

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE NORTH OLYMPIC HISTORY CENTER 1948 - 2026

Founding

The Clallam County Historical Society (CCHS) was formed in December of 1948. The goal of the first membership was to establish a local human history museum. Prior to its formation, a group of Clallam County Pioneers met once a year for a picnic and a time of remembering. This group was organized in about 1905 or 1906 and was called the Old Settlers Picnic and later became the Pioneer Association. The Pioneer Association met at Lincoln Park.

The founders of the CCHS were primarily people whose families had come to this area as children whose parents were members of the Puget Sound Cooperative Colony or Grand Army of the Republic-Civil War Veterans. They became members of the Pioneer Association. The prime organizers of the Historical Society were Minerva Troy, an artist, teacher, musician, and a very politically active woman; William Ware, a civil engineer, surveyor, businessman and community activist; and Madge Haynes Nailor, the City Treasurer.



Figure 1 Members of the Clallam County Pioneers Assoc. 1905 Object ID 1982.246.3

A Partnership for a Pioneer Museum

The organizational meeting for the CCHS was held on December 3, 1948, at Holmer's Cafe in downtown Port Angeles. A second meeting was held in January 1949. The group continued meeting at members' homes and then at places like the library, Elks Club, GAR Hall, and the Women's Literary Clubhouse. CCHS paid a \$5.00 fee for the use of these buildings. Programs for the meetings featured topics on local history. They dreamed of their own meeting space and a museum.

In 1951 Thomas T. Aldwell donated thirty acres of land to Olympic National Park and approached the CCHS to develop a pioneer museum there in cooperation with the Olympic National Park. Fred Overly, Olympic National Park Superintendent, and Aldwell knew the Society was looking for a home. After many meetings, the Society entered a gentleman's agreement with Overly to build a Pioneer Museum.



Figure 2 Clallam County Pioneers Board, 8/12/1951 Object ID 1994.114.276

CCHS agreed to raise money for the building. In 1952, Overly received the first check from the Historical Society. Thomas Aldwell donated \$5,000 for the foundation and Frank Donahue donated his time and equipment to clear and ready the ground for the building. For six years the CCHS members and the community raised money to pay for the materials that would go into this building. The Port Angeles High School carpentry classes, under the instruction of Marion Harthill built the Pioneer Museum. Finished in April of 1957, members of CCHS voted to incorporate as a non-profit organization and moved into the Pioneer Museum for meetings that year.

When the Pioneer Museum building was completed in 1957, it was evident that the Park and the Society did not have the same goals. CCHS was allowed to mount some photographic exhibits on walls and stands but little else. Little space was available for human history exhibits. CCHS never had designated workspace in the museum, and many records were stored in the basement of CCHS's president, James Machenheimer.

Some artifacts were stored in the museum basement and never saw the light of day in the Pioneer Museum. Many historical artifacts that were donated by pioneer families ended up in National Park exhibits and storage facilities elsewhere, and in park employee homes, never to be seen again.

Planning and Publishing *Jimmy Come Lately*

Elmer Critchfield, a past president of CCHS and a one-time county commissioner, suggested the society compile a history of the area. Under the presidency of James Machenheimer, the CCHS undertook the collecting of local history by authoring a book and publishing it.

The name of the book, *Jimmy Come Lately*, came from an expression the local Native peoples and some earlier pioneers used in referring to newly arrived early settlers. Some 50 old-timers and history buffs were charged with writing a factual and entertaining account of early Clallam County. CCHS put the funds made from the sale of the book toward the Pioneer Museum project.



Figure 3 *Jimmy Come Lately* Book Committee

CCHS moved the Beaumont cabin to the Pioneer Museum in 1963.

Elliot Beaumont homesteaded on south upper Mount Angeles Road and built the cabin in 1887. The cabin was occupied by the Beaumonts for almost half a century. It is the only artifact that remains on Park property. The Society maintained the cabin and the furnishings until 2023 when management was turned over to Olympic National Park

Moving and Reorganizing

After twenty-two years of a questionable partnership, CCHS was forced to remove all their collections from the Pioneer Museum. In 1978, the artifacts, records, photographs, and newspapers were moved from the Park to Port Angeles Savings and Loan-now First Federal Savings and Loan.

Under the leadership of Opal McLaughlin Ralston, an organizational system for recording and cataloging the clutter of artifacts and papers stored at Port Angeles Savings and Loan was created. Previously there were almost no records of the artifacts received and no system of keeping track of the items that CCHS was responsible for. The minutes of the CCHS meetings recorded some gifts, but those were the only records.

Opal Ralston knew that some method of accountability was a must. She recruited volunteers to bring order to the Society's holdings. Harriet Fish volunteered to oversee the recording and sorting. Then she recruited other volunteers.

The Hunt for a New Home

The Clallam County Museum Board under Ralston's leadership began a search for a new home. Many months of study led the Heritage Advisory Board to conclude that CCHS was the obvious choice to create and run a museum in the space vacated by the county offices in the old courthouse. Voters had convinced the county officials they did not want the old courthouse destroyed.

In November of 1978, the county commissioners passed a resolution calling for a museum in the Old Courthouse and asked CCHS to administer it. In June of 1980 the materials and artifact collection that had been stored at Port Angeles Savings were moved to the third floor of the courthouse, Volunteers painted areas on the second and third floors to make storage and exhibit space. research department, a library, a gift shop

In 1987, Clallam County Genealogical Society (CCGS) had evolved from Mary Harper's research, surveys and documentation of early local burial sites, extracting and archiving crucial historical records from the Clallam county Auditor's office from 1891-1913. In 1987 joined with CCHS to support a successful museum and robust

research departments. The CCGS and the CCHS Boards of Directors worked together sharing expenses and space.

The Clallam County Museum at the Clallam County Courthouse

A Grand Opening for the Clallam County Museum in the Court House was held June 19 and 20, 1982. More than 2,000 people attended. That was the beginning of many educational and entertaining events that the volunteers of the museum would organize and produce. CCHS and CCGS occupied this space until 1998.

Some educational programs were free, and others were given at a nominal fee to help pay for museum expenses. The fashion shows of the museum collection were extremely popular. Many sessions of Clallam County history were taught by volunteers through Peninsula College's Continuing Education program. Quilt shows were mounted. Workshops taught attendees how to store valuable family heirlooms, how to mat and frame artifacts and photographs, and how to store photographs

Over the years, local schools have taken advantage of tours and used the archives for research. Local citizens, government officials, researchers, and tourists have taken advantage of the archives and the research services provided by the librarians. The information garnered from these activities has been published in books, appeared on television, and found in documents for city, county, state, and national reports

Volunteers still go to community clubs, schools, and events with educational programs that fit the needs of the audience.

The Lincoln School Years

In May of 1990, Olympic National Park presented a check of \$155,000 to CCHS to buy out its interest in the Olympic National Park Visitors Center (Pioneer Museum). CCHS had anticipated the need for space and purchased the old Lincoln School campus in 1991. Mike Doherty worked hard for months to document CCHS's interest in the building. Negotiations had been underway for a decade. In 1991 the CCHS purchased the Lincoln School site for \$210,000 after looking at all available buildings and sites in downtown Port Angeles. CCHS paid off the property in 1993

From 1991-1999 a partnership of the Carpenters' Union, students in the local building trades classes, and a local homebuilders' group under the direction of Dan Moore did a retrofit of the Lincoln School building with steel beams, anchor bolts, and brought it up to code for seismic events.

Between 1996 and 1999 the same group tackled the renovation of the gymnasium, now the Artifact Storage Facility (ASF) and the lunchroom, now the NOHC Research Library. The ASF got an addition of three rooms across the west side of the building, insulation, climate control, a new roof, and wiring. The Research Library was completely remodeled.

In 1998 the CCHS and the CCGS had to move their administrative and research operations out of the old Clallam County courthouse and into gym and lunchroom of Lincoln School. CCHS continued to display artifact collections at the courthouse museum space until they shifted their major public museum exhibitions to the "Museum of the Carnegie" under a \$1.00-a-year lease with the city of Port Angeles. In 2016 the Lower Elwha Kallam Tribe took over the lease to open the Elwha Klallam Museum at the Carnegie.

CCGS Moves Out

In 2011 the CCGS was able to buy its own building and moved out allowing the Research Library to expand its resources collection.

Leaders of CCHS/NOHC

Volunteer and paid professional directors and managers have led the Clallam County Historical Society. The first was Harriet Fish, followed by Ginger Alexander, Robert Keeler PhD, Virginia Fitzpatrick, Dennis Noble, Darcy Fitzpatrick, Sharon Howe, and Kathy Monds.

New Leaders, New Directions

Under Kathy Monds directorship (1987-2020) CCHS transitioned from handwritten ledgers and 5x8 inch index cards to an electronic collection management system. It also changed its name to the North Olympic History Center to better reflect the scope of the group's activities in cataloging, preserving, and documenting the history of the area which ranges from the Pacific coast at Queets around Cape Flattery and along the Strait of Juan de Fuca to the Quimper Peninsula.



Figure 4 CCHS Board ca. 1979-1983 Virginia Fitzpatrick on far left

NOHC is continuing to evolve under the directorship of David Brownell, 2021-present. It has a robust online catalog, accessible at <https://northolympichistory.org/>, an exciting quarterly newsletter, *Strait News*, traveling exhibits which celebrate unique aspects of the history of the North Olympic Peninsula, and community programming.

Synopsis:

The North Olympic History Society has served as the region's steward of memory for more than 75 years. Founded by community members who recognized the need to preserve the stories, records, and artifacts of the North Olympic Peninsula, the Society began as a volunteer-driven effort to safeguard the area's heritage and make it accessible to future generations.

Over the decades, NOHC has built a substantial archival collection documenting the Peninsula's cultural and environmental history. Photographs, manuscripts, newspapers, maps, and personal histories trace the region's evolution—from Indigenous homelands and early settlement to logging, maritime industries, and the development of modern communities. These materials have long supported researchers, educators, and residents seeking to understand the forces that shaped Clallam County.

Today, the North Olympic History Center continues this work through preservation, digitization, exhibits, and public programs. The Center maintains a growing archive, supports community research, and collaborates with schools, libraries, and local organizations to share the region's history widely and accessibly. Its hands-on programs and digital resources help connect past and present, ensuring that the stories of the Peninsula remain part of community life.

As the region changes, NOHC remains committed to preserving historical materials and expanding public access to them. A more detailed history of the organization, including key milestones and developments across its 75-plus years, is available in the accompanying PDF.