Since 1966, the University Archives and West Florida History Center has acquired, cataloged and preserved the history of the University of the West Florida as well as the West Florida region.

But archives are more than collections of preserved important historical research resources. Archives also have the responsibility to raise the awareness of this history and accordingly, celebrate the traditions and milestones of an institution’s contributions to the region it serves.

As we continue to celebrate the University of West Florida 50th Anniversary of its first classes in 2017, it is appropriate that we also celebrate other anniversaries and contributions of the University to the Northwest Florida region.

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Celebrating the 50th Anniversary of the Groundbreaking and Dedication of the University of West Florida, 1965-2015

After an hour of dedicatory speeches, at 5:00 p.m. on Friday, April 16, 1965, UWF President Harold B. Crosby, Florida Governor Haydon Burns, and Board of Regents member John C. Pace grasped a silver shovel and turned the first earth to dedicate the launch of the University of West Florida at its official groundbreaking.

The occasion was marked by attendance of Florida Governor Burns and the Florida Cabinet, U.S. Representative Robert L. F. Sikes, State Representative Reubin O’Donovan Askew, the Board of Regents, and representatives of the Military Service, Escambia County, City of Pensacola, and Junior Colleges of the area.

And from the picturesque wooded Riverview site—considered by state architects as unexcelled in the state university system for its natural beauty—will rise a fully modern university which will open its doors to . . . college work on September 1, 1967. “Our purpose will be to meet the total educational need of Northwest Florida”, said President Harold Crosby.

CELEBRATING THE 50th Anniversary of the Groundbreaking of UWF

Governor Burns was crucial in his support of the new University and after becoming Governor moved the UWF construction to the top of the state priority building lists. John C. Pace, a member of the old Board of Control (oversight of state colleges and universities), pushed for the Escambia location as early as 1963 and remained a prime mover as member of the State Board of Regents.

At the dedication, Governor Burns noted that West Florida’s lack of a degree-granting institution had produced financial hardships in the region for young people and hampered industrial and economic development.

The Governor noted the crowning achievement of the University of West Florida will be to make quality education affordable and local, a service to the region, to the students of the area, and as an encouragement to improving the available trained labor force which in turn would spur economic development. He noted that Florida’s college age population was growing at the fastest rate in America, precipitating the need for Florida to invest in its higher education system.
At the groundbreaking ceremony, Pace served as master of ceremonies. Congressman Sikes gave the response for the district and with legislature responses from State Representative Reubin O’D. Askew, Regents Chairman Chester Ferguson spoke on behalf of the Board. The junior colleges were represented by T. Felton Harrison of Pensacola Junior College with Pensacola Mayor C. P. Mason speaking on behalf of the City of Pensacola. Other speakers included Rabbi N. William Schwartz (Temple Bethel, Pensacola); Rt. Rev. J. Edwin Stuardi (Catholic education superintendent, Mobile); Rev. James L. Pleitz (First Baptist Church, Pensacola). Dedicatory and closing remarks were given by UWF President Harold B. Crosby.

Also celebrated were the individuals that chose the location of the campus. Many of these were local community leaders who would remain as partners with UWF’s growth.
Following groundbreaking, initial construction on the campus began by Dyson & Co., who won the $1,166,000 bid for two 2-story buildings, and one 1-story building (Buildings 10, 11, 12 today). Another $5.3 million was earmarked for later planned construction in 1966 and 1967. In addition to the 1,000 acres of wooded land, the University holdings at groundbreaking included 165 acres on Santa Rosa Island. [Materials used in this newsletter from the Pensacola Journal and Pensacola News, April 15, 16, 17, 1965 and President Hal Crosby Papers.]
About the University Archives and West Florida History Center

Founded as the Special Collections Department of the John C. Pace Library, the department received its first donation of family papers and research materials in 1966, one year before the University opened for classes. Our mission is to preserve the history of West Florida, through the collection, preservation, cataloging, and providing reference services to research materials that document the history, development, people, environment, and institutions of the Panhandle. Today the collections comprise over one million items (in 850 separate collections of family papers, business records, church records, and personal papers of leading men and women of the region). These are complemented by over 100,000 printed materials (books, pamphlets, booklets, government documents, maps, and newspapers) – altogether the largest and most comprehensive research collection in existence about West Florida, the Florida Panhandle, and Pensacola region.

A list of our collections may be found online at:  http://uwf.edu/library/research_help/archives-guide

We also maintain an Archon catalog which includes individual folder and document listings of materials within the collections (this changes frequently):  http://archives.uwf.edu/Archon/

Of greatest interest is our growing online digital image collection which can be accessed by clicking on the ‘Digital Content’ tab of the Archon link. Here you will find images of the University of West Florida as well as throughout West Florida. (This, too, is always changing with ‘new’ items added). For more information, please contact any member of the Archives staff.

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