

[USFSP News Center »](#)

Graduate student creates documentary on the life and legacy of Nelson Poynter

Posted February 19, 2013 at 6:19 pm by [Chelsea Tatham '14](#)



Walt Gordon

Walter Gordon knew he faced a monumental task when he decided to create a video documentary of the late Nelson Poynter as his Master's in Liberal Arts project.

Poynter was a giant in the newspaper industry and a tireless champion of USF St. Petersburg. When he died in 1978, he left behind a 44-foot stack of papers, documents and filmed interviews. They are housed in Special Collections at the USF St. Petersburg library that bears his name.

The [Nelson Poynter Memorial Library](#) collection had only occasional interest by researchers until Gordon decided to dig in.

Gordon, a fall 2012 graduate, spent all last summer poring through the collection. The result is a 30-minute documentary about the man who turned the *St. Petersburg Times* (now the [Tampa Bay Times](#)) into one of the most distinguished newspapers in the country.

“I could have made an hours-long documentary on Poynter,” Gordon said. “He had such an interesting life.”

Born in Indiana on Dec. 5, 1903, Poynter knew at an early age that journalism would be his life-long career. His father bought the *St. Petersburg Times* in 1912 and Poynter wrote his first story

for the *Times* in 1914. In 1938 he became the general manager of the *Times*. Before that he was the editor and publisher of the *Clearwater Sun* and the *Kokomo (Ind.) Dispatch*. Poynter later acquired the *St. Petersburg Evening Independent*, which folded in 1986, and founded *Congressional Quarterly*, an influential legislative news service.

He is perhaps best known for leaving the ownership of the *Times* to the non-profit Modern Media Institute, now the [Poynter Institute](#), to ensure its independence. The Institute is located across the street from USF St. Petersburg.

Poynter died hours after participating in a groundbreaking at USF St. Petersburg on June 15, 1978, during which he was honored for his efforts to establish it.

James Schnur, Associate Librarian in Special Collections and Archives at the Nelson Poynter Memorial Library, suggested the Poynter documents as a subject of Gordon's project. Schnur, who first met Gordon while teaching Florida history at Eckerd College, assisted in the documentary process.

As a librarian and graduate of USF St. Petersburg, Schnur understood the impact Poynter had on the development of the university and downtown St. Petersburg. Schnur says Gordon's documentary is a great way for community members to understand Poynter's significance.

"He brought Poynter in to the community," Schnur says.

Making a documentary came naturally to Gordon, who taught TV production at Countryside High School and earned a Bachelor's degree in history from Eckerd College.

The Poynter Papers include interviews from the 1970s and 1980s that were recorded on film and transferred to video tapes. Because of his experience with TV and film production, Gordon was able to transfer the VHS tapes into digital files in order to make the 35-minute documentary.

Gordon is a staunch advocate for combining the latest technology with other disciplines like the arts and sciences in order to expand educational capabilities.

The documents and videos along with Gordon's annotations will be available to scholars, researchers, and students interested in learning more about Poynter and St. Petersburg history.

"Altogether, the collection constitutes an amazing amount of data that could still benefit from more research." Gordon said.

Gordon continues to teach TV production at Countryside High School. He presented his documentary at [Heritage Village](#) for its "Speaking of History" lecture series in November. Gordon also presented a 20-minute version of the documentary at USFSP for the 65th Annual Meeting of the Southeast Philosophy of Education Society Feb. 1-2.



Related News

Posted in:

[Alumni Stories](#)

[College of Arts & Sciences](#)

[Poynter Library](#)

[Research](#)

[Student Highlights](#)

[USFSP News](#)

Tags:

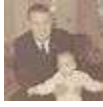
[Journalism](#)

[Liberal Arts](#)

[master's degree](#)

[Poynter](#)

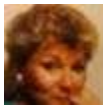
[Special Collections](#)



• [Jim Schnur](#) · [University Librarian](#) at [University of South Florida St. Petersburg](#)

Mr. Gordon's work on the Papers of Nelson Poynter serves as an excellent example of the way graduates of USF St. Petersburg learn the value of primary sources and original research. His efforts to remind us of Poynter's legacy today will continue to have great value for years to come.

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · [6](#) · [Unfollow Post](#) · [February 20, 2013 at 10:19pm](#)



• [Diane Craig](#) · Following · [Writing Tutor](#) at [Writing Tutor, Eckerd College PEL](#)

Awesome! Thanks Walter!

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · [2](#) · [Unfollow Post](#) · [February 20, 2013 at 12:03pm](#)



• [Nelson Poynter](#) · [Facilities Manager](#) at [Crossroads Bible College](#)

This was a wonderful piece of work and it was a pleasure to know more about the man I was named after. Thank you much.