AASLH

TECHNICAL LEAFLET BUNDLE

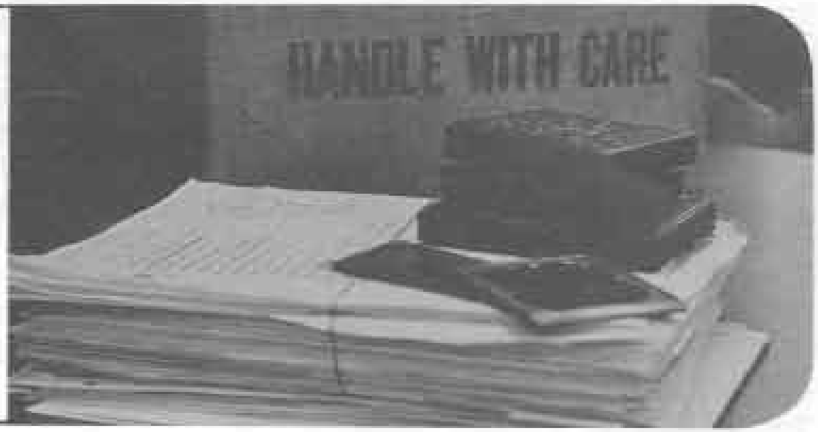
A PUBLICATION OF THE AMERICAN ASSOCIATION FOR STATE AND LOCAL HISTORY

Collections Management I

BNDL010

Most of us are far too familiar with the fact there is far too often a gap between the reality and the ideal of collections management. The leaflets in this bundle are a combination of examining the reality and striving for the ideal. This information can help you anticipate and resolve some common issues and explain to others (donors, trustees, and coworkers who are not familiar with collections management) why these issues are significant.

technical leaflet



CONVERTING LOANS TO GIFTS:

one solution to "permanent" loans

by Anita Manning, Registrar
Bernice P. Bishop Museum
Honolulu, Hawaii

Most museums have a backlog of unreclaimed loans that they would like to convert to gift status. Many of these loans may date back to the founding of the institution. Some may be "permanent" loans in the sense that the lender never intended to reclaim them but preferred not to declare them as gifts. Others may be "temporary" loans originally offered for exhibit, study, or identification for a certain time period and yet never reclaimed.

Specimens in either category are a constant source of trouble and irritation. The museum is bound to keep them, but the specimen shouldn't be loaned or exchanged. Worst of all perhaps, a relative of the original lender may find the museum's receipt someday and come to claim the object unannounced. The museum staff may be unprepared and uncertain. Consequently, it is to a museum's advantage to initiate an investigation of abandoned loans.

This technical leaflet outlines a method of organizing research on loans to find lost lenders or heirs. The goal of researching the loans, as well as of searching for the lenders themselves, is to clarify what is on loan to the museum, historical society, or library, to learn who the present legal owner is, and to appeal to that owner for conversion of the loan to gift status.

Know the Loans

Good administration in museums, historical societies, and libraries demands reliable systems for registering incoming loans. If your organization doesn't have such a system with accompanying forms and an index, make that a priority objective.[1]

1. Museum Registration Methods. D. H. Dudley. American Association of Museums, 1968.

Before embarking on loan research, provide yourself with a complete index of lenders that will lead you to the full registration file on each loan. Do not attempt to relist all the information in the registration file. List only the lender's name and the registration number, library call number, or other index number (e.g. Smith, A.C. L:3825-3827*). Often lenders have made several loans over the years. The loan index insures that the multiple lender is contacted only once in asking for conversion of loans to gifts. Be sure to continue adding incoming loans and subtracting returned ones so that the index is always up to date.

In creating the index, be sure all records of loans have been reviewed. Check accession records as well as other systems. For example, a librarian would do well to review curatorial records of loans. Library materials may have been received on loan by the curator as part of a larger group, and the loan status may not be noted in library records. Over the years, several recording systems may have been used, resulting in multiple numbers for the same loan. Knowing the history of your organization will facilitate checking all records.

Do not undertake this project unilaterally. Other employees in the organization must be involved, and their cooperation and support are vital.

Review the Loans

Using the loan index, review each loan. In larger museums, ask other staff to indicate those loans which are actively needed in their research or exhibits. Identify recently accepted loans which are no longer needed and return them promptly. Exclude these loans from consideration. Review the loan records for special situations. Were any special agreements made concerning the loan? Did the organization agree to keep the loan for a certain period of time, or on exhibit, or to repair the object? Have all commitments been fulfilled?

The next step is to locate each loaned specimen in the collections and note its condition. Be absolutely sure the item is in the collections and in good condition before beginning your research. Do not rely on the catalog entry showing storage location, but actually view the object itself.

Make every attempt to locate missing specimens. Review the records again—the item may have been returned to the lender. Or the item may have become lost or even stolen. Any museum professional will admit this can and does happen. If records show an item has been stolen, consult legal counsel.

If the loaned item has been damaged, try to determine the age of the break or mar. Could it have been damaged before being loaned? Review the museum's loan receipt; is the museum responsible for breakage or deterioration? Even if you are not legally responsible, it is good public relations to offer to repair the item for the lender. Put off researching damaged loans until competent conservation work is available.

Do not begin looking for the lender until the location of each loaned object has been verified, as attempts to decide the legal owner or locate heirs often result in requests by family members to see the items.

Find the Lender

Once the loaned material has been located, the legal owner must be established. With recently accepted loans, this process may consist only of con-

*All references to lenders, loan numbers, dates or items loaned are fictitious.

firming the address given by the lender at the time the loan was made. With most unclaimed loans, the process is long and difficult. The search also can be an exciting and challenging lesson in local history and government.

Much of the research may be done away from museum, historical society, or library. Prepare by stating the known facts on a plain sheet of paper to which notes, leads, and facts can be added. As you will need to keep this sheet permanently in the files, you should use acid-free or some other high quality paper. The sheet should be headed something like this:

> Smith, A   C   L.3825 thru L.3827
> rec'd June 8, 1901   Accession 426
> one daguerreotype, one rifle, diary of G. A. Smith

Begin adding to the sheet by researching the institution's own records. Accession and loan records, correspondence, trustee minutes, annual reports, and catalog files should be searched. Do not neglect to talk with long-time workers. Often retired staff can provide information that was considered common knowledge and so was not written down. Occasionally, these in-house sources reveal that a loan was converted to a gift, purchased, or left as a bequest at an earlier date.

As you begin to search outside the organization, explain the nature of your quest before asking for information. Elicit helpful responses by creating the impression the lender will be happy to be found (figure 1). A source may refuse information because he or she does not understand why you want to locate the lender and may even think it is to force payment of a debt or other unpleasant purposes. In person, by telephone, or mail, give a general statement: "The County Museum is looking for Mr. A. C. Smith (or descendants of Mr. A. C. Smith). Years ago Mr. Smith left (something) at the museum, and we would like to talk to him (them) about it."

When you believe the original lender is still living, consult telephone books and city directories.[2] Out-of-state telephone books are handy for checking addresses and are available at public and university libraries or the local telephone company. The postmaster will

2. City directories list all persons living in a city, their address and profession.

Dear ________________,

County Museum is trying to locate Mrs. E. S. Breck. In 1970 Mrs. Breck left an item with us for study. She did not make its status clear to us, however, and we would like to contact her to complete the transaction.

I am hoping that Mrs. Breck as a graduate of Northern State University is on your alumni mailing list. Could you help us and Mrs. Breck by returning the enclosed post card, checking the appropriate answers? Even a negative answer is helpful. Many thanks.

Sincerely yours,

Ms. Anita Manning
Registrar

Figure 1

research changes of address for a fee of one dollar. Write to the substation which handled mail for the lender at the last known address. Consult with any post office if you are unsure of the correct substation. Change of address will not be given on the telephone and remains on file for no more than one year after the change is made.

A great deal of information is available from public records or organizations of which the lender might have been a member. Possibilities associated with a lender's career are labor unions, professional associations or societies, branches of the military service, local or statewide teachers' groups, licensing boards or other government registration agencies, and the civil service.

Other sources might be your own museum association, auxillary, or friends group; religious organizations or orders; land tax records; bureau of conveyances; voter registration records; genealogical societies; local newspaper index; funeral or burial societies; mortuary and cemetery records; masonic or lodge records; fraternity or sorority rolls; and university registrar and alumni records.

Tracing women can be particularly difficult due to name changes upon marriage. The lender may have been recorded as Mrs. A. C. Smith without any indication whether the initials are a man's or a woman's. If the woman has been widowed since the loan was made, she may now use Mrs. Alice Smith.[3] Voter registration records are an especially useful source of information. A woman must vote under her own given name, Alice Smith, never as Mrs. Arthur Smith. Also, voter records are kept for many years and show address changes and failure to vote, which might indicate moves out of the jurisdiction or death.

Do not hesitate to write to organizations, associations, or government offices in other states or even foreign countries. When making inquiries by mail, always provide return postage[4] and, if possible, a fill-in-the-blanks form for reply. Postcards are inexpensive and easy to enclose (figure 2). Stress in your accompanying letter that negative answers are also important as they help to redirect continued searching. If writing to a non-English speaking country, writing in the language of the area will speed replies. Use your society's newsletter to advertise for a volunteer with foreign language ability or ask the foreign language department of a high school or college in your area for help.

3. The first year following the husband's death, city directories usually list "Smith, Mrs. Alice (widow W.O.)" or the equivalent.

4. Postage coupons, which may be purchased at any U.S. post office, provide return postage for foreign correspondents.

Figure 2

___ Yes, Mr. A. O. Smith is an active member of Physics Teachers of Ohio. His address is

____

____

____

___ No, Mr. Smith is no longer a member. Our records show he has moved to

____

____

____

___ No, Mr. Smith is not a member and does not show on our records as retired or moved. He may be a member of the organization below

____

____

____

Signed ______________________

Date ______________________

Smith L. 3852-L.3827

When trying to decide how to address letters to organizations in other cities, ask the local branch or equivalent organization in your area for help in directing an inquiry to the proper person. For example, call the local Elks club and ask how to address the Elks lodge in another locale. The nearest embassy representing the foreign country involved in the search is a source of addresses and useful hints. Out-of-state telephone directories are also helpful in determining proper titles and addresses. If all else fails, direct your query to key personnel in an organization or a branch of government; it will be forwarded to the proper level.

If your research shows that the original lender has died, the search will be more complicated. The ownership question may be extremely complex. You will need to consult probate, small estate, and trust records to determine if the lender left a will. The name of this branch of the courts varies from state to state. The records are handled by a clerk of the court who keeps an index by name of the deceased. These are public records which may be consulted *in person* without cost. If you have to write, give the name of the deceased and the place and date of death. In some courts, there may be a fee to cover the clerk's time to look in the index. Copies of wills can be obtained by mail with the fee determined by the number of pages. Be sure to ask what papers are filed with the will.

Considerable information can be found in probate records. The deceased may have willed the loaned item to a friend or relative. Even though the item is not specifically mentioned, it may be included in a general category (e.g., "all my historical papers to Alice Smith" or "any and all antiquities to Alice Smith"). If the loaned material is not covered by a specific bequest, it will fall unto the category of "rest and residue" or "remainder." The new owner will be the person or, upon occasion, the trust or organization receiving the rest and residue. If the rest and residue were divided among several parties by will, each is now part owner. Those receiving a bequest signed a receipt, now in the probate file, that shows where the person resided at that time (e.g., "Alice Smith of Kansas City"). Read the entire probate record—clues and leads will become apparent. Seek a legal interpretation of any passage which is the least bit ambiguous.

If no will is found (i.e., the lender died intestate), the law in the state where the lender or the lender's heirs died determines how property is divided. Obtain a copy of the laws governing descent of property for the state in question. Read the law carefully and then talk it over with legal counsel. This law will tell you which relatives to trace in intestate cases.

The search now begins again—using all the same techniques to locate heirs. The simplest method is to recreate a person's life—date and location of birth, schools, marriage, career, special interests, religion, date and location of death. Any facet of a person's life that might have resulted in records and files is a potential source of clues or answers. In short, your task is to play detective. You will need to continue tracing until you locate the living heirs. A person may be a descendant and not an heir. Who inherits the estate or portions of the estate can be confusing; seek legal counsel if you are at all unsure. Be on the lookout for special legal situations. For instance, you may trace a lender's descendants several generations only to find that prior to his death he created a private corporation and "sold" his entire estate to it for one dollar. The corporation then owns the loaned material, not the descendants.

Tracing families can involve the research in delicate problems as human relations are often complex. You may find yourself dealing with families with such problems as desertions, changed and contested wills, even feuds. A second wife may have been received unfavorably by the deceased lender's children. "Adopted" children have no rights of inheritance unless legally adopted, but adoption records are closed to the public, so checking on the legality of an adoption can be difficult.

These are a few of the reasons for not contacting family members until your research is complete or nearly so. Occasionally family members whom you know to be favorably disposed toward your organization can be helpful, but use caution. Once you have made your search public, there's no way to close it up again.

There will be questions and answers unique to your city and state. Learn the resources available at the archives, court records, public and university libraries, and special interest libraries. For example, a medical library may keep a historical list of doctors in the area. Local histories and genealogies may be invaluable.

Preparing to Approach the Lender

When the detective work is over, if it has consumed any considerable length of time, actually locate the loaned material and examine it again. Then you know exactly where it is and its present condition first-hand.

Next, in the case of a deceased lender, examine the attitudes of the heirs. Are they known to be favorably or unfavorably disposed toward your organization? Is their family orientation so strong that they will almost certainly reclaim the material for sentimental reasons? In a few cases, after reviewing the circumstances, you may decide not to contact the heirs. You are not bound to do so.

If several heirs, each a partial owner, are involved, all should be approached simultaneously and in the same manner. Explain how they came to inherit the specimen, what proportion of it is theirs, and who the other heirs are. Percentage of ownership will be determined by the lender's will or state law if there is no will. For example: Mr. Smith dies leaving all assets by will to his wife, Alice. Alice dies intestate (without a will) leaving ten children. Of the ten, there are eight survivors, each with a one-tenth interest or share in the loan. The remaining two children died leaving wills dividing their assets equally between spouse and four children. Each of the heirs of the deceased children has one-fifth of one-tenth interest. This would be a fairly simple case. If you have any doubts about your interpretation of the will or your accounting of the inheritance, seek legal assistance.

Approaching the Lender or Heirs

The goal of the search for the lender or heirs is to seek gift status for the material or, failing that, return the material. Occasionally, the loaned items may be unsuited to the collections or a storage burden. However, in most cases, the loan was accepted because the museum or library wished to study or display the material. Now you wish to convert the loan to a gift.

To simplify this part of the process, work out in advance one or more stock letters. The letter should emphasize the positive aspects of your organization and mention the possibilities of memorial gifts and tax deductions. Leave blanks to personalize the letter (figure

Dear ______________,

When County Museum was founded in 1901, many descendants of the earliest families in Grace County graciously lent items for the first display. These loans were extremely useful in helping County Museum get its start. As we approach our eightieth year, we are reviewing our accession records and note these early loans. Among those items borrowed for beginning displays was __________ lent in ________ by ____________________, your __________. In view of County Museum's care of this ________ for many years, we hope you and the other heirs of ____________ are now willing to place our continuing responsibility on the basis of a gift instead of a loan.

Your gift of this __________ would assure its having a permanent home in Grace County for future generations to enjoy. We wish to stress that by donating this __________ to County Museum you will be aiding in the preservation of the history __________ helped make. Items donated to the museum are always available to family members for viewing. It is our policy that all labels of items that are on view acknowledge the origin of the gift in a form acceptable to the donor. You may wish to consider a donation in memory of _____________. Another consideration is an income tax deduction for charitable contributions. Many friends of County Museum are taking advantage of this tax law. County Museum is a 501(c) 3 organization.

To approve the change of status described above, please sign and date the enclosed certificate of gift. The white (original) copy should be returned in the envelope provided. The green copy is your receipt for tax purposes.

Sincerely yours,

Director

Figure 3

CERTIFICATE OF GIFT

Name of Donor Mr. Robert H. Smith

Address 1617 S. First Street

Grace County

I hereby unconditionally give, grant, and convey the items described below to the Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum to be administered in accordance with its established policies. The title to said property shall remain in the Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum without reservation.

Number and description of donation: 1/6 interest in items listed below

L.3825 one daguerreotype
L.3826 one rifle
L.3827 diary of G. A. Smith

all items left at County Museum by Mrs. G. A. Smith October 10, 1902

Signature of Donor ____________________ Date ____________

Signature of Witness ____________________ Date ____________

Please note: Because the Museum cannot exhibit its entire collection at once, and makes changes in exhibits from time to time, it cannot promise the permanent exhibit of any object. Those not on public exhibition, however, are almost always available to scholars and scientists for study.

Original to Registrar, first carbon to donor, second carbon remains with donation.

Accession Number 426

Reg Form No. 107 Feb 1972

Figure 4

3). Accompany the letter with a deed of gift form that requires only the lender's signature (figure 4). Enclose a return, stamped envelope.

It is not wise to ask for loan conversion on the telephone or in person. The situation demands an immediate reaction and does not allow time for thought. Bequests are one alternative to immediate conversion. Be prepared for negative responses. Return loans graciously, but be sure your loan receipt is returned and that the lender signs a museum receipt stating that the loaned item has been returned. Should the lender request continued loan status, you rightfully might request the lender to remove the material.

In a case of multiple heirs, some may convert their portion, some not. Generally speaking, once the museum or society has a partial interest, it has an equal right to custody of the material with the other owners. Each situation, however, is unique. If the museum's custody is challenged, seek legal counsel. The museum may not dispose of or lend the material, however, without the permission of the other owners.

Always acknowledge conversions with a thank-you letter. If there is a museum association or society newsletter, recognition might be given publicly through a news article. Large gifts might warrant a news release. If you have a display case for new gifts, converted loans can be acknowledged here also.

Future Loans

The museum, society, or library can take certain measures to prevent the accumulation of permanent loans in the future; professional museum standards call for accepting a very limited number of loans. Prepare and use a loan receipt that protects the organization as much as possible (figure 5). Loans should be accepted for a definite and short term and for a specific purpose. Keep an up-to-date address on all lenders. Periodically review loans to ensure that forgetfulness does not lead to a new crop of abandoned loans.

Lenders who never return are only one of the time- and money-consuming problems that result from accepting long-term loans. Experience shows the negative aspects far outweigh any advantages. Long-term loans use space, time, and money that could be used for permanent collections. Their use is limited as they cannot be loaned or exchanged. In the case of manuscripts, letter collections, and diaries, the loaned material usually has cumbersome restrictions that restrict full use by society member or library patron. The long-term loan is always subject to unannounced withdrawal. In accepting the loan, the museum has accepted a bailment to return the object in the same condition as received. The society or museum must make restitution if the item is damaged. All of these problems can lead to friction and unhappiness between lender and museum. The negative feelings generated by a long-term loan can be very damaging to the organization's relationship with the lender. Long-term loans are simply not congruent with good museum policy and practice.

Conclusion

Reviewing loans made to your museum, society, or library is an inexpensive but important record-keeping project that offers the researcher a chance to learn local and organizational history. A carefully thought-out approach and thorough research will help lessen or prevent future embarrassment to the organization. Experience has shown that a significant number of loans can be converted to gifts by following the procedures outlined here.

TL-________

EL-________

LOAN AGREEMENT

The below described object(s) has(have) been offered as a loan to the Bishop Museum by:

Name ____

Address ____

____

____

Daytime
Telephone________________

and has(have) been accepted by the Bishop Museum subject to the conditions on the reverse side of this page.

Description:

PLEASE SIGN ON REVERSE--remove carbons before signing; sign all copies in ink. Original to Lender, first carbon to Registrar, second carbon remains with material in Museum.

BPBM Reg form #106 JL75

Figure 5

LOAN AGREEMENT CONDITIONS

1. The described property offered to the Bishop Museum will receive the same care given the Museum's regular collections.

2. Unless this loan agreement indicates that the described property is loaned for a specified period of time it may be removed from the Bishop Museum by the lender or his duly authorized agent or legal representative after not less than ten days written notice to the Bishop Museum and upon surrender of the lender's copy of this agreement or the delivery of the lender's written order.

3. The Bishop Museum may request removal at any time of the described property by sending written notice by certified mail to the lender at the address shown on the face of this agreement or the last change of address sent by the lender. Failure of the lender to remove the property within thirty days after the termination of the specified period of the loan or within thirty days after the mailing of the notice requesting removal by the lender will constitute authorization to the Bishop Museum to return the described property to the lender by express collect, or to deliver it to any warehouse company to be stored for the lender's account, or to otherwise store it in any manner the Bishop Museum may elect at the lender's expense, or to continue to retain the described property for Museum purposes.

4. Unless the receipt indicates that the property is loaned for a specified period of time, the term of this loan shall not exceed three years. After the period of the loan has expired and the Bishop Museum has sent the notice requesting removal of the property, as set forth in paragraph 3 above, then the Museum may retain the property for Museum purposes.

   If after Bishop Museum retains the property for one year and the described property shall not have been withdrawn by the lender, it is hereby agreed by the lender and the Bishop Museum that the described property shall be the unrestricted property of the Bishop Museum.

5. If the legal ownership of the described property shall change during the pendency of this loan, whether by reason of death, sale, insolvency, gift or otherwise, it is the responsibility of the new owner(s) and the lender to notify the Bishop Museum giving full name and address in writing. The new owner(s) may be requested to establish his (their) legal right to receive the described property by proof satisfactory to the Bishop Museum.

6. The Museum assumes no liability for loss or damage by theft, fire or other causes to the described property. Insurance is the responsibility of the owner.

7. All damage to the property upon receipt should be indicated in the description. The absence of notation as to condition of the property at the time it was received shall not mean it was in good condition at the time it was received.

8. Acceptance of this loan indicates that the described property may be available at the Bishop Museum to scholars and researchers, but does not imply that the property listed will be on extended public display in the Bishop Museum.

9. If any of the conditions to this loan are to be altered, changed, waived or otherwise affected, this must be done in writing on this agreement or by separate subsequent agreement with the Bishop Museum.

10. In signing this agreement the lender(s) certifies that he (they) is (are) the legal owner(s) or authorized agent(s) of the legal owner of the described property in question.

It is specifically understood by the undersigned that this loan is subject to the conditions listed above and that subject thereto the loan can become a gift. I have read the conditions above and accept them.

Offered by .... Date ....

Received by .... Date ....
(for the Bishop Museum)

Suggested Reading:

Materials related to a study course entitled "The Legal Aspects of Museum Operations" sponsored by the American Law Institute-American Bar Association, 4025 Chestnut Street, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19104.

Technical Leaflet II, "Documenting Collections: museum registration & records," Carl E. Guthe, American Association for State and Local History.

Technical Leaflet 55, "Glossary of Legal Terminology: an aid to genealogists," Shelby Myrick, Jr., American Association for State and Local History.

This leaflet is based on the author's experience at the Bernice P. Bishop Museum in Honolulu where she has participated in a project to convert the museum's "permanent" loans to gifts since 1972. Dr. Roland Force, former director of the museum, initiated the project in 1968. Manning was an education specialist at the Bishop before becoming registrar in 1972. She holds degrees from Palomar Junior College and San Diego State College. She is also the author of Technical Leaflet 85, "Data Retrieval without a Computer."

TECHNICAL LEAFLET 94

Technical Leaflets are published by the American Association for State and Local History for the purpose of bringing useful information to persons working in the state and local history movement. The series does not follow the same categories month after month, since the selection of subject matter is based upon varied inquiries received by the Association's home office. The leaflets, which are detachable from the magazine, are copyrighted © and should be catalogued as part of HISTORY NEWS.

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A A S L H

Technical Leaflet

Technical Information Service | American Association for State and Local History

Documentation Practices in Historical Collections

A Report from the Common Agenda

The objects held in history museums and historic houses across the country represent an irreplaceable legacy for the nation. The documentation of these objects is necessary for exhibitions, interpretive tours, outreach activities, scholarly and popular publications, and the most basic sharing of information and collections. Inadequate documentation threatens the value of our collections to future generations.

Complete documentation of museum collections involves inventories, catalogs, and historical research. Inventories tell where objects are. Catalogs tell what objects are. Historical research promotes understanding of what objects mean. This last activity enables museums to place their collections in context, explain the provenance of artifacts, and establish their historical significance. Collections research, however, is too often neglected; and of all the activities of museums, it may be the most difficult for boards, donors, and the general public to understand.

In the spring of 1990 the Common Agenda program of the American Association for State and Local History commissioned a survey of history museums to gather information on the status of documentation of historical collections throughout the United States. The survey sought to learn how museums and historic houses addressed the challenge of gathering and recording information about the objects under their care. It asked the respondents to identify factors that help and hinder documentation of collections; to estimate the percentages of their collections that had been inventoried, cataloged, and researched; and to suggest approaches to full documentation based on their experiences. It also asked respondents to distinguish between two categories of documentation: the routine housekeeping tasks of creating inventories and catalog entries; and research into the context of objects.

This report reflects the experiences of nearly nine hundred history museums and historic houses. It suggests that our material culture legacy is inadequately documented and therefore underutilized. The causes are limited personnel and financial resources, the time-consuming nature of research needed for documentation, and conflicting institutional priorities. The statistical evidence reported here, plus anecdotal information gathered from history museum professionals, point to a sobering possibility that unless steps are taken to correct this situation, we may become caretakers of an unfulfilled legacy.

—Patricia Gordon Michael
Executive Director
American Association for
State and Local History

Executive Summary

Survey Findings

•Seventy percent of objects in history collections remain unresearched while only 31 percent of the collections require inventorying and 37 percent cataloging.

•Most history museums, regardless of their sizes or types, have a similar profile of documentation activities.

•Accredited museums and museums that have adopted collections policies and computerized recordkeeping show higher percentages of documented objects.

•Although 69 percent of history museums recognize the importance of documenting collections, an even higher percentage express dissatisfaction with current practices.

•The use of historical collections for exhibition and interpretation, education and outreach predominate over those institutional imperatives for collections documentation.

•Institutional priorities directed toward research, scholarly publications, and educational initiatives can encourage full documentation, while demanding exhibition schedules and emphasis on educational programs may impede it.

•The main factors preventing adequate documentation are the needs for more staff, staff training, time for documentation activities, and the financial resources to meet these requirements.

•Seventy-seven percent of the respondents estimate that they need only one or two additional staff per year to meet their documentation needs. Additional funding requirements range from under $10,000 to $25,000 per year in 60 percent of the cases.

•Predicted benefits of adequate funding for increased documentation activities are valid interpretation and improved stewardship of collections, richer exhibitions for the public, and more accessibility for research. Benefits to the public functions of the museums outweigh but do not overshadow traditional and scholarly missions.

Conclusions

•Too many history museums neglect historical research on collections. The survey results suggest that our historical legacy will continue to be unfulfilled if action is not taken to bring more resources to collections documentation and to improve documentation practices.

•To champion the cause for improved documentation in historical collections, the AASLH's Common Agenda program should work with potential funders at the national, state, and local levels; with institutions that creatively address documentation research and can serve as models; with institutions training historians and museum staff members; and with the Accreditation and Museum Assessment Programs of the American Association of Museums.

Comparisons of data on the size and type of institution, staff, governing authority, collection recordkeeping, and other relevant variables are further analyzed in this report. Survey methodology, definitions, and response appear in the appendices. Case studies of documentation implementation and strategies from history museums were collected in conjunction with the survey. Quotes from museum colleagues and from the case studies give perspective to the statistics on collection documentation.

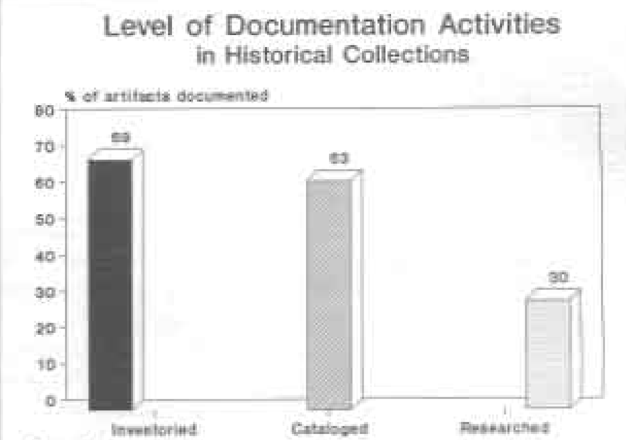
The Documentation Dilemma

Collections documentation involves all records and information generated by museums about the objects in collections—their identification, location, provenance, and context. It is a fundamental activity of all museums and a major responsibility of collections management. The following definitions used in the survey characterize three interlocking documentation activities of collections management:

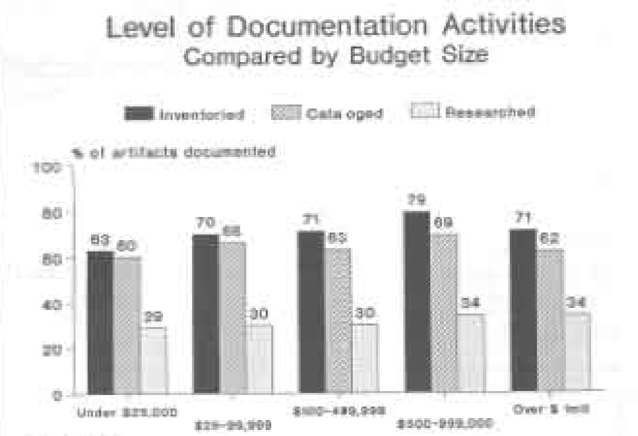
Inventory: **Inventories tell where objects are.** An inventory is an itemized list of objects, assemblies, and lots that identifies each object's location and movement.

Catalog: **Catalogs tell what objects are.** A catalog is a record of objects in descriptive detail, often itself, such as name, use, and physical description.

Historical research: **Historical research promotes understanding of what objects mean.** Historical research involves catalog entries and/or historic files that involve research into sources external to the object, information about the object's historical and practical contexts before it arrives at the museum. For example: When was it made? When and how was it used? Who made it? Who used it? Who was its first owner? What is known about its owners?



Graph 1



Graph 2

Does it have any special association or symbolic value? Why did the museum acquire it?

Disparity in Documentation Activities *(Graphs 1 and 2)*

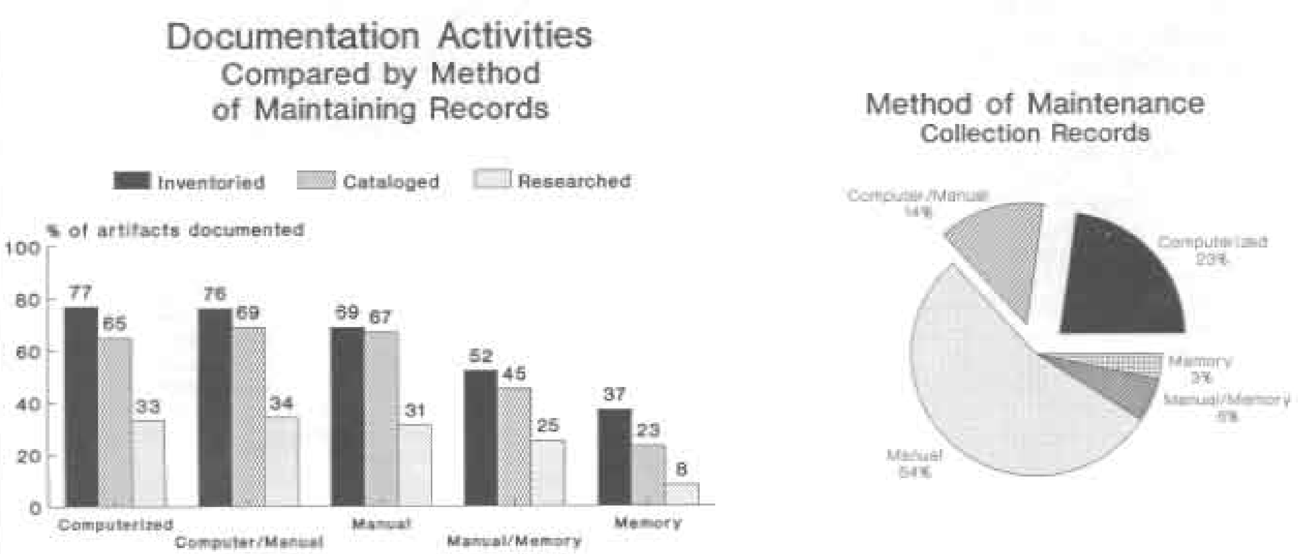
On the average, museums reported that 69 percent of the objects in their care had been inventoried and 63 percent cataloged, but only 30 percent had been researched. These statistics support the concerns of museum colleagues about the lack of historical research done on artifacts, thereby undermining the understanding and utilization of objects in historical collections. The higher average percentage of inventory and cataloging activities reflect a greater emphasis on recordkeeping and identification, only the first steps in the complete documentation of objects. Museums pointed to limited resources and the time-consuming nature of historical research.

> The utility of historic-museum object collections is limited. Often the provenance of objects within the museum's confines is not known. Their historical and cultural contexts have vanished or were never recorded . . . . Without a documented context, many artifacts remain little more than historical souvenirs.
> —Thomas J. Schlereth, "Museums and Material Culture," *History Museums in the United States: A Critical Assessment*, Roy Rosenzweig & Warren Leon, editors.

Larger institutions reported a higher percentage of objects completely documented, but proportionally fared no better than the smaller museums in completing historical research. In museums large and small, the percentage of objects researched, on average, were less than half that of objects inventoried and cataloged. The fact that budget size has minimal impact on relationships between research and other documentation activities suggests that institutional priorities play a larger role in this variance.

Statistics indicated that federally governed museums inventory, catalog, and research a higher percentage of their objects than do other museums. State museums and public universities reported a higher percentage of objects documented than do institutions with other governing authorities. This suggests that public institutions' legal responsibility to maintain records plus greater use of standard processes does have an effect on documentation activities.

Historic "sites" showed up as the type of museum that has a slightly higher percentage of



Graph 3

artifacts documented. National park sites often mentioned their established guidelines as an aid to completing documentation. "Specialized" museums, with a distinct collection focus, tend to research a slightly higher percentage of their objects.

The importance of a consistent collections documentation system is underscored by the statistics in the survey. AASLH's Common Agenda program is testing a set of standard information management categories (or data fields) at 10 Philadelphia history museums. AASLH will use the results of this test, which will be completed in September 1991, to formulate a standard set of data fields that history museums should use in documentation procedures. The data fields will cover the three areas of object information recordkeeping: administration, management, and historical context.
—Margaretta Sander, Project Coordinator, Philadelphia Documentation Project, AASLH Common Agenda for History Museums.

Methods of Maintaining Collections Records *(Graph 3)*

One of the trends that the Common Agenda wished to examine was the effect of computerization of documentation records. The survey suggests that even partial steps toward the computerization of collections information management led to an increase in percentage of artifacts inventoried. There is negligible impact in the area of research. Computers have been used mainly on the record-keeping and identification aspects of documentation. Although 54 percent of institutions maintain records manually, 37 percent are fully or partially computerized. The remaining 9 percent rely on institutional memory alone or in combination with manual records to keep track of their collections.

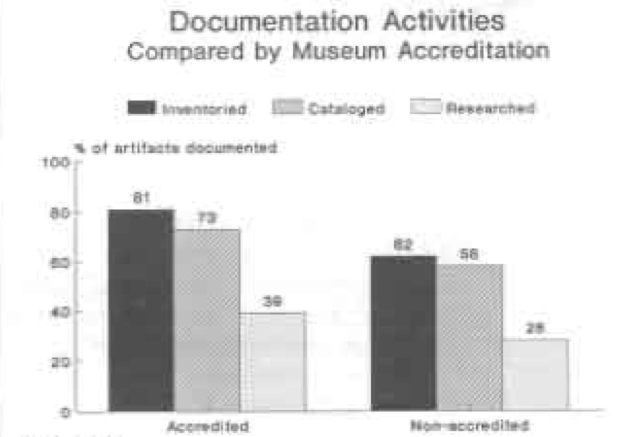
Several case studies submitted in connection with the survey shed light on the strategies, accomplishments, and unforseen problems inherent in using computers to help document collections.

Be cautious about delaying a project because of the promise of a new technology . . . . remember that worthwhile documentation (including any databases) is a consequence of quality work, not materials and equipment . . . . Do not assume computers are smarter or more productive than their operators.
—Case study: Maine State Museum, Steven Miller, Assistant Director.

Classification Systems

Sixty-one percent of the respondents use some standardized classification system or vocabulary for collections records. The statistics bear out the obvious—institutions whose records are computerized use classification systems at a far higher level (78 percent) than those maintained manually (53 percent). Thirty-eight percent of museums with very small budgets have a system, compared to over 70 percent with medium to large budgets.

Of the institutions that listed their vocabulary or classification system for records, 63 percent specified *The Revised Nomenclature for Museum Cataloging* (AASLH Press, Nashville, 1988). Some made no designation, but the majority of the remainder listed are in-house systems. Other systems include state museum, National Park Service, Library of Congress, MARC, ARGUS, Smithsonian, and various military recordkeeping systems.



Graph 4

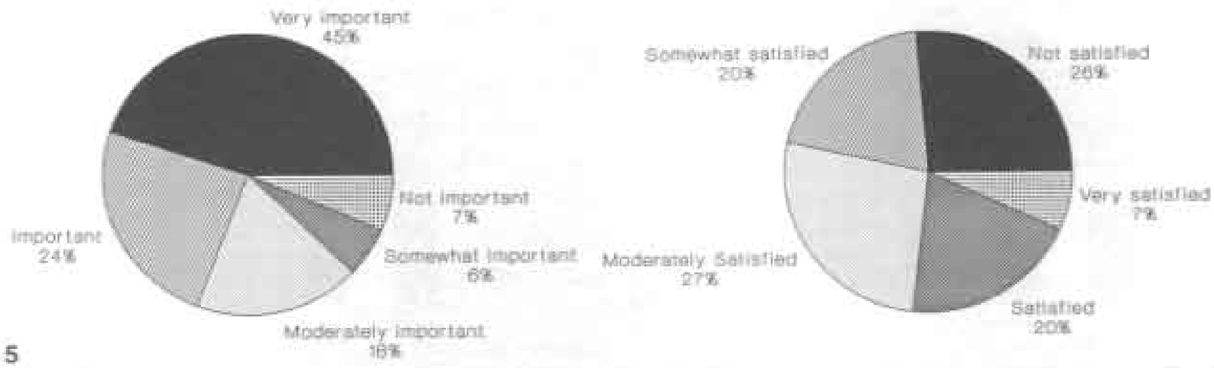
Museum Accreditation Correlation *(Graph 4)*

Museums accredited by the American Association of Museums showed higher percentages of objects inventoried, cataloged, and researched than unaccredited institutions. Thirteen percent (118) museums in the survey are accredited; 87 percent (775) are not accredited. Nine percent of all museums are accredited; almost one third of these are classified as history museums. During the lengthy process of attaining accreditation, collections documentation practices are not addressed as a whole. However, applicants are asked in the preliminary "Accreditation Self-Study" manual if documentation of their collections needs improvement and asked to describe their program for improvement. (The manual defines "Cataloging" as the creation of a full record in complete descriptive detail of all information about an object, assembly, or lot.)

The Accreditation Commission's twenty years of experience concurs with the findings of the AASLH survey. Museums that have thoroughly researched their collections greatly increase their abilities to convey to the museum visitor the knowledge and ideas contained in the collection. The Commission has found that researching collections directly results in the dramatic improvement of exhibits and indeed the enhancement of all public programming because the greatest beneficiary of collections research is the museums' audience.
—Dr. Roy L. Taylor, Director of Chicago Botanic Gardens; Chairman of AAM Accreditation Commmission.

Importance of Documentation to Institutional Mission

Degree of Satisfaction with Documentation Practices



Graph 5

Collections Policies

An average of 69 percent of the institutions surveyed have adopted collections policies with a span from 50 percent of the very small museums to 85 percent of the larger institutions. There is a correlation between having an adopted collections policy and achieving higher levels of documentation. For example, 75 percent of institutions with high documentation levels have an adopted policy while those that have zero percent of their collections cataloged have no collections policy.

Importance Contrasts with Satisfaction *(Graph 5)*

Sixty-nine percent of the institutions surveyed said that historical documentation is very important or important to their mission. Conversely, 67 percent stated that they are dissatisfied to only moderately satisfied with current documentation practices. This significant contrast showed up across the spectrum of museums with some variations in findings according to size and type of institution. The recognition of the need for thorough collections documentation to carry out institutional goals versus the overall dissatisfaction with current practices stands out as a dilemma for history museums.

Research on the collection can be the most time consuming of the whole project. There never seems to be an ending point. Research also separates your records from being just adequate to being excellent. The time spent will be well repaid in the end.
—Case study from Travellers Rest: J.H. Carpenter, collections manager.

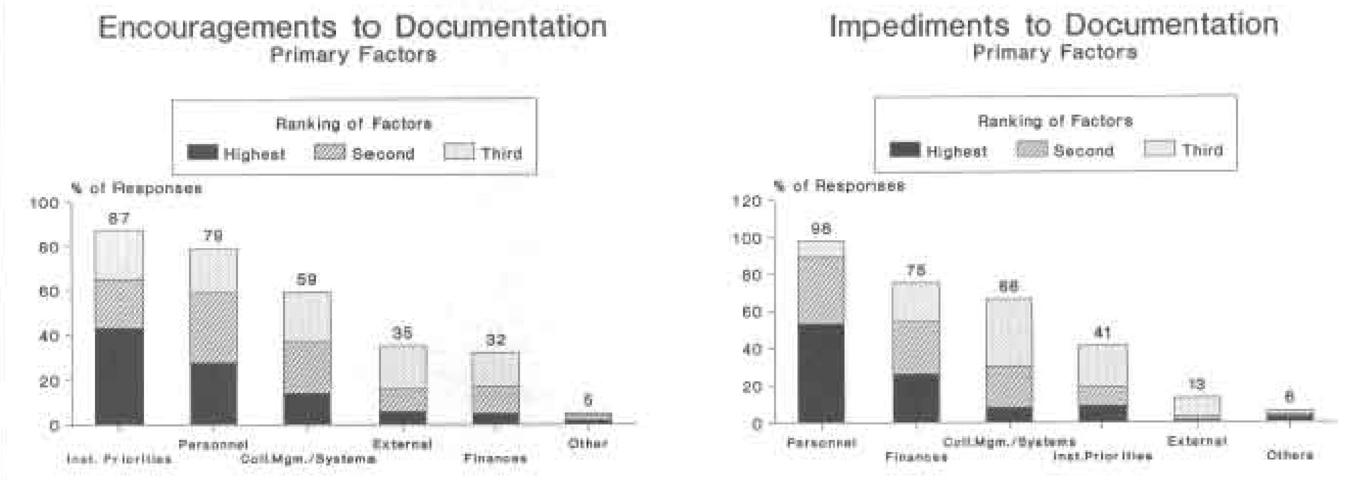
Like many small historical museums, it has accepted a wide range of objects. Over the years, sporadic attention has been given to documenting the collections, and almost no extensive research as been done, except for exhibitions.
—Case study on upgrading collections management program: Irene Zenev, Douglas County Museum of History & Natural History.

Research yielded significant documentation of the textiles produced by black and white women and revealed new information about the relationships between black and white women who spun, wove, quilted, and/or sewed together... Through their diaries and letters, the story of the lives of these women and their textile production emerged.
—Case study of exhibition development: Mississippi State Historical Museum, Mary Lohrenz, Curator.

The larger an institution, the more importance it places on documentation. Sixty-four percent of institutions with annual budgets of $5 million or over rated documentation as most important. Thirty-four percent of very small museums with budgets under $25,000, primarily run by volunteers, considered it very important. The lack of finances and staff apparently force other priorities on small museums. The smaller institutions were by far the least satisfied with their current documentation practices; the larger ones indicated a greater satisfaction. The thirteen largest institutions with annual budgets of more than over $5 million showed similar levels of satisfaction with no extremes.

Smaller museums and their boards should understand that the collective memory of the organization cannot endure precisely or permanently. Merely accepting an artifact into the collection is but the first step. No matter what, the museum must establish and adhere to an organized method for keeping track of the artifact; for describing it and its physical characteristics in consistent, understandable terms; and . . . how it relates to the world in which it was utilized.
—Sam Wegner, Southern Oregon Historical Society, Documentation Project National Advisory Board.

Federal and state museums and public universities deemed documentation more important to their mission than private institutions. Museums of all governing authorities reported similar attitudes toward satisfaction or dissatisfaction with prevailing practices. The greatest number of museums in the survey, 549, are governed as private, not-for-profit institutions.



Graph 6

Encouragements and Obstacles to Documentation *(Graphs 6 and 7)*

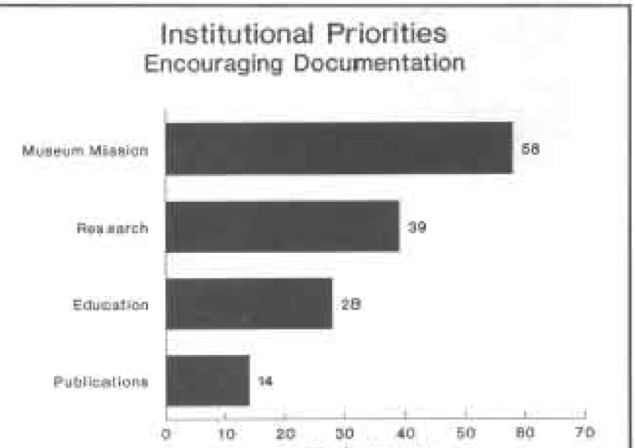
Examining the major factors that encourage history museums to document their collections—compared with those that hinder them—help to clarify the causes of the dilemma facing museums. Replies to the specific factors listed on the survey and other remarks by respondents reveal a frustration with institutional needs, conflicting priorities, and the lack of resources to deal with these requirements.

Given the complexity of a museum's mission, respondents confirmed the existence of tensions among museum functions. Institutional priorities that emphasize research interests, educational initiatives, and scholarly publications encourage museums to improve the documentation of their collections. Most museums acknowledged the role of collections documentation in carrying out their museum's mission. But other museum activities more visibly beneficial to the public attract resources that might be devoted to documenting collections.

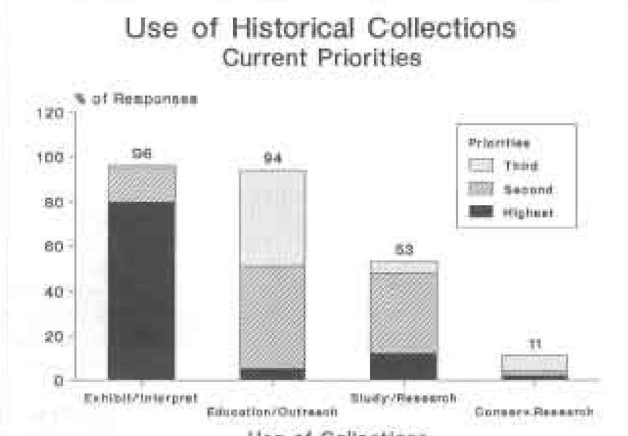
Use of Collections Sets Institutional Priorities *(Graph 8)*

When asked to assign a priority to current use of collections, respondents overwhelmingly placed the public functions of the museum on top of the list; 80 percent deemed exhibition and interpretation the top priority. Education and outreach ranked almost as high—second and third priority for most respondents. According to this survey, demanding exhibition schedules and emphasis on educational programs are factors that impede adequate documentation.

Note that study and research were considered the highest priority in 7 percent more cases than is education. They were the highest priorities in 35 percent of the university museums and 20 percent of museums under federal authority. Museums with larger budgets reported study and research as the primary use of their collections more often than smaller institutions. (The survey did not distinguish between study and research by staff members and by visiting scholars.)



Graph 7



Graph 8

AASLH-COMMON AGENDA
172 Second Ave. N.
Suite 202
Nashville, TN 37201

ASSESSMENT OF DOCUMENTATION PRACTICES FOR HISTORICAL COLLECTIONS

Adequate collections documentation is fundamental to all other museum operations; but it is also the one most frequently neglected and the one most difficult for boards, potential funders, and the general public to understand. This survey seeks to gather information about collections documentation in history museums, historical organizations and historic sites across the country. The Common Agenda Program of the American Association for State and Local History will use this information to examine documentation practices and to attempt to create more resources at national and local levels for museums to use to improve documentation of collections. The survey is being supported in part through a cooperative agreement with the Institute of Museum Services.

Complete documentation of museum collections involves three separate but interlocking activities: inventories, catalogues, and historical research. It is this last activity that is most often neglected, but it is the one that enables the museum staff to place their collections in context, explain the provenance of individual items, and establish the historical significance of artifacts. If your museum's collection is fully documented, you should not only be able to locate an object and know what it is called, but be able to answer questions like these about an object: When was it made? When was it used? How was it used? Who made it? Who used it? Who was its first owner? What is known about its owners? Does it have any special association or symbolic value? Why did the museum acquire it?

Please complete the survey with your additions and comments typed or printed legibly. Evaluations from history museums showed an average of only half an hour to finish the form. Responses to survey questions from small, medium and large institutions are critical in order to obtain a valid assessment of documentation practices nationwide. Be assured that we will respect the confidentiality of each institution's response.

Returned completed survey by **MAY 5, 1990** to:

Common Agenda Documentation Survey
American Association for State and Local History
172 Second Avenue North, Suite 202
Nashville, Tennessee 37201

REQUEST FOR CASE STUDIES: In addition to gathering information about levels of documentation, we are also interested in sharing strategies and methods used to implement documentation plans. Indicate if you would be willing to participate further in this project by submitting a case study from your institution.

YES________ NO________

Case studies submitted will be considered for publication by AASLH as a supplement to reports generated from this survey. Thank you for your help in this effort.

INSTITUTION DESCRIPTION

1. **Name of Museum** ______
   Name of Principal Institution (if different) ______

2. **Mailing Address** ______
   City ______ State ______ Zip ______ Telephone No. ______

3. **Name of Director** ______

4. **Museum Type**
   Check the one most appropriate.
   ______ General History
   ______ General Museum w/Historical Collection
   ______ Historic House
   ______ Historic Site
   ______ Outdoor Museum
   ______ Specialized History (specify)
   ______
   ______ Other (specify) ______

5. **Operating Budget**
   Check one.
   ______ Under $25,000
   ______ $25,000 – $99,999
   ______ $100,000 – $249,999
   ______ $250,000 – $499,999
   ______ $500,000 – $999,999
   ______ $1 million – $2 million
   ______ $2 million – $3 million
   ______ $3 million – $5 million
   ______ Over $5 million

6. **Museum Staff**
   Totals for this fiscal year.
   ______ Paid Staff
   ______ Non-paid Staff
   ______ Interns

7. **Governing Authority**
   Check the one most appropriate for the institution.
   ______ Private, not for profit
   ______ Government Agency
   ______ Municipal
   ______ County
   ______ State
   ______ Federal
   ______ Public university
   ______ Private college/univ.
   ______ Church
   ______ Commercial business
   ______ Other (Specify)

8. Year museum opened to public. ______

9. If your museum is accredited by the American Association of Museums, give year accredited. ______

COLLECTIONS PROFILE

Objects that are researched, exhibited and interpreted as part of the museum's **permanent collections** are the focus of this study. The **permanent collections** are those of intrinsic value that support the mission of the institution and are held and curated on a permanent basis. Photographs, prints, drawings, and other works on paper accessioned as part of the **permanent collections** are to be considered along with three-dimensional objects. Include permanent/long-term loan items over which the museum has responsibility. Support materials are **not** to be included.

1. Characterize the permanent historical collections of the institution by checking the appropriate categories from *Nomenclature for Museum Cataloguing* (© Nashville, AASLH). Briefly describe the significance of the collections.

______ Structures
______ Furnishings
______ Personal artifacts
______ Distribution and transportation artifacts
______ Recreational artifacts

______ Tools and Equipment for:
______ materials
______ science and technology
______ communication
______ Communication artifacts
(items created as expressions of human thought, i.e., art, religion, documents, books, photographs)

Significance
______
______
______
______
______
______
______
______

2. Is there a written, legally-adopted collections policy?
_______ yes _______ no

3. Total number of objects in permanent collections.
____

4. Give the percentage of your **permanent collections** that fall within the following categories.
%
_______ Objects (3-dimensional)
_______ Books
_______ Manuscripts/Photograghs/Prints/Paintings
_______ Historic Structures
_______ Living Collections

5. Estimated value of the permanent collections.
Use insurance valuation if available. Check one.
_______ Under $100,000
_______ $100,000 – $999,999
_______ $1 million – $9,999,999
_______ $10 million – $99,999,999
_______ $100 million – $999,999,999
_______ $1 billion and over

6. Indicate current use of the collection by prioritizing appropriate answers.
1 = highest useage   2 = next highest, etc.
_______ Exhibition/Interpretation
_______ Study/Research
_______ Education/Outreach programs
_______ Conservation research
_______ Other (Specify) _______________

7. Average number of objects loaned to other institutions each year.
____

8. Check method of maintaining collection records.
_______ Computerized or in the process of computerization
_______ Manually maintained
_______ Institutional memory

9. Do you use a standardized lexicon/vocabulary or classification system for records? yes _______ no _______
(If so, specify)
____

DOCUMENTATION PRACTICES

For the purposes of this survey, the following terms are used to describe documentation activities of collection management.
Inventory: itemized list of objects, assemblies, and lots which identifies each object's location and movement. **Inventories tell you where objects are.**
Catalogue: record of objects in descriptive detail, often including a photograph or drawing. Most catalogue entries contain only the basic information found within the object itself, such as its name, physical description and description of its use. **Catalogues tell you what objects are.**
Historical research: catalogue entries and/or historic files that involve research into sources external to the object, information about the object's historical and practical contexts before it arrives at the museum. **Historical research helps you understand what objects mean.**

1. Indicate the percentage of artifacts in the museum collection that are a) inventoried, b) catalogued, and c) researched by checking the appropriate boxes.

	0%	10%	20%	30%	40%	50%	60%	70%	80%	90%	100%
a) **inventoried**											
b) **catalogued**											
c) **researched**											

2. List number of personnel directly involved with collections management, full-time and part-time, and percentage of work time spent on documentation.

	Number in Collection Management		**% Time to Documentation**
	Full-Time	Part-Time	
Paid staff	_______	_______	_______
Non-paid staff	_______	_______	_______
Interns	_______	_______	_______

3. Is historical documentation of the collections important to your institution's mission?
Rank the level of importance by circling the appropriate number.

1 = not important, 5 = very important

1 2 3 4 5

4. How satisfied are you with your current documentation practices? Rank your institution's degree of satisfaction by circling the appropriate number.

1 = not satisfied, 5 = very satisfied

1 2 3 4 5

5. Rank the primary factors (printed in bold) that currently impede or prevent adequate documentation of your historical collections. Then check (√) the secondary factors beneath the major headings hat are relevant to your institution. Please make additions.

1 = highest ranked factor

______ **Institutional Priorities**
- ______ Beyond scope of museum's mission
- ______ Demanding exhibition schedule
- ______ Emphasis on educational programs

______ **Financial Resources**
- ______ Institutional budget priorities
- ______ Lack of grant/foundation support

______ **Personnel Resources**
- ______ Lack of staff
- ______ Lack of expertise
- ______ Lack of time
- ______ Insufficient training in processes
- ______ Staff turnover

______ **Collections Management/Systems**
- ______ Size of collection
- ______ Backlog of undocumented objects
- ______ Computer needs
- ______ Outdated documentation system

______ **External Factors**
- ______ Need for documentation standards
- ______ Lack of public policy
- ______ Inadequate reference resources

______ **Other** (Specify)

Rank the primary factors (printed in bold) that currently encourage or enable your museum to attain full documentation of historical collections. Check (√) relevant secondary factors listed beneath major headings. Please expand list and comment. Attach pages if needed.

1 = highest ranked factor

______ **Institutional Priorities**
- ______ Museum mission
- ______ Scholarly publications
- ______ Educational initiatives
- ______ Research interests

______ **Financial Resources**
- ______ Institutional budget priorities
- ______ Grant support
- ______ Foundation support

______ **Personnel Resources**
- ______ Curatorial expertise
- ______ Priorities of director or staff
- ______ Training opportunities

______ **Collections Management/Systems**
- ______ Effective documentation system
- ______ Computerization of records

______ **External Factors**
- ______ Community/regional needs
- ______ Requests for loans/research
- ______ Opportunities for collaboration

______ **Other** (Specify)

6. Indicate the level of additional annual funding and staff needed to achieve satisfactory documentation of your collections.

Additional funds. Check one.

- ______ Under $10,000
- ______ $10,000 – $25,000
- ______ $25,000 – $50,000
- ______ $50,000 – $75,000
- ______ $75,000 – $100,000
- ______ Over $100,000

Additional staff. Circle one.

0 1 2 3 4 5 Over 5

7. Approximate number of years needed to implement full documentation of your collections. Circle one.

0 1 2 3 4 5 Over 5

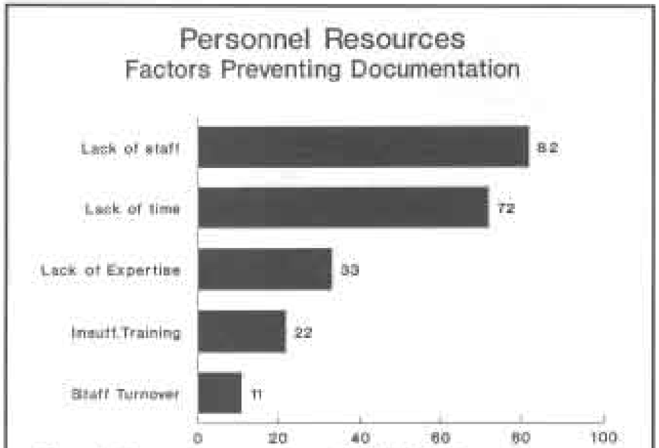
8. Do you know of the documentation support provided to museums by the National Endowment for the Humanities?

Yes______ No______

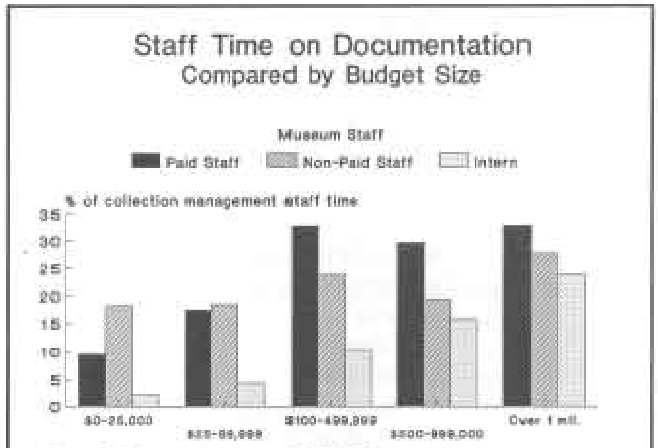
9. Given adequate funding for documentation practices, rank the three most important benefits that could accrue to your museum. Expand list, if appropriate.

1 = most important

- ______ Valid interpretation of collections
- ______ Richer exhibitions for public
- ______ Accessibility of collections for research
- ______ Inter-institutional loans
- ______ Sharing of scholarship
- ______ Educational/Outreach programs
- ______ Improved stewardship of collections
- ______ Expansion of publications
- ______ Other (expand list)



Graph 9



Graph 10

Other Encouragements to Documentation

In addition to effective documentation systems and computerization, respondents pointed out that research for a specific museum exhibition, requirements for insurance purposes, the need for legal protection, and complying with accreditation standards also encouraged more complete documentation.

> Inconsistencies in record keeping for these many objects for these many years invariably poses the question of commitment. Although our institutional priorities reflect commitment to the permanent collections these priorities do not exist in a vacuum. They are subject to the political moves and funding swings which affect all aspects of the museum's operation. We continue to lobby for funding and support of activities which are not easily or often seen. We continue to do so with the conviction that these artifacts cannot be effectively used if they are not documented and accessible.
> —Case study: Ann L. Koski, Neville Public Museum of Brown County.

Personnel and Financial Constraints *(Graph 9)*

The most serious impediment to improving documentation is a lack of personnel resources; 98 percent of respondents cited needs in this area. The lack of staff accompanied by lack of time and staff expertise, insufficient training, and staff turnover were the major contributing factors. Financial resources weigh heavily in decisions about personnel. Finances were also a constraint in other areas, with half of the respondents noting competition from other institutional budget priorities and 42 percent citing a lack of grant or foundation support.

The size of a museum's budget seems to have little or no influence on the list of major factors that prevent documentation. "General history" museums, with their wider collecting focus, gave a third more emphasis to problems of collections management than those of institutional priorities.

A backlog of undocumented objects, often from early administrations, the sheer size of collections, and computer needs are problems that slow documentation. Respondents also pointed out the need for space for staff to work on records and adequate storage space for the objects.

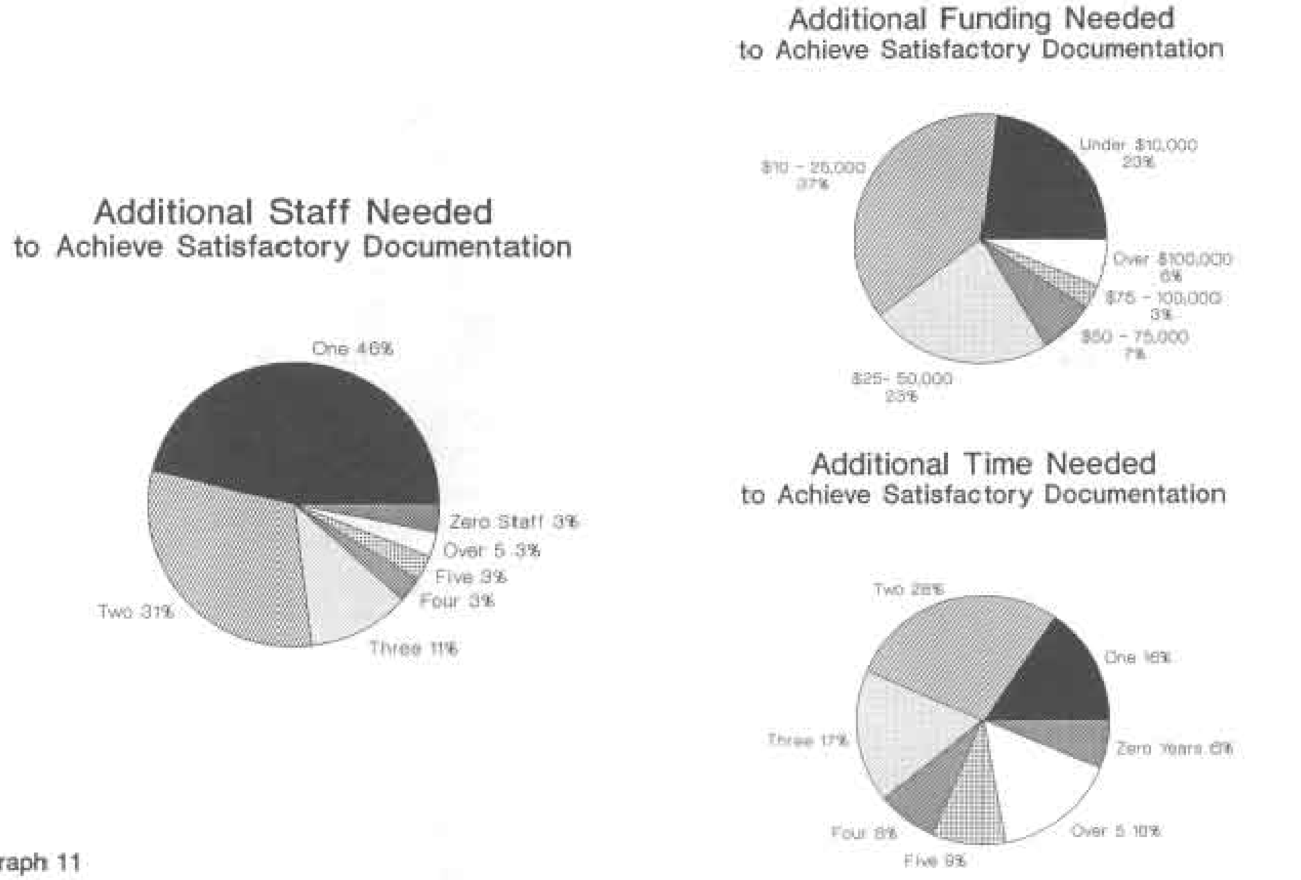
Staff-related Trends *(Graph 10)*

The importance of personnel resources warrants a more detailed examination of the current staff situation and how contributing factors, such as budget size or computerization, influence the time given to collections documentation. Fifty percent of museums with budgets over $25,000 had at least one paid staff in collections management. Thirty percent of the largest museums had from six to twenty. Thirty to thirty-eight percent of the time of paid staff in collections management was given to documentation.

The average time spent on documentation by collection management staff jumped from less than 10 percent in very small museums to more than 30 percent in medium to larger museums. Non-paid staff and intern time given to documentation also increased when paid staff gave a greater percentage of time to collections documentation. This statistic suggests that even a small amount of paid staff time can increase the amount of time given to documentation by non-paid staff and interns. Some case studies emphasized the value of using qualified volunteers for collections research.

> Research on the collection has been ongoing. We have had some success with graduate students who had to perform a local history project. These students were able to research parts of the collection. Research has also resulted in more deaccessioning as duplicate and non-relevent items are identified.
> —Case study: Rock Island Arsenal Museum, Daniel T. Whiteman.

Museums with computerized collections records allocated nearly twice as much paid staff time to documentation than those maintaining records manually. They showed a corresponding increase in unpaid staff and intern time. The



Graph 11

extra time given to documentation in this instance seems to benefit only inventory and cataloging functions, not research. Staff time spent on documentation in museums with formal collections policies increased by about 10 percent while accredited museums doubled staff time, compared to non-accredited institutions. The greater staff time given to documentation in museums that have computerized collections records, institutional collections policies, and/or museum accreditation increases the percentage of objects documented in these museums.

The Legacy of Our Historical Collections Future Needs, Roles, and Responsibilities

Future Needs in Staff, Funds, and Time *(Graph 11)*

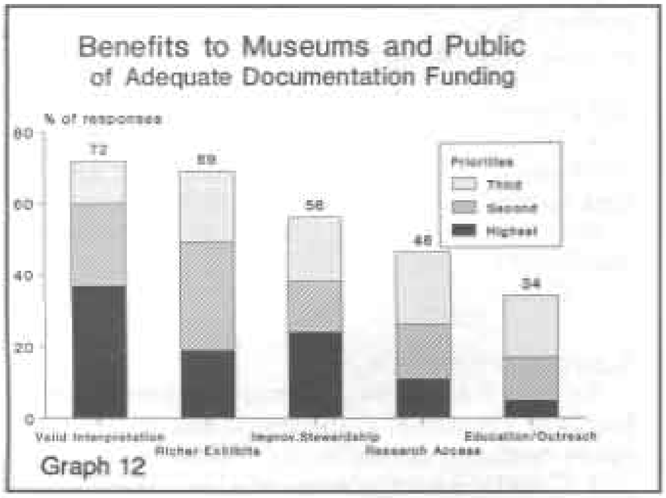
One or two additional staff members, according to 77 percent of the respondents, would mean the difference between satisfactory and inadequate collections documentation. Sixty percent replied that it will take under $25,000 annually to achieve their goals. The time required varied with the size of the institution. The resources projected and the spread of time, primarily over a five-year period, offer an optimistic but ultimately achievable goal.

Perceived Benefits to Collections, Museums, and the Public *(Graph 12)*

"Valid interpretation of collections," followed by "richer exhibitions for the public" and "improved stewardship" were perceived as the three most important benefits for institutions and the public, given the resources to accomplish adequate documentation. "Accessibility of collections for research" and "educational/outreach programs" were also important. Size and other institutional variables did not significantly affect these responses, with the exception of federally governed museums, whose first, second, and third emphases were stewardship, valid interpretation, and accessibility.

> Whether we use photographs or maps, oil paintings or television transmissions, decorated Easter eggs or stovepipe hats, we take the artifact in hand and oblige it to yield its meaning, context, and associations. And it is these aspects of the artifact which we communicate to the general museum-going public or the scholarly community in our displays and publications.
> —Steven M. Beckow, "Culture, History, and Artifact," *Material Culture Studies in America*, Thomas J. Schlereth (AASLH 1981).

The use of collections has a profound impact on perceived benefits and the expenditure of current and future resources. The benefits predicted by respondents reflect the priorities of their institutions. Of those who responded that the first use of



Graph 12

their collections was "exhibition and interpretation," the number one benefit of having adequate funding for improved documentation is listed as "valid interpretation of collections."

Of those who ranked "study and research" as the most important use of their collections, "accessibility of collections for research" was rated as the major benefit, followed by "valid interpretation" and "stewardship." Of the institutions that emphasized "education/outreach," the primary benefit was valid interpretation followed by educational programs, stewardship, and richer exhibitions at equal importance.

Future Roles and Responsibilities

From its inception the Common Agenda has focused on furthering the complete documentation of America's historical collections so that its material culture legacy could be accessible and understandable.

> A second common thread that ran through the group discussions was the need for both the museum profession and the funding agencies to give the research and documentation of collections as high a priority as they have given the interpretation of collections . . . . An organized focus on research and documentation is a responsibility that must be shouldered at national, regional, state, and institutional levels if our national artifactual heritage is to be preserved, understood, and used to increase our understanding of the past and the present.
>
> —From the report of the original proceedings at the conference of history museum leaders in 1987 that spawned the Common Agenda for History Museums.

Through this survey American history museums have identified documentation of collections as an important priority. Alarmingly, the respondents identify the potential for jeopardizing this important historical legacy if collections remain incompletely documented.

The American Association for State and Local History's Common Agenda, with its membership drawn from a diverse group of those concerned with the expression of history in museums, stands in an ideal position to champion the cause for improved documentation for all history museums. In-depth study and planning will be given at AASLH's Planning Congress in early 1991 toward the next steps to resolve the documentation dilemma. Recommended Common Agenda efforts will include:

- Publicizing the need for improved documentation practices to museums, related organizations, and funding agencies.
- Promoting throughout the field the available resources for collections documentation, especially in the area of research.
- Insuring that collections documentation receives appropriate funding through national, state, and local channels.
- Investigating successful museum strategies for fully documenting collections.
- Reinforcing efforts by the American Association of Museums to address historical collections documentation through the Accreditation and Museum Assessment Program.
- Addressing the training needs for collections documentation to improve personnel resources available for documentation activities.
- Studying further the role of automation in addressing complete documentation needs in inventorying, cataloging, and especially research.

AASLH-Common Agenda is currently experimenting with basic documentation tools in the Philadelphia area. This project will result in tested approaches to documentation—including most basic object information and more general contextual data. After the completion of the project the Common Agenda will offer history museums these tested approaches. The survey findings and these specific approaches to documentation should form the basis for further AASLH publications and training activities.

Appendix 1

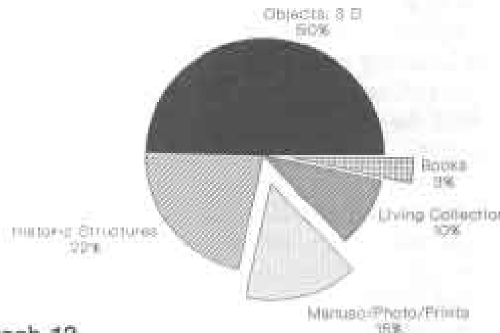
Profile of Historical Collections

This appendix profiles the collections of the museums represented in the survey. Collections are the core of history museums and represent our rich and varied national heritage. Artifacts in collections include three-dimensional objects, photographs, prints, drawings and other works on paper that are researched, exhibited and interpreted as part of permanent collections.

Composition of Historical Collections *(Graph 13)*

Three-dimensional objects account for just 50 percent of the artifacts in permanent collections. The high percentage of historic structures reflects not only the number of house museums that are part of the study, but the practice of housing

Composition of Permanent Collections
Categories of Artifacts



Graph 13

history museums in historic structures that are then incorporated into the collections. The manuscripts, photographs, prints, and paintings that are part of works on paper, plus books, comprise 18 percent of historical collections. This percentage grows slightly in the case of "specialized" museums, many of which have ethnic collections that are stronger in these areas than in three-dimensional objects.

Number and Value of Artifacts

The number of objects held by a sampling of 702 history museums totals 300 million. If loosely extrapolated to the approximately 6,000 institutions identified for this study, totals could reach over 2 billion objects. More than 190 respondents did not reply to the question, many indicating that they did not know the number of objects in their collections. Estimates by respondents of the value of collections were ambiguous; many stated that one cannot put a value on something irreplaceable. Nevertheless, billions of dollars of our national wealth is invested in the collections of our history museums.

Appendix 2

Methodology and Response

To compile a survey list that would encompass the universe of history museums for the documentation study, we borrowed from research done by the American Association of Museums in 1989 for their Decade Survey. Key contacts further refined the list on a state by state basis, coming up with a target population of 5,900 history museums from the largest to the smallest. There was a healthy response from 950 institutions (16% of the total). Size, location, and types of responding museums coincided with the national estimate. The sampling used in the report includes 893 (15%) institutions whose survey (1) arrived before June 1990; (2) was correctly completed; and (3) met the criteria for inclusion. Institutions included in the report met the following criteria:

a. Organized as a public or private nonprofit institution existing on a permanent basis for essentially educational or aesthetic purposes.

b. Own and care for historical collections and exhibit them on a regular basis.

c. Open to the general public on a regular basis.

Survey Methodology

To gain a solid insight into the documentation levels of historical collections, the survey developers centered on three activities.

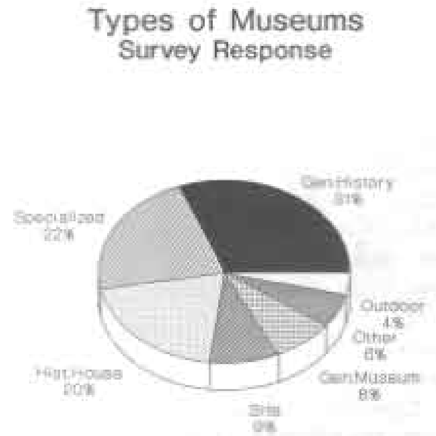
1. Creating an understandable survey focused on comparative data regarding documentation practices. The deliberate use of established museum vocabulary and criteria assured that information could be communicated and shared. Definitions and terminology correspond to those utilized by the American Association for State and Local History and to those employed by the American Association of Museums in their recent Decade Survey. Philadelphia area museums involved in a Common Agenda project were interviewed and used as the first target population and as evaluators. An advisory board of knowledgeable museum professionals provided in-depth insight and guidance throughout the process.

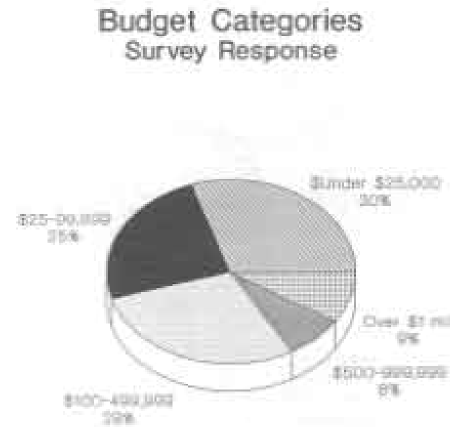
2. Obtaining a valid sampling of history museums in the United States. The basis for obtaining a valid sampling of the universe of history museums was built on the most current combined list of AASLH and that used by AAM. The 893 complete responses that met precise criteria provided a sampling reflecting national conditions in all sizes and types of history collections throughout the country.

3. Analyzing and reporting data. Statistics were compiled and compared as representative of the whole of history museums with professional guidance and analysis from the Marketing Department of Louisiana State University. Percentages given in charts and graphs represent averages from respondents. The objective evidence, comments, and case studies from respondents, plus the evaluation of the national advisory board, constitute the basis for findings and conclusions in this report.

Types of Museums *(Graph 14)*

The types of museums surveyed were divided into seven categories. The notations, which are not inclusive, are offered to clarify the kinds of institutions in each category. The type of museum has an impact on documentation practices, the categories of collections, and the importance of documentation to the mission of the institution.





Graph 14

General History Museum—addresses many facets of history and interpretation. Includes large federal and state museums as well as local and regional museums often run by a private historical society or municipal entity.

General Museum with Historical Collection—usually describes a museum combining art, history, and/or science in general presentation.

Historic House—encompasses historic structures of all kinds.

Site—includes historic sites such as National Park Sites, battlefields.

Outdoor Museum—refers to a collection of historical structures with a common interpretation. Sometimes called Living History museum.

Specialized History—those with special collecting and interpretive focus, such as a transportation museum or one depicting a certain ethnic group.

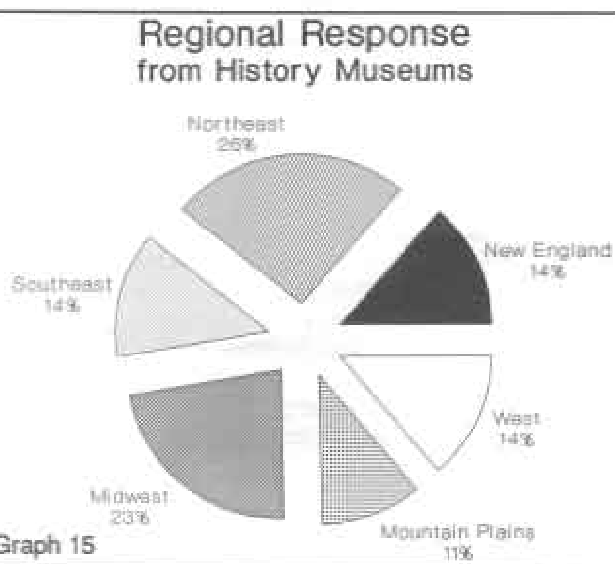
Other—includes such institutions as libraries, children's museums, or science museums with historical collections.

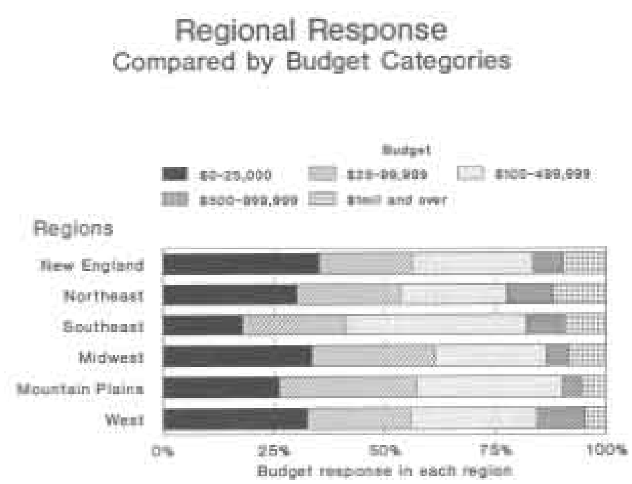
Size of Museums *(Graph 14)*

The size of an institution has a strong impact on all museum functions, including documentation practices. In accordance with general practice, the annual operating budget is used to denote the size of history museums. Analysis of survey data indicated that museums in the categories that follow had similar analogies. The number of museums in each category is listed.

Under $25,000 budget	very small museum	261
$25,000-$99,999	small museum	215
$100,000-$499,999	medium-sized museum	249
$500,000-$999,999	large museum	68
Over $1 million	very large museum	78

Analyzing the types of museums by their size disclosed that the "Outdoor" museums carry the highest percentage of very large budgets; "Sites" have medium to large budgets, while "General History," "General" museums, and "Historic Houses" have larger numbers in the small to medium annual budget categories.





Graph 15

Governing Authorities

Private, not-for-profit museums are predominant in this study, comprising 62 percent of the total, with the other governing authorities divided into the remaining 38 percent. Comparisons of budget sizes show that museums operating under the auspices of federal and state authority have very similar profiles, with over half governing medium to large institutions. Private, university, and municipal museums show about 60 percent in the very small to small budget categories.

Regional Representation *(Graph 15)*

The parts of the country represented correspond to the regions of the American Association of Musuems and the average figures are generally representational of the number of museums in each region. The profile of sizes of museums in the survey in each region demonstrates a good sampling, with the exception of a slightly lower representation of very small museums in the southeast. Survey results indicated that location of museums had little or no impact on documentation practices and trends.

Acknowledgments

The documentation survey and report were compiled, written, and coaxed into being by Carol J. Nelson, National Survey Coordinator. The National Advisory Board of the Philadelphia Documentation Project guided the project. Lynne Poirier-Wilson of the Strong Museum, chairman of the board, played a major role in developing the project and publicizing its results. The contributions of board members were manifold in the design of the documentation survey, as well as in the final presentation and interpretation of the material. Members are Jeb Bennett, U.S. Army Center for Military History; Jon Freshour, Museum of New Mexico; Alvin Gerhardt, Rocky Mount Historical Association; Steven Hamp, Henry Ford Museum and Greenfield Village; Peter LaPaglia, AASLH; Katherine Spiess, National Museum of American History; Sam Wegner, Southern Oregon Historical Society; and Douglas Dolan, Bucks County Historical Society, ex-officio from the Philadelphia Documentation Project.

Lonn Taylor, National Museum of American History, representing the national AASLH Common Agenda Advisory Committee, served as advisor, creative sounding board, and evaluator. His insight into the issues of collections documentation has guided the project from its beginnings. Thanks go to Bob Selim of the National Museum of American History for editing the report.

The Common Agenda documentation survey was supported in part through a cooperative agreement with the Institute of Museum Services. The Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History, the Pew Charitable Trusts, the American Association of Museums, the Louisiana Association of Museums, and Louisiana State University's Marketing Department generously contributed expertise, services, and space to the project. These contributions insured the project's successful completion.

—Mary Alexander
Program Coordinator
AASLH Common Agenda
for History Museums

 Technical Leaflet #176, "Documentation Practices in Historical Collections: A Report from the Common Agenda," *History News*, Volume 46, Number 1, January/February 1991.

Technical leaflets are issued by the American Association for State and Local History to provide the historical agency and museum field with detailed, up-to-date technical advice. Technical leaflets and reports are available through *History News* magazine to AASLH members or through the AASLH Press catalog to any interested buyer. Membership information or technical leaflet or report reprints may be ordered by contacting American Association for State and Local History, 172 Second Avenue North, Suite 202, Nashville, Tennessee 37201, (615) 255-2971, FAX (615) 255-2979.

A A S L H

TECHNICAL LEAFLET

Technical Information Service — American Association for State and Local History

BURIED IN STORAGE: *The Alexandria Archaeology Collections Management Project*

by Barbara H. Magid and Carol E. Snow

INTRODUCTION

The importance of historical archaeology collections to the research and interpretation of the past is well known and well documented. The problems of unprofessional curation, lack of management and horrendous storage conditions of many of these collections is also recognized. Archaeological excavations in the United States are documented back to Thomas Jefferson's time, but it is only in the last decade that archaeologists and museum professionals have begun to address the effects of storage conditions and packing materials on their collections and to take actions to improve existing conditions and prevent recurring collections management nightmares. Without proper storage and conservation treatments, many important collections are rapidly deteriorating.

The old storage conditions of the Alexandria Archaeology collection offer a prime example of a collections management nightmare. Artifacts were disintegrating, storage bags and their all-important labels were being destroyed by dampness and mice, and boxes of artifacts were collapsing. Such problems were successfully overcome through a cooperative effort of many people, professions and agencies. Grant-funded projects were developed and carried out with careful planning and a phased approach that allowed us to cope with seemingly overwhelming tasks. The methods used were simple and economical, yet effective.

In 1991 we are celebrating thirty years of archaeology in Alexandria, Virginia. Excavations have produced several million artifacts from 155 sites. Many of the artifact assemblages are from residential sites representing a broad cross section of the city's inhabitants from the 18th to 20th centuries. Other sites relate to business establishments including cabinetmakers, shoemakers, combmakers, copper and tinsmiths, potters, a glass factory, a sugar refinery, taverns, a doctor's office and an apothecary shop. The breadth and depth of the collections make them one of the foremost comparative studies in urban archaeology. But if steps had not been taken to improve collections storage, there would be no cause for celebration.

The Problems

The Alexandria collections are now housed in a state-of-the-art, climate-controlled storeroom, in archival record storage boxes on compactor shelving. But this is a very recent accomplishment. For many years the artifacts were stored in a damp, crowded basement, similar to conditions in many museums and repositories across the country. Like many historical archaeology collections, they were out of sight and out of mind and nearly inaccessible for the research purposes for which they had been collected.

Our storage and conservation problems derived from a dangerous combination of overcrowding, high humidity and, in many instances, inappropriate packing materials. The basement storeroom, in a city facility two miles from our museum, was large enough to shelve only half the collections. The remainder of the boxes were then stacked on floors, in hallways and in an adjacent garage. Continuing excavations added to the problem, so that eventually boxes in the aisles blocked access to nearly all of the shelved boxes. The environment in these spaces was completely uncontrolled. High humidity caused growth of mildew on the walls, delamination and collapse of cardboard boxes, disintegration of paper bags and labels, and corrosion of metal artifacts.

Many of the boxes, bags and labels used to house the artifacts were, for a variety of reasons, made of unsuitable materials. For economy, liquor boxes had been used as containers, grocery bags made of acidic paper or unstable plastic for artifact storage and acidic newspaper as padding. These materials were originally obtained at no cost to the city. Many artifacts were never washed and remained in their paper bags from the field. These bags had begun to fall apart, mixing proveniences and losing some field records entirely.

Solutions

It was clear that steps needed to be taken to improve conditions, but the problems seemed insurmountable. We needed more money, more staff time and more professional expertise than were available in our city budget, so we decided to apply for federal grants.

The grant application process turned out to be beneficial to the planning process, as the granting agencies required a logical approach and large amounts of detail. It was the process of applying for our first grant that made us look at each step of the project and develop rational goals instead of jumping ahead to the desired results. Input from a contract conservator, who was later funded by the grants, helped the staff archaeologist in developing a project with professional standards. Program officers at the granting agencies helped us decide if our projects were appropriate before the application process began and provided assistance along the way.

A flint lock dated 1807 was among the artifacts treated.
Photograph courtesy of Alexandria Archaeology

The Alexandria Archaeology Collections Management Program was broken down into three phases: surveys, renovations and rehousing and conservation. The phases were funded through a cooperative effort among the National Science Foundation, the Institute of Museum Services and the city of Alexandria. In all, the three sources provided approximately $150,000 for consultant fees, storeroom renovations, storage equipment and supplies. For a small museum, it seemed like a fortune.

Phase I: Surveys

The goals of Phase I of the program were ambitious and multifaceted: to survey, identify and quantify our storage problems. We accomplished the goals in three simultaneous tasks: 1) collection inventory, 2) conservation survey and 3) environmental survey.

Phase I required a motivated crew with skills in archaeology, computers and conservation. Archaeology staff, grant-funded contractual staff, and other city departments participated. The key players were the staff archaeologist, who masterminded and supervised the project, the conservator and two conservation assistants. For the conservator, with a background in fine art conservation and archaeological field experience in the eastern Mediterranean, the nature of the materials was at first a hurdle. We overcame it with the enthusiasm and knowledge of the assistants, both anthropology students who had worked on excavations in Alexandria. The design of the project required the players to be able to trade positions regularly, adapt to logistical challenges and maintain a sense of humor throughout a long summer.

The survey team examined the contents of each of the 3,158 boxes. The inventory and conservation survey were entered together into a computer data base using a portable computer in the storeroom. Our data base recorded up to forty-nine fields of information for each box of artifacts, providing various reports, statistics and even box labels. For each box, we recorded the site numbers and other information about the provenience of the artifacts. We included a brief description of box contents using codes for artifact categories. To improve access, we recorded the exact location of each box. At the end of the inventory, we printed out box labels in site, provenience and material order. We then color coded the labels by their designated shelf unit, and later put each box easily in its place in the new storeroom.

In the new storeroom, Alexandria Archaeology volunteers help to replace nearly every box, bag and label.

Photograph courtesy of Alexandria Archaeology

We also recorded past treatments (i.e., washed, marked, catalogued), the current methods of storage and the number, size and type of new boxes, bags and labels needed. We then used the computer's statistics function to calculate instant counts of supplies to include in the budget of our next grant application.

The conservation survey assessed current conditions and conservation needs of the artifacts. We provided a description of the level of conservation required, from simple surface cleaning to sophisticated treatments, a notation of whether the treatment should be done by a trained staff person, supervised volunteer or professional conservator, and a time estimate in hours required for the treatments. A priority system was developed to quantify the urgency of the treatment, with "1" being the highest priority and "5" the lowest. After looking at many similar artifacts, the two assistants were eventually able to give reliable conservation estimates. The results were not highly refined, but that was not what we were after; we wanted an overview of the conservation needs of nearly three million artifacts.

The contract conservator simultaneously performed a survey of the storage facility's environment. A close look at the storage areas gave a few causes for concern. The city's nearby sewage treatment plant produces a number of pollutants. Supervisors there assured us that enough distance protected us from any ill effects. Of more serious concern was the city's fire-burn building where firemen practice rescue techniques in a smoke-filled tower located virtually outside the collection storeroom. These outside forces, beyond our control, were not ideal, but given the alternatives, especially the option of leaving the artifacts where they were, we felt the decision to renovate a room in the same building was the right choice.

The internal storage environment that existed in 1989 had been monitored for temperature and relative humidity with recording hygrothermographs and for pests by periodic inspections of "Mr. Sticky" insect traps. Occasional sightings of mice and snakes had been reported by employees in the building.

The three months spent in the dampness of the basement storeroom, known as "The Pit," tested team spirit and motivation. Personnel, the computer and the tape player survived three floods in storage and work areas. The mouse nests and empty snakeskin we found in the collapsing cardboard boxes and among the artifacts added nothing to our sense of comfort.

Phase II: Storeroom Renovation

Renovating the storeroom, which we had planned from the start, really took shape as we saw the results of the environmental survey. The goal of the renovation included providing optimum storage conditions in an available room on the second floor of the same off-site facility. This 1,500-square-foot room had unfinished cinder block walls, twenty-foot ceilings and huge Palladian windows. We needed to provide shelving for 3,000 boxes, with room for growth, and to provide an environment that would maintain the stability of the artifacts. We also wanted a work area

The conservator treated artifacts which were actively deteriorating.
Photograph courtesy of Alexandria Archaeology

so that researchers could use the collections in the storeroom, all of which we had to accomplish, of course, at minimum cost and as quickly as possible.

The contract conservator collaborated with the staff archaeologist, architects, engineers and city administrators to plan the new facility. The simple renovation included blocking the windows as an economical solution to insulation and security, insulating walls, hanging drywall and installing new lighting. The conservator supplied a list of materials that could be harmful to the artifacts and approved all materials which were to be used in construction.

A "computer room" HVAC unit, which combines heating, cooling and humidity control, was installed. The unit provided the optimum environment for most of the artifacts and also filters out smoke and other pollutants from our neighbors. A strip to seal the door provided further protection from the outside. The storeroom was wired to security and smoke detectors and a wet-pipe sprinkler system was installed. Wet artifacts are far better than burned ones!

Compactor shelving doubled the storage space of regular shelving. Our ten-foot high shelving units roll laterally on a track, so that only one aisle is open at a time. By turning a handle, we can move ten fully loaded rows of shelves at once. In an area of expensive real estate like Alexandria, compactor shelving is less costly in the long run than additional floor space. Compactor shelving can be purchased with fancy cabinets and drawer units, but we took the more economical approach of lidded boxes on open shelving.

The construction was nearly completed when the shelving arrived. A little cooperation between shelving installers and electricians helped complete the project the day before our grant-funded staff and movers arrived to commence Phase III. The archaeologists, Phase III staff, Alexandria Archaeology volunteers, city staff and workers from a labor pool all helped to move the collections onto compactor shelving one aisle at a time.

Phase III: Rehousing and Conservation

Phase III had two goals: 1) passive measures to enhance preservation of the entire collection by providing improved storage conditions and rehousing the artifacts in stable, inert packing materials and 2) active measures to conserve deteriorating artifacts identified as high priority in the collections survey. Our goals would have been useless without the provision of a climate-controlled storeroom from Phase II.

The contract conservator was hired to perform the treatments. A diverse group of assistants, interns and volunteers worked steadily on rehousing the collection under the supervision of one of the Phase I assistants. The continuity of staff helped to make a smooth transition to the new phase of work.

The survey revealed that the old storage materials were often in much worse condition than the artifacts themselves. But the packing methods were also detrimental to the artifacts. Almost every box, bag and label needed to be replaced, artifacts needed to be sorted by material, and microenvironments needed to be created. We bought 2,000 new boxes, 17,000 plastic bags and 245 pounds of silica gel. The rehousing team dealt with the worst parts of the collections over a six-month period.

We store most artifacts together by provenience, but we made exceptions for artifacts requiring microenvironments. As we repacked the collections, we removed all metal artifacts and placed them in airtight polyethylene boxes arranged by site. Other artifacts were packed in unsealed polyethylene bags along with an appropriate amount of silica gel conditioned to halt or slow down corrosion processes. Museums with larger budgets can use specially built, airtight desiccating cabinets, which serve a similar purpose to our micro-environments in polyethylene boxes. Other artifacts were sorted and placed in new polyethylene bags and archival record storage boxes. We used our portable computer and a word-processing program to print uniform and legible labels on acid-free card stock. An important aspect of the project was updating the inventory, which sometimes presented a challenge as box contents were divided or combined. Updated conservation information was also entered into the data base.

The general philosophical approach used for conservation treatments in the project complemented standard archaeological conservation. We followed the principle of minimal intervention, or "less is more." Our goal was to stabilize actively deteriorating artifacts in order to provide and preserve maximum information for archaeologists studying the collections. Unlike many treatments for historic or decorative arts objects, the treatments were not done for aesthetic or cosmetic reasons. The artifacts were not returned to a new or "as used" appearance, but are still exhibitable, if not pretty. Preventive measures were employed wherever possible, such as providing microenvironments for temperature- and humidity-sensitive artifacts, like ivory combs, or potentially unstable artifacts, like corroded iron gunlocks. Written and photographic documentation was recorded for all treatments. A final report provided a summary of the treatments, environmental recommendations and advice on cleaning and packing artifacts. It also included Material Safety Data Sheets on the conservation materials, now stored in the Alexandria Archaeology Laboratory, to inform the staff of the toxicity and safe handling of the chemicals.

Conservation treatments were only performed on artifacts whose survival was seriously threatened. The treatments were carried out in twenty days over a six-month period, during which the conservator addressed any problems encountered by the rehousing crew. A wide range of materials received treatment: ceramics, glass, metals, wood, leather, textiles, bone, horn, ivory and paper. The quality, which may have no bearing on archaeological or historical significance, varied from well-preserved silver coins to sludgy textile fragments excavated from a privy to fine Chinese export porcelain. Treatments ranged from relatively simple surface cleaning and reconstructions to more sophisticated desalination and consolidation treatments. Because the laboratory was set up in a small space within the Alexandria Archaeology Museum, museum visitors, volunteers and staff members were able to observe and learn about the conservation processes.

Ongoing Responsibilities

Phases I, II and III have been successfully completed, but we cannot boast that the Alexandria Archaeology Collections Management Program is over. The collection received emergency care, but ongoing preservation measures never end.

Routine maintenance and continuous monitoring of the storeroom and collections allow us to identify and resolve any problems as they arise. Regularly scheduled housecleaning and maintainance of the HVAC system has been set up with city employees. A recording hygrothermograph monitors the storeroom environment. The monthly changing of the hygrothermograph charts mandates periodic inspections of the room, the microenvironments and the collections. No food or drinks are allowed in the new storeroom, and the area is monitored with "Mr. Sticky" insect traps. Our aim is to prevent the need for fumigation. Emergency needs are addressed in the museum's disaster plan.

The work area of the storeroom provides space for processing artifacts and studying the collections. Computers generate information on the artifact assemblages as well as on their exact locations. Access to the collections for research and exhibition is at last possible.

Long-range conservation plans include surface cleaning and rehousing the backlog of excavated artifacts, the remaining low-priority conservation treatments, proper care of artifacts from current excavations and preservation of archival materials. We hope these efforts will avoid future conservation nightmares, and we hope our efforts will inspire others to establish their own archaeology collections management programs.

Supplemental Information

SUGGESTED READING

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SOURCES OF FUNDING

Institute of Museum Services
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Conservation Project Support Program
and Conservation Assessment Program

National Endowment for the Humanities
Office of Preservation
1100 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20506
(202) 786-0570
National Heritage Preservation Program

National Science Foundation
Anthropology Program
Division of Behavioral and Neural Sciences
1800 G Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20550
(202) 357-7804
Support for Systematic Anthropological Collections

FINDING A CONSERVATOR

The Foundation of the American Institute for Conservation (FAIC) offers a Conservation Services Referral System. It provides a brochure on the system and a computer-generated list of conservators to anyone interested. Contact them at FAIC, 1400 16th Street N.W., Suite 340, Washington, D.C. 20036, (202) 232-6636, FAX (202) 232-6630.

Carol Snow is a conservator in private practice, specializing in objects conservation. Snow was consultant conservator for Alexandria Archaeology's National Science Foundation and Institute of Museum Services grants and completed a conservation survey of the Alexandria Archaeology collection in 1989.

Barbara Magid is assistant director of Alexandria Archaeology. She has worked extensively to improve the care of Alexandria's archaeological collection through developing computerized inventory and cataloguing systems and assisting in the design of Alexandria Archaeology's museum, laboratory and storage facility at the Torpedo Factory Art Center in Alexandria, Virginia.

Technical Leaflet #178, "Buried in Storage: The Alexandria Archaeology Collections Management Project," *History News*, Volume 46, Number 5, September/October 1991.

Technical leaflets are issued by the American Association for State and Local History to provide the historical agency and museum field with detailed, up-to-date technical advice. Technical leaflets and reports are available through *History News* magazine to AASLH members or to any interested buyer. Membership information or technical leaflet or report reprints may be ordered by contacting American Association for State and Local History, 172 Second Avenue North, Suite 202, Nashville, Tennessee 37201, (615) 255-2971.

HISTORY NEWS TECHNICAL LEAFLET

A PUBLICATION OF THE AMERICAN ASSOCIATION FOR STATE AND LOCAL HISTORY

Digitizing Your Collection

BY JILL MARIE KOELLING

Digital imaging (DI) is no longer a new topic in the museum, library, and archive community. In fact, the speed at which this technology has incorporated into our culture rivals the invention of photography itself. Many institutions around the country are already involved in DI projects or are in the process of seeking funding for them. Deciding to embark on a DI project is the easy part. The desire to create better access to collection materials is a goal we all share. Figuring out how to manage the project successfully is more difficult. This technical leaflet is designed to help identify and answer the many questions that surround DI projects.

QUESTIONS TO ASK BEFORE YOU START SCANNING

Is this project about access or preservation?

There are two main reasons to enter the digital arena. The first and most obvious is to provide access. By creating DI files we enable the use of our collections via electronic media online and on CD-ROMS.

Preservation is the other reason to start a digitization project. However, it is important to recognize that a DI file can never replace the original. Nothing can substitute for the experience of seeing the original Declaration of Independence. Even with today's advances in digital technology it is impossible to replicate an original exactly. What we can do, however, is give our patrons a better way to see the information held in the original while at the same time limiting its use. By creating a digital image of the original, we can also stop the loss of information due to ravages of time.

Access vs. Preservation — Time and Cost Implications

DI projects that are strictly access-driven are cheaper, faster to complete, and require less storage space. They result in smaller image files, which means less information from the original is available in those files, and the files offer fewer uses. Digitizing for access will not allow for long-term preservation of originals because the length of time the digital files will be useful is severely limited by their size. Preservation-driven projects are more expensive—sometimes considerably more—much slower to complete, and require more storage space. The result, however, is larger files that offer much more information from the original for researchers, the possible retirement of original materials, and a hundred-fold increase in the long-term viability of the files. Deciding to digitize for preservation will, of course, not preclude creation of surrogate files for access.

Another important consideration is the ability of originals to withstand handling. When the Nebraska State Historical Society digitized the Solomon D. Butcher photograph collection, the scans were generated from 6x8 inch glass plate negatives. The project also included cleaning and re-housing the collection so every negative was handled sometimes two or three times. Most of the more than 3,000 negatives had rarely been touched since they came to the Society in 1915. Preservation projects allow for effective retirement of the originals. Considering the time investment either in access or preservation projects, scanning for long-term viability, i.e., preservation, is the wiser choice.

Outsourcing vs. In-House Production

The next decision is whether you or an outside organization will do the digitizing. There are advantages and disadvantages with either scenario.

Hiring an outside vendor has several, often overlooked, advantages. First, your institution will incur no cost for purchasing equipment, or hiring new staff, and will not add to existing staff's already heavy workloads. The vendor will be responsible for maintaining the equipment or replacing it as technology advances. Your staff can concentrate on what they already do best, cataloging, i.e., metadata and access, without having to learn how to make scanners accurately capture historic photographic materials.

The disadvantages of hiring an outside vendor include the difficulty of finding someone you trust! Although organizations around the country are offering digitizing services specifically for museums and archives, few have been in business long enough to have earned a reputation for quality and reliability. Another problem involves the delay in ascertaining quality control of the files, especially if the vendor is not working onsite. This potential lag in turn around time could considerably slow the progress of your digitization project.

Doing the work internally is the practice favored by many institutions currently involved in DI projects. In-house production requires a tremendous up-front investment in equipment, space, staff, and training. DI technology changes so quickly that within five years the scanner purchased for your project may be useful for nothing more than a doorstop. And the amount of time spent training staff to digitize the collections cannot be reclaimed. Once your grant funded project is complete it is hard to stop scanning, especially with an in-house DI operation already established.

The real advantages to in-house production are the ability to respond immediately to quality control problems and the fact that your collections do not have to travel to the vendor. While some vendors will come to your institution to do the digitization, and this eliminates much risk to the collection, you must find space for the vendor's equipment and staff.

How to choose the right equipment

DI equipment comes in many shapes and sizes and not all scanners and cameras are created equal. Below is a list of specifications to keep in mind while determining which equipment to buy, whether the DI project is for access or preservation. Access-only projects require less resolution and less expensive equipment.

Preservation projects require higher resolutions and more expensive equipment. I cannot stress enough the impact of handling original collection materials, so if you are going to scan a collection, scan it once and scan it right for longevity of the image file and protection for the originals. Finally, when it comes to equipment, as with most things in life, you get what you pay for!

Flatbed scanner technology has grown rapidly over the last few years. Scanners are now available for less than $100. However, such inexpensive scanners may not create the best results. Look carefully at the type of material you are going to digitize. Does the project include photographic prints, negatives, or transparencies? What size are the originals? If you are scanning from manuscripts, are they typescripts or handwritten? How small is the text? When scanning from text-based materials, be sure to consider whether you want the result to be a digital image of each page or text-searchable files. These formats are mutually exclusive and require different types of equipment and software to generate. Are you hoping to digitize three-dimensional objects or large objects such as maps or quilts? The answers to these questions will help determine what equipment you choose. Moreover, no single piece of equipment can meet all these needs.

Picking a Scanner

Control is everything. You must be able to adjust the scanning software manually. Talk to the vendor or manufacturer about white and black points. It is vital that you be able to set those points, rather than relying on the scanning software to do it for you. This control will greatly increase your ability to capture accurately the original. [See the later discussion of white and black points under the section on quality control and benchmarks.] If the vendor or manufacturer's representative does not know what you are talking about, ask to talk to a technician at the company or pick a different manufacturer.

Optical resolution is also important. Do not buy a scanner that has an optical resolution lower than 600 pixels per inch (ppi), which is the minimum at which you should digitize. Ppi and dpi (dots per inch) are used interchangeably by scanner manufacturers, although they are not the same. Every dot in the print world requires two pixels. Most scanner manuals use dpi when they are really describing ppi.

Dynamic range is the last, but not least, important option to consider. The greater the dynamic range, the better the scanner. It is also true that the greater the dynamic range the more expensive the scanner. Many scanners have a dynamic range between 3.2 and 3.7. If you are planning to digitize late nineteenth-century glass plate negatives, buy a scanner with a dynamic range of at least 3.5. The best scanners coming on the market have dynamic ranges over 4.0.

Scanner bed dimensions — the larger the scanner bed the larger the original you can scan. Remember that it is usually a good idea to leave a bit of room around the original during capture. You may also want to include a color bar when scanning in RGB, so think of that when comparing bed sizes to your originals.

Scanner speed — how long does it take to generate a file on the scanner? This information is available in the technical specifications. Beware though, it is often presented as the speed at which the scanner generates a file at the lowest resolution, not necessarily the speed at the maximum optical resolution. As a general rule, the higher the resolution the longer it takes the scanner to generate the file.

Transparency adapters — does your project include both reflective and transmitted objects, both prints and negatives or slides? If it does, you may decide to buy a scanner that has a transparency adapter. Sometimes these are larger, heavier lids that replace the standard lid. On other models, you place the negatives or slides in holders that fit into a drawer underneath the CCD and light source. [The CCD, charged-coupled device, is the capture mechanism on scanners and cameras.] Either design has good and bad points. Adapters such as lids can create problems when scanning fragile objects. The heavier lid will put more pressure on the original and may cause damage. Trays that slide in and out under the CCD are often stiff and require extra care once the originals are in place. Many times the film holders used in the tray do not leave extra space around the edge of the negative. Depending on the type of negative this can cause problems when trying to capture the entire sheet of film, particularly with holders designed for 4x5 negatives. Some scanners that utilize trays for transparent materials offer a generic holder that covers the entire capture area. This holder is often included for use with glass plate negatives, but you can use them for any film size. Try putting another piece of glass on top of the negatives to keep them in place when using the generic holder. Do not do so, however, if the negative is fragile!

Some scanners digitize only film or slides. If your project involves only scanning slides, these scanners might work well. However, the same considerations apply when looking at object-specific scanners. Optical resolution is particularly important. Thirty-five millimeter slides are so small it is crucial to digitize them at higher resolutions to be able to look closely at details in the image and make 8x10 prints.

As with any computer equipment, the minute you buy one, a newer and better scanner will come on the market. Do not let this be a factor in your decision. Choose a scanner that meets your needs and spend as much money as you can afford to get the highest optical resolution and dynamic range. As previously mentioned, make sure you buy a scanner that allows you to have complete control over the software. Remember that this scanner will not last forever, but it needs to give you results that will meet your benchmark.

Digital Cameras

Today's market includes several high-output digital cameras that might be the solution to your digitizing needs. Several institutions around the country are using such cameras to capture all types of photograph material as well as three-dimensional objects. Few digital cameras can actually capture at high enough resolutions to meet even the lowest benchmarks. This shortcoming may seem remarkable, given the hundreds of digital cameras showing up at the local shopping mall, but these cameras have yet to achieve the output quality of flatbed scanners.

The biggest difference between digital cameras and scanners is the size of the capture area. Both digital cameras and flatbed scanners use CCDs to capture information from the original and turn that information into a digital file. The capture area, however, is much smaller in a digital camera than on a flatbed scanner. This difference translates directly into the amount of information you can capture. Think of the CCD in a digital camera as film. The size of the CCD or the area over which the CCD moves during capture depends upon the size of the camera. Most digital cameras on the market today are roughly the size of a typical 35mm camera. The CCD is small and generates file sizes often not larger than 3MB.

The other big difference between scanners and digital cameras is the way in which resolution applies to the image file. Scanners offer many variations on resolution, the higher the resolution the larger the file size. With digital cameras, resolution is defined not by the number of pixels in an inch, but by the number of pixels the CCD can capture in total, for example, 1240x1080. This limitation controls the ultimate file size and amount of information it can hold.

Although most digital cameras will not be suitable for your project, a few might work. Two companies, Phase One and BetterLight, offer digital capture devices that attach either to medium format cameras, for example Mamiya or Hasselblad, or to large format 4x5 view cameras. These devices are called scanbacks because they are basically mini scanners housed in what looks like an extra long film holder. The device moves a CCD along the length of the capture area to create the digital file, in effect acting much like a CCD in a flatbed scanner. These scanbacks offer maximum pixel dimensions upwards of 10,500x12,600 pixels, and file sizes of 380MB and higher. With these capture tools, generally $26,000 and up, digital camera technology begins to approach the level of capture generated by flatbed scanners. It is important to remember, however, that a large object captured with these high-end digital cameras will not stand up to life-size print output and retain the amount of detail held by the original. There are not enough pixels in the file to support small details, especially in maps. Software control remains important with digital cameras, especially output levels for white and black points. However, the important concern is the number of pixels captured.

Buying equipment, whether it is a digital camera or a scanner, can seem overwhelming. Make things easier by talking to your colleagues at other institutions that are already involved in DI projects. Find out what kind of equipment they use and what they like and dislike about it. Ask them about software controls, dynamic range, and optical resolution. Finally, buy the best equipment you can afford, but be realistic. There are good scanners on the market that will not break the bank and will allow you to meet your benchmarks.

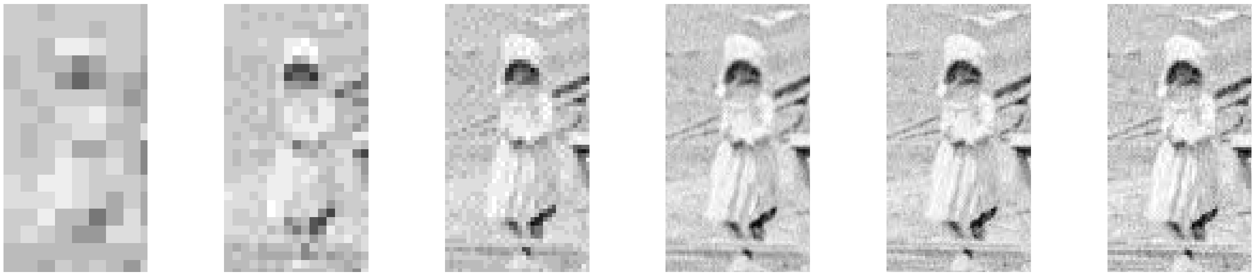
A note about computers

Buy a computer that has the fastest processor and as much RAM as you can afford. The faster the processor the faster your image processing will go, and the more RAM you have the more flexibility you will have with programs like Adobe Photoshop.

TECHNICAL ISSUES: ESTABLISHING BENCHMARKS

Benchmarks are technical standards you establish in order to obtain the best possible digital representation of the original, within the parameters of your equipment. Their establishment is a vital step in any DI project. It is a good idea to try to establish a set of basic benchmarks before purchasing equipment, as this might help in the selection process.

RESOLUTION COMPARISON



150 ppi | **300 ppi** | **600 ppi** | **1200 ppi** | **2400 ppi** | **3175 ppi**

This glass plate negative is 6 inches tall by 8 inches wide. High resolution digital imaging makes an incredible difference when looking at small details. The colored square on the full plate indicates the portion of the original shown in the resolution examples at the top. Photos courtesy of the Nebraska State Historical Society.

Benchmarks include requirements for resolution, white and black points, histogram characteristics, compression algorithms (if any), color requirements (if applicable), and authentication requirements. Without a set of predefined benchmarks, quality control on files generated in-house or through a vendor will be virtually impossible.

How to establish benchmarks

Resolution

In order to create benchmarks that will work for your project, you need to answer several technical questions. First, at what resolution are you going to scan? This decision depends entirely on the size of the originals and the use to which you plan to put the files. For purposes of this discussion, let us assume you are doing a DI project for preservation and access, with the goal to scan once and scan right, so the originals can be retired.

Resolution directly affects the ways in which a digital file can be used. Currently, Website use requires at most 300ppi, while magazine or book publication can require up to 800ppi. Think carefully about the potential uses of the files you generate. Think also about hard copy prints. How large are the prints you generate for your patrons or exhibitions? Will the resolution you choose be enough to print an 8x10 original at 20x24? The larger the print size, the more information you need, so the more pixels you need per inch.

Is there a resolution threshold? There is a point when using higher resolutions no longer helps you see more information held in the original. At very high resolutions, 3,000ppi and higher, the visual information is obscured by the paper fiber in a print when examining the file at 100 percent or one-to-one. More study is needed to determine resolution thresholds for all types of photographic media. Just because your scanner can capture at such high optical resolutions does not mean it is appropriate to do so. Think again about the benefits of high resolution scanning and the potential uses of the digital files and let those answers guide you. Remember, today's Internet is nothing like tomorrow's, so do not limit yourself to low resolution image files just because that is all you might need for the next few years.

Color

Working with accurate color is the most difficult challenge in the digital environment. Color is a problem for several reasons. Every scanner, digital camera, computer monitor, and software package has different color spaces in which the files are created or displayed. Color space is the way software defines the color spectrum. Have you ever taken a photograph indoors without a flash while using outdoor film? The photograph looks orange when developed because the film you used is designed for outdoor use where the light is much cooler or bluer. Taking a photograph indoors with this film under tungsten light, which is very warm in color, results in the orange cast in the image. Color space is similar in that it has its own way of defining and representing color. A red shirt may look the same to your eyes indoors and outdoors, but the film does not see it that way. Color space used by your monitor may show that red shirt in a different way than any other monitor.

Some software allows the user to choose a color space. This is how printers are able to go from scanner, to monitor, to hardcopy print, and end up with results that match. This is called color balance. Adobe Photoshop has multiple color spaces from which to choose. It is important to remember that no matter how well your system is color balanced, as soon as a different user opens the image file on their home computer it will no longer look exactly as you saw it when you posted it to the Internet.

Unfortunately, there is no industry standard for color. However, there are some solutions or at least some ways to minimize the problem. First, when creating the master scan of your original, include a color bar as part of the image file. Color bars are industry standard tools developed by companies like Kodak to judge color and help film developers accurately process and print film.

By placing a color bar in the master file, you give everyone who uses that file a standard reference of color. It helps take the guesswork out of color interpretation. Another way to help your users is to include a color bar as part of your Website. The color bar will help anyone who comes to your site adjust their monitor for viewing your images. Of course, this assumes the user will have a good understanding of how to do that. The best way to help your users understand the realities of this issue is to let them know that the color they see on their monitor may not exactly replicate the original.

File Formats

Generally, it is a good idea to use uncompressed tiff files for the master scans. Tiff files are cross-platform compatible, meaning you can open them on either a Mac or PC computer. There is no compression, so this eliminates the possibility of problems with compression. The tiff file format is not new and is widely used. Although a tiff file will take up more storage space than a jpeg or gif, the long-term viability of a tiff file compensates for the extra space required.

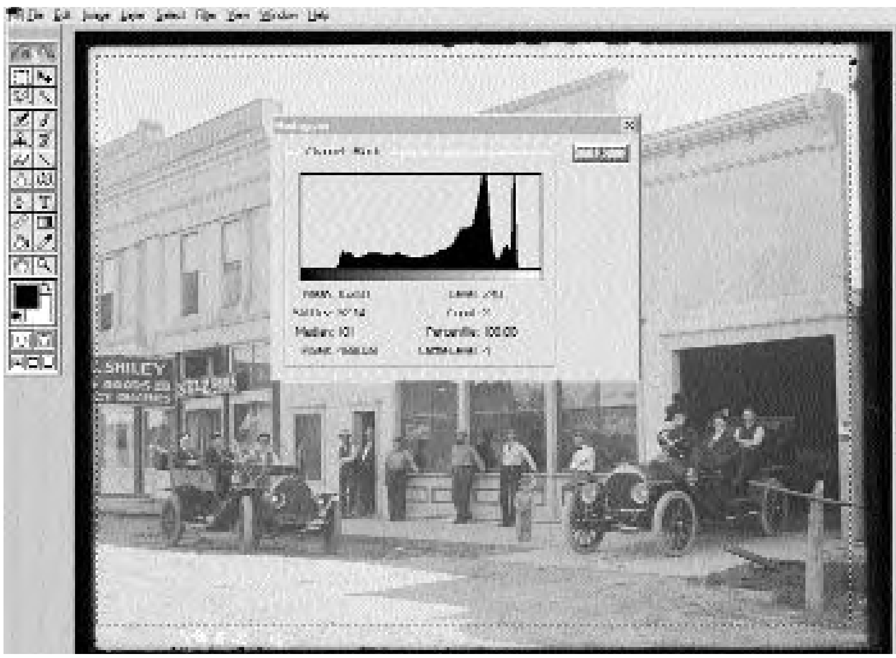
Once you generate a master file and it passes quality control, surrogate image files may be generated for use on the Internet or producing hard copy prints. Because these files are in effect, disposable, making them jpegs is the best option. The jpeg file format is a compressed file that shrinks the size, requiring less storage space, making it faster to access on local area networks and the Internet.

Working with histograms

Histograms offer the best view of tonal range captured by the scanner and are examined for clipping as well as the correct setting of white and black points. Clipping results when the white and black points are not set on true white and black during the set-up of the scan. If white and black are improperly set, everything above or below those points is "clipped" or registers as the same tone. When clipping occurs, the scanning operator has misjudged the actual white or black points in the image and must rescan the original using different settings for the white or black point.

Spiking on the ends of the histogram usually indicates clipping. This problem also shows up in the image itself as blockage and pixelization in the shadows and blowouts in the highlights. Acceptable spikes can occur if the edge of the original negative has lost emulsion, for example, or the sky holds no detail and is one tone in the original. Such instances, however, are rare.

You can best observe optimum placement of whites and blacks through the histogram. It is important to look at the number value assigned to the brightest highlight and the darkest shadow. Highlights should not read a value higher than 247 and shadows should not be lower than eight or 9. If these numbers are exceeded the scan must be redone. This is particularly vital if the original image has a short dynamic range. The white and black points must not be set on 0 and 255, as this will stretch the dynamic range of the image, creating gaps in the histograms, and thus unusable scans.



Histograms offer the best view of tonal range captured by the scanner and are examined for clipping as well as the correct setting of white and black points. Spiking on the ends of the histogram usually indicates clipping.

Storage

Storage is an important issue because your needs will increase as you generate more image files. Two methods used by many institutions around the country are local area networks (LANs) and CD-ROMs. A LAN is the most versatile system for storing digital image files, allowing immediate access for anyone connected to the system. Cost is a disadvantage for using a LAN for permanent storage. Although hard drive space is getting cheaper every year, megabytes of space fill quickly. An 8x10 photograph scanned at 800ppi in RGB results in a 360MB file. It is also vital to have reliable backup systems in place. These features will ensure the time and money invested in creating the files is not lost due to hard drive failure.

The other popular method of DI storage is CD-ROMs. A CD will hold approximately 650MB of data and it is now possible to buy them for around $1.00 each. It is a good idea to create two copies of each CD and store one set, the backups, at a different location. This simple solution will give your institution better odds of retaining the data if a natural disaster or some other tragedy should strike and damage the CDs.

Metadata and File Authentication

Metadata is data about data, information about the digital image file. The compilation of metadata at the time of capture is also an important step in file authentication. Digital image files are easily copied and without associated metadata there may be confusion as to which file is the master scan.

A lot of information is available online and in published form regarding metadata. (See additional resources at the end of this article.) However, two categories of information need to be compiled for every digital image generated: 1) Source information - original object number, original object size, and format (type of print, type of negative). You might also want to include limited descriptive information about content; 2) Image File information - file name, resolution, grayscale or RGB, equipment used, name of the person who generated the file, and date the file was created.

Refreshment

This is the most important aspect of any DI project. Refreshment is the transfer of digital files from one storage media to another to ensure that the files remain retrievable as technology advances. Do you have 5 1⁄4 inch floppy disks with files that you cannot retrieve because you do not have a computer with a 5 1⁄4 inch drive? This is a common occurrence and will continue to be a problem as computer technology evolves. To avoid this problem in the future, transfer files to new media as it becomes widely available. The next big change in storage technology, CD-ROM to DVD, is already here. Most new computers are now coming with DVD drives as standard equipment, rather than CD-ROM drives. Although current DVD drives will read CDs, as newer, faster DVD drives are built, they will no longer be able to do so. Considering the amount of time and money put into your DI project, it is worth the effort and cost to refresh your files. Do not let more than five years elapse before refreshing your data. Longevity of the storage media is not as important as the ability to access the information.

DI projects are challenging but fun and the results can forever change the way your collections are used. Remember that a successful DI project depends on careful planning and a good understanding of the implications for your institution.

Jill Marie Koelling is Curator of Photographs and Head of Digital Imaging for the Nebraska State Historical Society.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Besser, Howard and Jennifer Trant. *Introduction to Imaging.* Getty Research Institute, 1996.

Conservation Online, http://palimpsest.stanford.edu /bytopic/imaging/. This site is full of valuable information on all aspects of digital imaging.

Council on Library and Information. *Guides to Quality in Visual Resource Imaging,* July 2000, © 2000.

Gill, Tony, Anne Gilliland-Swetland, and Murtha Baca *Introduction to Metadata, Pathways to Digital Information.* Getty Research Institute, 1998.

Kenney, Anne R. and Stephen Chapman. *Digital Imaging for Libraries and Archives.* Department of Preservation and Conservation, Cornell University Library, June 1996.

Koelling, Jill Marie. *Revealing History: Digital Imaging the New Photographic Research Tool,* Spectra, Fall 2000, Volume 26, Issue 2, pgs 10-15.

The National Digital Library program at the Library of Congress http://lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/award/ lessons/lessons.html, offers several articles available online that address the many aspects of DI projects.

Research Libraries Group Resources, http://www.rlg.org/visguides/

AASLH
TECHNICAL LEAFLET
A PUBLICATION OF THE AMERICAN ASSOCIATION FOR STATE AND LOCAL HISTORY

Ethics Position Paper: The Capitalization of Collections

PREFACE

The American Association for State and Local History (AASLH) issues periodic Position Papers to assist individuals and institutions in implementing specific components of the Association's Statement of Professional Standards and Ethics (revised 2002). Adopted by the Council on June 21, 2003, Ethics Position Paper #1 provides practical guidelines for interpreting, adopting, and implementing the Association's position on the ethics of capitalizing an institution's collections.

INTRODUCTION

Whether or not to capitalize collections is one of the most important decisions that a museum or historical organization will make. It has the potential of playing a major role in the organization's long-term financial strategy and can make a significant impact on its relationship to governmental agencies and the public. AASLH believes that collections are not financial assets, but constitute a separate category of resource directly fulfilling institutional missions, legal responsibilities, and fiduciary obligations. Reflecting these values, the AASLH Statement of Professional Standards and Ethics is specific: "Collections shall not be capitalized or treated as financial assets."

Powerful forces may argue on behalf of capitalization. Decision-makers must be knowledgeable about accounting standards and legal requirements and understand the arguments both for and against capitalization. Decisions regarding capitalization must be made consciously at the highest level and in a public manner, and they must be implemented through consistent and definitive policies and procedures. Institutional leaders must be prepared to present their decision persuasively to other public and private decision-makers.

DEFINITIONS

Collections are items or groups of items that are owned by an organization and have been formally accessioned for the exclusive purposes of research, education, interpretation, and exhibition. They may include personal property—artifacts, documents, photographs, maps, ephemera, etc.—and real property, such as historic buildings, structures, and grounds. Collections are different from other organizational property in that they are acquired, recorded, and managed solely to meet the institution's fiduciary purposes, in accord with its articles of incorporation, bylaws, and collection policies and procedures.

Capitalization is the act of establishing a cash value on property as an asset within the institution's financial reports. The purchase costs of capital items are not expensed, but are added to the total accrued value of the institution's assets. If donated, the value of capital items is treated as income and increases the value of the organization's assets. A collection is capitalized only if and when it is defined and treated as a financial asset by the institution's policies, practices, and financial statements. An institution may choose to identify its capitalized collections as a type of fixed asset or as a separate category of asset. Although an institution may apply depreciation to capitalized collections as a pro-rated expense, as a general rule collections appreciate in value, and a depreciation schedule is not applicable.

If collections are not capitalized, their value will not be identified within an organization's financial statements as a financial asset. Non-capitalized collections still must be identified as a separate item with an identified cash value, which may appear on the appropriate financial statement, within an auditor's note explaining the institution's significant financial policies, or both. Such identification, however, does not constitute or suggest capitalization, unless so specified by the financial policies and identified as financial assets within the financial statements themselves.

The sole act of placing a cash value on a collection does not necessarily capitalize it. Appraising a collection for insurance purposes, for instance, establishes a value in case of damage or loss, but it does not by itself capitalize the collection. Appraisal in and of itself offers unique challenges. Some items may have historical value because of the stories they tell far in excess of their monetary value, while other items may fluxuate widely in value in accord with a fickle market over time. In addition, if an item literally cannot be replaced, how does an institution identify a replacement value?

An institution also may place a cash value on the collection for political or public relations purposes without capitalizing it. A state historical agency, for instance, might place a cash value on its research collection for the purpose of documenting the state's investment over time or to argue for expanded budgetary support without capitalizing that collection. Conversely, if a historical organization uses the value of a collection as collateral against a loan to improve its facilities, those collections are being treated as capitalized financial assets, regardless of any institutional policies and financial statements to the contrary.

THE AASLH POSITION ON CAPITALIZATION

First stated in the AASLH Statement of Professional Standards and Ethics in1990 and repeated without revision in 2002, the Association's position on the capitalization of collections is clear: "Collections shall not be capitalized or treated as financial assets." Why?

First and foremost, 501(c)(3) non-profit corporations and government agencies own, manage, interpret, and share historical resources in fiduciary trust on behalf of the citizens within the states in which they are incorporated. Even though a historical organization may be a private corporation, its collections are considered part of the public domain. Thus, when an institution owns and manages a collection, it acts as a fiduciary agent of a broader community. That is why museums and historical organizations are exempt from certain taxes—because of the public value of what they do, including and especially care of the public's collections.

By capitalization, however, an institution makes a conscious decision to treat its collections just like any of its other financial assets, no different than bank accounts, investments, office equipment, or real estate. It should not be forgotten that the primary purpose of a collection is to fulfill the fiduciary purpose of the institution. The primary purpose of a financial asset is to be managed in such a way as to achieve financial stability and health for the organization.

As financial assets, capitalized collections are in danger of being used as security, attached by lien, sold, or otherwise encumbered to meet outstanding financial debts and obligations. If the institution is a unit of government, such as a city or state museum, the governing body might be forced to sell all or portions of the collections, just like office equipment or a fleet of trucks, to meet payroll or to pay off bonded debt. This is not why the institution acquired its collections, why they have value, or why a donor received a tax deduction for contributing a collection to an institution. Capitalization of collections clearly violates the public's fiduciary interests in the collections.

Even if an institution does not capitalize its collections, it must take care not to treat those collections as if they were financial assets. During times of financial crisis, an institution might be tempted to sell collections to cover operating expenses, like utilities and salaries, or as security to obtain a line of credit. Not only is this bad financial practice that puts the institution's (and public's) collections at risk, but also it is unacceptable in meeting the institution's fiduciary obligations. Neither economic conditions nor bad financial management are excuses for treating collections as financial assets.

PRESSURES TO CAPITALIZE COLLECTIONS

FASB & GASB

The Financial Accounting Standards Board (FASB) of the Financial Accounting Foundation established the standards for the capitalization of collections by private, non-profit institutions in its Statement of Financial Accounting Standards No. 116 (FASB 116), first published in 1993, which is repeated by the Government Accounting Standards Board (GASB). FASB 116 and its GASB equivalent establish standards and procedures for reporting collections on audited financial statements, whether or not they are capitalized. But, neither FASB nor GASB standards require that museums capitalize their collections. Paragraph 11 (pp. 3-4) of the FASB Statement reads as follows.

An entity need not recognize contributions of works of art, historical treasures, and similar assets if the donated items are added to collections that meet all of the following conditions:

a. Are held for public exhibition, education, or research in furtherance of public service rather than financial gain

b. Are protected, kept unencumbered, cared for, and preserved

c. Are subject to an organizational policy that requires the proceeds from sales of collection items to be used to acquire other items for collections.

There are three key elements in this definition of collections. First, the purpose of collections is not to provide for the financial health of the institution. Second, collections are to remain unencumbered—that is, they are not to be used as security against debt. And third, proceeds from the sales of collections can be used only to enhance the collection.

Condition "c" has nourished rigorous debate within the professional community, even more than among auditors, on how tightly the acquisition requirement should be applied. Some professional associations demand that proceeds from sales of collections can only be used "to acquire other items for the collection." Other organizations, such as the American Association of Museums and the American Association for State and Local History, allow a broader interpretation. The AASLH Statement of Professional Standards and Ethics requires that "collections shall not be deaccessioned or disposed of . . . for any reason other than the preservation or acquisitions of collections." There is general agreement among all professional organizations, however, that capitalization is contrary to responsible care of the collections and that, at the minimum, any proceeds from sale of collections must be used only for activities—specifically replacement and direct care—that maintain an equivalent value within the collections.

Public Agencies

City, county, and state governments are increasingly pressed to identify all of their potential assets in order to obtain the best bond rating and lowest interest rates against long-term debt. It is not surprising that they look at the publicly owned collections as one of the last unidentified sources of financial value. In some cases, auditors may instruct governments to capitalize their museum collections under the guise of GASB requirements. But, once again, GASB standards do not require the capitalization of collections. The bottom line question is this: If a government is in default of its debts, is it actually willing to sell the public's heritage to fund that debt?

Governing Boards

Governing boards of private non-profit museums also are under pressure to show the strongest possible bottom line on their financial reports. The FASB definition of collections is exactly the issue that the board must address. Are the institution's collections different than its other assets? If the answer is "Yes," then the decision is obvious, and the board will act to protect its collections and will not capitalize them. If the answer is "No," then the institution should re-examine its mission, commitment to the public trust, and non-profit status.

Other: Insurance Companies, Donors, Press & Public

Insurance companies, particularly those covering directors' and officers' liability, have been known to request that collections be capitalized in order to improve the balance sheet. They should be resisted. Similarly, donors, the press, and select individuals in the public may inquire as to why the collections are not capitalized. In most instances, an institution can use those inquiries to make and strengthen its case that the public interest is not served by capitalization.

CONSEQUENCES OF CAPITALIZING OR NOT CAPITALIZING COLLECTIONS

Consequences of Capitalization

The greatest threat of capitalization is the potential loss—even if distant—of the collection to the public domain. If an institution chooses to treat its collection as just another financial asset, then it is subject to all of the conditions applied to those assets, including encumbrance and potential loss. This violates the fiduciary relationship of the institution to the citizens of the state in which it is incorporated, its obligations to the collections' donors, and probably its articles of incorporation and very mission as an institution. And it poses a potential public relations disaster. Picture the headline: "History Museum places public's heritage at risk to pay salaries."

Consequences of Non-Capitalization

The chief financial consequence of not capitalizing collections is that hundreds of thousands and perhaps millions of dollars of potential assets will not appear on the balance sheet. Some auditors and board members may suggest that this negatively affects the public picture of the institution's financial health. Since collections cannot be used to support the daily operations of an institution, the decision to not capitalize actually represents the most accurate financial position. By consciously choosing to protect its (and the public's) collections, an institution acknowledges the public trust for which it receives substantial benefits, honors its mission, and makes a strong public statement of commitment. Picture an alternative headline: "History Museum commits to protecting public heritage at all costs."

GUIDELINES FOR ACTION

Know the Requirements

It is important to know first hand what is required and what is not required regarding financial recordation of collections. Every institution should obtain a copy of GASB's Statement of Financial Accounting Standards No. 116 or FASB's Statement of Government Accounting Standards No. 116, whichever is appropriate. Don't let someone else interpret the standards for you. Be prepared to make the case for non-capitalization based upon what is allowed and what is in the best interests of the public and your institution.

Obtain Legal and Accounting Counsel

There are no legal or accounting prohibitions that prevent any institution from choosing not to capitalize its collection. Engage auditors and attorneys with extensive non-profit experience and detailed knowledge of FASB/GASB 116 and their implications. Public institutions must hold detailed and regular discussions with the senior government auditing and legal agents to which they report.

Involve all Stakeholders Early, Publicly, and Often

An institution is acting in the public interest when it decides to protect its collections, and it is appropriate to involve the public in the discussion. Do not be afraid of making the discussion public or of involving the press in the discussion before there is a crisis. It is equally important for governmental institutions that their governing and advisory bodies, overseeing agencies, and authoritative public officials understand that collections are not assets to be traded for salary support, bond ratings, or garbage contracts. The earlier and more publicly all of the stakeholders understand the decision and why it was made, the greater is the chance that a public crisis can be avoided.

Make a Conscious Decision

The governing authority is well advised to act consciously, publicly, and officially when it adopts a policy of non-capitalization. The decision must be thoroughly and openly discussed and its implications understood. This is especially true if the institution is a governmental agency, where the public nature of the discussion often may provide the strongest defense against the pressures to capitalize. It may be valuable to revisit the issue on a regular basis—every three to five years—to introduce new governing board members to the issues, re-engage key external constituencies, and reaffirm the institution's values.

Implement the Decision in the Institution's Policies and Procedures

An institution's policies and procedures provide the best protection against challenges to the decision not to capitalize collections. It is particularly critical that collection policies and procedures restrict the use of funds generated by the sale of collections or the recovery of insurance payments on damaged or lost collections. The more tightly the policies restrict those proceeds to the acquisition and direct care of collections, the more easily they can be defended against challenges.

CONCLUSION

Because historical museums and organizations act in public trust, the public interest must be paramount in any decision involving the acquisition, care, interpretation, and use of collections. Therefore, institutional leaders must deliberate carefully before making any decision that might put the collections at risk. Since no accounting standards require that collections be capitalized, any institution that chooses the course of capitalization is making a conscious decision to treat its collections as financial assets, and that decision automatically places those collections at potential risk. AASLH believes that such risk, and therefore the act of capitalizing collections, is inconsistent with the institution's fiduciary responsibility to the collections it maintains and the citizens it serves.

For additional information or assistance, contact the AASLH Standing Committee on Standards and Ethics, 1717 Church Street, Nashville, TN 37203-2991.

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