

Museum Collection Management Program – Database Documentation

Overview

The County of Henrico has a collection of over 40,000 historical artifacts. The collection was established in 1978 with the donation of Meadow Farm, an 1810, 150-acre farm and the entire contents of furnishings, decorative art, farm equipment and family documents. That particular donation consisted of over 20,000 items. In subsequent years the Historic Preservation and Museum Services section of the Henrico Division of Recreation and Parks has served as a repository for any and all historical materials related to the history of Henrico.

With 7 museums furnished with 18th, 19th and early 20th century artifacts in permanent and changing exhibits, the collections management function has grown and developed to keep accurate records using up-to-date technology, which includes recognized and approved museum documentation software. The goal of the county's museum department is to collect, document, preserve and interpret the material culture of previous generations at the highest level of museum standards. The issue of documentation is essential to realizing the full education value of the collection and making that information accessible to the local community and beyond.

The Challenge/Need for Program

The process of artifact documentation is lengthy and on-going. There is an abundance of paperwork and information that is required for the processing of a museum artifact. This information must be retained in an accessible, secure, and accurate format. These are the standard procedures in the museum field for proper stewardship and collection management.

Once an item is officially accepted into the collection, which entails full legal paperwork authenticating County ownership and acquisition information, the item is given a permanent accession number which serves as its object identification number. For each and every artifact, a hard file known as the Object File is created corresponding to the number. Any and all information about the object such as: identification, source, provenance, size and condition is recorded into the Object File. For perpetuity that hard file is kept and added to, as additional research is completed or information is uncovered about that object. That information can include but is not limited to conservation and exhibit history, any moving, re-housing or deterioration is also recorded. Updated condition checks, value, and inventory information must also be retained for every object. The paper Object Files get larger and more cumbersome, making it difficult to obtain the information needed for staff or patrons.

Further complicating the accessibility and management of collections, only about 4% (1780 objects out of 40,000) of the county collection of artifacts is on display in the 7 historic site museums. The remainder is in secured, climate-controlled storage. Approximately 90 % of the collection in storage is inventoried and accounted for (large

archival and archeological collections are still being processed), but accessibility proves challenging.

With artifacts being the tangible link to the past, they are essential to tell the story of those who came before us. They are however very fragile. A successful collections management program allows for the rotation of like objects to insure preservation of artifacts for future generations. Curators and historical interpreters depend on complete database inventories to know what exactly is in the collection. This requires collection staff to know where every artifact is at all times.

In order to facilitate the annually inventory of collections, and to allow and increase accessibility to staff and the public, an automated entry and retrieval system had to be established. Artifacts in a museum collection are in the public trust which means they belong to the people of that particular locale. It is therefore vital to not only establish accountability for each and every artifact, but to also provide supervised access to the artifacts and information about the artifacts to interested parties.

Description of Program

Our collection management initiative, to create complete, accurate and accessible collection records, is a multistep process with some actions completed simultaneously.

- Processing of new acquisitions into the museum collection:
 - Acquisitions: includes transfer of legal title and the creation of a Donor Files.
 - Artifact Processing: includes assigning a unique accession number, cataloging of physical description, condition check, tagging of artifact,

photo documentation, basic cleaning, and housing in archival materials in a permanent location.

- Object File Creation: requires assembling copies or originals of all paperwork and information about each artifact into one hard paper file folder per artifact, and filed by accession number.

- Manual Inventory: a physical “manual” inventory of every object in the museum collection.
 - Inventory is conducted annually for every object on exhibit at the historic house museums and other Division facilities.
 - Inventory of artifacts in storage is conducted on a rolling basis, by housing location and artifact category, such as *Kitchenwares*. Artifacts in storage are assigned a home location, including facility, room, shelving unit, shelf, and box number. As each object is inventoried, it is added into an Excel spreadsheet, which records its accession number, object name, home location, and any condition concerns.

- Phase I Appraisal of artifacts on exhibit: Gathering baseline values for artifacts on exhibit for insurance purposes. Added to Object File.

- Past Perfect Database: All information from new Object Files and manual inventories are added into the database. New information can also be added for

artifact records that are already in the database, such as a new exhibit record or updated condition rating.

The Past Perfect database is a software program specifically designed for museum collections, with individual catalogs for Objects, Library, Photos, and Archives. These catalogs can be used to capture all information about a variety of collections including published works, maps, manuscript collections, archaeology, natural history specimens, photographs, architectural elements, furniture, clothing and textiles, tools, kitchenwares, and other three dimensional objects. Fields are specific to capturing the data needed in museum collection management. The database also offers fields for keywords to aid in research. The database has numerous search and report features, and is very user friendly.

The process of automating collection records will be long, but the County is committed to permanent, consistent and on-going curatorial care and documentation of its historical collection.

Use of Technology

The use of up-to-date technology is essential to allow complete accessibility to artifact information for both the staff and the public. The collection belongs to the citizens of Henrico, and as stewards of the collection it is essential that we not only maintain the artifacts' physical condition at the highest level, but manage, update and share all information associated with the artifacts.

Museum staff works closely with division IT staff to manage and update the software and conduct regular staff training. With staff utilizing current software for PastPerfect and Excel, the use of a Bar Code Scanner, the commitment to setting quotas for data entry and the creation of regular reports, the ultimate goal will allow for virtual tours of the entire museum collection.

Cost of Program

• Past Perfect Software version 1	\$2,150
• Past Perfect Software including upgrade version 5	1,268
• Annual Support (Network Users 11-25)	596
• Inventory Manager upgrade	236
• Data Conversion	160
• Past Perfect training series	<u>119</u>
 Total Expenses	 \$4,529

Volunteer hours were no cost to the program. Most of the equipment was already utilized by the Division. All other expenses were absorbed in house such as office supplies and full time staff hours.

Results and Success of the Program

During Phase I of the project, 20% (8444 out of 40,000) of the collection was added to the Past Perfect Database and is accessible. Staff has been able to create reports for exhibit and program purposes. Searches can also be conducted for research inquiries, publications and to update historic house tour information. Staff's initial goal was to create accessibility to information for all artifacts on display to the public. These are the objects they are the most vulnerable, thus accountability and condition status is essential.

These are also the objects the public inquires about because they are seen regularly. Having information about location, condition and history of each artifact exhibited boosts the museum credibility and assures the public the county is serious about its mission to preserve local history.

During Phase II, which began in Spring of 2012, an additional 998 new artifact records were added to the database, and existing records were updated with new information. Phase II continues with 29 hours a week of staff time devoted to collection database and inventory management. It should be noted that a hold was placed on the actual data entry of the project between Phase I and Phase II while the software company upgraded its database and nomenclature. Artifact processing and documentation, including the manual inventory, continued during that period with no down time in collection management activities and services.

Lasting Community Benefits

Museums are indispensable establishments in our society. They are essentially institutions of higher learning with a recreational component. More people are recognizing the lasting and affordable value of visiting museums and historical attractions. The case can always be made that these places don't provide a life sustaining service to the public; however they do enhance the quality of life by providing the necessary enrichment for personal and intellectual growth that can benefit by all ages. The County's commitment to preserve and interpret its historical collections indicates an assurance to provide educational opportunities to individuals and families now and in the future. The county's steadfast obligation to historical stewardship of collections sets a

precedent that can be easily continued by successive museum professionals, as well as appreciated and enjoyed by the communities of tomorrow.