

## II. Discourse on the History of Archaeology

### MUSEUM RECORDS AND THE HISTORY OF ARCHAEOLOGY

by

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#### Introduction

One cannot help but think of museums when contemplating the history of archaeology. For those of us who work in museums, contact with past research and former ways of thinking about and doing archaeology happens on almost a daily basis. Not only do museum collections contain the information and things collected by older colleagues, these materials embody the thoughts, theories, methodologies, and techniques of these individuals and of the discipline's past paradigms.

The records associated with museum collections are one major class of records made by archaeologists in the course of their research, and are distinct from scholar's personal papers. Museum records contain invaluable information for understanding not only the work of individual archaeologists, but detailed information on the practice of archaeology. Introspective studies of the discipline using museum records have the potential to significantly broaden our perspectives, especially regarding the conduct of field research, but getting access to these records is often a problem due to poor management.

A primary task of the Society for American Archaeology's Committee on the History of Archaeology is to plan for better management of the discipline's archival materials. At present, some records are inaccessible because they have not been placed in professional repositories. Others are in repositories, but are often difficult to find and use. A problem for many repositories is that staff are faced with a jumbled assortment of records with no defined path for creating order out of the chaos. Stories also abound about highly significant materials that have been destroyed by

repositories that did not understand the nature and importance of the records.

This paper discusses the potential of museum records for historical research and suggests an organizational scheme that may help repositories better manage these records. The organizational scheme was conceptualized in conjunction with a project to increase the accessibility of the archaeological records curated by the New York State Museum.

### What Are Museum Records?

Museum records are distinguishable from scholars' personal papers, although both types of records result from the career of any archaeologist who is involved in fieldwork. In general, museum records specifically document collections of artifacts and specimens. Personal papers do not relate to specific collections of objects, and may include materials such as lecture notes, general correspondence, and drafts of presented and published papers that provide syntheses or broad perspectives on research (e.g. those papers that do not report the results of specific field projects). While there are some gray areas in distinguishing these two types of records, such distinctions usually can be readily made.

Museum records provide information critical for use of and continuing research with the artifacts and specimens, as well as legalistic information regarding the circumstances under which the repository acquired these materials. Museum records are so integral to the use of these objects that the standards, recently issued by the National Park Service (NPS), for care of federal archaeological collections define an archaeological collection as the material remains recovered in the course of fieldwork (e.g. artifacts and specimens) and associated records. Museum records need to be curated where they can be used in conjunction with the related collections of objects and samples – that is, in a museum or other repository that provides care for collections of archaeological artifacts and specimens. In contrast, since the personal papers of individual scholars do not directly document collections of artifacts and specimens, these records may be curated by a non-museum archive using standard archival description and arrangement techniques.

Museum records include documentation about the specific archaeological contexts, identifications, and treatments of artifacts and specimens, as well as information concerning the conduct of the field projects that collected the objects. The NPS standards define the records associated with archaeological collections as records "that are prepared, assembled, and document efforts to locate, evaluate, record, study, preserve, or recover a prehistoric or historic resource." Such records include, for example: field notes, forms, and maps; photographic records; project-related correspondence; paperwork concerning project logistics or acquisition of a collection from another individual or institution (e.g. Deeds of Gift transferring title to the museum; antiquities permits; correspondence related to obtaining landowner permission for investigations, etc.); artifact catalogs; records from specialist analyses of artifacts or samples (e.g. identifications of faunal refuse bones, results of radiocarbon dating, etc.); archival records related to background research for a field project (e.g. historical maps, drawings, photographs of the project area or site); and project specific reports (e.g. site reports, reports of specialist analyses, etc.). Many of these records are systematically cross-referenced to artifacts and specimens through a numbering or cataloging system. It is often the case that such records are intelligible only to persons initiated to archaeological recording systems.

### Research Potential for the History of Archaeology

The major, present use of museum records is continuing research concerning problems of site interpretations and regional culture history. Research about the development of archaeology as a discipline and the careers of individual scholars are certainly avenues of research that also should tap these records. Museum records "lay bare" individual fieldwork and recording styles. These records provide direct insight to the kinds of information considered important enough to record by particular scholars, chronicle experimentation and variation in field techniques, and document networking and personal contacts related to collections acquisitions. While individual "sets" of museum records are specific to particular research projects (and by extension reflect mainly the influence of individual principal investigators), diachronic and

cross-regional comparisons of, for example, field techniques, could help explain the development of regional research traditions.

As a somewhat tongue-in-cheek example of the kinds of historical questions that could be asked of museum records, we can consider the lowly, excavation "level form." Archaeologists have not always used standardized forms for recording excavations, nor are the same types of forms used by all archaeologists. How, then, did the use of standardized forms develop? Does the variation in forms reflect the regional character of the archaeological record, research emphases, or personal idiosyncrasies? Given the propensity of standardized forms to highly structure the nature of collected data, it may prove enlightening to investigate the formation processes of archaeological forms. Investigation of the history of "formology" in archaeology may well lead to a better understanding of the development of modern field recording techniques in general. In the meantime, where does a student get information on out-dated recording techniques (e.g. the old "trench system" for provenience recording, or older grid systems using base lines and center lines)? Such information is often critical to being able to use older collections for research. At present, much of this type of information appears to be oral history.

### Managing Museum Records

Accessibility is a major problem in using museum records for any type of research. Records management techniques are not well developed, and problems with curation of these records are related to the chronic curation problems of all archaeological collections (cf. Christenson 1979; Ford 1977; Marquardt et al 1982; Trimble and Meyers 1991). Management and care of collections has simply not been a priority of the archaeological profession. Museums, too, are guilty of often placing collections care as secondary to exhibits and public programs. This situation is beginning to change as a result of a number of forces including: the NPS standards; federal legislation regarding archaeological collections of Native American materials; efforts by the Society for American Archaeology's committee; a growing interest by professional archivists in archaeological records (Kenworthy et al 1985); and availability of funding for collections management from programs like that of the National

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## Science Foundation's (NSF) Systematic Anthropological Collections Program.

A recent project undertaken to organize the archaeological collections curated by the New York State Museum (NYSM) provided an opportunity to confront the problems of managing museum records. The NYSM is a 150 year old institution that has either been "home" to or curates collections made by a number of distinguished archaeologists including Arthur C. Parker, M. R. Harrington, and William Ritchie. It also serves as the repository for collections resulting from many CRM-related projects. The archaeological collections include an estimated 1,000,000 objects and 210 linear feet of associated records with state-wide coverage. As such, the NYSM's archaeological collections are the most extensive for the State of New York, and represent a century and a half of archaeological research in the Northeast.

Work with the records was the second phase of a more comprehensive project to generally upgrade the accessibility of the NYSM'S archaeological collections. The first phase, sponsored by NSF, completed an inventory of the artifacts and specimens. A computerized database was created during this phase to assist in managing the collections. This database includes summary information for specific collections (e.g. accession number, catalog numbers, site name and location, collector or donor's name, etc.) as well as generalized artifact/specimen descriptions and the storage locations of these items. This inventory also provided a preliminary listing of the collections for which the museum should have records, and formed the basis of a published guide to the archaeological collections in the NYSM's holdings (Sullivan et al 1990).

The major goal of the second phase of the project, also sponsored by NSF, was to make the archaeological records curated by the NYSM accessible for research. These records had never been systematically organized. Records pertaining to particular projects and/or collections of artifacts and specimens were not centralized or inventoried. Instead, one might find the artifact catalog in one place and photos or maps in another. There was no way to determine what kinds of records existed for a given project or collection, or to easily find where the records were stored. Another goal was to improve the storage conditions of the records. These conditions did not approach archival standards, as records were stored in an

assortment of acidic paper folders and wooden storage cabinets that had not been treated for off-gassing.

The NYSM project developed a hierarchical system for records organization that may prove useful for other repositories faced with similar problems of records accessibility. The first level in this organizational system is the accession number. A collection that a museum has agreed to curate is referred to as an accession. Normally, when a collection is brought into a museum, it is assigned a unique accession number which is used for tracking the collection. In the case of the NYSM records, matching records with appropriate collections was not a simple task. The only clues as to which accession a record belonged were the actual contents of the records (names, dates, subjects being discussed) and in the case of artifact catalogs, the catalog numbers. When two or more individuals had "worked" the same site and records contained no catalog numbers or clues as to name or date, techniques such as comparison of handwriting were necessary for determining to which specific project the records belonged.

The second level of organization is by type of record. Four general categories were used: (1) administrative records; (2) fieldwork records; (3) laboratory and analytical records; and (4) publication records. Table 1 describes specific kinds of records included in each category at the end of this paper. Within the four major categories, where appropriate, records are filed as to type. For example, in the laboratory and analytical records category for each accession there may be several files, each including one set of records. One file may contain an artifact catalog, another may contain an inventory of seeds prepared by a botanical specialist, or another may be a file of radiocarbon dating results. Records with special storage needs (e.g. photographs, slides, and oversized maps and charts) are stored in the same room with the other records, but in appropriate files and cabinetry.

The four main categories and the special categories were added as fields for each accession in the computerized collections management database. Entry of a storage location code for a record category indicates to database users that records of that category are present for a specific accession, and where these records may be found. While this system does not provide precise information as to the kinds of records present for a particular collection, it is

sufficient to advise a user as to whether the kind of record he or she is seeking may be present and, if so, where to look.

### Summary

Museum records embody valuable information for the history of archaeology as well as documentation for collections of archaeological artifacts and specimens. Museum records are distinct from scholarly "personal papers" and require a different type of records management than these latter more "standard" archival materials. Museum records need to be curated where they can be used with the related collections of artifacts and specimens. Management plans for archiving archaeological documents need to consider these broad distinctions in the kinds of records generated by professional archaeologists.

Managing archaeology's paperwork is not an insurmountable task, but correcting past deficiencies is never simple. The accessibility of museum records can be greatly improved by using a hierarchical scheme to file records related to individual field projects or collection acquisitions. Records are filed first by the project or acquisition, then by record type. Special storage conditions can and should be created for photographic and oversize materials. Computerized database management systems can assist with cross-referencing records to collections of artifacts and specimens, and to other related records. Creating this type of order for older records is not easy, especially in cases where records are not labeled as to date or project. To avoid this problem in the future, archaeologists should take care to make sure records are adequately labeled during fieldwork and analytical phases of a research project.

Museum records are an important legacy we leave for future generations. Let's hope the future generation of historians of archaeology not only have some positive things to say about what we did, but can find the materials necessary to say something.

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Acknowledgements. Susan Bender provided the impetus for this paper and discussions with her, Ed Curtin and Lisa Anderson added significantly to the ideas presented here. Table 1 originally was



**Table 1.**  
**CLASSIFICATION STRUCTURE OF DOCUMENTS**  
**New York State Museum**

**ADMINISTRATIVE RECORDS:**

- Grant Proposals
- Project Administration
- Collection Acquisition Information
  - deed of gift
  - bill of sale
- Statement about Gift, Sale or Loan
- Letter or Memo Concerning Ownership/Sale/Loan

**FIELDWORK RECORDS:**

- Field Notes, Maps, Plans, Drawings
- Logs of Surveys or Trips to Meet Collectors, Landowners, or Others Involved with the Logistics of Field Work
- Photocopies of USGS Topographic Maps Showing Site Locations

**LABORATORY AND ANALYTICAL RECORDS:**

- Artifact Catalogs
- Data Compilations
  - tables or graphs
  - analytical maps, such as
    - catchment analysis maps
    - transformed artifact density maps
    - spatial distributions maps
- Specialist Reports
  - faunal/floral/ceramic/lithic/soils
  - radiocarbon dates
- Post-Fieldwork Data and Records
- Analytical Components of Research

**PUBLICATION RECORDS:**

- Publications
- Publication Drafts
- Unpublished Reports or Drafts Thereof
- Contract Reports
- Grant Reports
- Publication Related Correspondence (e.g. copyright information)