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National Park Service Museum Collections: Documentation Equals Access

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The National Park Service (NPS) may well have one of the largest museum collections in the world. With 109 million items at over 350 sites, the size and diversity of the collections have required innovative approaches to the documentation of collections. Documentation is sometimes called “museum record-keeping”—the work that encompasses accessioning and cataloguing collections, maintaining loan records, completing inventories, and any activity that involves written or computerized information about the items in a collection. Although documentation is generally considered the boring part of museum work, it’s actually the foundation of a collection. You’ve got to know what you have and where it is before you can plan for conservation work and exhibits and interpretation.

Knowing what the NPS has and where it is has always been a challenge for three reasons: the size and diversity of the collections, their geographic locations, and a frequently changing, collateral-duty staff. Ever since 1920, when Yosemite National Park began keeping systematic museum records, museum documentation has been evolving to meet these challenges.

There’s no doubt that the number and types of collections are a challenge. There are natural and cultural resource collections in several disciplines. For example, cultural collections include the Philip Syng silver inkstand used in the signing of the Declaration of Independence at Independence National Historical Park and the child’s doll that was in the room at the surrender of the Confederacy at Appomattox Court House National Historical Park (see also Figure 1). There are a growing number of archival collections, including landscape design documents from Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site and field project records for archaeological investigations at Sitka National Historical Park. Ethnographic and archaeological collections include Mono Latke Paiute baskets at Yosemite National Park and bullets from Gettysburg National Military Park. Natural collections include a new species of dinosaur at Dinosaur National Monument and a rare tree snail collection at Everglades National Park (see also Figure 2). Take a look at some of the web exhibits featuring NPS museum collections at www.cr.nps.gov/museum to see even more examples.

Keep in mind that without museum records, very little would be known about these diverse collections. The challenge comes in documenting so many different types of items. It requires a broad range of expertise from discipline specialists, such as biologists, historians, and archaeologists.

Another challenge to documentation directly relates to the site-specific nature of the collections. It’s the most important feature of NPS museum collections. By being preserved in place, the collections can create a sense of place. That makes the information about them even more important. What may look very ordinary may have a great story to tell. Someone once said that most museums have the right stuff in the wrong place, but the National Park Service has the right stuff in the right place.

Having the collections on site is great, but documenting those collections under one system is a geographic challenge. The NPS is spread out all over the country, and sites are often in remote areas. Computers have helped tremendously, but getting staff in one place for training is difficult and expensive. Communication between sites, regions, and the Washington office is essential for everyone to be working on one system.

Staffing is still the biggest challenge. Unfortunately, the NPS doesn't have trained curators at every site. Collateral-duty staff may know what to do, but they have little time to work on collection documentation. Others have little knowledge or training in museum records.

NPS staff also move from park to park. As people move, their positions may remain vacant, and the history of the collection may leave along with them.

Given the challenges of size, diversity, geography, and staffing, the NPS has had to come up with some innovative ideas for keeping everyone on the same page. Almost from the beginning, the NPS realized that there had to be some type of servicewide guidelines for museum records. As Ralph Lewis states in *Museum Curatorship in the National Park Service 1904–1982*, “The permanent linking of objects and supporting data necessitates systematic museum records.” Documentation guidelines have evolved over the years, but basically it's been a progression from paper to computer media.



Figure 1. Chief Red Cloud's Shirt, Oglala Sioux, possibly made by Cheyenne, pre-1902, Agate Fossil Beds National Monument (AGFO 439). Photo courtesy of Harpers Ferry Center, NPS.



Figure 2. Miami blue butterfly (*Cyclargus thomasi bethunebakeri*), Everglades National Park (EVER 6501). Photo courtesy of Nancy Russell, Everglades National Park.

The original guidelines took the form of a handbook. The first *Museum Handbook* was in one volume and published in 1967. Its predecessor was the *Field Manual for Museums*, published in 1941. The *Manual for Museums*, published in 1976, was used by many non-NPS museums. In

the 1980s, the notebook format came back into use, and the *Museum Handbook* split into three volumes. Volume I provides guidelines on preservation and protection. Volume II provides guidelines on museum records, and Volume III provides information on access and use of collections. The handbooks have been used in many museology programs and are cited by the American Association of Museums (AAM) in its reference services. The handbooks are constantly being updated, have been rewritten in a plain-language format, and are available on the web at www.cr.nps.gov/museum.

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In 1977, the NPS started to collect all the catalogue records in a central repository called the National Catalog. The park typed a catalogue record with a carbon copy, kept the carbon copy at the park, and sent the original to Harpers Ferry, West Virginia, where the National Catalog is located in a converted bomb shelter. The idea was to have an alternative storage location in case of loss at the park and to eventually aggregate all the data.

In 1985, park museums began using the Automated National Catalog System (ANCS) for cataloguing collections. It was an in-house program that was offered at very low cost (\$25) to other museums. Many museums both here and abroad ordered the system and the manual.

ANCS has evolved into ANCS+, which is a customized commercial software system. Some curators call it one-stop shopping because parks can do almost all of their museum record keeping using the program. All of the required reports and forms are in the program. Other museums that are considering what to put in their own systems frequently contact the NPS to get examples from ANCS+.

A lot of park curator input went into customizing the commercial product. This participation resulted in two things: a huge NPS system because the collections are so diverse, and some really good ideas from field personnel. The company, which is Re:discovery Software, Inc., has adopted these ideas for its non-NPS version of the software. The company sells the NPS-customized version of the program outside the NPS. Some state and local museums are using it. ANCS+ is now on the General Services Administration pricing schedule, which has recently been opened to state, local, regional, and tribal governments.

One of the things that happened with the use of ANCS+ was that parks could now easily search their collection documentation. Information about NPS museum collections suddenly became much more accessible. The dream was to aggregate all the data into one large database, and that database now exists in both Washington, D.C., and Harpers Ferry. For example, the NPS can now quickly answer questions such as, “Does the NPS own a piano made by Clementi that belonged to Alexander Hamilton?” or “Which parks have bat specimens?”

A future goal is for all parks to have catalogue data available on the web for researchers and the general public to search. There is currently a web catalogue that allows parks to purchase services for mounting NPS catalogue records on the web. Users can browse records or do a word search or search specific fields. They can look at brief records or more detailed records or choose to browse only those records with images.

The NPS is also doing museum exhibits on the web that include multiple images of objects or specimens along with exhibit text and actual catalogue data. These exhibits are making some of the more remote collections accessible to other museums and the public, including objects that are in storage.

So what does the future hold for documentation and access? The NPS still has over 55 million items to catalogue—and more being acquired all the time. And museum staff still need to scrub a lot of old data, like lots of museums do. On the bright side, the NPS has now converted all of the catalogue data from over 270,000 old paper records that were created before computerization. Some of these records date back to the 1930s and 1940s. These records have been virtually inaccessible to anyone but park staff.

Of course, NPS museums will have to continue to migrate data as computer technologies change. As they do so, field staff will come up with additional utilities and reports that will be of use to the larger museum community. Parks suggest improvements to the system almost every month.

The NPS museum program will continue to make museum collection data more accessible. There are plans to place archival collections on line. The Teaching with Museum Collections initiative will soon be available on the web. The next version of ANCS+ will be compatible with NPSpecies, the database used by the agency's inventory and monitoring program.

NPS museums celebrated their centennial year in 2004. The progress has been tremendous, but there's plenty to do in the next hundred years. Hopefully, the NPS museum program will continue to come up with innovative ideas for getting it done with increased efficiency and professionalism. Who says documentation is boring?