

October 30, 2013
Breakfast Keynote
John C. Hughes



John C. Hughes is the chief historian for the Office of the Secretary of State. An alumnus of the University of Puget Sound and the University of Maryland, he served three terms as a trustee of the Washington State Historical Society. He is also a past president of Allied Daily Newspapers of Washington and a former Timberland Library trustee. He is the author of biographies of former governors Booth Gardner and John Spellman; former U.S. senator Slade Gorton, and Lillian Walker, a Washington State civil rights pioneer. He has contributed to several other Northwest history books, **including *On the Harbor: From Black Friday to Nirvana***. A genealogist as well, Hughes is the descendant of a Welsh immigrant who served in the Revolutionary War as a colonel in the Virginia militia.

John writes, “My earliest memories are of Saturday afternoons at the library with my mother, a former teacher who loved books. Libraries have been my magic carpet for 65 years. The late Murray Morgan, dean of Northwest historians, was my Northwest history professor, mentor and friend. We spent many hours together in libraries and museums. Now after a long career as an editor and historian, I am privileged to work at the Washington State Library, which my former boss, Sam Reed rescued from extinction when he was secretary of state. What a loss that would have been. Its search engines and trove of microfilmed newspapers, genealogical records and rare books have propelled my ability to write six major biographies in five years. Hardly a day passes that I don’t encounter someone downstairs doing family-history research or striving to write a book of their own. The librarians here, together with our oral history program and the State Archives, are the skid-greasers. It’s the same story in every library from Port Angeles to Pullman—in every library everywhere.

Arguably the most important story I’ve ever told focused on a remarkable 97-year-old civil rights pioneer who was largely unknown outside Kitsap County. I developed the questions that brought her oral history to life with help of the Bremerton Public Library. City directories, microfilm, and clippings allowed me to document her story. She died two years later, proud that her story had been told, hailed by the Legislature for breaking barriers. She also served two terms as chairman of the municipal library board. Her son, the great-great-grandson of slaves, went to Stanford. Her biography is now in every school in the county. That is something to reflect on. The stories on our shelves are not our only calling.”