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COLLECTIONS

Advisor



Martin Collection, Indiana Historical Society, cropped from original

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Numbering Systems:
How Many Are Too Many?
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I was hired in 2008 to take charge of the collections at the Montgomery County Historical Society in Crawfordsville. In the late 1930s, MCHS acquired a historic house, Lane Place, containing many original pieces dating to the early- to mid-1800s. Lane Place was built and named in 1845 by Henry S. Lane, former governor and senator of Indiana, and his wife, Joanna Elston Lane. The house opened to the public in 1931 but was not officially a museum until the 1940s.

When I began delving into the collection, I discovered a nonstandard and confusing numbering system. Most of the artifacts had been numbered and cataloged with a "55." prefix, regardless of origin (provenance). The artifacts had not arrived in 1955; the museum was not founded in 1955. After investigation, the basis of the "55." prefix became clear. When the Association of Indiana Museums conducted an inventory in 1978, MCHS was specified as "Museum #55." The staff and volunteers later



Part of the 73-piece set of Staffordshire china, 1947.1, in the process of renumbering.

numbered the objects with a “55.” prefix followed by the next available number instead of utilizing a form of the serial number that the item was assigned in the AIM inventory. So, a fainting couch was cataloged as 55.179 and a pitcher, 55.989 with no explanation of what the numbers meant. To address this issue, I decided that where applicable, the objects would be renumbered to reflect their provenance. I established a three-part number – year of donation, source of donation, then object number.

Many of the catalog records in fact captured a source and sometimes even a year of donation. For more answers, I scoured old board meeting minutes for mentions of donations and was able to identify other objects. If the source and the date were both known, then these items were renumbered accordingly with a four-digit year prefix, then source, then object, for example: 1947.1.73 (one dish out of a set of Staffordshire china with 73 pieces.)

The set of china, originally numbered 55.915, had been cataloged with the source cited and its arrival in the 1950s. I began the quest for more information by reading through many years of board meeting minutes starting with 1950. I learned that the catalog record was incorrect when I had to delve even farther back and discovered that the china was actually donated in 1947. I assigned the china the number 1947.1 using the new information. That was phase one; phase two was renumbering the 73 pieces in the set, from teacups to vegetable dishes with lids and ladles to platters. Phase three was updating the records in the database. Phase four was simply a sense of satisfaction!

If I found an object that had an associated donor but could not determine when it had arrived, I created a similar numbering sequence. Using the same formula of year, source and object number, I substituted the four-digit year with a simple “00.” prefix. For example, a piece of fabric was sent to Company M of the 11th Indiana Volunteers who served during the Spanish American War. The soldiers signed their names and sent the cloth



Embroidered cloth with signatures by Crawfordsville men of Company M of the 158th Indiana Volunteers during the Spanish-American War, now assigned 00.9.1.

back to Indiana. These signatures were then embroidered in either red or blue thread. Although the piece never received a “55.” number, it was listed in the 1978 AIM inventory with the source. It was framed and at some point donated to MCHS. I numbered it 00.9.1.

Like at any museum, not every single collection item came with information, much less any paperwork. In these cases, I kept the “55.” numbers for items associated with materials from the original occupants of the house, the Lanes and their family members, and for objects found in the collection that I could not prove otherwise.

There is no ideal numbering system; each organization must determine for itself an appropriate method. Discovering provenance is not only helpful with numbering systems but it can provide answers to as yet unasked questions like, “My great-grandmother gave a gizmo to your museum about 40 years ago. Do you still have it?”

If records, old inventories or catalog cards do not resolve this problem, then seek out board meeting minutes and/or collections committee notes for possible solutions. Be aware that this is a time-consuming and often nonlinear process. Be sure to keep careful records of why changes to numbering systems are made to avoid confusion in the future.

If in-house data, books and online resources find you asking more questions, you can always seek out colleagues in the field for helpful insight, or perhaps even a healthy debate. The Connecting to Collections online community, AASLH Small Museum listserv and Museum-L are excellent resources to ask questions and to enter into discussions about collections care.

Resources:

- **Collection Conundrums: Solving Collections Management Mysteries** by Rebecca A. Buck and Jean Allman Gilmore
- **Things Great and Small: Collections Management**

Policies by John E. Simmons

- The AAM Guide to Provenance Research by Nancy H. Yeide, Amy Walsh and Konstantin Akinsha
- Association of Indiana Museums (AIM) www.indianamuseums.org
- Connecting to Collections Online community www.connectingtocollections.org
- Indiana History Society Lending Resources Center www.indianahistory.org/our-services/local-history-services/lending-resources
- Museum-L www.finalchapter.com/museum-l-faq
- American Association of Museums Registrars Committee (RC-AAM) www.rcaam.org

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