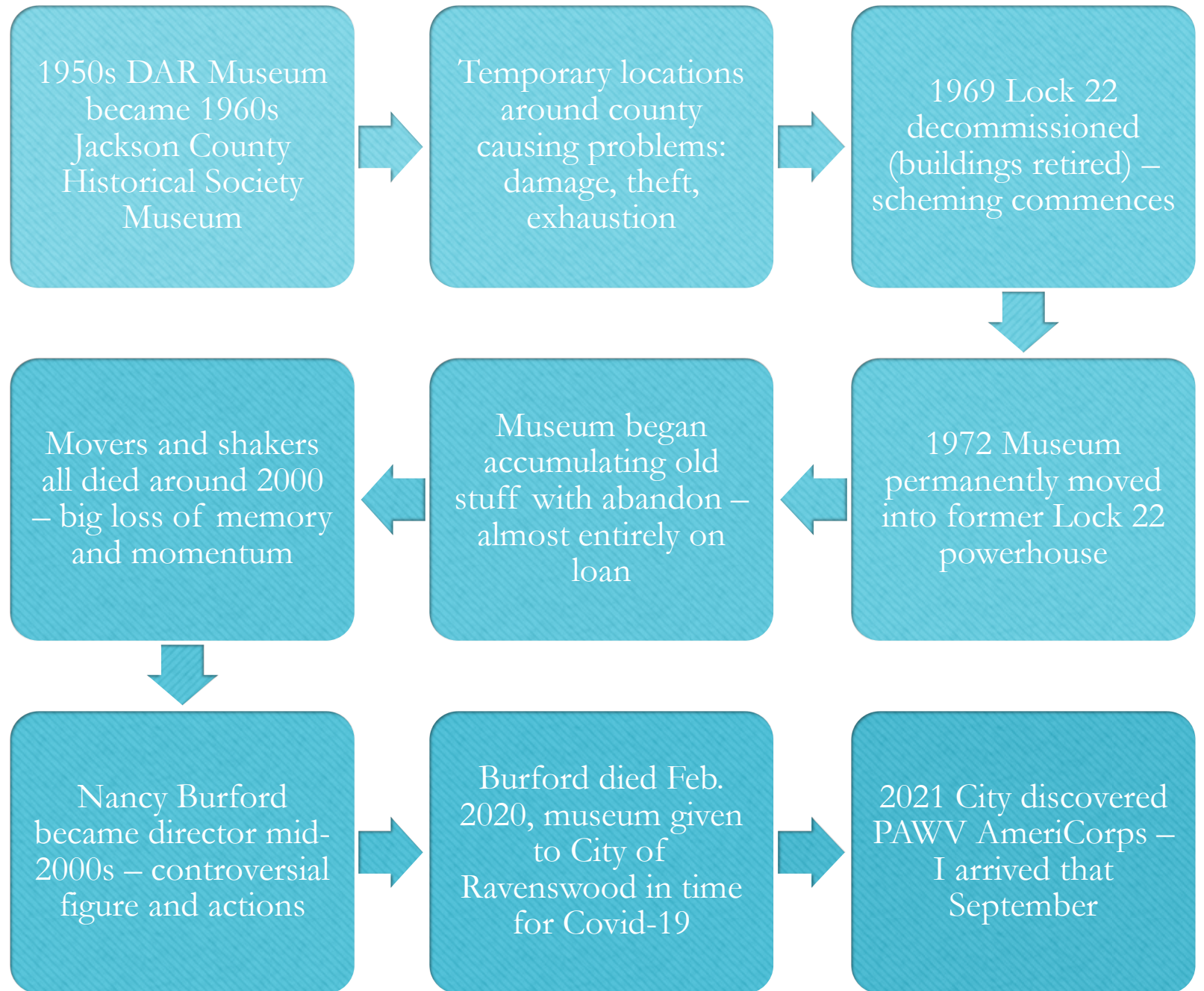
Director, The Great Bend Museum, Ravenswood WV

PAWV AmeriCorps





Institutional  
History:  
50 Years In a  
Nutshell





# Who We Are Now

---

Board of Culture and History < Parks and Recreation  
Commissioners < City Council

Mission: To preserve and inspire curiosity in the  
history of the Great Bend region

\$50k City-assigned budget plus grants

1 full-time employee (moi) plus interns and volunteers

2 historic buildings plus small displays in Ripley and  
Ravenswood City Halls

~10k-piece collection





# Management and Oversight

## BEFORE:

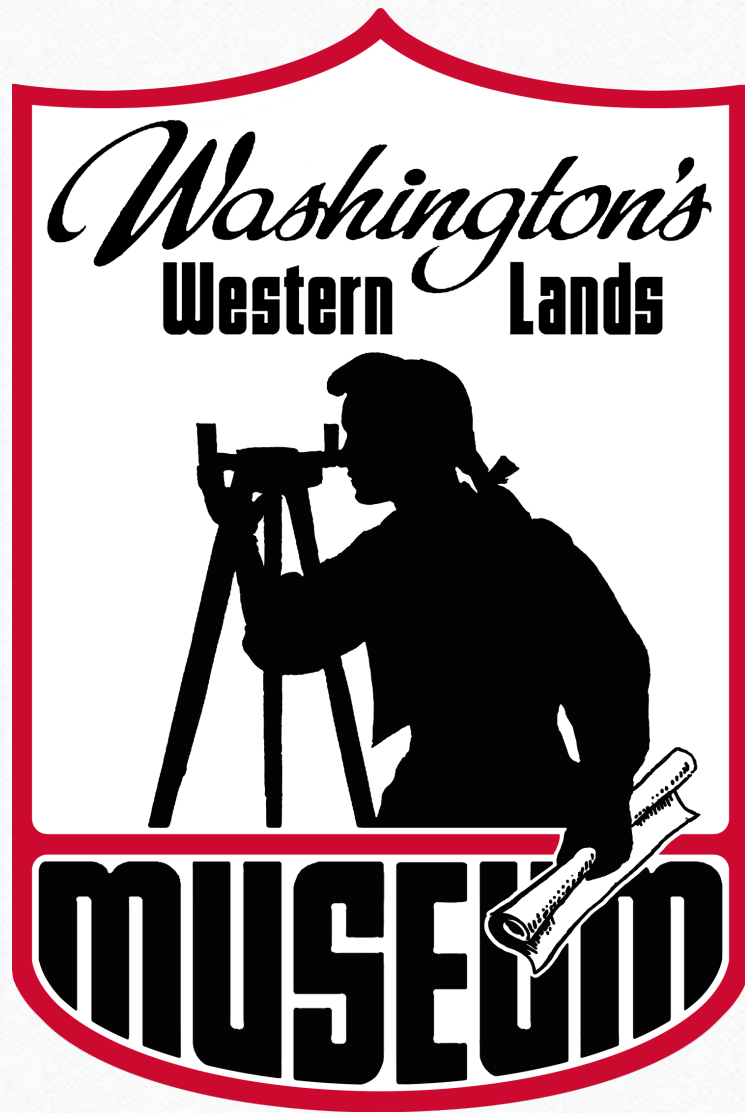
### Washington's Western Lands Museum

- Aging leadership with no system for designating or training successor
- Personal laptop without backup, records kept at home
- No bylaws, policies, procedures, or plans
- Cumbersome name, busy logo, any brand identity felt clumsy

## AFTER:

### The Great Bend Museum

- Multi-layered leadership with plans for training successors
- Public laptop with OneDrive and Google backup, no records at home
- Developing bylaws, policies, procedures, plans with board oversight and approval
- Short and inclusive name, clean logo, working on other aspects of brand identity



GREAT BEND  
MUSEUM  
RAVENSWOOD



# Collections

## BEFORE:

### Washington's Western Lands Museum

- Few records and poorly kept - no catalog or accession register
- Objects either irrelevant or dissociated, very disorganized, environmental damage
- Collections storage didn't exist; mixed-use closets and exhibits used
- Nothing post-1950 collected but liberally accepted nearly anything else (Victoriana)

## AFTER:

### The Great Bend Museum

- Complete catalog/accession register maintained on paper and in Past Perfect Web Edition (online access with backups)
- Researching, recording, and re-associating as much collection history as possible
- Designated storage areas, restricted access
- Judicious board review of all new donation offers for relevance, condition







# Exhibits and Interpretation

## BEFORE:

### Washington's Western Lands Museum

- “~~County~~ Ravenswood Museum” – exhibits biased and unbalanced
- Labels often absent, misplaced, handwritten, or mismatched
- Very cluttered, dirty, and disorganized exhibits, lace doily-lined cases
- Exhibits unchanged for 50 years, just accumulated stuff and dust

## AFTER:

### The Great Bend Museum

- Representing women, people of color, and relevant non-Ravenswood places
- Consistent labels, professional interpretive panels, accessible fonts and sizes
- Cases clean and lined with unbleached muslin, contents curated and switched out
- Thematic exhibits that consider the whole physical space and relate to other exhibits







# Outreach and Publicity

## BEFORE:

### Washington's Western Lands Museum

- People thought museum had permanently closed years ago
- Newspaper column in the 1980s, irregular postings in later decades
- No social media until the last ~5 years, irregular posts
- No tourism materials

## AFTER:

### The Great Bend Museum

- Networking with community members/groups to let them know we're open, mend fences
- 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary - hard opening
- Social media presence with semi-regular activity
- Professional tourism materials





Washington's Western Lands Museum

November 29, 2015 · Ravenswood · 🌐



Still standing and is open to the public during the summer



0

People reached

28

Engagements

–

Distribution score

Boost unavailable

👍 15

1 comment 11 shares



The Great Bend Museum updated their profile picture.

Published by Faith Walker · January 18 · 🌐



In the absence of an appropriate mannequin to drive our 1884 hearse, Marvin the BOPARC Skeleton will be filling in for the foreseeable future.



No insights to show ⓘ

Create ad

👍 🤔 ❤️ 39

8 comments 4 shares



# Access

## BEFORE:

### Washington's Western Lands Museum

- Irregular/infrequent open hours
- Exhibits accessed via steep and narrow stairs, cluttered spaces
- Exclusive “club-like” attitude where some people prohibited/didn't feel welcome
- Little to no online presence, no designated phone number or email

## AFTER:

### The Great Bend Museum

- Open regularly 20 hours per week
- Upstairs areas closed off, walkways 3+ ft wide and clear, wheelchair ramp in works
- Working to accommodate more group visits and do school visits
- Online collections database, Google business listing, TripAdvisor, Yelp, official phone number and email





### Interested - but check the hours of operations

May 2016 • Solo

Finally after seeing the museum several times, I decided to stop and give it a try. Unfortunately, I discovered it was close when I stopped. I walked around the park for a while which is nice....and was surprised by a huge barge on the Ohio River.

There are other structures onsite and picnic pavilions if you need a nice place to break and stretch your legs.

I hope to get there sometime when the museum itself if open.

[Read less](#) ^

Written 4 May 2016



### Worth it for the views !

Apr 2017 • Couples

My husband and I stumbled upon this by accident on a recent road trip through West Virginia. We didn't visit the museum since it was closed but It's worth it to stop and walk around. There are plenty of benches to sit along the river and enjoy the views. Next time we will make sure to visit when the museum is open.



Written 21 April 2017



### Nice Park.

Jun 2017 • Family

Small City Park that offers a little for your time. Has a boat launch, parking lot for your trailer, a picnic area with a shelter for family get togethers, a place to pull over and watch the River traffic. There is a museum and a kayak rental in the summer for trips up a small tributary that's only acessable by small boat.

Written 10 July 2017



# Advice

---

- You won't be there forever. Don't make it hard for successors to pick up where you left off.
- No such thing as too many records.
- Incorporate young people in the museum's workings – energy, enthusiasm, and new ideas to make the museum sustainable.
- Join professional orgs, expand your network, keep up to date on current museum theory/practices.
- Spread the word – utilize board members, volunteers, interns, friends, etc to boost interest in the museum. It's not “alive” if there's not an active and growing audience.
- You have a much bigger audience on the internet – use it.
- Mend fences, heal schisms, don't let personal or political differences limit the success of your museum.
- Change is good. Nothing lasts forever in one form.



# Resources

---

- Kipp, Angela. **Managing Previously Unmanaged Collections: A Practical Guide for Museums.** United States, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2016.
- Simmons, John E.. **Things Great and Small: Collections Management Policies.** United States, American Association of Museums, 2006. **Rebranding: A Guide for Historic Houses, Museums, Sites, and Organizations**
- Williams, Robin. **The Non-designer's Design Book: Design and Typographic Principles for the Visual Novice.** United Kingdom, Peachpit Press, 2015. **Reinventing the Museum**
- Ambrose, Timothy, and Paine, Crispin. **Museum Basics: The International Handbook.** United Kingdom, Taylor & Francis, 2018.
- Boylan, Patrick J., ed. **Running a Museum: A Practical Handbook.** France, ICOM, 2004.
- AASLH Technical Leaflets
- National Parks Service Conserve-O-Grams
- Museum Facebook