

The Archive Project

“Concept to Reality”

by Gail Anderson



Prior to the 75th Anniversary (2022) of this iconic attraction, some members of the Friends of Weeki Wachee were excitedly given permission to explore the warehouse used to store memorabilia, photos, etc., with the intent of creating a pictorial vintage calendar. It was obvious that little had been done to organize or preserve the contents. Over the years, items were stored without protection in boxes, on shelves, in binders, on clothing racks, and stacks of photos.

The vintage calendar did not come to fruition, but it certainly sparked a whole new archival project! The first step was to approach the park manager concerning our involvement and desire to preserve any historical items found on the property - and begin an official project to catalog, digitize, identify and preserve those items. Having received permission from not only the local park administration but also the Florida Department of Environmental Protection/State Park System, we developed a proposal for the Friends of Weeki Wachee's Board of Directors and presented it in 2023. The proposal was accepted unanimously by the then current Board with an initial budget of \$25,000 allotted for equipment, supplies, and an archivist. Funding for this project is be a continuous need – and one of the very important reasons to continue with our fundraising efforts, and shoot for the goal of having a Visitor's Center on the property.

We were fortunate to hire Rebecca Schwandt as our archivist. She was already very familiar with Weeki Wachee. Her master's thesis in Public History from the University of Central Florida (UCF) focused on the attraction's history. She was also a researcher for a grant that conducted oral history interviews and hosted a local “History Harvest” for Weeki Wachee in 2019. All her findings are located in UCF's “RICHERS” online website at <https://riches.cah.ucf.edu/>. Rebecca also has the important task of uploading our newly organized history to the State of Florida's archive in Tallahassee.

As mentioned above, our long-term goal is to have a Visitor Center erected on park property for the public to learn about the geology and history of the park. In 2023, we began organizing items by type (photos, flyers, scripts, films, slides, costumes and props) as well as by date, names, and locations. It is a tedious job but the process of identifying, scanning, digitizing and entering the data into the State's Archive Computer is being accomplished. We are thrilled with our progress so far – and so is the State of Florida Archives!

Over the decades, a significant amount of historical information and many valuable artifacts have sadly been lost to fires or mishandling. The Friends of Weeki Wachee are eagerly recruiting and urging individuals who have any information, souvenirs, photos, etc. related to Weeki Wachee to share them with the Archives.

This can be done in two ways:

- A. Donate items to the park and receive a certification of donation. Items will be documented and placed in the donor's named collection. Everything will then be preserved and stored properly and may be used for exhibit in the future.
- B. Items can be loaned to The Archive Project for the time needed to process them into the archival file and be returned intact.

As Weeki Wachee Springs celebrates its 80th Anniversary in 2027, The Friends have committed to continue to sponsor ‘The Archive Project’. After all, history is perpetual and we certainly have made great progress in preserving our beloved Park's past!

**Chairman and
contact person:**

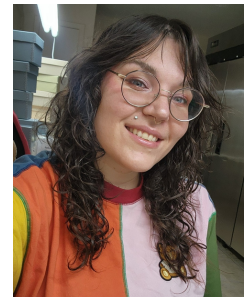
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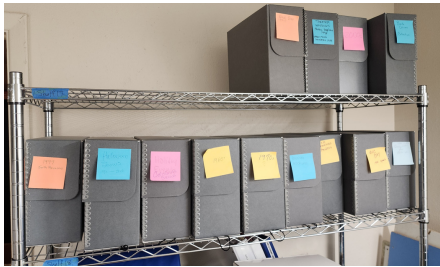
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The Archive Project

“The Process” by Rebecca Schwandt, Archivist



The Weeki Wachee Archive is considered a hidden collection because it is a special collection of historical artifacts that is largely unprocessed, uncataloged, and therefore inaccessible to both the public and researchers. A goal of this project is to reveal the collection and make it accessible. The archival workshop consists of approximately 600 square feet of rooms filled with materials documenting the park's history. Before the Weeki Wachee Archival Project began, the collection included three storage cabinets containing photographs, blueprints, and documents; two shelving units filled with artifacts; a broken-down refrigerator holding film reels from the 1950s and 1960s; and a clothing rack containing costumes. Only one of the three storage cabinets housed materials in proper archival storage conditions.



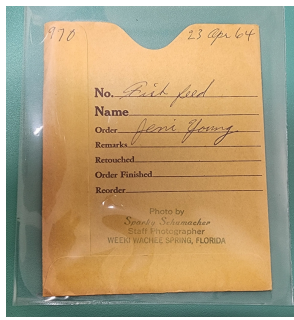
One of the first priorities of the project is to bring the archive collection closer to professional archival standards. According to the Society of American Archivists, historical collections should be maintained between 60–70 degrees Fahrenheit with humidity levels between 30–50 percent. LED lighting is also recommended because it emits minimal heat and no infrared radiation, reducing damage to sensitive materials. The Library of Congress further recommends freezing film reels if deterioration has already begun. To improve preservation conditions, the Friends of Weeki Wachee Springs State Park purchased dehumidifiers, air conditioning units for each room, deep freezers for film reels, LED lighting panels for workstations, and window coverings to reduce UV light exposure.

Proper storage was another essential step in the preservation process. As physical media ages, it naturally deteriorates. Paper releases acid as it breaks down, causing yellowing and brittleness, while humidity and UV light can fade and damage photographs. To slow this deterioration, each document and photograph must be stored in acid-free Mylar sleeves, and groups of items must be housed in acid-free archival boxes. Project staff identified and purchased the most common sizes and types of archival supplies needed for the collection. Additional shelving units were also added to accommodate materials being rehoused in proper storage.

Before cataloging could begin, the archive first needed to be organized in a way that would make materials easier to locate and manage. Because the collection contains tens of thousands of items, organization is an ongoing process. The most practical system for the archive was grouping similar materials together and arranging them by decade of creation. As items are sorted, they are placed into protective Mylar sleeves to ensure their safety preservation while they await cataloging.

Cataloging Efforts began with the oldest materials in the collection, as these items are the most vulnerable to further deterioration. One major project involved photos and negatives from the 1950s and 1960s taken by Weeki Wachee's official photographers. These images documented promotional photo shoots used in park advertising materials. Each photo set had originally been stored in its own envelope, often labeled with the date, title of the shoot, and photographer's name. The sets typically included both negatives and photographic prints.





The first step in processing these collections was organizing the photographs within each set. The original photographers had written numbers beneath each negative for their own organizational purposes, so the negatives and prints were sorted according to those numbers. This ensured that every image in a set would be scanned, since some sets did not contain prints of every photograph. Once individual sets were organized, all

photo sets were arranged chronologically to create a clearer historical timeline of the park's history development and for more comprehensive displays in a future Visitor's Center.

Each item was then assigned a catalog number according to the standards established by the Florida Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) archivists. Because Florida has 175 state parks, maintaining a uniform numbering and cataloging system is essential for preventing information from being lost or misplaced in digital records. After training with DEP archivists, these standards were implemented within the Weeki Wachee Archive, giving every artifact its own unique identifier.

After numbering, high-quality digital scans were created for every item in the collection. The archive's scanner allows it to convert negatives into photographic images. Once digitized, detailed metadata was created for each item to preserve its historical context. For photographs, this process included identifying the mermaids featured in the images, the shows being performed, costumes being worn, locations depicted, events being documented, and additional relevant information. This state of the process required extensive research and collaboration with former mermaids, whose firsthand knowledge of the park has been invaluable. Many former performers have volunteered countless hours helping identify people, places, and events represented in the archive.

Once cataloging was completed, all digital scans and metadata were sent to Florida DEP archivists to upload into the state's museum cataloging software. The physical materials were then safely stored in archival cabinets. This same process is repeated for every item in the collection. Preserving Weeki's history is an on-going project. Although it is time-intensive, the work ensures that the history of Weeki Wachee will be preserved and accessible for future generations, and to meet our goal of establishing a Visitor's Center within Weeki Wachee Springs State Park.

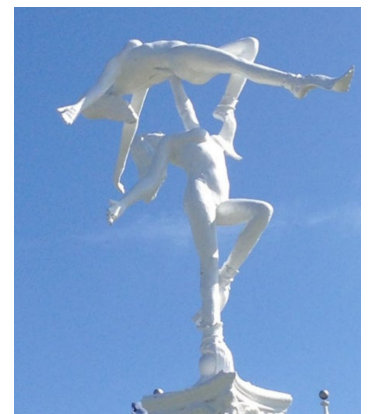
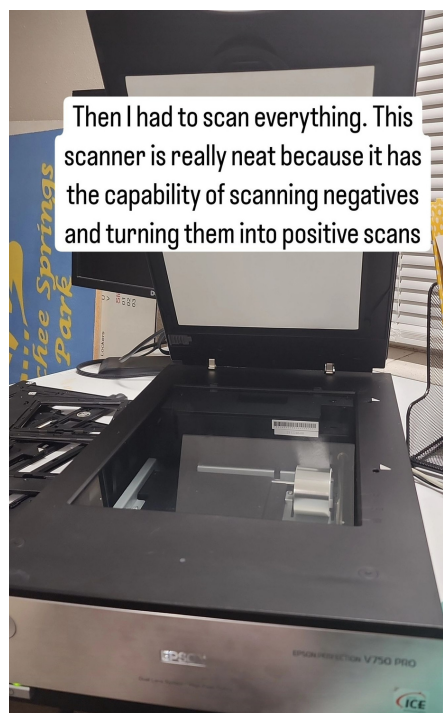


< Photos carefully recorded, catalogued, and added to the Weeki Historical Collection.

1500+ items



Archived Show Costumes



The beautiful Adagio was completely restored under strict historical guidelines, by Western Construction Group out of St. Louis. 100% funded by the Friends of Weeki Wachee Springs State Park.

Weeki's Archive Project Collection is processed in coordination with the Florida State Archives, each sharing and preserving our history.



Florida State Archives Building
500 S. Bronough Street, Tallahassee

The R.A. Gray Building (Florida State Archives) is one of the most comprehensive collections of Floridiana. Materials covering all aspects of Florida's past, present and future are included. Books, manuscripts, maps, memorabilia, newspaper articles and periodicals are just some of the 60,000 items to be found in the collections. A huge digital archive of Weeki's history has been retrieved from the State's repository for inclusion in our records.

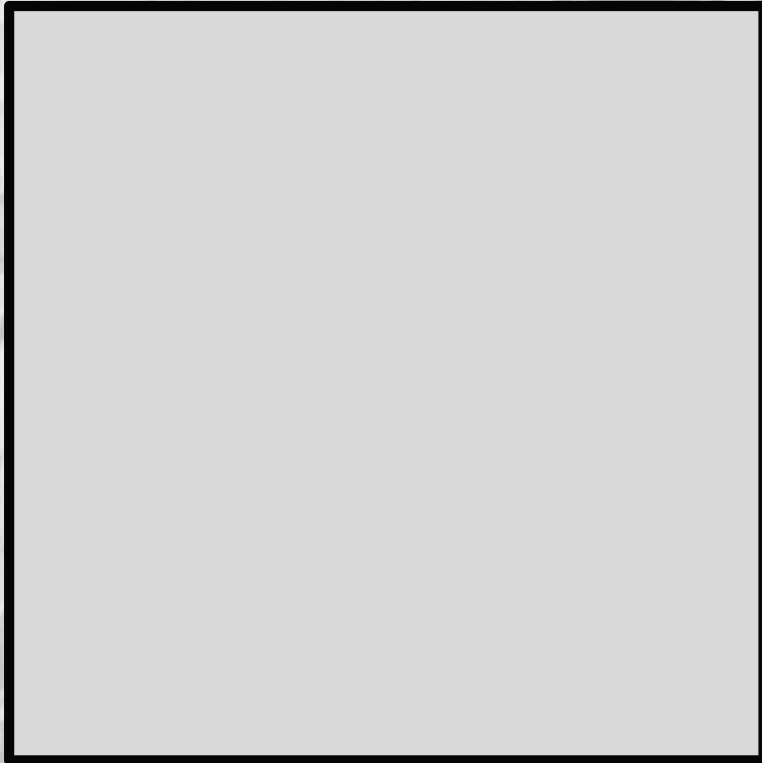


L-R, far left photo: Francesca Kern, Bill Stanton, and Olivia Williamson of the Florida State Archive in Tallahassee, spent a full day at the park in late 2024, reviewing our archival processes, accomplishments, and our storage facilities, offering insight and advice on how best to catalog and preserve our treasures. In the center photo, Bill is helping with the removal of the old and ineffective freezer, while in the far-right photo, Francesca helps with organizing the new one.



Can you help solve a Weeki Wachee mystery?

**Our Archive Team
needs your help!**



Do you recognize the person (s) in this photo?

Do you know the date it was taken?

Can you tell us the story behind it?

Photo 061826

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Mission Statement
Friends of Weeki Wachee Springs State Park

*To promote the use, history, protection and
enhancement of Weeki Wachee Springs State Park*