Documenting Missionaries and Indians

The Archive of Myron Eells

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Writing in his diary in 1898 from the rain-drenched Skokomish Reservation in western Washington, the missionary Myron Eells made a confession. “Have finished copying the journal of Rev. H. H. Spalding from 1839 to 1843, for Prof. F. G. Young of the Oregon State University. I have[,] I acknowledge, omitted a few pages which speak of some of the troubles of the missions, which had better never see the light.” As Eells labored over this task, spending four months copying “87 large foolscap pages” of Spalding’s “fine writing—205 of my smaller pages,” he was both preserving and censoring a unique manuscript created by the first missionary to the Nez Perce.¹ Fortunately, Eells’s censorship did not extend to destroying his sources.²

Myron Eells had a vested interest in showing Spalding in the best possible light. A minister and missionary in his own right, Eells was also the son of Spalding’s colleagues, Cushing Eells and Myra Eells. As a systematic collector of the journals and correspondence of the early missionaries, Eells was in a unique position to influence how the missionaries were viewed. He also collected artifacts of local Native tribes, and what he chose to include and exclude from his collection illustrates how he wanted others to perceive these peoples as well. His aim was to demonstrate that western Native peoples had benefited from the government’s “civilizing” and “Christianizing” programs. He left his collection to Whitman College, providing the foundation for its archives, its library’s Northwest history collection, and its museum. Eells spoke regularly at regional meetings, interacted with fellow collectors, and corresponded with other authors. He reached an even wider audience and contributed to national perceptions of western missionaries and Native peoples through his academic and popular writings—particularly his efforts to burnish the reputation of Marcus Whitman—and his collecting on behalf of Washington State and the federal government for the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago.

Collectors of Indian cultural artifacts provided a skewed interpretation of Native Americans. Some believed that Indians were a vanishing race and therefore accumulated Native American materials before it was too late; others viewed contemporary Native peoples as degenerate, and so they focused on acquiring “old-fashioned” objects—objects that showed no signs that the Indians had had contact with Euro-Americans. Eells, however, was interested in ideas of progress and the “civilizing” efforts of Christian missionaries and the federal government. Though Eells gathered some “old-fashioned” artifacts for his collection and those of others, he also carefully documented contemporary Indian culture, particularly changes on the Skokomish Reservation between 1875 and 1900.

Archival collections are never neutral; rather, they promote certain agendas, leaving an incomplete legacy. The act of collecting is itself inherently biased, and this bias informs the archive. The process of creating and preserving archives generally privileges white elites of the dominant culture while silencing members of other groups. Archives do not simply appear fully realized and neatly organized in acid-free boxes. As the historian Antoinette Burton observed, “Though their own origins are often occluded and the exclusions on which they are premised often dimly understood, all archives come into being . . . as a result of specific political, cultural, and socioeconomic pressures—pressures which leave traces and which render archives themselves artifacts of history.”³

Collectors and archives are critical for history: without archives, we would not have primary sources. Though historians routinely interrogate individual sources for their authenticity, content, and bias, they would also benefit from interrogating the collections from which those sources come. Archivists describe the provenance of primary sources, that is, their origins, creation, custody, and ownership. Provenance informs the reading, interpretation, and context of individual sources within a collection and also provides clues to what is excluded. Provenance is the fundamental principle for the management and organization of archives. Archival collections are generally organized around the collector or creator of the sources rather than dispersed and reorganized by subject or format. However, the provenance of many collections is dimly understood. Because Myron Eells wrote about his collecting and how he organized his archives, his collection is a rich case study in provenance.
The Myron Eells Collection has its origins in the decision of Eells’s parents to serve as missionaries in the Oregon Country. In 1838, Myra Eells and Cushing Eells joined Elkanah Walker and Mary Walker and others as part of a group of missionaries sent to support the activities of Marcus Whitman and Narcissa Whitman and Henry Spalding and Eliza Spalding. These Congregationalist missionaries received funding for their work from the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM). Founded in 1810 by graduates of Williams College in the midst of the Second Great Awakening, the ABCFM operated a global network of missions.

The Walker and Eells families established a mission at Tshimakain in 1838, approximately 45 miles from present-day Spokane, the most remote of the missionary stations in the Oregon Country. A native of the Pacific Northwest, Myron Eells was born on the morning of October 7, 1843, in a crude log cabin at Tshimakain. Marcus Whitman traveled by horse roughly 160 miles from his mission site, Waiilatpu, near Walla Walla to help deliver the baby. Mary Walker wrote in her diary that Cushing Eells had visited the Walker home that morning “to take some breakfast. When he returned, he found his wife nicely in bed & was presented with a son.”

The Walker and Eells families lived at Tshimakain for a decade, attempting to farm and to convert the Spokane Indians. They had little success as missionaries or farmers, and by the late 1840s their mission was on the brink of failing for lack of converts.

Their work ended abruptly after a group of Cayuse Indians killed Marcus Whitman and Narcissa Whitman and 11 others on November 29, 1847, at their Waiilatpu mission. The sensational deaths of the Whitmans and others at Waiilatpu led to the temporary closure of all Protestant missions in the region and the attempted military conquest of the Cayuse. These events accelerated the efforts of the federal government to bring the Oregon Country into the United States.

Five months after the killing of the Whitmans and the others, soldiers escorted the Eellses and Walkers and the couples’ eight children from their remote mission to Fort Walla Walla. On their journey they stopped at the Whitman mission station, Waiilatpu, where they witnessed a macabre sight. Mary Walker wrote to the Reverend David Greene, ABCFM secretary in charge of the Oregon missions: “The native fields were all grown up to weeds, their fences broken down. The bones & hair of the Missionary & wife with others had been scattered by the wolves.”

Mary Walker’s son, Elkanah, then four years old, saw his mother pick up some of Narcissa Whitman’s blonde hair and show it to Myra Eells. Though only a child at the time, Myron Eells maintained a relic of Narcissa Whitman’s hair in his collection. He would later inherit his father’s papers and collect all available sources related to the Whitman killings.

The Eells family moved to Forest Grove, Oregon, where Cushing Eells taught school, farmed, and eventually became principal of what was then Tualatin Academy and Pacific University (today’s Pacific University). Cushing Eells did not care for Forest Grove and yearned to return east to his former missionary haunts on the Columbia Plateau. In 1859, when the U.S. military reopened the region east of the Cascade Range to settlement (it had been closed in 1856 because of Indian resistance to the U.S. military), Cushing Eells traveled to Walla Walla and purchased the site of the Whitmans’ mission over the objections of his wife, Myra, who preferred the more settled Forest Grove. After farming the claim, he obtained a charter from the Washington Territorial Legislature to establish a seminary to memorialize the Whitmans in 1859. Classes were held at Waiilatpu, but the seminary’s first building was constructed in Walla Walla in 1866. The seminary became Whitman College in 1883. Cushing and his son Myron later played critical roles in the survival of Whitman College, which struggled financially for decades.

After several years of helping his family with their farm and the seminary, Myron returned to Forest Grove and attended Pacific University. Upon completing his degree, Eells received some advice from Pacific University’s president, who told Eells that he was “a pretty good specimen of an Oregonian” but he needed “to go east and become an American.” In 1868, Eells started a diary that he kept until his death in 1907. He went east and studied for the ministry, graduating from the Theological Institute of Connecticut (today’s Hartford Seminary) in 1871. Eells’s education, his habit of keeping a diary, and his need to prepare sermons and speeches and to communicate with his fellow ministers as well as government officials led to the formation of his own personal archive. After a few years as a pastor in Boise, Idaho, Eells moved to the Skokomish Reservation as a missionary and teacher. His brother, Edwin, served as the Indian agent on the same reservation for nearly 24 years. Here Myron remained until his death in 1907.

Eells found travel to and from the Skokomish Reservation challenging. The reservation comprises some five thousand acres and is located on the Olympic Peninsula approximately 35 miles from Olympia, on the delta of the Skokomish River, where the river empties into the Great Bend of Hood Canal. When Eells journeyed from the reservation, he had to cross rivers, walk miles, ride horses, and eventually take ferries or catch trains. But the remoteness of the reservation afforded Eells the time to read and write prolifically. To research the historical topics that
interested him, including Indian ethnology, linguistics, western church history, and especially the lives of Marcus Whitman, Henry Spalding, and his father, Cushing. Eells systematically collected manuscripts and printed sources. Collecting was a matter of necessity. With no libraries nearby, Eells had to develop his own collections to support his scholarship. His diaries and voluminous correspondence also provided sources for his writing. His literary output included hundreds of newspaper and journal articles, some fifty pamphlets, and four books. A number of these works were still in manuscript form upon his death and were published posthumously.\textsuperscript{12}

While Eells’s reputation as an author and collector grew, he struggled as a missionary. Though he remained on the Skokomish Reservation his entire life, he complained in his diary about being taken for granted by government officials and Indians and not being paid for officiating at funerals and weddings. As he recorded in his diaries, he expected some compensation for his travel and time. He might also have felt undercompensated in comparison with his fellow pastors. In 1888, Eells recounted a difficult journey to a funeral at Puyallup with his wife, Sarah. The trip included their boat “sticking in the river” and their “wading to haul the boat along, & then meeting a strong head tide.” As a result, the Eellses arrived late for the funeral, where they discovered that the Indians had not waited for them. Some of the “Catholic Port Madison Indians being present, one of them had acted as priest, and they finished the funeral just as we arrived.” That these Skokomish Indians were Catholics especially bothered Eells. He continued, “I do not know when I have been treated so; Sarah feels it very much. . . . No wonder Sarah said, we might as well leave, for there is no gratitude in these Indi-
One prevailing notion is their religion. The practical part of it goes by the name of tamahnous, or spiritual, post that Eells obtained from an "old Potlatch house." Eells noted that after he cut the post down he learned that it belonged to Tyee Charley. According to his catalogue for the cabinet, Eells "satisfied" Charley with a sack of flour and some sugar, remarking that if he had not obtained the post "in the way" he did, the "Indians would probably not have allowed" him "to get it." That the item was so hard to get and thus rare also made it a more desirable piece for his collection.

Eells's second major collection was his library. As with his Indian cabinet, Eells meticulously catalogued his library in a dedicated journal. He created an accession number for each book in the collection, entering that along with the title and cost (or, if donated, source) of the book. He created cross-references by placing a nameplate or calling card in the book on which was written the accession number, year of acquisition, and cost. Around 1875, Eells began adding entries in the journal for a more expansive range of materials, including scrapbooks, pamphlets, and manuscripts. While published books such as those found in Eells's collection generally are readily accessible in library collections, the other materials, particularly the scrapbooks and manuscripts, are unique.

A newspaper article pasted in the back...
of the journal cataloging his collection sheds light on the broader conceptual framework Eells employed. The author of the article, Selah Merrill, was an archaeologist and curator of the museum at the Andover Theological Seminary. According to Merrill, “A few persons in different parts of the world are engaged in the gathering of special collections of books; but there ought to be thousands engaged in it instead of dozens, as now.” Merrill rejected amassing books because of their “age or binding, or to gratify any particular taste, whim or fancy, of the collector.” Instead, he urged “the making of collections that shall be of positive and very important service to the world.”

Eells did not have the resources to acquire expensive books with fancy bindings. However, the notion of providing a “service to the world” resonated with his missionary work. Eells devoted his energies to aiding others, rejecting more lucrative careers to focus on his missionary work, his writing and collecting, and his role as a trustee for Whitman College and Pacific University.

To create such special collections, Merrill recommended that individuals “save the books that have been printed and still exist, and to collect others that are now being printed or that may be printed on any given subject, and to have such books gathered into one place.” Unlike the “miscellaneous collections” that most people assemble that are of very little use to the world[s] . . . special collections are invaluable.” Merrill concluded, “If young persons would commence the collection of books, articles, pamphlets, etc. on any given subject and follow it up for a number of years, they would be surprised at the results. It would be a far more noble and useful work than indulging the stamp collecting mania.” Eells followed Merrill’s advice; no philatelic indulgences for him. Rather, Eells retained his focus on western history, particularly the region’s churches, missionaires, and Indians, for more than 30 years, creating one of the region’s most noteworthy collections.

Whenever Eells traveled to preach or attend meetings, he visited libraries and collections. In 1883, for example, he combined a public reading of his essay on western Indian missions with a trip to a private collection in Umatilla, Oregon. He noted in his diary that the reading was “extra well rec[eived]—the [Congregationalist] Assoc[iation] wishing to have it printed in the Oregonian, Pacific, Advance Congregationalist, while Mr. Himes offered to print 1000 copies free, for me . . . Thank God & not me.” After the reading, Eells visited the Indian cabinet of Helen A. Kunzie. In his diary, Eells gushed about the collection. “It is splendid, having in it Stone beads, Glass, shell & antelope teeth beads, bone awls . . . a baboon, arrow heads . . [and] also native glass beads.” Eells noted that the objects were “evidently very old, most of them not being claimed by the present Indians, who say they have no knowledge or care for the graves where they are found.”

Though Eells assumed the veracity of this statement, we can easily imagine that if the Indians in question did know about the objects and cared about the looting of graves, they might have opted not to inform Kunzie or Eells. Grave robbing was a common form of collecting during this period. Scholars estimate that the skeletons of more than 500,000 Native Americans are held by repositories and private collectors in the United States and another 500,000 by European institutions.

Eells did not object to collecting Native American bones for “scientific” research or to adding human skulls that he found on the Skokomish Reservation to his own Indian cabinet; however, he did criticize robbing graves for money or other goods. In a description of the burial practices of the Twana, he wrote that the Indians no longer left money with the corpses because “the temptation is too great for some one to rob the grave, as unprincipled white men have occasionally done.” Revealing his bias as a missionary, Eells continued, “An Indian I think has never been known to do such a thing, partly from superstitious fear, I presume.” Eells routinely described all indigenous religious traditions as “superstitious.”

Eells sometimes crammed his travel with research and collecting, as he did during a visit to Oregon in 1882. At the start of the trip, Eells consulted the collections of the Washington Territorial Library in Olympia, “looking up points about Dr. Whitman’s work, Indian missions & Indian customs of religion.” Afterward, he conducted business in Portland, took a trip to a subscription library run by the Library Association of Portland, and inspected the cabinet of D. Raffety, where he made drawings. Then he “stopped at Mr. Griffins & looked over a number of Mr. Spalding’s letters.” Eells next took part in an excavation of an old Indian “mound or fort.” The details of this work Eells did not mention, but instead noted in his diary, “The ethnological work I shall embody in an article or two so will not repeat it here.”

After attending commencement at Pacific University, he visited one of the missionaries who worked with his parents, Mary Walker, at whose home he found “a large number of Dr. Whitman’s old letters.” In this diary entry, Eells provides a glimpse into how much manuscript material was in private hands, if one knew (as Eells did) on whom to call.

In 1882, Eells contacted the Whitman College president Alexander Jay Anderson, offering to donate some of his books and $25 to support the college’s library. On November 17, 1882, Anderson wrote in response to Eells’s offer, “The books you think of sending us are such as will aid us . . . Whitman College library has now four books. Send yours.” Anderson was delighted that Eells also proposed sending $25.
Eells meticulously documented his library in a dedicated journal, which he called the "Catalogue of Library." Note that he even cataloged the catalog as item 638. (Myron Eells, "Catalogue of Library," 1892, box 3, Eells Collection)

along with the books. Anderson continued, “I cannot say which is better—to make your $25 the beginning of a library fund or spend it now for needed reference books.”

After more than a decade of serious collecting, Eells noted in his diary on December 9, 1885, that he had finished cataloging his library up to this point. “I find I have 630 volumes, & 229 pamphlets worth putting in the catalogue, worth at first cost [$]797.26.” Eells continued, “Of these[,] 211 volumes & 206 pamphlets, worth [$]281.45[,] have been given to me.” His collection was particularly strong on American Indian topics and Indian missions. Eells recorded that he had “23 books & 13 pamphlets on Indian missions, 36 books & 13 pamphlets on Indians politically & 42 books & 32 pamphlets on Indians, scientifically.” To put this in some perspective, Eells earned $725 a year, on which he supported a family of seven. In spite of this modest salary, he was able to build an important collection. Eells stated that he was “very thankful for so good a library.”

The research topic that most interested Eells, beginning in the 1860s, was the region’s early missionaries, particularly Marcus Whitman. From the 1860s through the early 20th century, most of the literature on Marcus Whitman centered on the reasons for his trip east during the winter of 1842, rather than on his death or accomplishments as a missionary. Whitman supporters argued that this journey was political, to prevent a treaty that would cede Oregon to the British. According to the story, Whitman was a chief booster in raising the large emigration party that he led west on his return journey the following spring, with the aim of increasing the number of U.S. citizens in the Oregon Country and thereby ensuring that the territory would become part of the United States. These elements became part of the “Whitman saved Oregon” story or the “Whitman Legend,” a tale that cast a heroic light on Marcus Whitman and the conquest of the Northwest.


Frances Fuller Victor, a contributor to Bancroft’s History of Oregon, though initially a promoter of the Whitman Legend, later argued that surviving
sources did not support it. Other historians followed suit. Edward Gaylord Bourne, a history professor at Yale University, and William I. Marshall, a Chicago school principal, became the chief debunkers of the legend. Bourne published what is widely considered to be the definitive essay on the subject in the January 1901 issue of the American Historical Review. Marshall’s writings were more combative and his attacks personal, directed at Eells and his father.37 Bourne and Marshall could not find any contemporary evidence that Whitman traveled back east with the goal of saving Oregon. They argued instead that his winter trip was related to missionary business. The ABCFM had ordered Whitman and Spalding to close their missions and for Spalding to return east. Whitman, they insisted, made the journey to plead in person with the ABCFM to reverse its decision.

As he prepared to respond to Bourne and Marshall, Eells collected everything he could. He drew on family connections and his position as a minister, writing to missionaries, pioneers, and others involved with Whitman. This research culminated in his final major work, Marcus Whitman, Pathfinder and Patriot, published posthumously with support from the Whitman College president Stephen Penrose.38

By comparing Eells’s posthumously published book with his surviving archive, we can see how Eells used, and censored, materials in his collection to create the image of Whitman he wanted others to see. In 1883, Eells had received a letter from the missionary Mary Walker, who had served with his parents, on the Whitman controversy. In his book on Marcus Whitman, Eells quoted the first half of Walker’s letter verbatim, but did not cite the second half of the letter.39 In the quoted paragraph, Walker confirmed Eells’s argument that Whitman “went East in 1842 mainly to save the country from falling into the hands of England”; however, in the rest of the letter Walker revealed that she and her fellow missionaries were concerned about being criticized as the Methodists had been for “leaving their legitimate missionary calling to make money.” She wrote, “Mr. Walker and associates felt that Dr. Whitman in leaving missionary work and going on this business was likely also to bring disgrace on the cause, and were so afraid of it that for a long time they would hardly mention that object of Dr. Whitman’s journey publicly.”40

As he had done with the Spalding diary, Eells censored unfavorable material—in this case, the second part of Walker’s letter—in order to show the missionaries in the best possible light. Eells may certainly be faulted as a historian, but as a collector he preserved valuable sources.

In the late 1880s, Eells’s growing reputation led to further opportunities and honors. In 1888, President Anderson of Whitman College wanted to hire Eells to raise money in the East for the college’s endowment and operating expenses. Though Eells was tempted by the salary and the opportunity to visit libraries and museums in the “East looking up points in regard to Dr. Whitman, Anthropology Missions &c,” he ultimately declined because he thought that the financial needs of Whitman College were too great.41 In 1890, Eells received an honorary doctorate of divinity from Whitman College. He noted in his diary that he “was surprised at it—did not work for it—or ask for it, nor did father.” Eells was not entirely satisfied with the honor, remarking, “Because of my writings I had earned [a] PhD but doubted whether anyone would give it to me and I would not ask for it.”42 The following year, Eells rejected another job offer: this time the presidency of Whitman. Although he had “ideas in regard to the general management of colleges, & esp. in regard to the denominational relations,” he wrote in his diary, his doctor advised that the strain from “the care of a College under my circumstances would be likely to break me down. So I suppose that settles it.”43

Eells’s stature as an author, an authority on Indian history, and a collector led to both Washington State and the U.S. government inviting him to collect professionally for the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago. The exposition would be a major event. Fair organizers planned to remake a section of Chicago’s lakefront into a white, neoclassical city that celebrated American technology, though at the same time they would deny African Americans, Native Americans, and women the opportunity to participate in the fair on equal terms with white men.44 One of the displays planned for the exposition was an exhibition of living indigenous peoples wearing exotic, “traditional” costumes. Grouped together in an area called the Midway Plaisance, these exhibits would appear next to other major amusements, including a massive Ferris wheel. Nearby, just off the exposition grounds, Buffalo Bill would stage his popular Wild West show.

Frederic Ward Putnam, curator of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology at Harvard University, was in charge of organizing the living exhibits as well as the displays in the Anthropological Building. Putnam began planning years before the exposition, writing to state officials across the country about his vision of presenting “a living picture as complete as possible of the actual home life of the native peoples in different parts of America.” Putnam noted, “Arrangements have been made to bring to Chicago a family of native Mayas from Yucatan, who, dressed in their native costumes will live in their native dwelling surrounded by their utensils, implements, weapons, etc. and carry on their characteristic industries of pottery making, basket weaving, etc.” In addition to this display, Putnam would organize live representations of indigenous peoples from Peru, Bolivia, Patagonia, Tierra

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del Fuego, and other parts of South America.45

Putnam planned his exhibits within a teleological framework combining ideas of American progress with levels of civilization. In partnership with Thomas Jefferson Morgan, commissioner of Indian affairs, Putnam placed the Natives of Tierra del Fuego on one end of the grounds to indicate that they represented the least civilized of the humans exhibited and arranged the rest of the tribes in order of their level of civilization. The exhibits culminated in the display of a model Indian boarding school representing the apex of civilization. This racist ordering reflected Putnam’s idea—shared by others at the time—that a group’s assimilation into the dominant culture meant that it had reached the highest level of civilization.

In his instructions to exposition planners and collectors, Putnam cautioned, “Particular attention should be paid to the fact that the most important things to be collected are those of genuine native manufacture; and especially those objects connected with the olden times.” Although American Indians and Europeans had interacted for centuries, “objects traded to the natives by the whites are of no importance and are not desired; the plan being to secure such a complete collection from each tribe as will illustrate the condition and mode of life of the tribe before contact with Europeans.” Putnam sought to create a picture of Indians before white contact, ignoring, in some cases, centuries of exchange and adaptation by indigenous peoples. His emphasis on objects from “olden times” was ahistorical and led to an inaccurate portrayal of Indians as primitive and unchanging.46 The exhibit artifacts were later added to the collections of the Field Museum, the Smithsonian Institution, and the Peabody, among other repositories, and thus perpetuated ideas of Indian stasis. Furthermore, the placement of an Indian boarding school showing students clothed in Euro-American uniforms and stripped of their cultural affiliations at the end of a series of exhibits showing the progression of Native civilization solidified the theme of Euro-American superiority.47 Putnam therefore arranged the exhibit to reflect his own prejudices, much as Eells had assembled a collection that represented his own bias.

To fulfill his ambitious plans, Putnam enlisted the help of the anthropologist Franz Boas. The two men had met at Harvard in 1891. Later that year, Putnam put Boas in charge of creating charts of detailed measurements of the bodies of Indian peoples that would be displayed in the Anthropological Building and of securing a major collection of Northwest coastal ethnology.48 Boas himself did not collect; instead, he hired his contacts from the Pacific Northwest to acquire and ship artifacts for the collection to Chicago. Eells would gather Puget Sound Salish materials. James Deans of Victoria would assemble a collection of Haida materials from the Queen Charlotte Islands; Filip Jacobsen and Odille Morison would collect materials from the Skeena River region; and James G. Swan, who had previously collected for the Smithsonian, would gather artifacts from Cape Flattery. Finally, George Hunt would collect what would be the focus of the display, material culture of the Kwakwaka’wakw tribe. Hunt would also arrange for a group of Kwakwaka’wakw from Vancouver Island to travel to Chicago, stay in a reconstructed big house, and serve as a living display of First Nations life.49

Seven full pages of a detailed ledger Eells started in 1892 are devoted to the items he collected for Boas on behalf of the federal government. Boas apparently covered Eells’s traveling expenses in exchange for a vast range of coastal Indian material culture, including mats, baskets, fishing gear, canoes, garments, tools, and sacred objects such as tamahnu sticks.50

While Putnam and Boas planned the U.S. exhibit, preparations for individual state exhibits also began. On November 17, 1891, Eells wrote to Nelson G. Blalock, president of the Washington World’s Fair Commission, to offer his advice regarding Washington’s contribution to the World’s Columbian Exposition. Based on his visits to libraries and collectors around the region, Eells confidently reported, he knew of “but four collections . . . on this side of the Cascades” and that “Judge [James] Swan had a good one.” Eells also noted that he had “something of a collection” to contribute. However, he confessed, “I do not know what collections there may be east of the mountains, Judge Swan’s collection, Mrs. Kunzie’s and mine represent decidedly differed types of Indian life.” Eells elaborated, “Judge Swan’s being largely from British Columbia of articles made there but many of which have been used by the Puget Sound Indians. Mrs Kunzies representing eastern Oregon and Washington in ancient days it being largely of articles of stone and bone and mine being largely of articles of Indian make.”51 Blalock, a successful businessman and doctor in Walla Walla, knew Eells through their mutual involvement with Whitman College and was evidently impressed by Eells’s knowledge of available collections. He appointed Eells superintendent of the Department of Ethnology for the Washington World’s Fair Commission.

On January 2, 1892, Eells wrote to Blalock to accept the appointment. “I do not know how I shall succeed, but will try and do something so that you shall not be ashamed of me.”52 Eells was now collecting for both the state and federal governments. In May of that year, Eells told Blalock he had visited J. Y. Collings in Whatcom and viewed his “considerable” collection of hammers, arrowheads, and hatchets. Eells reported that Collings would loan
items for the exposition if a "guaranty" was given of their return and would also "sell what duplicates he has, though he is not anxious to do this." Eells continued, Collings "finds that there are so many buyers in this field now, and that the articles are becoming so scarce that he has to pay and charge more than he did a few years ago." During the latter 19th century, intense interest in purchasing Indian art and artifacts drove up prices.

Eells finished his letter by estimating that "$250 will pay for a fair collection" and "would make a good beginning for the State." Eells had one other request that revealed both his vision for the exposition and his view of Native Americans. "I should also recommend that from [$]25.00 to 50 be spent in obtaining articles of Indians of civilized make, from our schools etc. to show the progress they have made under the civilizing and Christianizing policy of Government." Eells added, "It seems to me that this would really be a very important point and I earnestly recommend it." In essence, Eells attempted to justify his missionary work through his collecting and displaying of contemporary "civilized" Indian items. Eells sought to showcase the assimilationist work to which he had devoted his life. The "civilizing and Christianizing" policy adhered to by missionaries such as Eells fit nicely within the framework of U.S. progress showcased at the exposition. The United States had conquered the West and now set to civilize it. For Native peoples, such as those on the Skokomish Reservation, it was a full, concerted assault on their traditional culture.

In June, Eells reported to Blalock that he had been "fortunate enough to secure some old fashioned things from the Indians" that he had not "seen among them" in his "18 years" of living on the reservation, including "a blanket of mountain sheep wool and a woman's skirt of beaten cedar bark." He had also written to Indian boarding schools around the state requesting the manufacture of items "of civilized style" and noted that "some of them are already at work and some will probably contribute without any expense to us." This was an important point to report. Blalock assumed that Eells would pay for the collections he acquired for the state and then be reimbursed later. However, Eells did not have enough money to comfortably finance his collecting, so any items he obtained without expense were welcome. The lack of money available to Eells became acute in July 1892.

In an emotional four-page letter to Blalock, Eells threatened to resign from the Washington World's Fair Commission unless $50 could be advanced to him for six months. Eells recalled that he and Blalock had spoken previously of an advance for Eells's collecting, but
Blalock had told him he “could not furnish the money in advance” and that Eells must borrow it. Noting that his wife had urged him to resign unless he received money to purchase collections, Eells said he was “determined to hold on.” Eells said he had approached the treasurer for the Washington World’s Fair Commission, Samuel Collyer, for a loan and was initially rebuffed, but Collyer relented when Eells threatened resignation. According to Eells, Collyer “let me have fifty dollars for one month and I signed a note the first time I ever signed a legal note in my life.” Having spent the money, Eells reported that he received a “dun for it.” Eells wrote at length of his financial troubles, his unpaid work as a trustee for Whitman College and Pacific University, his poor pay for his preaching and missionary work, and his need to support a family of seven. On top of all of this, he had “a sick wife which has cost me $125 during the last three months and now in addition to ask me to furnish my own money to buy for the State seems to me to be asking too much.” Eells noted that the conditions while working for Boas were much different. “The United States has asked me to purchase some things for them and have advanced me $150 with which to do so. I would rather work for this State than the U.S. however.” This statement reflects Eells’s local pride. Only three years earlier, Washington had become a state. The exposition was a major forum to showcase Washington State’s culture, natural resources, crops, and industry on an international stage.

Eells’s letter to Blalock had the desired result. Blalock sent a voucher to Eells on July 30, 1892, for $100 for 33½ days of work collecting on behalf of the Washington World’s Fair Commission. Eells replied that Blalock had been “more literal and kind to me in signing the voucher . . . as I have not to date performed 33½ days work.” Blalock overpaid for work that Eells had not yet completed as a way to compensate Eells for his troubles. With prompt payments from Blalock for all of his subsequent invoices, Eells did not complain further about money problems.

By the end of 1892, Eells had completed his collecting for Washington State. As he was collecting for the state and federal governments, he had also been collecting items for his own Indian cabinet. He noted that he had gathered more than “100 specimens for my cabinet, & did all that it seemed to me possible to be done for the State, under the circumstances.” In January 1893, Eells finished collecting for the U.S. exhibit at the fair. On January 16, he noted in his diary that he had shipped to Boas that day 15 packages, which included “5 boxes, 2 canoes, 7 bundles boards for house, & 1 [bundle of] spears.” The shipment comprised “231 articles besides the house, which has 69 pieces in it. Have also thus far obtained 341 articles for the state exhibit, & 40 for Mrs Dyer, who expects to enter her collection as the finest private one in the U.S. making in all 681 articles.” Ida Dyer, the wife of a U.S. Indian agent, ultimately received a certificate and medal for the exhibit. The Dyers donated the collection; it currently resides in the Kansas City Museum.

Eells never saw the exhibits at the Columbian World’s Exposition in person. He did not have the means or the leisure to travel east again, although the objects he acquired for the exposition enriched the collections of the Smithsonian and the Field Museum. Some 240 objects displayed at the exposition, mostly related to the Washington coastal tribes, also went to the Burke Museum of Natural History and Culture in Seattle. Of these items, Eells collected 123 and Swan 118. (Like Eells, Swan was collecting on behalf of both the federal government and the state government, focused on gathering Makah fishing artifacts.)

The exposition had a lasting influence on western history and archives. At the ninth annual meeting of the American Historical Association, held in conjunction with the exposition, Frederick Jackson Turner presented the paper “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” in which he declared that the western American frontier was closed. Settling the frontier, according to Turner, was the process that transformed European immigrants into Americans. Indians are nearly absent from Turner’s theory, making the essay, in the words of the historian Steven Conn, “the nineteenth century’s last, best word on the relationship between Native Americans and history.” Turner largely excluded...
Native Americans from his theory about the frontier and in doing so excluded them from the most significant historiographical idea of the next 50 years. Turner did, however, highlight the role that the early Euro-American missionaries played in the settlement process, missionaries like the Whitmans and Eellses. Turner’s paper would influence American history for the next century, and his ideas directly affected the writing about and teaching of the West in the Pacific Northwest.

Edmond Meany and Herman Deutsch, historians at the University of Washington and State College of Washington, respectively, received their training under Turner at the University of Wisconsin. Also at the meeting, historians gave presentations on the need for a national archive, and after the conference, the American Historical Association created the Public Archives Commission. Historians had recognized the importance of archival collections for their work and the need to systematically collect records at the national and local level. Meany and Deutsch collected archival sources for their own teaching and research and also ensured that such collections were preserved at their respective academic institutions.

The same year as the exposition Eells inherited unique materials for his personal collection. His father, Cushing Eells, had died in February 1893. The senior Eells left the bulk of his estate to Whitman College, but did bequeath a substantial sum of money and items from his own collection to Myron and his brother Edwin. Myron wrote in his diary, “After paying debts & funeral expenses, he gives Edwin & I each [$]1000—our choice of his books, me his manuscripts, & the rest of his books & property to Whitman College. He has left a rich legacy to us all in his life, prayers, &c.”

The reputation of Eells’s collection was growing, as is evident from a May 5, 1896, article in the Seattle Post-Intelligencer titled “Myron Eells Library: A Valuable Collection Bearing on the History of the State.” After a full column describing Eells’s books related to missionary, Indian, and regional history, the paper noted that Eells “has also a small soap box full of correspondence about Whitman college, two larger ones full of correspondence about Pacific university, and two coal oil boxes full of papers which were left by his father and Rev. H. H. Spalding.” In addition, the paper mentioned 24 scrapbooks of newspaper clippings and many interesting “relics,” including a “sample of the Beaver money of Oregon” (gold coins minted in Oregon Territory in 1849), “a buckskin flour sack,” and “some of the hair of Mrs. Narcissa Whitman picked up by one of the Volunteers in the Cayuse war.” Of course, Eells’s collection was much larger than described in the paper: it also included his extensive diaries and vast correspondence.

Because of the collection’s growing renown, Eells increasingly fielded research requests from scholars around the country. On October 1, 1898, he noted in his diary, “Finished writing for Col. Wood, Indian words, traditions, legends &c. It seems as if much of my time was spent for others for nothing. . . . From Tues to Fri. wrote historical matter for Prof Young. Yesterday wrote hard for Col. Wood.” Eells wondered “how much work of this kind I ought to do, to the neglect of other work. Heretofore I have never refused such information & help when asked for it, but lately it has been coming very thick.”

In 1902, a great critic of Eells and debunker of the Whitman Legend, William Marshall, stayed at the Eellses’ home for two days to consult and copy extracts from Spalding’s diary. Eells described Marshall as an “anti Whitmanite, & very cranky.” Eells was particularly upset that Marshall had sent a pamphlet stating that Eells and his father were “fool friends” of Whitman to members of the American Historical Association. Eells said that he treated Marshall as “gentlemanly as I could,” though his visitor had more “cheek than most any man I ever saw.”

In addition to acquiring materials for his personal collection and for the World’s Columbian Exposition, Eells facilitated a lively trade in Indian baskets. In 1899, he noted in his diary that over the last two years, he had multiple requests for baskets, with sales of more than $250. Eells remarked that collecting baskets had “become quite a fad with certain rich women.” This trade in baskets also provided much-needed money for the basket makers. Eells noted that he had received nothing beyond 10 cents per order for packing and numerous thank-you letters from collectors. These baskets went to private collectors for the most part, though some were also shipped to a curios dealer, S. B. Dickens. Given the volume in trade, Eells believed that more baskets could be sold, if it were not for the fact that the reservation was nearly “cleaned out” of baskets, except for “some good ones that the owners will not sell.”

In his final years, Eells continued his writing, collecting, and missionary activities. He recorded in his diary that in 1905, he had written “1204 letters & posts, including 57 newspaper articles,” traveled 5,838 miles, and added 66 books to his library. Eells died in 1907. On January 10, the Seattle Daily Times announced, “Myron W. Eells, pioneer clergyman and historian who died last week, endows Whitman.” According to the paper, Eells left Whitman College a “magnificent collection of books and manuscripts.” The gift to Whitman also included artifacts and historical objects. President Penrose of Whitman College attended Eells’s funeral service, noting that the bequest “was a priceless one and would be of inestimable benefit to the college.”

When Eells’s collection arrived at
Whitman, college officials divided it between the library and the museum. The artifacts and natural history specimens went to the museum, and the books, pamphlets, and newspaper clippings went to the library. In 1907, the Whitman librarian Arminda Fix reported that “the donations to the Library this year have been, perhaps, the largest ever given.” The most significant gift of the year according to Fix “was the Library of the late Dr. Myron Eells. . . . It consists of 978 volumes and 336 pamphlets, and clippings, treating of the history of the Northwest.” The Whitman College archives had not been established yet, so manuscripts from the collection were stuffed in a trunk and kept in the attic of the Whitman Memorial Building. They remained there for decades. Over time, as the campus archives and museum hired trained staff, the Eells materials were reorganized.

The Eells materials at the Whitman library received better treatment than those placed in the museum, where storage conditions were poor and only part-time curators oversaw the collection. In July 1938, Howard S. Brode, a biology professor and the museum curator, warned campus administrators, “Unless funds can be secured from other sources the museum will be left in a very undesirable state and disintegration will soon take place.” Decades later, George Castile, an anthropology professor and the museum curator, told the Whitman president Robert Skotheim that the museum needed “a half time curator/half time archeologist position to clean up the museum’s karma once and for all.” It took the passage of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act in 1991 for Whitman to invest in fully cataloging the museum’s Native American collections so that it might comply with the act’s mandate to return Native American bodies and sacred artifacts to their source communities. Eells collected Native American bones and sacred items without qualms about removing such objects from their communities, but the ethics of keeping such collections had changed.

Myron Eells deliberately created one of the earliest collections of books, manuscripts, and artifacts related to the Indians of the Pacific Northwest and the missionaries who sought to convert them. Eells’s knowledge in these areas and his noted collection allowed him to engage with other scholars around the country and resulted in a rich archive of correspondence. He used his collection to support his own writings, which though no longer widely read, influenced early Pacific Northwest historiography. Eells’s expertise was sought by Boas and Blalock, organizers of displays for the federal and state governments at the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition. His efforts resulted in the development of collections both for the Field Museum and Smithsonian as well as the Burke Museum.

Eells was a systematic collector. Because of his meticulousness and dedication, he created a well-organized collection of materials. His detailed and honest observations as a longtime resident of the Skokomish Reservation are a key source for those seeking information on topics such as the development of the Indian Shaker Church and decades of failed U.S. government policy aimed at the forced assimilation of Native peoples, including implementation of boarding schools and the Dawes Act, which broke up commonly held reservation lands into individual...
alotments, many of which were then lost by their owners. Eells's own particular agenda, to show the positive elements of assimilation and Christianization of the region's Native populations and to burnish the legacy of Marcus Whitman and his fellow missionaries, shaped the archive he created. His articles, pamphlets, and posthumously published biography of Marcus Whitman, though criticized by professional historians, solidified an enduring image of Whitman as a heroic missionary who saved Oregon for the United States.

His collection formed the nucleus of Whitman College's Penrose Library and Maxey Museum, as well as its Whitman College and Northwest Archives. Eells's personal papers, which include 22 boxes of correspondence and an additional 42 boxes of notebooks, diaries, manuscripts, scrapbooks, and photographs, survive in a collection of 35 linear feet. The papers he inherited from his father, which include correspondence, diaries, and sermons, document the first wave of Protestant missionaries to the Columbia Plateau, and also include the journal and correspondence of Henry Spalding. Eells's decision to gift his collection to Whitman, an institution created through the efforts of his father, meant that the archive he assiduously created over 40 years was not removed to more established and wealthier repositories and remained in the region it documents. Eells in part developed the archive he did because he could not access the research collections held in eastern repositories.

By questioning the provenance of archives such as that of Myron Eells, scholars gain a richer understanding of the creation and preservation of collections. Libraries, archives, and museums take on distinct identities based on their collections. These collections in turn reflect the passions, egos, and agendas of their creators. Furthermore, the earliest collections acquired by repositories influenced later acquisitions. No archives are objective or neutral; instead, collections privilege some individuals and silence others. In regard to the collection of Myron Eells, he valued the sources that documented his missionary work and his observations of Native peoples, that pertained to the culture of the Pacific Northwest, and that justified and celebrated the Protestant missionary enterprise. Understanding the provenance of collections provides us with a fuller understanding of the limits of the stories we tell of the past.

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1. Myron Eells, diary, Sept. 29, 1898, box 2, Myron Eells Collection, Whitman College and Northwest Archives, Penrose Library, Whitman College, Walla Walla, Wash. (hereafter cited as Eells diary, with appropriate date). Eells did not differentiate among commas, periods, semicolons, or colons in his diary—all appear as dots. The author has replaced the dots with conventional punctuation.

2. Spalding's original diary survives in box 2, Spalding Collection, Whitman College and Northwest Archives.


7. Myron Eells, Father Eells; or, The Results of Fifty-Five Years of Missionary Labors in Washington and Oregon (Boston, 1894), 168.


12. Myron Eells's publications include Justice to the Indian: Read before the Congregational Association of Oregon and Washington, July 14, 1883 (Portland, Oreg., 1883); History of Indian Missions on the Pacific Coast: Oregon, Washington and Idaho (Philadelphia and New York, 1882); Marcus Whitman, MD: Proofs of His Work in Saving Oregon to the United States and in Promoting the Immigration of 1843 (Portland, Oreg., 1883); Ten Years of Missionary Work among the Indians at Skokomish, Washington Territory, 1874-1884 (Boston, 1886); and Marcus Whitman, Pathfinder and Patriot (Seattle, 1909).


15. Eells diary, July 30, 1888.


17. There were three human skulls in the Myron Eells Collection. One was described as Twana; the other two were of unknown Native American origin. Inventory of artifacts donated to Whitman College by Eells, n.d., in author's possession. Whitman College returned these human
remains under the provisions of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act.

18. Myron Eells, “Descriptive Catalog of Indian Cabinet,” 1878, box 1, Eells Collection.


20. Eells, Ten Years of Missionary Work, 37.


25. Ibid., 178-79 (1st qtn.), 179 (2d, 3d, last qtns.).


29. Eells diary, June 12, 1882.


31. Eells diary, Dec. 9, 1885.

32. Myron Eells to Nelson G. Blalock, July 16, 1892, accession 1119, Burke Museum of Natural History and Culture, University of Washington, Seattle.

33. Eells diary, Dec. 9, 1885.

34. In 1878, the Territorial University of Washington held 162 volumes. With regular funding starting in 1879, the collection grew to 2,000. Jessica Chandler Potter, “The History of the University of Washington Library,” MA thesis (University of Washington, 1954), 10-12.

35. Eells, History of Indian Missions.


38. Eells, Marcus Whitman, Pathfinder and Patriot.

39. Ibid., 166-67.

40. Mary Walker to Myron Eells, June 7, 1883, box 21, Eells Collection.

41. Eells diary, July 30, 1888.

42. Ibid., June 9, 1890.

43. Ibid., May 14, 1891.


46. Ibid.


49. Ibid.

50. Myron Eells, Ledger, 1899-1906, box 3, Eells Collection. Eells used this ledger to record his collection for Boas in 1892.


52. Myron Eells to Nelson G. Blalock, Jan. 2, 1892, ibid.


54. Ibid.


56. Eells to Blalock, July 16, 1892.

57. Myron Eells to Nelson G. Blalock, Aug. 8, 1892, ibid.

58. Eells diary, June 29, 1892.

59. Ibid., Jan. 16, 1893.

60. The items collected by Eells and Swan are not named as the collectors; however, an accession list in the Burke Museum archives indicate who collected each object. See “State Museum of Washington List of Specimens Accession No. 1119 Collection of Wash. World’s Fair Comm.,” n.d., acc. 1119.

61. “State Museum of Washington List of Specimens.”


63. Hinsley, 18.

64. Steven Conn, History’s Shadow: Native Americans and Historical Consciousness in the Nineteenth Century (Chicago, 2004), 220-23 (qtn., 222).


67. Eells diary, Feb. 25, 1893.

68. Ibid., Oct. 1, 1898.

69. Ibid., July 28, 1902.

70. Ibid., March 29, 1899.

71. Ibid., Jan. 1, 1906.


76. Ibid.

77. For example, Eells’s extensive writings on the Indians of western Washington are cited by William W. Elmendorf and A. L. Kroeber, The Structure of Twana Culture (Pullman, Wash., 1960); and George Castile produced a scholarly edition of Eells’s manuscript notebooks, Indians of Puget Sound.