

the Courthouse Journal

W A C O U N T I E S . O R G

November 23, 2009

Issue No. 30
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Courthouse Journal*

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*Washington Association of County Officials
Washington State Association of Counties*

\$13,000 Raised for WA Counties Scholarship Fund

by James McMahan, WACO Staff

WACO is proud to announce that more than \$13,000 has been raised from its members and staff for the Washington Counties Scholarship Fund.

Each year, the officers of WACO and WSAC (also known as the 'Scholarship Committee') meet to award up to five merit-based scholarships (valued at \$3,000 per scholarship) to dependents of county employees to attend an institution of higher education. Scholarship awards are funded entirely through private contributions and fundraising activities by the WACO and WSAC membership and staff.

This year, recognizing a downward trend in contributions and Scholarship Fund investment earnings, WACO issued a challenge to all organizations whose membership benefit from the scholarship effort (see the October 9, 2009 edition of the Courthouse Journal). WACO and its members then "walked the talk" and would like to thank the following for their efforts:

Auditors:	\$2,100
Clerks:	\$1,867
Coroners:	\$1,195
Prosecutors:	\$2,200
Sheriffs:	\$300
Nationwide Insurance (WACO):	\$1,500
Nationwide Insurance (WSAC):	\$1,500
WACO/WAPA Staff:	\$1,245
Other (golf tournament, book drive, etc)	\$1,550

Total Raised 2009 (to date)	\$13,457
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WACO is very proud of the effort its members and staff (including WAPA staff) mounted to raise funds for this worthy cause. We eagerly await similar good news from the other organizations whose members benefit from this effort.

**Job announcements & links to County
Employment pages at:**

<http://wacounties.org/>

the Courthouse Journal

Published weekly (during Legislative Session)
and Bi-weekly (other than Session) by the

Washington Association of County Officials

(WACO) wacounties.org/waco

and the **Washington State Association of
Counties**

(WSAC) wacounties.org/wsac

We welcome your suggestions and contributions.
The weekly / bi-weekly deadline is noon
Wednesdays. Direct inquiries and
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The How and Why of Property Tax

by Bob Carlton, WACO Staff

This paper on the history of property tax was initially delivered at the IAAO Conference on Assessment Administration in Boston, Massachusetts. These are the same good folks that help to establish sound appraisal practices that are in use and implemented throughout the world.

Many thanks to the author of this article Richard Carlson. This is without a doubt the best synopsis and factual gathering of Property Tax History that I have ever encountered. While the article is a little long, if you stick with it to the end you will know:

- 1. The real reason Lady Godiva rode naked through the streets of Coventry, England.**
- 2. The name of the first gentleman generally regarded as a “tax lawyer” who went on to become President of the United States.**

Thanks are also due to the IAAO magazine who graciously allowed this article to be reprinted. For those interested, you may log on to the IAAO Web site for a complete list of references Mr. Carlson used for this article, in addition to a biography of him. Enjoy the article; I believe many of you may find it quite interesting. Due to the length of the article, we are going to introduce you to property tax in stages, and progress through time in successive issues of the Courthouse Journal. This first section will take us from the dawn of time up through the Roman Empire. As you read, you will often find and notice corollary's introduced into the property tax system that are still in use today.

A Brief History of Property Tax

by Richard Henry Carlson

Taxation has existed in various forms since civilization began. In days of old the source of wealth was land and its proceeds. Before the existence of a monetary system, taxes were paid by a percentage of crops raised. Through most of history, the tax assessor and the tax collector were the same person; therefore, “tax collector” is used interchangeably with “tax assessor” throughout the following paper.

Some of the most common forms of taxation over the millennia were poll taxes, tariffs on goods, and property taxes on the value of land, buildings, and other personal property. The purpose of this paper is to present some of the major moments in the history of real and personal property taxation. Let's take a short walk through time to understand what we have in common with our ancestor assessors, what we can learn from them, and how developed the current property tax system has come to be.

Legislative Committee Schedules and Agendas:

<http://www.leg.wa.gov/wsladm/calendar.cfm>

Bill Information: www.leg.wa.gov

The earliest known tax records, dating from approximately six thousand years B.C., are in the form of clay tablets found in the ancient city-state of Lagash in modern day Iraq, just northwest of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. The king used a tax system called *bala*, which meant "rotation." The assessors would focus on one area of the citystate, assessing and taxing one area each month, thereby breaking down the arduous task into more manageable components. (This is a lesson that we have used in present day Boston by not attempting to focus on all property in a revaluation year. Instead, we focus great attention on the valuation of retail and industrial property during one year, following up the next year with apartments or other sub-sets of property. This allows a thorough review of the various components of value and ultimately leads to better assessments.) In Lagash taxes were very low, but in a time of crisis or war the tax rate was ten percent of all goods, which were primarily composed of food.

You can have a Lord, you can have a King, but the man to fear is the tax assessor. ~ Anonymous citizen of Lasgash

Property taxes were used in Egypt, Babylon, Persia, and China and throughout the ancient world. Most people were poor and lived in hovels. The primary focus of early property taxation was land and its production value. Ancient Egypt had a thriving culture that began around 5,000 B.C. and lasted thousands of years. Taxes were levied against the value of grain, cattle, oil, beer and land. Approximately one in a hundred people were literate; they were called scribes. Some of the scribes were tax assessors. They kept records about who owned title to lands along with the size of their fields. At various times they collected annual or biannual data by counting cattle and checking the crop yields. The most common taxpayers were the farmers, from whom assessors coerced collection. If a taxpayer did not or was not able to pay, he was brought before courts that immediately dispensed justice. A typical tax rate was ten percent of all production. Tax assessors were highly valued people because of their skills with hieroglyphics and their ability to collect revenue. Often when a king died, the assessor was the only staff person not killed and buried along with the king, so valued was his service. There were tombs and monuments for assessors in Egypt and Syria that rivaled those of some kings. In Egypt, the famous Rosetta Stone was actually a tax document granting exemption to priests.

Be weary of strong drink. It can make you shoot at tax assessors... and miss. ~ Robert Heinlein

Tax assessors were also highly valued officials in ancient Greece. Near the Acropolis there is a monument to the honest tax assessor. The Athenian general Aristides (530 B.C.–468 B.C.) completely reformed the property tax assessment system of Athens while serving as treasurer (i.e., assessor). Known as the most competent and impartial person who ever held the position in Athens, Aristides acted in the interests of the city above all else. His prestige was so great that he became known as Aristides the Just.

The good and fair tax system established by Aristides fell Apart during the Peloponnesian War (Sparta vs. Athens, 431 B.C.–404 B.C.). Athenian citizens complained that real and personal property taxes were too high and demanded that the government lower expenditures. The tax assessment system was also perceived as biased and inefficient compared to the earlier standards set by Aristides. The Athenian council decided to reduce property taxes but increased both tariffs and tributes paid by council allies. The tribute from each ally was calculated according to the value of property that came under each state. Taxes assessed in Athens and Attica (Athens's territory) were assessed according to the value and productivity of the land, with the more productive lands receiving higher assessments. As the Peloponnesian War dragged on, the Athenians increased the tribute expected from allies to the breaking point. The tribute was doubled and then doubled again. Ultimately, Athens ran out of money and lost the war.

Alexander the Great (356 B.C. – 323 B.C.) conquered the known world. While he was a military genius, he was also an able administrator. As he moved through Persia, India, Egypt and other parts of his world, he left administrators with explicit instructions on how to implement property taxes. Specifically, he was concerned that there would be revolts in areas that were already conquered. When there were, he was brutal in stopping them. Prior to his conquest, the people were very heavily taxed, and the collected money typically went to the treasury of the king, not to public improvements.

Alexander's tack was to substantially cut taxes and use half of the raised funds for public improvements (water systems, roads, ports, etc.) while keeping the remaining half for his treasury. Therefore, the people not only paid fewer taxes while receiving more benefits for their taxes, but they were also far less likely to revolt against his administrators. From roughly

200 B.C. to 300 A.D., Romans paid property taxes on the value of land, buildings, livestock, trees, vines and other personal property.

When Julius Caesar was preparing for the Gaulic campaign, one of his generals told him there was not enough money to pay for the needed materials. Caesar's response was, "Send out the assessors!" Pothinus once asked Julius Caesar, "Is it possible that Caesar, the conqueror of the world, has time to occupy himself with such a trifle as our taxes?" Caesar's response "My friend, taxes are the chief business of a conqueror of the world."

Only little people pay taxes. ~ Leona Helmsley

Early Roman administrations had tax policies with intended outcomes. Prior to Augustus Caesar, the state sold the rights to collect taxes to private citizens. These people would make significant profits by enforcing Roman tax law. Today we call such people consultants. Augustus put an end to the practice by making Roman assessors public employees. In the early years of the Roman Republic, the tax rate was just one percent of value (land, buildings and all personal property including plants and animals). The tax rate climbed during war and crisis to three percent. However, as Rome expanded public benefits the budget was stretched. Prior to Julius Caesar, over 300,000 people received food from the state. Caesar thought that many of these people should be working instead of receiving public benefits and therefore cut the number of recipients of public welfare in half. The result was that expenditures went down, and with more people plowing fields, the tax revenue increased.

Augustus Caesar was greatly concerned that people were not producing at maximum levels and made other adjustments to the system. One of the more important advances was a reassessment based on flat land rates. He implemented a valuation system based not on what a farmer produced but what a farmer *could* produce. If a farmer worked hard and produced more crops than a less productive neighbor, he still paid the same in property taxes. Economic incentive and maximum use of the land was at the heart of his taxation policy. The tax rate for wealthy farmers became one percent of value per year.

Other Roman emperors were far less insightful. Tiberius Caesar cut back on public improvements and retained huge portions of tax in his treasury. This resulted in a financial crisis where money was in short supply. Over time there were other emperors who implemented disastrous policies that were largely to blame for the collapse of the empire. Public expenditures increased with more expensive entertainment. Entire months of the year became holidays and public welfare systems became very generous. Over time, fewer people produced goods and the tax rates began to soar. Some emperors wanted to reduce the wealthy Senate class and taxed the value of their estates so high that the property was confiscated or the owners were driven away or into hiding. The emperors also began to reduce the silver content of coins. This practically destroyed the economy. In fact, some property owners tried to give themselves up as slaves until it was declared illegal to do so by Emperor Valens (368 A.D.). Eventually the system so completely broke down that there was no longer a monetary system and trade went back to barter. Of course with no ability to pay an army, the entire system collapsed and the barbarians invaded Rome. It has been noted that many citizens were happy to be free of the excessive tax burdens and could once again produce for themselves.

In Roman times assessors were no longer honored but considered evil and low class people who often required military escort. After being criticized by religious leaders for associating with tax assessors in Jerusalem, Jesus Christ said, "The tax assessors and prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you." Christ also said, "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and render unto God the things that are God's." The apostle Matthew was a tax assessor.

Next Issue: Medieval Property Tax

Budget, Finance and Taxes

Department of Revenue Proposes 2010 Interest Rate for Property Tax Refunds

by James McMahan, WACO Staff

The Department of Revenue has proposed a draft rule to establish the 2010 interest rate for property tax refunds. The draft rule can be read here: http://dor.wa.gov/Docs/Rules/draft/CR105_18_220_10.pdf.

Pursuant to RCW 84.69.100, the Department of Revenue annually updates its rule (WAC 458-18-220) to establish the interest rate for refunds of taxes made pursuant to RCW 84.69.010 through 84.69.090, and to judgments entered in favor plaintiffs pursuant to RCW 84.68.030.

The 2010 interest rate proposed by the Department is 0.29%. The 2009 rate was 2.14%, and the 2008 rate was 4.81%. Because the rule is being proposed as an expedited rule, there will be no public hearings. For more information, please contact: Marilou Rickert, Department of Revenue, PO Box 47453, Olympia, WA 98504-7453, Fax: (360) 586-0127 or MarilouR@dor.wa.gov.

Association News

Sheriffs Meet in Whatcom County

The Washington State Sheriffs' Association (WSSA) met last week at the Washington Association of Sheriffs and Police Chiefs (WASPC) Fall Conference in Whatcom County. Twenty-three sheriffs attended.

WSSA President Yakima County Sheriff Ken Irwin introduced recently elected Jefferson County Sheriff Tony Hernandez and Cowlitz County Sheriff Mark Nelson to the group. Nelson was appointed in early October when his predecessor Bill Mahoney retired. Hernandez was appointed in March. Sheriff Nelson drew a few chuckles when he quoted a cowboy sign in his office, "There is a hell of a lot of things you didn't mention when I signed on with this outfit." WSSA members offered to assist any time they could in the transitions.

The sheriffs discussed the resolution of budget issues in Thurston County, their legislative priorities for the coming year, and budget outlooks in the 39 counties. Walla Walla County Sheriff Mike Humphreys and Sheriff Irwin spoke of the factors that make for successful passage of local option taxes. Yakima County recently approved an extension of the local option sales tax. WSSA voted to support changes to the local option sales tax statutes to allow the local legislative authority to impose up to 3/10ths of one percent. The proposal was offered by Grays Harbor County Sheriff Mike Whelan.

Sheriff Irwin appointed the following to the WSSA Legislative Committee: Sheriff Mike Whelan; Douglas County Sheriff Harvey Gjesdal; Chelan County Sheriff Mike Harum; Pacific County Sheriff John Didion; Pierce County Sheriff Paul Pastor; Cowlitz County Sheriff Mark Nelson; Mason County Sheriff Casey Salisbury; and Clallam County Sheriff Bill Benedict.

The balance of the week was dedicated to the WASPC Agenda. WASPC is lead by Pacific County Sheriff John Didion.

Grant Commission Appoints New Coroner

Grant County commissioners have appointed David Matney as county coroner. Matney is an investigator in the county prosecuting attorney's office and will assume the duties December 7. Grant County Commissioner Cindy Carter said the board was impressed with his criminal justice background and his work ethic. Matney was named from a slate of six candidates, selected by Grant County Republicans when former Coroner Jerry Jasman resigned as of November 15.

Good Things

Skamania Dive Team Members Earn Recognition

from The Enterprise Newspaper

Over the past several decades, Skamania County and the surrounding Gorge communities continues to have water rescue and recovery calls at a steadily increasing rate.

In 1999, the Skamania County Sheriff's Office developed a group of volunteer divers to assist deputies in water related emergencies. Public Safety Diving is a highly technical skill which requires specialized equipment, extensive training, and most importantly, the professional mental attitude to handle water emergencies.

Water related accidents happen all year round. Rescue divers normally find themselves in cold, dark, and hazardous waters. As a friend and mentor of team leader Sgt. Arne Gonser, the late Cpl. Bob Teather of the RCMP wrote:

"Public Safety Divers come in various shapes and sizes. They see more sunrises, sunsets, rivers, ponds and cesspools than anyone else. In the movies you can find them hanging from helicopters and cliffs. In real life they're found hanging around and answering the telephone to respond to an emergency."

"Public Safety Divers are a lot of things. When they make a rescue, they're heroes. When they complete a body recovery, they're too late. When they're paid for their work, they do it for the money. When they volunteer, they're crazy."

"Public Safety Divers like hot coffee on a cold mission, friendship, laughter, and hearty handshake." "They dislike liquor in boats and children without life jackets." "Sometimes they get a medal for saving a life or recovering a child from the ice. Sometimes their widow gets the medal."

The Skamania County Sheriff's Office Dive Team, like numerous others throughout the world are a unique group of individuals who make up a professional team. They spend time away from work and family to assist others in the time in need and most of the time for closure.

"Fortunately in Skamania County we have a dedicated group of volunteers who do just that. The Skamania County Sheriff's Office Dive Team has 15 members who live and work throughout the region," said Gonser.

Since Skamania County is the only Public Safety Dive Team in the Torge region, they also provide diver support to Klickitat, Hood River, Wasco and Sherman counties.

Divers come and go for various personal and professional reasons but this year marks the 10th anniversary of the formation of the Skamania County Dive Team.

Five local Public Safety Divers, charter members: Dan Fahrni, Mark Weiland, TJ Wyckoff, Leroy Booth, and Adam Brice were part of the original team and continue to serve the Gorge community.

At the dive teams' November in-service training, Sheriff Dave Brown recognized these divers with a certificate of volunteer service and a merit coin thanking them for their service.

Other dive team members Dennis Crow and Jim Larsen have been with the team for nine years now and Noah Adams and Erik Plunkett for eight.

The remaining team has six years, perhaps less, but are a strong group that will be around for several more years.

Training & Upcoming Events

Washington Counties – [wacounties.org/Calendar of Events](http://wacounties.org/Calendar%20of%20Events)

County Training Institute – www.countytraininginstitute.org

Washington State Open Government Conference

Learn your rights to open government and get practical tips on exercising them at the federal, state, and local levels. Hear the latest on court battles, issues expected at the 2010 state legislative session, and the Obama administration's open government initiatives. Network with other community leaders, and meet the most knowledgeable experts in the field - all at the Washington State Open Government Conference, in spectacular surroundings on the University of Washington campus.

The January 16 conference begins with a keynote speech by **Hon. Rob McKenna, Attorney General for the State of Washington**, a leader in the effort to heed and strengthen open government laws. The luncheon speaker is **Heather Brooke, an award-winning journalist and author**, and graduate of the University of Washington, whose pioneering use of open records laws exposed widespread misuse of public funds by members of the British Parliament.

The heart of the conference consists of simultaneous one-hour "break-out" groups held twice in succession, with your choice among the following four topics:

- **State and local public records**
- **State and local public meetings**
- **Campaign and lobby disclosure**
- **Federal public records and open meetings**

Each group includes presentations and discussions led by attorneys, journalists, former elected officials, and others, who know open government laws and how to strengthen them. Each group will explore how to exercise your rights to monitor government and proactive opportunities that governments can take for greater transparency. This is also an opportunity to bring in your own discoveries and questions.

Mark your calendar for January 16, and don't miss this informative and inspiring day devoted to open government! Please [click here to register](#) for the conference. Questions about the conference can be directed to the WCOG office at info@washingtoncog.org or by phone to 206-782-0393.



Attachments

Welcome to the U.S. Communities Purchasing & Finance Agency

(U.S. Communities) website <http://www.uscommunities.org/>

The Association of School Business Officials International (ASBO), the National Association of Counties (NACo), the National Institute of Governmental Purchasing (NIGP), the National League of Cities (NLC), and the United States Conference of Mayors (USCM), jointly sponsor the

U.S. Communities Government Purchasing Alliance (U.S. Communities)

Designed in cooperation with an Advisory Board of local government purchasing officials, U.S. Communities pools the purchasing power of public agencies, achieves bulk volume discounts on behalf of public agencies, competitively solicits quality products through a lead public agency and provides a purchasing forum for public agencies nationwide.

You can obtain information on how to contact all U.S. Communities suppliers by telephoning (866) 472-7467 or by sending an email to info@uscommunities.org

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"Results from our internal customer satisfaction survey show that our customers want two things from Purchasing. First save us time in the procurement process and second save us money. When Kansas City, Missouri uses a U.S. Communities contract we save both time and money for our customers."

**Ray Burnett,
Commissioner of Purchases and Supplies
Kansas Citv. MO.**