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THE NEWSLETTER FOR THE AASLH MILITARY HISTORY AFFINITY GROUP

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AASLH Military History Affinity Group

Random Thoughts on Military History Exhibits at Small Museums

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For this newsletter's article I thought it might be helpful to talk about some of the resources, references and random thoughts on doing exhibits with a military theme in small museums with limited resources. I started out my museum career twelve years ago making exhibits out of scrap material and dumpster debris and continue doing it today.

Military exhibits can be anything from one small case about a town during World War I to a large exhibition with numerous cases, macro-artifacts and even a diorama. Whatever the topic, size and shape, the following are some thoughts about how to create a good military exhibit.

First, exhibit techniques and construction. Everything you need may be found in two paperback books published years ago. The best exhibit books available are both by Arminta Neal; they are practical common sense guides written for those of us who aren't loaded with money. They have lots of illustrations and examples including how to convert old store exhibit cases into much better museum exhibit cases. The two books are *Help for the Small Museum: Handbook of Exhibit Ideas & Methods* and *Exhibits for the Small Museum: A Handbook*. They are both out of print but available on used book sites on the internet. Their content is different enough I recommend acquiring both of them.

For labels remember many museum visitors are seniors and labels done with a small font combined with the normal low light levels will result in frustrated visitors. I recommend printing artifact labels using an off-white color of resume paper such as light grey, tan or beige. The reason to avoid white is that it reflects light,

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making the labels harder for the visitor to read. Any regular printer can be used to produce professional labels. Label text fonts with a serif, like Times New Roman, are easier to read than sans serif fonts like Arial. Avoid any type of font which is "artistic" as they are hard to read. Font size 16 point is the minimum and that is only for labels that are close enough for the visitor to touch with their nose. Increase the font size for labels that are farther from the visitor's eyes. For mounting labels, there are adhesive sheets and sprays with the sheets being much easier to use. 3M sells Positionable Mounting Adhesive (PMA), which allows for putting a label down and then changing its position. The best label backing is Gatorboard, a kind of super foamcore. It is rigid, tough, easy to cut and even comes with adhesive already applied. When mounting labels in the exhibit, consider the angle from which the visitor will be reading the label. For example placing labels flat on a case floor that is four feet off the floor can be made better by putting the label at a 45-degree angle.

Unless you want visitors telling you about things you got wrong, good references are essential. That said, just because a visitor tells you something is wrong doesn't mean it is. Many of the loudest critics don't know what they are talking about so always check.

The most comprehensive reference on U.S. Army uniforms, weapons and equipment is free online from the U.S. Army Center of Military History. It is entitled *Survey of U.S. Army Uniforms, Weapons & Accouterments*, by David Cole, approximately 100 pages with color illustrations. It is downloadable in color as a pdf file at this address: <http://www.history.army.mil/html/museums/uniforms/survey.html>. For additional references see the Military Bibliography on the AASLH website. Beware the Internet and most especially eBay -- more than half of the identifications on eBay are wrong.

Finding knowledgeable assistance is much more challenging than finding good reference material. Here are some hints on finding someone. Avoid anyone that does these things: calls themselves an expert, does not use reference materials, shows a lack of respect for museum ethics and rules. Never allow your assistants unescorted access, never allow any artifacts to be removed from the collection, never allow trades or exchanges. There are many good honest collectors and dealers out there, but there also are fair numbers of bad actors.

Great exhibit ideas can come from anyone. Often exhibits are tied to an anniversary, which always brings increased interest. Community members and other museums are good sources of ideas. Depending on space, resources and time, one can either expand or reduce the core of the exhibit. The community and local collectors are excellent sources of loaned artifacts to create a more comprehensive exhibit.

I hope this brief article has presented some useful information. For further information or questions please contact one of us on the AASLH Military History Affinity Group.

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Surprising Source for Military Reference Books

[Track of the Wolf](#) in Elk River, MN, has long been a great source of colonial and frontier equipment and supplies. Since 2007, they have also published three superb books of subjects related to early North American history. All three paperback books include excellent color photographs of artifacts. The first two books are military subjects: "A Soldier-Like Way": *The Material Culture of the British Infantry, 1751-1768* and *Of Sorts for Provincials: American Weapons of the French & Indian War* and are great resources for your military history library.



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