

Aspiration Field Guide
AASLH 250th Anniversary Task Force
Collections Working Group White Paper

Executive Summary

As the nation's semi-quincennial approaches, America's collecting institutions are faced not only with the question of how to commemorate the country's 250th anniversary, but more importantly, how to engage the public with history collections while moving the field forward. Understandably, the landscape around how these repositories approach their work will look vastly different in 2026 than it did in 1976, 1876, or 1776. The tools with which to complete our work have changed extraordinarily in recent decades, and the need for public access has grown as society and technology have changed. No longer is preservation for its own sake sufficient. Rather, repositories must find more ways to facilitate meaningful interaction between the public and their collections. In order to deliver on our promises to act in the public trust, the nation's museums, archives, and historic sites must also move the needle forward on how and what we are collecting. A more collaborative approach in terms of cataloging, best practices, and language standards must be promoted across the wide spectrum of collecting institutions if we hope to substantially improve access to the general public. The work cannot end there, however. Our collections not only need to be accessible, but also need to reflect the nation they document and serve. The United States has always been a place of diversity; something that has not always been readily apparent in the collections we have saved. Moving forward, our nation's museums, archives, and historic sites – both large and small – must work to capture the country's past, present, and future in all of its forms.

Narrative

America's semi-quincennial occurs at a time of dynamic transformation across our societal spectrum.

Attempts to define, assimilate, and contextualize the changes place demands upon historians, curators, and collecting institutions to provide perspective and comprehension, and assure authenticity, at an ever-increasing speed.

The quest for definition at a time of dizzying complexity redounds to our collecting institutions in that the public need for the services they provide is in greater demand, and the collections they preserve, and to which they provide access, are ever more vital to understanding the forces that influence our lives.

The challenges exist within the traditional framework of the collecting community – our museums, libraries, and historical societies.

In the last 50 years, we have experienced a paradigm shift pertaining to our records, our artistic expressions, and our ability to capture and present them to our target audiences large and small.

"We have statements in an object language about subject descriptions of data and token codes for the data. We also have statements in a meta language describing the data relationships and transformations, and ought/is relations between norm and data."

~~ David Griffel, Stuart McIntosh
Massachusetts Institute of Technology
Center for International Studies, 1967

When the United States observed the nation's bicentennial in 1976, the term "meta data" was 8 years old, but hardly in wide circulation.

Most people were more familiar with the idea, expressed a year later at the Moderna Museet, in Stockholm, Sweden, and attributed to the artist Andy Warhol:

"In the future, everyone will be world-famous for 15 minutes."

The two quotes, coming from different directions, comprise, albeit in an inchoate manner, an off-shoot of the 1964 observation by social theorist Marshall McLuhan in *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, that:

"The medium is the message."

Each individual statement is, in essence, an attempt to define or understand the incipient changes occurring in society and in technology.

Our known universe presents challenges with which there is familiarity. Across our cultural disciplines, the unearthed artifact, the discovered manuscript, the found artwork, or the undisclosed document are tangible pieces of evidence that help us define, understand, and appreciate our world. They could be collected, housed, preserved, and studied in time-honored manners.

But, as the three quotes augur, times are changing. As the pace of change quickened, our society struggled to maintain perspective, find context, and foster appreciation for the expressions of human endeavor that held lasting value – even if that immediate lasting value was consumed in 15 minutes.

The perceived but not fully understood challenges emerging 50 years ago are now raging around us, demanding judgments in our world of known collections, yes, but also increasingly in the realm of the unknown.

In our unending efforts to identify, appreciate, preserve and share the products of human endeavor, we can admit to challenges worthy of our attention and energy for America's 250th anniversary.

Two such challenges are related. Each has subsets that can comprise a worthy mesh.

In the pre-digital world, especially pertaining to the known disciplines, techniques exist to preserve our individual and societal expressions. For our purposes, however, preservation is insufficient. If we lack the means – and perhaps the motivation – to provide appropriate access to that which we preserve, then we risk hampering the appreciation and education that can come from considering the works in the full panoply.

Access can be assisted in the adoption of common language and definitions, where possible, such that comprehension is assisted in areas such as cataloging, curating, and presenting.

In that the Internet has become a dominant means by which information can be shared nearly instantaneously worldwide, defining and adopting a common language will facilitate communication, which should lead to comprehension and appreciation.

The standards that lie within reach are deployable in what we regard as the known world of collections – those organizations and institutions, such as major museums and libraries, whose missions and holdings are broadly known and appreciated.

The acceptance and use of a common language and methodologies can make it possible to draw forth the unknown, the hidden collections of traditional works, whether from historical societies, families, churches, corporations, or social organizations, that can provide further context to our appreciation of our past and present forces.

The new and unknown universes present a challenge that this Working Group also acknowledges.

The digital world that has inundated us with meta-data, is also swamping us with challenges to process, describe, preserve, catalog, and provide access to human expression that never becomes tangible.

And where the traditional works make physical demands for storage and presentation space, the digital works challenge us as creators and curators to process and preserve them appropriately. At the same time, curation becomes a daunting task.

The traditional hidden collections are largely not in view. They await discovery and appreciation.

The modern hidden collection exists many times in plain sight, as close as the nearest keyboard and computer mouse. But, here, too, they await discovery and appreciation.

Efforts are under way to address what can be considered an emergent need. Tools are in development, and the commercial and non-profit forces seem poised for collaboration. Success in this area would transcend providing history organizations, regardless of their sizes and budgets, the tools to collect to their missions, including modern and digital materials. Success would include the development and deployment of the means to preserve and to provide access in perpetuity.

As a nuts-and-bolts consideration, a key component would begin with cross-disciplinary agreements on a standard vocabulary and a field-wide subject heading system.

The work cannot be accomplished in a vacuum. We can begin at any time by convening the respective stakeholders to foster cooperation and collaboration for the greater good of smoother communication and collections access. During the commemoration of the semi-quincentennial, the Commission can showcase the progress achieved – knowing that the work has barely begun.

Desired Outcomes

America's semi-quincentennial provides a unique opportunity to reengage visitors with the rich trove of objects and archival materials preserved in our nation's museums, libraries, and historic sites. While these materials can and will certainly be used to interpret the history of America's founding, this is a time when we need to look beyond that singular use and expand the narrative around collections to achieve a series of desired outcomes.

Outcome – America's museums, archives, and historic sites steward what they have

This desired outcome would involve the following steps and solutions:

- Attention to and funding for the cataloguing and digitization of collections held by museums, archives, and historic sites.
- Best practices generated, shared and modeled around collections storage, cataloguing, deaccessioning and other topics.
- Focus on collaborative collecting initiatives to facilitate loans and increased access to underutilized collections.
- Development of models focused on organizational sustainability regarding collections and collections care, including repatriation efforts.
- Encouraging, facilitating, and supporting inventive and collaborative digital projects to engage audiences, encourage discovery, and facilitate new ways of interacting with collections within and across institutions.

Outcome – America's museums, archives, and historic sites collect for the future

This desired outcome would involve the following steps and solutions:

- Launch of a “History is Still Happening” initiative that focuses on collecting around recent history and making resources available for collecting and recording future events.
- Best practices generated, shared and modeled around saving born-digital material and recovering material saved on obsolete technology.
- Initiatives to help the public know how to save their own objects/family history and educate around why and how museums collect.

Outcome – America’s museums, archives, and historic sites use objects to tell new stories in new ways

This desired outcome would involve the following steps and solutions:

- Best practices generated, shared and modeled around material culture-centered interpretation.
- Programs developed that use objects and archives to facilitate civic discourse about American identity, empathy, and other topics.
- Attention to and funding for addressing collections imbalances and aiding museums, archives, and historic sites in creating more representative, fuller and diverse collections.

Moonshot

History is Still Happening Initiative

History is happening now, all around us. It is not just something that happened 100 years or more ago. The Collections Working Group encourages the public to interact with history and collections, and urges collecting institutions to focus on “collecting modern.” By collecting now, we can ensure a future. Doing so will also provide a means to connect contemporary life and challenges and foster an interest in the past.

This initiative encourages museums and historical organizations to build collections that reflect the local communities, past and present, spanning the community’s entire history, to the present day, where appropriate. The organizations must connect with local communities in deciding collecting goals, for instance including the importance of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act or NAGPRA for local historical societies.

The effort should build upon the Mellon-funded AASLH project “Framing History with the American Public” and the Stanford University project “Lighting the Way National Forum on Discovery and Delivery.” The tools and resources that result from an AASLH effort would help collecting institutions build their holdings to meet the expectations and needs of future audiences. The initiative should also work with the Council on Library and Information Resources (CLIR) and other interested parties to uncover truly hidden collections held by

private associations, religious, family, or corporate repositories, not just those that reside in institutional backlogs.

Integrated Public Access Catalog & Digital Toolkit based upon a New Cataloging Model

Now is the time for a new model of cataloging. Single item cataloging is insufficient in enabling the public to understand the connections between objects and documents. It is also time and cost prohibitive. Examining applications of descriptions of artifacts based on archival finding aids will be more appropriate and cost effective. This “finding aid” could include traditional archival material, three dimensional items, and artwork. Current archival finding aid software tools enable staff to enter location information separately from the intellectual system, which allows for safe storage and context retention.

Preservation is meaningless without access. In addition to using a new model of cataloging to make all acquisitions accessible as soon as possible, we propose a national database system. It will provide a single interface for artifacts, archives, and libraries across institutions and regions of the United States. It will facilitate cross-institutional connections between collections to facilitate improved public access. Such a system would allow the field to assess more accurately the state of collections and to effectively share objects, information, exhibitions, and resources between institutions. The system must be cross-platform and designed for accessibility including information such as alt text for images.

Institutions that identify and share their collections can more readily make them accessible to the public in exhibitions, education, research, and other settings. Gathering national data about collections will also reveal opportunities to build collections that better reflect the nation’s diversity. Areas of overlap between collections will enable institutions to better focus collecting goals on the things that make their holdings unique.

Creating the tool requires using standard nomenclature and subject genre terms like Getty or Library of Congress, as well as name authority files. Work continues to be accomplished by the library and archives disciplines. Collaborating with museum colleagues will enable the use of common language and unified standards across three-dimensional cataloging and archival processing. This will benefit the respective staffs, and help the public who interact with history collections.

Integrated union catalogs will foster digital reunification of materials that have been separated between multiple institutions, both in the user search results, and through purposeful projects that may result.

The library and archives fields have provided union catalogs and standardized vocabulary. The museum field can, and should, use the same tools to promote improved access and better understanding of collections.

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Understandably, these initiatives will result in an increase in collecting born-digital artifacts. Museums and historical organizations must have a toolkit for the preservation and maintenance tasks that digital artifacts require. They must also have the means to store and to back up the data. The Internet Archive and the Digital Public Library of America already function well. AASLH can build upon and augment those programs to assist small institutions to manage workflows and assure that efforts into collecting digital resources are less threatened by obsolescence.