

Washington County Free Library and the John Clinton Frye Western Maryland Room

Hagerstown, Maryland

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The Washington County Free Library (WCFL) system has been serving the Washington County, Maryland, and Cumberland Valley area since 1898. Each of the eight branches is dedicated to serving the personal, educational, and professional information needs of the local communities. WCFL promotes community enrichment and economic vitality by providing information and library materials in a variety of formats.

The Alice Virginia and David W. Fletcher Library branch of the WCFL is located at 100 S. Potomac Street in Hagerstown, MD. The 84,758-square foot recently reconstructed library has three floors and 2,011 yards of shelf space, which is a little more than the length of 20 football fields. The new library's design reflects the area's rich transportation and manufacturing history. The glass-capped atrium was designed to represent the old Hagerstown rail yard roundhouse off South Burhans Boulevard, a staple of Western Maryland rail travel in the mid-1900s that was demolished in 1999, and the industrial-themed thick silver wiring of the atrium's staircase pays tribute to the rich manufacturing history of Washington County.

*Those who do not remember
the past are doomed to repeat it.*
— George Santayana

Located on the 3rd floor of the library, the John Clinton Frye Western Maryland Room, named after its founder and curator, provides an extensive collection of information for those who are researching or trying to remember the past of Western Maryland.



Since 1968 when John Frye began working part time at the WCFL, he's been organizing and collecting books, maps, photographs, newspapers, ledgers and a limited number of artifacts from the Western Maryland area, including Washington, Allegany, and Garrett Counties; plus Frederick and Carroll Counties in Central Maryland. Limited material is also available for areas in close proximity to those five Maryland counties, in the three surrounding states of Pennsylvania, Virginia and West Virginia.

Today, that collection contains approximately 10,000 books and over 400 cubic feet of archival material. Approximately 70% of the collection is available upon request, but is not on public shelves because the materials are rare or fragile. John Frye and Elizabeth Howe, a reference librarian and archivist for the Western Maryland Room, are working to create a more detailed inventory and index of the collection to help researchers interested in specific subjects. The materials also have to be properly stored, something Elizabeth Howe, as a certified archivist, is doing.

The Western Maryland Room collection's index is not available online yet, but patrons are able to call the Western Maryland Room or a reference librarian in any of the library's branches, to find out what's available, or they can use a computer in the Western Maryland Room to search the collection. If you're

totally stumped, John Frye usually knows the answer off the top of his head or can point you in the right direction; if not, he can retrieve the information from a book or file faster than an Internet browser.



Facing page: Authentic George Woltz grandfather clock, donated by Alice Brumbaugh of Chambersburg, PA. George Woltz, a cabinetmaker born in York, PA in 1744, served in the Maryland Militia during the Revolutionary War and was a charter member of the Hagerstown Fire Co. in 1791.

Above: Overview of the Western Maryland Room.

Right: The industrial-themed atrium pays tribute to the rich manufacturing history of Washington County and highlights the library system's history, dating to the early 1900s.

Right below: A large three story staircase spirals up from the bottom of the atrium. At the first floor center of the staircase is a depiction of a locomotive turntable, paying tribute to the area's railroad history.



Many people use the collection to research their family roots, since the room has church, marriage, death, mortgage and cemetery records, as well as written family histories. The collection is also a source for students writing reports and school lessons. Civil War buffs will find a wealth of information. Other popular subjects of interest include canals, railroads, local culture and industry.

For more information on the Washington County Free Library visit the web at www.washcolibrary.org. For more information on the Western Maryland Room, call 301-739-3250 x350; John Frye, Historian and Curator or Elizabeth Howe, Librarian and Certified Archivist.

