

# Archeological Curation in the 21st Century

## Or, Making Sure the Roof Doesn't Blow Off

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Over the past few years it has become apparent that a crisis in American archeology exists.<sup>1</sup> Those words were written in 1980 in response to a symposium, “The Curation of Archaeological Collections,” at the 44th Annual Meeting of the Society for American Archaeology (SAA) in Vancouver, British Columbia, April 1979. Exactly 20 years later, Verna L. Cowin organized a symposium entitled “The Crisis in Curation: Problems and Solutions” at the 64th annual meeting of the SAA in Philadelphia, April 2000. The speakers in this symposium touched on a series of curation problems: large backlogs of uncataloged collections; extensive collections from recent cultural resources management (CRM) projects; inadequate staff; increasing curation fees; substandard and overflowing storage facilities; and the lack of awareness in the archeological community of just how bad things are. The fall 1999 thematic volume of *Museum Anthropology* on the management of federal archeological collections included articles on curation accountability, funding, accessibility, partnerships, and deaccession policies. It seems that once again a number of people are thinking about the state of archeological curation and, unfortunately, finding many of the same problems cited in 1980. I recently did an informal poll of curators with archeological collections to learn what their top concerns were. Generally, recurring themes regarding archeological collections fall into five categories: accountability, accessibility, conservation/preservation, deaccession policies, and storage.

### **Accountability**

In 1990, regulations entitled *Curation of Federally Owned and Administered Archeological Collections* (36 CFR pt. 79) were published, partly as a result of a 1980s General Accounting Office audit of the status of federal archeological collections. The 1987 GAO report found that

agency accountability was poor, largely due to the lack of records and guidelines.<sup>2</sup> Three years later, 36 CFR pt. 79 was finalized. Unfortunately, a decade after its publication, federal agency accountability shows only sporadic improvement.<sup>3</sup> Today, some agencies still do not have formal policies on curation, making accountability difficult to achieve. Other agencies, including the Departments of Defense and Interior, have made significant progress in terms of accountability.

Accountability asks two questions: what do you have and where is it? Problems with answering the first question generally center on the backlog: the number of uncataloged objects and archives. Until material is cataloged, we don't really have a handle on what we have, and the numbers can be overwhelming. Ten years ago, Chaco Culture National Historical Park calculated its archeological and archival backlog to be around 1.5 million items. Today, about 54% of the backlog has been cataloged. Unfortunately, the backlog continues to grow as new collections are accessioned each year.

Trouble answering the second question usually arises when we deal with older collections or federal agency collections. Often, older collections were divided, traded, or even sold off. For instance, archeological collections from Chaco Canyon, excavated in the late-19th and early-20th centuries, are now located in museums around the world. Old collections, dispersed among different institutions, sometimes with poor or no documentation, nonetheless can be useful for exhibits and type or comparative collections. As Joan Schneider of the University of California's Center for Archaeology and Paleontology observes, even with just general provenience information, these old collections can also be useful for research, if we know what and where they are.<sup>4</sup> Sometimes, unfortunately, collections have simply been lost. Old field

school collections are a good example—occasionally languishing, forgotten, in an attic or basement. Other collections, moved from storage room to storage room get lost along the way. Today, computerized accession and catalog records provide us with tools to track storage location moves and, with cooperation among institutions, to intellectually re-unite dispersed collections to facilitate research.<sup>5</sup>

At the federal level, responsibility to protect and preserve archeological resources on federal land dates back to the 1906 Antiquities Act. Agencies and bureaus whose primary mission does not include managing cultural resources (such as the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers or U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service) typically place most of their cultural collections in local or regional repositories. Since 1906, some of these agencies and bureaus have lost track of their collections. Federal compliance with the deadlines imposed by the 1990 Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) has had the beneficial effect of forcing agencies to locate and inventory their collections, and to make formal arrangements with non-federal repositories. The publication of 36 CFR pt. 79 in the same year as NAGPRA reinforced federal accountability for archeological collections. The Department of Defense, through its U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Mandatory Center of Expertise for the Curation and Management of Archaeological Collections, has been particularly aggressive and effective in locating its collections, assessing conditions at repositories, and making recommendations for long-term curation.<sup>6</sup>

The problem of locating collections is not limited to past practices. The rise of CRM projects over the last three decades has resulted in large, well-documented collections. However, we don't always know where these collections are. Although a repository agreement is required before a State Historic Preservation Officer will grant a permit, there is no way to monitor if the collection, after excavation and sometimes years of analysis, actually ends up in the specified repository.<sup>7</sup> According to Verna Cowin of the Carnegie

Museum, CRM firms often cite a lack of staff to pack collections to repository standards and the high cost of curation fees as reasons for their failure to comply with state and federal regulations concerning archeological collections.<sup>8</sup>

Accountability is the responsibility of the agency or institution. Archeologists and curators must ensure that agencies and institutions acknowledge their responsibility to manage collections to professional and regulatory standards. We must also encourage the public to hold us accountable for our cultural heritage.

### **Accessibility**

Accessibility generally refers to whether or not researchers, managers, and the general public can use archeological collections. This in turn relates to the question of accountability—if we don't know what we have and/or where it is, we cannot make collections available for use. This is not a trivial problem. According to 36 CFR pt. 79, federal collections must be made available for "scientific, educational and religious uses." The general public pays for federal collections through taxes and, therefore, is entitled to use them appropriately. The Smithsonian Institution's creation of a Museum Support Center was in response to the need to appropriately care for collections and make them accessible. From 1983 to 1996, the National Museum of Natural History moved its archeological and ethnographic collections to the new facility. During the move, inventories were completed, a new database system was installed, artifact storage locations were barcoded by catalog number, and

*The Maxwell Museum of Anthropology's storage warehouse for bulk archeological collections. Photo courtesy Chaco Culture National Historical Park, National Park Service.*



storage was upgraded.<sup>9</sup> Researchers can now query electronic databases and easily locate artifacts for study. The Smithsonian Institution's curation center is an excellent model, but most of us do not have the good fortune to work in such well-designed facilities.

From a curator's perspective, the lack of accessibility relates directly to space and staff. Staff is necessary to catalog the artifacts. Even when you know what you have and where it is, without staff to retrieve requested items, collections are still not fully accessible for research. Overcrowded, unsafe storage conditions also physically hamper a curator's ability to pull items for researchers. Researchers face other accessibility challenges. For instance, collections dispersed in multiple repositories across the country (or world) make research physically difficult and often expensive. Sometimes just finding out what collections exist is a problem. The result is a lack of research use of important but little-known collections. Joan Schneider cites the example of the Elizabeth and William Campbell collection at Joshua Tree National Park, an important historical collection about which few outside the local academic community know. The University of New Mexico's Chaco field school collections from the 1930s and 1940s are uncataloged and information about these important small site assemblages is unavailable to researchers. Other field school collections no doubt suffer the same fate — forgotten on shelves in university storage rooms. As Schneider asks, "What is the purpose of curating collections if no use is made of them?" The American public, who pays for much of this work, would like an answer to that question as well. One way to increase accessibility would be to create a single, indexed, searchable web site with links to all archeological collections in the United States.

#### **Conservation/Preservation**

Conservation is another concern. As Karin Roberts of the National Park Service Midwest Archeological Center points out, storage facilities for archeological collections must be appropriate for a wide variety of materials, from stone to metal to textiles to celluloid.<sup>10</sup> Often, storage conditions are geared toward generic, stable materials and fragile specimens may suffer over the long term. Roberts also observes that while archeological collections should be accorded the same protection as other museum collections, this is not always the case. In my experience, bulk

archeological collections in particular are often housed in substandard conditions.

Increasingly, attention is focusing on archival collections. Without documentation, archeological collections are generally not useful for research. When documentation exists, it can be considerable. The Chaco Museum Collection has seen an exponential growth in the amount of field notes, personal papers, photographs, and maps donated as researchers finish projects and/or retire. Preserving these records that are on non-archival paper is expensive and time-consuming. Another archival issue concerns electronic media. Managing data on computer tape, diskette, CD-ROM, and zip disk is a challenge. The media change so quickly that long-term preservation studies are non-existent and would be largely irrelevant. For now, we must keep old hardware so that we can read data on old media. The temptation is to get rid of obsolete technology as quickly as possible, but we must be careful not to throw out equipment before salvaging associated data files. The Chaco Museum Collection is currently engaged in an electronic database rescue project: we are converting 1970s-1980s data on old mainframe data tapes to CD-ROM format before the tapes disintegrate and the data are lost. This will not be a long-term solution, however, as technology changes faster than we can keep up with it. Migrating data files to new media every five years or so is a worthy goal, but one that may not be realistic, given other curatorial concerns and crises. National curatorial standards for electronic data migration, verification, and preservation would be useful.

#### **Deaccession Policies**

Archeological collecting in the United States dates back to the beginning of the republic. Americans of European ancestry shared the continental interest in curiosities from other cultures. The founding of the Smithsonian Institution in 1846 provided both the impetus, via funding, and a national home for the collection of antiquities on a large scale. By the late 1800s, institutions vied with each other to acquire antiquities for display in museums. The Antiquities Act of 1906 required that collections recovered under the Act be deposited in a public museum or national repository.<sup>11</sup> Over the last 150 years, a staggering number of artifacts have been collected and housed in the Smithsonian Institution, private museums, universities, federal agency repositories, state and local historical

museums, and in some cases, garages and basements. Today, we face the problem of managing these collections and, sometimes, deciding what we will curate “in perpetuity” and what we will not.

Culling collections for cost, management, and research considerations is a touchy subject. However, several curators who responded to my informal poll brought up this problem, and S. Terry Childs of the National Park Service Archeology and Ethnography Program has argued for the need to incorporate deaccession policies into collection management plans.<sup>12</sup> In times of decreasing funds for museum support, increasing curation costs, and lack of space, curators are looking more closely at what is piled in the storage rooms. What we could (or should) discard, who should make those decisions, and how we justify our decisions are difficult questions, and should not be made in haste to solve short-term storage problems.

For private museums, deaccessioning is usually a policy issue, and these institutions can work with their boards of directors to develop such policies. However, at the state and federal level legislative authority is required to dispose of publicly-owned property. Within the federal government, some federal agencies and bureaus have the authority to deaccession inappropriate collections, and some do not. For example, the Department of Defense, the Department of State, and the Smithsonian Institution have deaccessioning authority, but in the Department of the Interior only the National Park Service and the Department of the Interior Museum have this legislative authority. The NPS deaccessioning authority was granted in 1955 and broadened in 1996, and the NPS museum program has had formal guidelines in place for deaccessioning since 1967. However, other bureaus in the Department of the Interior do not have general legislative authority to deaccession, with the exception of NAGPRA. This authority is needed. As Nancy Coulam of the Bureau of Reclamation notes, deaccessioning objects with limited or no value would be fiscally responsible and in the public interest.<sup>13</sup> The American Association of Museums (AAM), the American Anthropological Association (AAA), and the SAA could and should work with state and federal agencies to obtain the legislative authority needed to deaccession inappropriate archeological collections through such mechanisms as transfer, exchange, or donation.

## Storage

“The roof blew off the car wash last week.” Not words that normally strike fear in a curator’s heart, unless of course you have archeological collections stored in the car wash. This actually happened to a university anthropology museum this past March. This museum had outgrown its storage space long ago and was desperate for additional storage space. Several years ago, the university’s board of regents came up with a temporary solution—use an abandoned two-bay car wash for overflow storage. Since it was to be temporary, the university did not renovate the building. To stop the roof from leaking, it constructed a metal roof above the original roof. This is what blew off in a wind and rainstorm. Luckily, this story has a happy ending: a generous private donor has given the university money to construct an archeological research and curation center.

While most of us do not have to worry about roofs blowing off, there are few state-of-the-art facilities such as the Smithsonian Institution’s Museum Support Center in Suitland, Maryland, and the National Park Service’s new Museum Resource Center in Landover, Maryland. I suspect most of us labor in small, overcrowded, ill-lit storage facilities never designed to hold museum collections. The Chaco Museum Collection is currently housed in six locations: three in the park and three on the campus of the University of New Mexico in partnership with the Maxwell Museum of Anthropology. One of our shared facilities is the Maxwell Museum Warehouse, a 16-foot-high warehouse stacked floor to ceiling with archeological collections from the Southwest. The Chaco Archive is housed in the 1930s book stacks section of the University of New Mexico’s main library. I imagine a great many repositories across the country are similar: retrofitted spaces with limited or no environmental controls, security, or fire protection. Most of all, repositories are full — packed to the rafters and beyond, every inch of floor space taken up by piles of boxes. Even the Smithsonian Institution’s Museum Support Center is now facing a scarcity of storage space.<sup>14</sup> Archeological collections and their accompanying archival collections grow steadily—sometimes slowly, sometimes at an alarming rate. Real estate is expensive, especially real estate that must be built to strict federal standards for curation and have room to expand. Not surprisingly, universities, private museums, and federal agencies are not overly

anxious to undertake expensive construction projects to build the kinds of facilities required.

Not only do many (most?) repositories fail to meet the standards of 36 CFR pt. 79 for the curation of federal archeological collections, many present severe safety and health concerns. Before the Museum Support Center was built, the National Museum of Natural History's anthropological collections were physically and figuratively stored in the "nation's attic," as the Smithsonian Institution is affectionately nicknamed. In this case, the conceptual charm of an overflowing attic was counterbalanced by the reality of asbestos contamination. Two of the Chaco Museum Collection storage areas in the park are infested with hantavirus-carrying mice. The 16-foot-high storage shelves in the Maxwell Museum Warehouse are a potential OSHA nightmare. The list could go on.

#### ***Where Do We Go from Here?***

It seems to me that the pressing issues concerning archeological collections can be characterized from two different standpoints: policy and implementation. The policy aspects of accountability and accessibility can and should be dealt with by the museum profession. The implementation aspects of accountability, accessibility, conservation/preservation, and storage require funding. Securing legislative authority for state and federal agencies and bureaus to deaccession inappropriate collections may require the political assistance of non-governmental entities such as the AAM, AAA, and SAA.

Discussing the papers presented at the "Crisis in Curation" symposium, Francis P. McManamon, Departmental Consulting Archeologist for the Department of the Interior, observed that the infrastructure of curation is crucial: facilities and staff. It is this infrastructure that implements curation. Without an adequate and solid infrastructure, there will be no meaningful solutions to the problems facing us. Unfortunately, the curation infrastructure is expensive. Facilities that meet the standards of 36 CFR pt. 79 are costly to build and operate. Professional staff with the necessary expertise does not come cheap. Asking Congress, boards of directors, boards of regents, state legislatures, and city governments for more money for curation is not easy. We must compete with social programs that directly impact the public welfare. How? We need to do a better job educating the public about the importance of caring for the objects of

our past and preserving them for future generations. Professional initiatives and public education are the tools to which we have immediate access. We must use them wisely to find solutions.

Archeologists also must become more involved in curation. The SAA has a newly-formed Committee on Curation; a good, if curiously late, start. However, in a cursory examination of the Society for American Archaeology's recently published *Teaching Archaeology*, I found only one reference to the need for professional, effective curation and collections management.<sup>15</sup> There is a strong emphasis on the preservation ethic in this volume, but it focuses on site preservation. Curation does not seem to be part of either undergraduate or graduate archeological curricula. It is as though archeologists collect things and then the objects disappear into another realm of responsibility. In 1980, Alexander Lindsay and Glenna Williams-Dean wrote:

It is our opinion that many of the curatorial problems are created and can be solved or ameliorated by archeologists themselves. The apparent lack of a positive ethic for the preservation, care, and use of collections in the training of archeologists is one cause of the problem.<sup>16</sup>

I can personally attest to the fact that some graduate schools today still do not train archeologists in the care and use of collections. Ironically, as Ann Hitchcock of the National Park Service has noted, many museum studies programs developed within anthropology programs, such as those at the University of Arizona, the University of Colorado, the University of Denver, and the University of Washington.<sup>17</sup>

If archeologists do not become involved in curation policies and implementation, decisions will be made by boards of directors, federal and state managers, and administrators in the private sector. I suspect that most archeologists will not be comfortable with the decisions these individuals make. It is up to us. If we want to make sure the roof doesn't blow off, we must all work on solutions to the archeological curation crisis.

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#### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Andrea Lee Novick, "Symposium on the Curation of Archeological Collections," *Curator*, 23:1 (1980): 5-6.
- <sup>2</sup> 36 CFR pt. 79, *Federal Register* Vol. 55, No. 177 (September 12, 1990): 37625.
- <sup>3</sup> Bobbie Ferguson and Myra Giesen, "Accountability in the Management of Federally Associated

- Archeological Collections,” *Museum Anthropology* 23:2 (1999): 19-33.
- 4 Joan Schneider, personal communication, March 2000.
  - 5 Donald McVicker, “All the King’s Horses and All the King’s Men: Putting Old Collections Together Again,” paper presented at the 65th Annual Meeting of the Society for American Archaeology, April 2000, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.
  - 6 Kenneth L. Shingleton, Jr., Laura Kozuch, and Michael K. Trimble, “The Department of Defense National Archaeological Curation Assessment Project,” paper presented at the 65th Annual Meeting of the Society for American Archaeology, April 2000, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.
  - 7 Martha P. Otto, “CRM Curation in Ohio,” paper presented at the 65th Annual Meeting of the Society for American Archaeology, April 2000, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.
  - 8 Verna L. Cowin, “Caring for Collections: A Case Study of Carnegie Museum of Natural History,” paper presented at the 65th Annual Meeting of the Society for American Archaeology, April 2000, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.
  - 9 James J. Krakker, David J. Rosenthal, and Deborah Hull-Walski, “Managing a Scholarly Resource: Archaeological Collections at the National Museum of Natural History,” *Museum Anthropology* 23:1 (1999): 9-18.
  - 10 Karin Roberts, personal communication, April 2000.
  - 11 36 CFR pt. 79, *Federal Register* Vol 55, No. 177 (September 12, 1990): 37626.
  - 12 S. Terry Childs, “Contemplating the Future: Deaccessioning Federal Archaeological Collections,” *Museum Anthropology* 23:2 (1999): 38-45.
  - 13 Nancy Coulam, personal communication, March 2000.
  - 14 Greta Hansen and Catherine Zwiesler Sawdey, “A Moving Experience: Thirteen Years and Two Million Objects Later,” *Curator* 42:1 (1999): 13-35.
  - 15 Susan J. Bender, editor, “A Proposal to Guide Curricular Reform for the Twenty-First Century,” in *Teaching Archaeology*, edited by Susan J. Bender and George S. Smith (2000), pages 31-48, Society for American Archaeology, Washington, DC.
  - 16 Alexander J. Lindsay, Jr. and Glenna Williams-Dean, “Artifacts, Documents, and Data: A New Frontier for American Archaeology,” *Curator* 23:1 (1980): 19-29.
  - 17 Ann Hitchcock, personal communication, May 2000.

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## Deaccessioning Museum Collections

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**D**eaccessioning museum collections is the process of permanently removing them from a museum’s ownership and custody. When a museum deaccessions an object, the museum no longer has physical custody of the object, and it relinquishes all claims to ownership.

Deaccessioning museum collections runs counter to the main purposes of museums, which are to acquire and preserve collections for the benefit of future generations through exhibition, interpretation, and research. We think of museums as collecting objects, not disposing of them.

However, there are several valid reasons for deaccessioning collections. The obvious ones include loss, theft, or destruction from involuntary means, such as flood or fire. There are also cases when an object has lost all value due to extensive damage, or when a specimen is deliber-

ately destroyed during scientific analysis. Native American materials that meet the criteria of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) may be deaccessioned as part of a repatriation agreement.

Many museums also contain collections that don’t fit within the museum’s current scope of collections statement. Most museums now use some form of a scope of collections statement that defines the types of materials the museum will collect, based on the mission and purpose of the museum. In earlier years, museums were much less systematic in what was collected, resulting in collections that aren’t relevant to the museum.

Of course in a perfect world, there would be no need for museums to deaccession collections. All the objects would fit within the museum’s scope of collections, and nothing would get damaged or stolen.