**Deaccessioning Basics or**

**How to Declutter Your Museum with a Purpose**

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**INTRODUCTION**

One of the scariest words to museum personnel, whether new to the field or with years of experience, is Deaccessioning. This is because it goes against the very nature of museums and what most of us were taught. Museums are meant to house objects and archive materials from the past and present for future generations, so that they can be used for education, exhibits, research, or just a testament to a particular time, place, or event.

What is deaccessioning really? **(SLIDE 2)** According to several online and print sources, deaccessioning is the formal process of permanently removing an object or document from a museum’s collection register, catalogue, or database. While disposal is the physical act of removing an object or document from the organization’s collection or facility via the process dictated in the Collections Management Policy and decided upon by the individual or committee leading the deaccessioning project. This can be in the form of offering the item back to the donor’s family (if you can track them down), transferring to another organization (thereby keeping the donated item or items within the public trust), public sale or auction (usually recommended to be completed a fair distance away - at least two counties - from the organization’s hometown to avoid locals seeing items from the museum collection up for sale), destruction (items that pose a safety or health hazard to other objects or personnel), or simply throwing away (placing items into the trash that are too severely damaged, torn, ripped to be displayed or have no research value).

A few examples of when things can be just tossed without any accompanying numbers are broken dishes in a box, books that are falling apart, stained textiles, or broken records. A couple of years ago, when a fellow curator and I were sorting most of our 78 RPM record collection by recording studio labels in order to inventory and accession them, we heard a loud crack. After looking abound the storage area, we could not immediately see any reason for the noise. We later noticed a few pieces of a record. Two of the records in the middle of a stack had broken. Since they were not accessioned, it was easy to just throw away the pieces of the broken records.

Unfortunately, most small historical museums – especially county historical societies – did not operate under the same policies and procedures we do today. Many of these were begun and operated by well-meaning individuals within the community with a desire to preserve their town or county’s heritage. Many of our current organizations received their start sometime during the 1900s and in the early years were almost exclusively volunteer run organizations without what we would call a “professional curator.” They had no training but rather just set things out for their fellow residents to look at. Labels varied widely by organizations containing all sorts of information for visitors to read. Inventorying and assigning accession numbers to their collections was rarely done or crudely at best.

Here are some examples from the early days of the Wyandot County Archaeological & Historical Society, which was founded in 1929:

1) Receipt book with basic description (a detachable receipt says the item can be retrieved by bringing the receipt back to the museum) This causes another whole set of headaches which could be addressed in another session on abandoned museum property laws. **(SLIDES 3 & 4)**

2) Artifacts with the original “accession number” glued on the front – seriously frowned upon today. In fact, this oil painting depicting the one of the first farmsteads in Wyandot County on display at the Overland has the “accession number” attached to the right side of the image. This shocked an art conservator we brought in to access our collection in 2020. **(SLIDES 5 & 6)**

3) Postcards and paper ephemera were often assigned a number, which was written in ink on the item. Another interesting part of this is that whole collections would just be given the same number (without an A, B, C or a .1, .2, .3, etc.) **(SLIDES 7 & 8)**

However, the majority of items in the early collections received no number on them, have had the number fall off over time due to the label simply being taped to the object, or unfortunately a former curator did not like the labels, so they were removed from an object. This leaves a vast amount of items without their accompanying history. Without provenance, it becomes much more difficult to tell the story or an object or use an image in our exhibits. **(SLIDE 9)**

Why am I talking about bad or non labelling and accessioning of artifacts and documents when this session is about deaccessioning? It is necessary to understand the provenance (aka history of the items) because that influences the method of deaccessioning (which I will later share some examples of how our organization has completed this activity) as well as the disposition of the items, whether by trying to return it to the former owners, transfer to another organization, public sale, or simply tossing the items into the trash. It is much easier to remove an object from the collection that has never been formally accessioned because there are fewer steps necessary to remove it. The number one thing to remember is to leave a paper trail for future museum personnel to follow.

When I was hired at the Wyandot County Museum in 2011, our storage area was wildly unorganized with a variety of cardboard boxes, archival boxes, and other random means of storage (think cigar boxes, plastic ice cream buckets, suitcases, trunks, manilla folders, loose on shelf, etc.). If I was going to inventory the collections, I needed to organize it and know what was there. Having an inventory, or at least an idea of what you have that is relevant to your community, is a necessary early step. **(SLIDES 10 & 11)**

Over the course of the first few years, I was there, a series of activities took place to organize the storage area. I will not go into a lot of detail, but this included building shelves, applying for (and receiving) numerous grants to purchase archival storage materials, and many, many hours of physical work moving and reorganizing the area. Most items were transferred into banker boxes from the random assortment of boxes, simply because they were the same size as traditional archive storage boxes. This made it easier to figure out later special needs. **(SLIDES 12 & 13)**

With the assistance of my fellow curators (Robin Conley and Sarah Fisher) we began to compile handwritten lists of items in the numerous boxes beginning in the winter of 2018-2019. It soon became apparent that we had quite a bit of non-Wyandot County related material in our storage area. There were expected items from surrounding counties and throughout Ohio (both paper and three-dimensional objects) as well as some more unusual pieces of ephemera (Elvis’ death, Nixon’s resignation, and the Kennedy assassinations) which were taking up valuable storage space but would most likely never be displayed. It was during this organizational period that we realized our textile, clothing, and uniform collections were badly comingled and needed to be sorted. Many items were stored in cardboard boxes lined with aluminum foil.

We were lucky in that our Board had recently undertaken the process of evaluating and updating the Society’s policies circa 2015-2017. This included the Collections Management Policy featuring updated deaccessioning procedures. I will say that this last piece was guided in part by what was already written as well as my over 20 years of experience working in and for museums across the country. This resulted in a renewed focus of telling the story of Wyandot County with local objects including the idea of removing non-local materials from the collections.

Again, why am I mentioning this? – It is because one of the first things you need to complete a successful deaccessioning project is Board of Directors buy-in. Ultimately, they will make the final decisions regarding the status of objects. It does not matter whether you have a committee working on the project, an individual such as the Curator-Director-Registrar, etc., they can only compile a recommendation list of items to be removed from the collections and present it for discussion and a final vote. I will mention that I feel very lucky that our Board trusted my judgement (as well as that of my fellow curator Sarah Fisher) to make recommendations that were in the best interests of the organization.

So, once you have an idea of what is in your collections, what you want to remove, have Board approval to conduct a deaccessioning project, have a well-written procedure to follow, and have identified the personnel to complete it, how do you actually do it?

There is truly not a real “one-size fits all” method to completing a deaccessioning project. Since all organizations vary slightly in their focus, and the makeup of collections are vastly different across the board, it is necessary to figure out what will work best for your organization.

Here are some basics steps to remember: **(SLIDE 14)**

1) **Collections Management Policy** (Updated with Deaccessioning Policies Spelled Out)

2) **Board of Directors Buy-In** (Necessary to Face Potential Public Backlash)

3) **Inventory** (A Basic Knowledge of What You Have and Wish to Dispose)

4) **Time and Personnel** (These Projects Are Not Quick and Simple – Identify Who Will Actually Do It and When)

5) **Paperwork** (Keep Track of Items Being Removed – Whether They are Accessioned or Not, and List Why You Wish to Remove Them)

6) **Board Approval** (Once Items Have Been Targeted for Removal, Present the List to the Board for a Yes or No Vote)

7) **Record Keeping** (Once the Final List is Approved – Place a Copy with the Secretary Minutes or Other Permanent Records Kept by Your Organization)

8) **Removal of Objects** (Via Transfer, Sale – Remember to Follow Ethics Policy, or Trash)

Before I share a few quick examples of how our organization has deaccessioned items from our collections over the past few years, I thought I might discuss some basic information about the items to include on your preliminary deaccession list. We started with a handwritten list and later transferred the information to an Excel file, which we shared with the Board. This information aids the Board in making its final decision. We also laid out the items for removal so they could examine them prior to the Board meeting. **(SLIDE 15)**

1) **Accession Number(s)** (Any and all numbers you find associated with the items because this helps you look up the item’s history)

2) **Basic Description** (A simple description to identify the item)

3) **Date Accessioned** (Can be found in the collections register or accession forms and gives an idea as to how long the item has been in the collection)

4) **Reason For Deaccession** (A simple note such as broken, stained, single item of a pair, damaged, transfer, etc. allowing the Board to know why you think it is beyond keeping)

5) **Who Is Making the Recommendation** (The name of the Curator or Committee Supervisor making the assessment)

6) **Date Recommended** (The date the item was reviewed and/or moved out of the collections while awaiting a decision on its disposition)

7) **Location of Item** (A note of where the item was moved to - a Transfer/Deaccession location separate from the main collections)

8) **How To Dispose of Item** (The recommendation for Transfer, Sale, Trash, etc. of the item)

**CASE STUDY #1**

I will now briefly share an example of how our organization processed the Clothing, Textiles, and Uniform collections during the winter of 2019-2020. I was assisted by Curator Sarah Fisher following the end of our Christmas programs in December. We began by moving every box of materials we could find from the Attic Storage Area to the first floor Parlor. We also moved clothing and textiles from closets, dressers, trunks, etc. throughout the Beery/McConnell Home. This helped alleviate some of the stress from the exhibit furniture as well. **(SLIDE 16)**

Each box was opened, the contents reviewed, and then consolidated with similar items. We labeled boxes for women’s, men’s, children’s clothing, accessories, purses, hats, gloves, etc. At the same time, each object was examined and added to a hand-written inventory list for each box. If the item was ripped, torn, stained, or otherwise damaged, it was placed in a large plastic storage tote designated to hold potential deaccession items. The item description (and any corresponding accession number) was added to the hand-written list along with the reason for potential disposal. **(SLIDE 17)**

One example was a box of 29 white cotton bloomers, all virtually identical with slight variations on the leg lace. Only a couple had any identifying number on them but around 14 or so were badly stained, had rips in the fabric, lace was missing or loose. We decided due to the amount of repetition to place the worst items in the disposal pile. After informing the Board of our intentions, permission was granted to throw away any items not accessioned that we felt had outlived their usefulness. As we had been given permission to “use our best judgement” these items soon found their way to a trash bag which contained numerous other severely damaged clothing items.

This continued for several months until the COVID-19 shut down in March. By then, we had gone through nearly every box, sorted like items, and had begun the process of accessioning, tagging, and entering the data into our PastPerfect 5.0 computer database. The items we decided to deaccession were typed into an excel file while the clothing, textiles, and associated accessories were laid out on tables for the Board to examine prior to voting on our recommendations. After little discussion, the Board approved the deaccession list and a copy of the Excel file was printed and added to the Secretary’s Book, which a copy of is kept in the Museum Office. The items for the most part were then placed in the trash with a few items transferred to other local historical societies. **(SLIDE)**

On a side note, I will mention that it seems 2020 and its associated shut down was a time many institutions utilized for organizing their collections and numerous deaccession projects took place across the nation. Not having visitors or public programs allowed many institutions the ability to focus on their collections, often neglected due to lack of time. We have been the recipient of numerous deaccessioned items related to Wyandot County from other organizations as well.

**CASE STUDY # 2**

While inventorying the collection of Technical Sergeant John Kear, a United States Army Air Forces photographer during World War Two, a box containing several 35 mm films and film rolls (some with their original boxes). We noticed a rather pungent odor emanating from the collection and soon realized it was coming from the filmstrips, some of which had started to solidify. After conducting some research into film used at the time, we soon realized that these were most likely highly flammable nitrite films, which had begun the process of decomposition, and the rotten egg smell was them off gassing. After consulting with Board members and the local fire department, it was decided that the best course of action to protect the remaining collections, building, and museum personnel was to immediately remove these items. They were taken by Board members to the fire station to be destroyed. A record of the items that were destroyed was added to the inventory of the Kear Collection with the notation that they had been deaccessioned and the date this occurred. In this case it was best for the immediate removal of the objects with the paperwork to be completed after. This has been the case in other institutions that have found live artillery shells in their collections.

**CASE STUDY # 3**

During the winter of 2020-2021, I was again assisted by Sarah Fisher with a project to organize, inventory, and deaccession part of the Wyandot County Historical Society’s archive collection**.**

There were random photographs, cabinet cards, books, papers, postcards, newspapers, deeds, music booklets, magazines, etc. in boxes of varying size or just sitting on shelves. We began the process of organizing and soon discovered hundreds of postcards and cabinet cards from locations through Ohio and the United States; dozens of Lion Coffee cards from Toledo; books literally falling apart, and ledger books from businesses in other counties. These items would not help us tell the story of Wyandot County and it was decided (again with permission to forge ahead on the project by our Board) to remove most of these items as we began the process of inventorying, assigning accession numbers, and labelling the archival materials we wished to keep. **(SLIDE 18)**

Sarah and I later sorted the piles of postcards, photographs, and small pieces of ephemera by Ohio counties and other states. We sorted the photographs in folders by general descriptions (transportation, schools, sports, agriculture, etc.). **(SLIDE 19)**

A preliminary hand-written list was made of the books we wished to dispose of. Many had never been assigned numbers and these were taken to the local recycling center rather than tossed in a trash can. This was completed with the knowledge of and assistance by members of our Board. Again, a formal list had been compiled and typed to be presented to our Board for proper removal of the accessioned items prior to any disposal activities taking place.

Several banker boxes were filled with materials to be transferred to other historical institutions. The postcards, images, and other small paper items to be removed were placed into small envelopes or manilla folders tagged with the county or state name on them. I was given permission by the Board to mail out these items and began to create a typed list of the computer of each item to be sent, even if it was not formally accessioned.A copy of this list was placed in our Secretary’s Book. **(SLIDES 20 & 21)**

I wrote an accompanying note on letterhead from our Society to the receiving institution informing them of our project; why they were receiving these postcards, cabinet cards, letters, envelopes, etc.; and transferring ownership of the items to do with as they wished. **(SLIDE 22)** This has worked both ways as our organization received unsolicited items from many other historical societies (Hancock, Hardin, Marion, Shelby, Fostoria, and Galion) as well as Ohio History Connection to name a few. I personally transferred a box of items to the Seneca County Historical Society several years ago, when I spoke to their staff and volunteers about museum procedures.

Most of the items not processed for mailing yet were placed in boxes and moved to a Transfer Processing Station in the Attic Storage Area. **(SLIDE 23)** We still have several boxes of materials to transfer as this is a constant project. I utilized the assistance of an intern, who created hand-written lists of materials to be mailed out. The task of deaccessioning materials is daunting at first, but once you have a procedure in place, with repetition it becomes easier to remove items, especially if you are transferring them to fellow institutions. We could all use extra storage space plus you can save money and supplies by housing only those items which help your organization tell its specific story. **(SLIDE 24)**

Today, many of us have collecting policies which allow us to try not to bring everything and anything into our museums as they did in the past. Deaccessioning is a great way to correct several of the challenges created by our predecessors, many of which never had the formal training (or access to it) we have today. This way, those following us will have an easier task to share the history and heritage of our great communities in northwest Ohio.