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Kathleen T. Byrne

Deaccessioning Museum Collections

Deaccessioning 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.

In the real world, deaccessioning is a necessary practice. However, in the last 25 years, the public has given increased scrutiny to deaccession actions, and the museum profession has become more knowledgeable about legal and ethical responsibilities. Some controversial and highly-publicized deaccession actions have made museums very aware that deaccessions can cause poor public relations and even lawsuits. Deaccession policies and procedures have become much more rigorous as a result. Deaccession actions must meet the highest professional, legal, and ethical standards for accountability.

For the National Park Service (NPS), deaccessioning museum collections is an especially sensitive subject. The American public rightly considers the NPS museum collections to be their national treasures from their land and historic sites. Even the perception that the NPS is “getting rid of” museum collections could result in disastrous publicity.

Yet appropriate deaccessions are a necessary part of good collections management. It is an inefficient use of park staff and funding to care for collections that do not fit the park’s scope of collections or that are damaged beyond repair. Material that is not relevant to one park or museum may be a welcome addition to another.

The NPS recognizes several types of deaccessions: destructive analysis, involuntary destruction, loss, NAGPRA compliance, outside scope of collection, return to rightful owner, theft, and voluntary destruction/abandonment. Collections that fall outside a park’s scope of collection can be deaccessioned by transfer, exchange, conveyance (donation), or voluntary

destruction. Note that the sale of collections is not an option.

The NPS may donate collections only to institutions that are dedicated to the preservation and interpretation of natural or cultural heritage and qualified to manage the objects. In addition, private institutions must be exempt from federal taxation.

Although deaccessioning museum collections is an accepted museum practice, it should be a relatively rare occurrence. The NPS uses an annual collection management report completed by each park to document the number of items that are deaccessioned servicewide each year.

The majority of park deaccessions are transfers to other parks or federal agencies. Very few items are deaccessioned outside the federal government. For example, in fiscal year 1999 (October 1, 1998–September 30, 1999), NPS deaccessioned 749 items outside the federal government. Five items were exchanged, 135 items were donated to qualifying institutions, and 609 were repatriated under NAGPRA. This is a small number for collections totaling over 80 million items.

The procedures for deaccessioning NPS museum collections are in Chapter 6 of the *Museum Handbook*, Part II, Museum Records. These procedures meet professional museum standards and the requirements of the 1996 amendment to the Museum Properties Act of 1955, the legal authority for deaccessioning NPS collections that are outside a park’s scope of collection statement. NPS staff are required to follow these rigorous procedures.

NPS deaccessioning procedures vary depending on the type of deaccession. For example, the procedures for deaccessioning a theft are different from the procedures for deaccessioning something that is out of the park’s scope of collection. However, the need for good documentation is common to all types of deaccessions. It is essential to create a complete paper trail for all steps in the deaccession process. The documentation may be needed to defend the deaccession.

Deaccessioning should not be an easy or quick process. In general, museums follow a series of steps for deaccessions that include a sound justification, committee review by subject specialists, monetary appraisals, approval by the director or governing board, and public advertisement of the proposed deaccession.

The Pacific Northwest by William Henry Traher, acrylic on canvas, 1966. One of four paintings commissioned by Jefferson National Expansion Memorial for exhibit in the visitor center lobby and deaccessioned by transfer to the Department of the Interior Museum in 1999. On exhibit at the Department of the Interior. Photo courtesy Jefferson National Expansion Memorial, National Park Service.



Strict deaccession procedures are precautions against controversy. They protect museum personnel or their relatives from allegations of unethical conduct, partiality, or conflict of interest. They also maintain the public's trust.

Deaccessions can turn into a public relations nightmare unless there is a full public disclosure of the museum's actions. What can go wrong? Donors can become irate if their family heirlooms are removed from a collection. A community may have strong feelings that the deaccessioned objects should remain in the community. Staff may face charges of receiving personal benefits from the deaccession action. The museum may be accused of dealing in collections or making deaccession decisions based on personal taste or current fashion.

NPS Deaccessioning Procedures

The NPS deaccessioning procedures were written to provide safeguards against these problems and to achieve objectivity in the deaccession process. The procedures for deaccessioning museum collections that are outside a park's scope of collections include several steps.*

Review by a Collections Advisory

Committee. The committee reviews a proposed deaccession and makes written recommendations to the superintendent, who has the authority to approve or disapprove a deaccession. The superintendent chooses the members of the committee based on the material to be deaccessioned. The committee must include at least two members. One member must be a curator at the GS-11 (full performance) level or higher. The curator may not supervise the other members of the committee. Parks that don't have a curator at the appropriate level, must appoint a curator from another park or support office.

There are several reasons for the committee. It allows for a systematic review of the material by impartial subject matter experts. It also protects the superintendent and park staff from possible accusations of partiality or vested interest. If the superintendent goes against the committee's recommendations, he or she must attach an explanation to the deaccession form.

Advertisement to Other Parks. Before deaccessioning objects out of the NPS, parks must advertise the availability of the objects to other parks in the system. This is to make sure that the NPS is not deaccessioning objects from one site that are needed by another site. After publishing the advertisement, there is a 30-day waiting period for other parks to respond.

Order of Preference. Parks must follow an order of preference that is based on maintaining federal government interest, keeping collections in the public trust, and protecting NPS interest. The first order of preference is transfer to another NPS site, the last is voluntary destruction. The superintendent must provide a written justification for going out of the order of preference.

Monetary Appraisal for Exchanges. The NPS requires formal appraisals for all exchanges outside the federal government. One formal, written appraisal is required for objects below \$20,000, and two formal, written appraisals are required for objects over \$20,000. Both the objects to be deaccessioned and the objects to be acquired must be appraised.

Appraisals are an accepted museum practice to make sure an exchange is credible and equitable. The appraiser must state in writing that he or she has no vested interest in the outcome of the appraisal.

Public Advertisement for Exchange and Conveyance (Donation). Parks must publish a notice of intent to deaccession objects to a stated recipient before exchanging objects outside the federal government or conveying (donating) objects. The notice must appear for 45 days on the NPS Museum Management web site at <<http://www.cr.nps.gov/csd/>>. This site is advertised monthly in *Aviso*, the newsletter for the American Association of Museums and *Dispatch*, the newsletter for the American Association for State and Local History. Parks may also use this site to search for potential recipients.

The NPS deaccessioning procedures are like those in many other museums. They increase the professionalization of NPS museums, and allow parks to deaccession collections with confidence that their actions are fully accountable. More importantly, they allow the collections to be treated, as stated in the amendment to the Museum Properties Act of 1955, "in a careful and deliberate manner that protects the public interest." The American public expects no less.

Note

* By NPS policy, archeological and natural history collections and associated records acquired as a result of systematic investigations within a park's boundary cannot be outside a park's scope of collection.

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