

Out of the Archives

a newsletter from the Washington State Archives

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Office of the Secretary of State

KING-5: Ballard's Big Jake receives overdue recognition

by Dr. Jewell Lorenz Dunn, Olympia Branch Researcher

In the early-1900s, Ballard was home to Seattle Police Sergeant Jakob Bjarnason, better known as "Big Jake." At 7-feet-4-inches, he remains the tallest Seattle officer on record.

For nearly a century, Jake's grave has been difficult to find, with a temporary marker covered in growth, featuring the wrong birth date. On May 10, 2017, the 90th anniversary of his death, he will get a permanent marker and an official funeral.

[KING-5 tells the story of how this came about.](#)

The Archives also got to play a role.

Occasionally we are asked to help Washington-based agencies or private groups to locate ancestors or living descendants. These are typically people who are related to someone who served in the military or as a public servant in some capacity.

We had one of those requests from Heidi Hiatt, a member of the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR), who has connections to the Nordic Heritage Museum. Her DAR group took a tour of the Archives awhile back. Heidi recently contacted the State Archivist Steve Excell to enlist our help. Heidi organized a group called "Team Jake" with a goal of finding descendants of Big Jake, who was an Icelandic immigrant turned Seattle Policeman. Jakob passed in 1927. The



Seattle Police Sergeant Jakob "Big Jake" Bjarnason, of Ballard, WA, patrolling a neighborhood, c. 1904. (from KING-5 website)

group planned a dedication of a new headstone for Jakob and they wanted to find extended family to share the event on May 10, 2017, at [Washelli Cemetery](#).

The project was spearheaded from the genealogical work of Jakob Bjarnason's great nephew, Fridrik Thor Gudmundsson (of Iceland), the Nordic Heritage Museum (Seattle), Officer Ritter, and a few others. They had come to a genealogical brick wall and could not locate any other living family members.

That's when they turned to the State Archives for help. Through our wonderful [Washington State Digital Archives](#), Ancestry.com and some great genealogical research, we were able to prove a correct family connection with living relatives. There had been a public genealogical tree, which previously led everyone to an incorrect family—right name, wrong people, which we encounter often in genealogy. The wonderful ending to this story was being able to link two families in Oregon to invite them to the event and meet their Icelandic cousins. They are a great-grandson and great-great-granddaughter of Grace Bjarnason Ryan, sister of Jake.



*Seattle Police officers. Big Jake is in the middle, towering over even the officers standing on higher steps, c. 1904.
(from KING-5 website)*