

Cultural Heritage Collaboration

By Melissa Mannon

Join AASLH to receive articles like these quarterly.

How Collection Planning and Collaboration Support the Cultural Heritage Institution and Community Memory

Editor's note: This article is featured for additional discussion on the new AASLH community, *History News: Your Turn* at <http://aaslhcommunity.org/historynews>.

A cultural heritage institution stores materials that represent society's intellectual and artistic essence and supports the continuance of the traditions and memories of communities.

In this capacity, museums, libraries, and archives must embrace a documentary role and view their collections—documents, artifacts, and other materials—as the foundation for their work and a key to success. Institutions can and should stand as testimony to the past through well-considered, cooperative, geographic, or subject-based collecting policies, by networking with like-minded organizations, by forming relationships with colleagues across disciplinary boundaries, and by welcoming the diverse views of non-professionals.

Collaborative collection development boosts professionalism, cements identity, promotes awareness of the role of cultural heritage institutions in society, enhances focus, and increases the likelihood of success in documenting a community's heritage. Organizations can use a community documenta-



University of Massachusetts, Lowell, Center for Lowell History

Remembering Lowell's industrial past, the Center for Lowell History preserves images such as this one of the city's mill girls.

tion strategy to move toward collaborative collection development and to help them measure accomplishments. Perhaps above all, cultural heritage repositories must reexamine their purpose, defining a central mission to support the documentary record while renewing emphasis on collection development to create centered, relevant resources.

Importance of Collecting

A community is a formal or informal group with a common history. The community can be based around a geographic area or topic of interest. Communities can be represented by civic organizations, governments, informal social groups, educational institutions, causes, and the like. Cultural institutions support the collective memories of communities by retaining materials that reflect individual group member ideas and remembrances, document-

ing special events as well as day-to-day activities. The collections these repositories gather are the physical embodiment of society's functioning and progress, demonstrating the existence, thoughts, and activities of individuals and the groups in which they participate. Cultural heritage collections are central to a person's understanding of history and can help one form a better sense of self, preserving identity and transmitting heritage from one generation



From author's personal collection

to the next. The items humans create to communicate ideas bridge the past, present, and future and provide materials to evaluate that build upon retained knowledge. Collections allow individuals to better define their role in society with a more complete understanding of humanity and a shared sense of history. They also form a core around which cultural heritage institutions should work to reflect and challenge ideas about society by supporting educational programming, exhibits, digital projects, and other forms of outreach.

The ways organizations set about establishing collections and working to preserve the collective memory can greatly affect what is remembered, influencing how a culture views its past and shapes its future. The documentary record is the surviving written or otherwise recorded

information that provides evidence or information about a society and its activities in a certain time and place. Cultural heritage organizations identify and make this information available to those trying to understand history. The methods we use to do that and to protect the documentary record also mold how society views its cultural heritage institutions and their value. When a cultural heritage institution ties its work to the public responsibility of safeguarding society's historical resources, it exudes a strong sense of purpose, while commanding a certain level of respect and promoting an understanding of its role. Therefore, while cultural heritage institutions work to break down barriers to access and promote their resources, they must also retain an established duty as repositories for information that reflects our lives.

Importance of Heritage Institutions

Concord and Lowell, two very different communities in Massachusetts, typify the role of collecting institutions in representing and shaping a community's image, cementing a town's local identity, and helping to guide a locality's future by defining and proclaiming its past. Concord is a suburb west of Boston. Best known for its role in the American Revolution, the city reinforces its reputation and place in history books with two strong collections of original resources located at the William Munroe Special Collections

at the Concord Free Library and at the Concord Museum. Both collections were established in the nineteenth century at a time when few others purposefully gathered artifacts and archives to preserve local history. Keenly aware of its historic importance, Concord has also had the money and clout of famous citizens to care for materials that reveal its memories and help shape its legacy. Its collections ensure that its historic role will be remembered.

Lowell, the second community exemplifying efforts to retain and reflect culture through collections, is a large city north of Boston. It is now widely recognized as the birthplace of the American Industrial Revolution with a manufacturing industry that thrived until the 1920s. The city struggled to redefine itself after the downfall of textile businesses that had served as an economic engine. Lowell saw its unique history as an opportunity and worked to preserve local mill buildings as a National Park in the 1970s—half a century after many had been abandoned. The city is now home to six historic museums within the mills, each focused on a central theme such as quilting, mill girls, and street cars. Additionally, the Center for Lowell History is the Special Collections and Archives at the University of Massachusetts Lowell. Their holdings focus on Lowell's history and telling the immigrant story, reflecting industrial life and demonstrating a rich textile history through university records and the historical collections of many other local organizations. Lowell cultural heritage institutions proactively created themselves to document the community, encourage research, reestablish Lowell's place in American history, and to give rise to a sense of local cultural pride.

Negative effects of unplanned collecting

In order to retain community memory as in Concord, or to rebuild it as in Lowell, the field must carefully consider what should be collected and not just rely on serendipity. Each community must decide what stories represent them and focus strong collecting procedures that consider all aspects of their heritage. Many organizations are familiar with collecting just what is given to them and gathering the most visible items representative of material culture rather than seeking those that adequately document multiple community stories with a spotlight on what makes a community unique. Collections are frequently balkanized when clear strategies are lacking. This reduces their overall informational value, as well as the impact they would have if similar resources were kept together as in the well-conceived separate Lowell museums and Center for Lowell History. When we do not proactively build collections, we threaten the health of our cultural institutions, as well as our communities.

Many people lump the idea of museums, libraries, and archives together and many regular users of cultural heritage collections assume that they hold complete accounts of society and the events that are important to them. In fact, collecting is often ill-conceived and secondary to other goals,

leaving repositories with spotty documentary resources to share with their public. Much of what we do not know about history is because records are lost over time due to inadequate care, apathy, and lack of thoughtful collecting by appropriate organizations. At a 2009 archivists' conference, biographer Gretchen Holbrook Gerzina spoke about her struggle to find all the resources she needed to evaluate an African American family living a free life in the eighteenth century. While many materials she needed for her research were located in archives and historical societies, she and her husband tracked other materials through individuals whose ancestors took part in events. Regrettably, she found some of the most important documents decomposing in the attic of a condemned courthouse.¹

It is the responsibility of cultural heritage institutions to meet the public's expectation that we are preserving historical resources. We can more efficiently and effectively accomplish this when we involve those outside our institutions in our quest to find material to add to our collections, but we must also proactively seek them ourselves so those that can be identified are available when researchers come looking. To best promote our shared collecting function, diverse cultural heritage institutions must collaborate.

Introduction to Collaboration

As keepers of collections, libraries, archives, and museums have much in common (though they operate in seemingly disparate fields). When "gentlemen scholars" formed the first community collections in the Age of Enlightenment, they deliberately chose to preserve human knowledge in all its forms (albeit quite subjectively) rather than focusing on a particular medium. In the nineteenth century, new theories and techniques emerged about how to maintain artifacts, publications, and archives, firmly establishing the distinct professions of librarianship, archives management, and museology, often resulting in a diaspora of collections of books, archives, and artifacts. Although these separate fields make sense for preservation, organization, and a general classification of knowledge, they often inhibit like-minded professionals from partnering and forming strong interlocked collections that adequately document and support communities.²

A broad overview of collecting principles across diverse repositories benefits all types of collections. Though we may focus on artifacts, books, or archives, cultural institutions tend to dabble in a variety of media and should not neglect worthwhile materials outside of their areas of specialization. Sometimes, disregard of assorted materials is due to lack of knowledge related to appropriate practices for their care. Partnering with colleagues who have diverse skills provides us with the support necessary to ensure all appropriate resources are given proper consideration. Collecting repositories have a public responsibility to collect, preserve, and provide access to cultural heritage resources that contain



information with community significance. Despite their disparities, cultural institutions all handle historical resources that benefit the populace for their educational value, inherent community building properties, recreational opportunities, and harboring of knowledge.

Due to their collecting expertise and specific collection management skills, museologists, librarians, and archivists must be co-leaders in implementing collaborative collecting strategies. Partnering helps overcome challenges, understand differences, share knowledge, and determine what theories and practice work best in a particular situation. One challenge in partnering is the diversity of professional terminology and differing methodologies developed for the care of varying materials within the past 150 years. For example, archivists tend to think of collections as groupings of documents rather than individual items, as museum professionals or librarians do. For successful community documentation, professionals must be committed to community involvement and see the general public as partners in collecting efforts. The public can bring expertise and enthusiasm that can propel efforts, as in the case of the author seeking African American archives. Additionally, though archivists, curators, and librarians have expertise in the development and maintenance of collections, they cannot be experts in every field for which they have materials. Institutions must consider a mutual desire to preserve



Anacostia Community Museum researchers visit the Jerusalem Church of God in Christ in southeast Washington, D.C. As part of its ongoing community documentation project, the museum surveyed houses of worship in neighborhoods east of the Anacostia River in 2009. A directory of community churches and their services is being developed from the project.

community memory and play to individual strengths that can help reach documentation goals and consider the best roles for all cultural heritage collaborators.

Application of Community Documentation Strategies

Communities beginning or re-evaluating collections, looking to form better partnerships, searching for grant opportunities, and seeking additional tools to help guide collecting decisions should consider a community documentation approach, which aims to identify all elements of a community that

should be documented. In the 1980s, a group of archives professionals developed the “Community Documentation Strategy” for their field to foster collaboration among individuals with a shared collecting interest. Partnering archival repositories define their communities and list the people, events, and places that represent the multidimensional aspects of their chosen subject. Groups consider those aspects of their communities that have high visibility, as well as those that are lesser known. In archives management, this strategy can help confirm that a complete, well-rounded set of records is collected for a given subject. Archival community documentation was originally defined for collections of records created by institutions. It was not applied to community as we are using it here, but it can be modified for this approach.

The Marist College Archives and Special Collections serves as a good example for its implementation of this modified documentation strategy. Founded in 2000, the Marist Archives has become one of the premier repositories of environmental history in the United States. Later that same year, the college hired John Ansley as its head of Archives and Special Collections. Ansley quickly realized the value of a group of documents Franny Reese had donated to the archives. In the 1960s, Reese began collecting materials related to a proposed hydroelectric plant on the Hudson River, in an area where her family and ancestors

had lived for three centuries. Ansley determined that little was being formally collected in this area and recognized its tremendous research potential. He aimed to build upon the story that the existing collection told by performing his own research, identifying all aspects of the issue important to document, and seeking additional materials that provided more information from multiple points of view. He began by contacting area libraries and institutions to inquire if anyone possessed related materials. The archives received grant funding to perform a survey, allowing it to more systematically collect information about available documentation. Marist has grown its original collection into a much stronger one, but also records information about similar collections so that it can keep track of the Hudson River Valley’s full range of environmental documentation. This work has created a documentation network including diverse people involved with conservation in the area.

The original creators of the “Community Documentation Strategy” suggested it ideally should be implemented before any collections are gathered by a repository. However, it is worth considering how modified versions can apply its fundamentals to existing collections of all types. Keeping the strategy in mind, partnerships can be forged across professions within a geographical boundary or focused on a subject, can include many organizations or just a few, and can involve institutions of any size or budget. A documentation strategy can also be expanded beyond the archives field to consider other forms of evidence of civilization’s activities.³

Within the museum field, the Smithsonian’s Anacostia Community Museum (ACM) may stand as the premier example of a community museum, embracing a documentation strategy approach along the lines archivists defined, taking it further by considering how artifacts and archives work together to reflect society. Founded in 1967 as a community-based enterprise to reach into the inner city to attract diverse audiences, ACM was the Smithsonian’s first outreach museum. Anacostia citizens rallied to define a niche for the new museum with its inception, expressing the need for a cultural institution that focused on the African American experience and preserved the memories of the local community. Family histories were an initial building block for relevant materials as many residents donated items that described their lives. The museum also solicited oral histories and contemporary photographs to boost its documentation efforts. Material from the local Apex Beauty School—training manuals, photographs, salon machines, and recorded interviews—is but one example from their collections that exemplifies a strategy to combine artifacts and archives to tell stories. Together, this material provides an incredibly nuanced and powerful story of one aspect of the community that is related through programs and exhibits that make use of the collections.⁴

Over time, with the building of a strong collection base, the Anacostia Community Museum grew and came to see itself as a national African American museum. It began focusing more on programming and less on collecting. A recent reexamination of their mission has allowed the museum to refocus and renew its emphasis on community documentation. Aiming to return to the initial vision of its founder and to redefine its purpose to avoid conflict with the

new Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture opening in 2015, ACM will use and expand its collections to tell stories about changing, contemporary urban communities. They are pursuing exhibit and programming subjects that open doors for community collaboration and serve as launching points for documentation work and collection development. This year, the museum is documenting creative expression in focused local communities. Next year they will focus on the environment and the Anacostia River, partnering with museums in other countries to collect related materials and explore how rivers influence urban settings.

Benefits of a Community Documentation Approach

A documentation strategy allows organizations to more systematically gather items vital to the story of civilization. It makes sense for diverse community organizations that are collecting multiple overlapping cultural resources, using diverse support systems, and attracting similar audiences to look towards this approach. While the possibility of applying community documentation principles to diversified cultural heritage institutions has yet to be thoroughly scrutinized, it is clear that all cultural heritage organizations will find some benefits from applying a modified version of this strategy to support goals. The strategy brings together people with varied expertise, pools resources, and increases visibility. It redirects attention on collections, enabling retention of the resources that reflect communities. With a strong core of materials we will have the resources to develop educational and entertaining activities relevant to other aspects of our mission.

Organizations must recognize the civic role of the cultural heritage institution in reflecting communities and appealing to audiences who will respond to poignant collections about the lives of individuals and their communities. A community documentation approach to collection management considers the variety of formats of materials that society creates to share ideas and how these materials reveal culture. Both large and small documentation projects can be successful in institutions representing communities of different sizes and economic means. With collaboration and consistent outreach that continually seeks to ask the community what it needs, community documentation allows organizations to create appropriate collections that are well received and supported locally.

Cultural heritage institutions are symbols of humanity and

Clippings supplement archival material to tell the story of the Storm King controversy in the Hudson River Valley in the Marist College Archives and Special Collections.



help preserve collective memory. Through open collaboration, cultural heritage partners can effectively document the world around them. In this role, institutions exude a sense of purpose and can undeniably proclaim themselves as vital community partners, ensuring the longevity of cultural resources and providing a key to better understanding of who we are, where we have been, and where we are heading.

Melissa Mannon is an archivist and cultural heritage consultant with twenty years of experience promoting collaboration and professionalism among museums, libraries, historical societies, town governments, and private collections. Her new book is *Cultural Heritage Collaborators: A Manual for Community Documentation*. You can reach Melissa at melissa@mannon.org or <http://archivesinfo.com>.

¹ Gretchen Holbrook Gerzina. *Mr. and Mrs. Prince: How an Extraordinary Eighteenth-Century Family Moved Out of Slavery and Into Legend*. New York, NY: Amistad Press, 2008.

² For more information about the separate practices of cultural heritage institutions see Liz Bishoff "The Collaboration Imperative," *Library Journal*, January 2004. For more information about the common histories of museums, libraries, and archives, see Carmine Bell, "Public Education and Community Development: The Shared Mission of Libraries and Cultural Heritage Institutions." Report. http://eric.ed.gov/ERICDocs/data/ericdocs2sql/content_storage_01/0000019b/80/1a/b9/bb.pdf.

³ Larry J. Hackman and Joan Warnow Blewett provide the most succinct definition of the documentation strategy I have read in "The Documentation Strategy Process: A Model and a Case Study," *The American Archivist* 50:1, 14.

⁴ Holly Bass. "Camille Akeju: New Director Seeks to Rejuvenate Anacostia Museum." *Crisis*, March / April 2006: 37-39.

Join AASLH to receive articles like these quarterly.