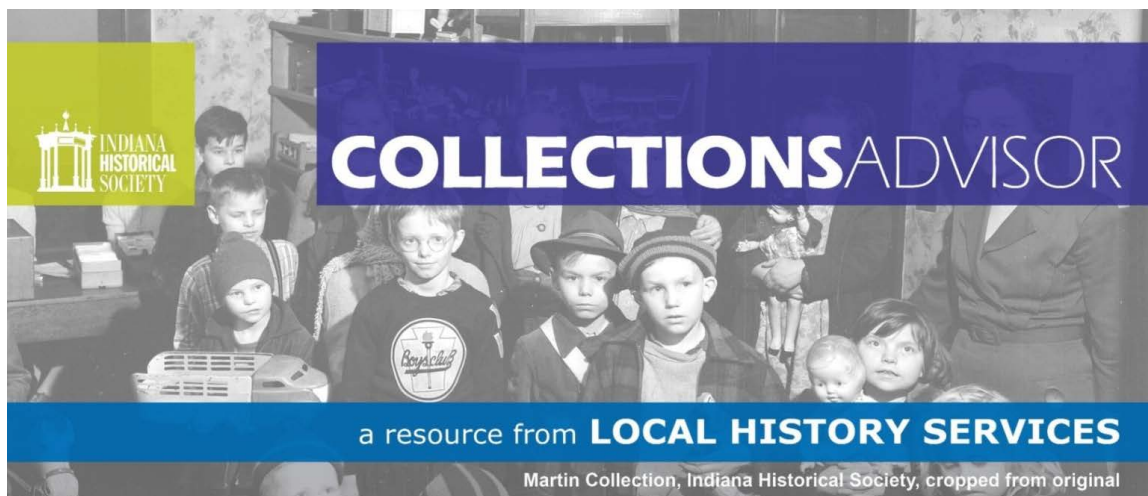




[The publication is a service of the Connecting to Collections project.](#)



Issue 40, February 2015

## Stewardship of Collections Case Study

by Cherie Cook, senior program manager, [American Association for State and Local History](#)

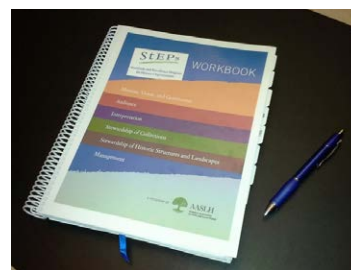
Who knew before working or volunteering at a museum or historic site that caring for collections could be so complicated? Ethical issues, legal questions and unique situations with donors, plus recordkeeping and physical care, are all in a day's work. As the story below of the fictional Middletown Historical Society illustrates, a variety of situations can (and will) arise within your own organization. Like a good Boy or Girl Scout, be prepared. Make sure your house is in order and paid and unpaid staff are knowledgeable about what it means to hold collections in public trust.

The [StEPs program](#) (Standards and Excellence Program for History Organizations) can help everyone within your organization, including board members, learn more about their role in collections management. Currently there are 650 organizations nationwide enrolled in the program, 19 of which are in Indiana.

The case study below is an excellent way to start the stewardship of collections discussion in your own organization. Use the questions that follow and the list of Unacceptable Practices to inform your discussion of the case study and how it could apply to your own organization.

### Case Study: Middletown Historical Society

As a former curator, Grace Duffy was confident that MHS would be able to move through the collections standards relatively quickly. One rainy afternoon, she sat down with Barbara Smith, the executive director, Tom Hughes, the longtime volunteer curator, and two enthusiastic members of the collections committee: Susan Childs, a lawyer, and Frank Robbins, owner of a local antique store. All appeared ready to begin the process. Grace had copies of a collections management policy she wrote for another organization, some publications from AASLH on collections management, and



The Stewardship of Collections case study is drawn from the StEPs workbook, a program of the American Association for State and Local History.

catalogs from vendors of acid-free storage materials in her tote bag. She noticed that Tom had a stack of papers in front of him, which seemed to be summaries of the collections.

Pencil poised over the open *StEPs* handbook, Grace asked if everyone had read the standards. Susan Childs cleared her throat and offered, "Grace, I think we need to start with the 'unacceptable practices.'" Tom Hughes, the volunteer curator, crossed his arms and sat back in his chair. He and Susan often disagreed in board meetings and another confrontation seemed inevitable.

"I can think of at least three of these guidelines we've violated," Susan explained. "Last year we returned a trade sign we removed from the carriage house to the grandchildren of the donor. They said if it wasn't going to be displayed, they wanted it back. I don't think we actually deaccessioned it. I know Tom often sends donors down to Frank for informal valuations of their donations. And Elizabeth Rogers borrowed a tea set for her mother's 75th birthday party. I think it is part of the collection. I remember when it was donated." With their attention drawn to the list, the others continued the conversation. "We use pewter plates for our school program – they are definitely in the collection. I know it didn't seem that the kids could do any damage, but they have gotten banged up over the years," Frank observed, "and yes, I do appraisals all the time. There's really no one else in town who can do them."

Barbara Smith started to speak quietly. "This has been bothering me. Mrs. Everson – I think she's a Waterman niece; she lives in Chicago – gave us those wing chairs in the parlor last year. She said they belonged to George Waterman and that's what the house guides say on the tour. But I've looked at them carefully. They are definitely early 20th century reproductions. Maybe they belonged to his grandson, who was also George Waterman. I've tried to get the guides to stop saying it, but she's promised us a large bequest. Ed [board president] was very angry with me and told me to drop it. It's just two chairs, but Ed made me feel like I could lose my job if I made an issue of it, but now that we're talking about this Mrs. Everson gave us other things as well that I haven't had a chance to research."

Grace shook her head back and forth slowly. "Well, we've opened up the can of worms, let's continue. Do we have any Native-American materials?"

"Sure," said Tom, "but if we don't get any federal money, do we still have to do [NAGPRA](#) stuff?"

"Wait, doesn't the grant for the reading series we co-sponsor with the library come from the state humanities council? I think that's federal money," Frank observed.

Grace began to realize just how much work was ahead of the committee. She looked at Barbara and said, "Where should we begin?"

#### Case Study Group Discussion Questions

1. Has the historical society really been unethical?
2. Whose responsibility is it to "fix" these unacceptable practices?
3. Where might they begin?
4. Where might Grace and Barbara (or whoever works on this) encounter difficulties?
5. What's the right approach to this problem?
6. What resources are available to them?

## 7. What's a reasonable short-term goal?

### Unacceptable Practices

While many appropriate policies and practices are described in the [AASLH Statement of Professional Standards and Ethics](#) and the [AAM Standards and Best Practices](#), there are unacceptable practices that may occur within history organizations that require special attention. The following list addresses practices that are unethical and in some cases illegal.

Collections in history museums, historic houses and other history organizations are held in the public trust. Caring for collections is therefore critical work, making collections misuse a serious violation. This includes:

- Personal use of artifacts and archival items by any individual for any reason.
- Performing irreversible cleaning, restoration or other procedures on a collection item, such as applying an accession number in a permanently damaging manner, or mechanical or chemical cleaning, unless performed by a professionally trained conservator.
- Institutional sale of collections material for short-term museum needs.
- Use of funds from deaccessioning for anything other than acquisition of new collections or **direct care** and conservation of existing collections.
- Individual use of, or dealing in collections by staff or volunteers by gift, purchase or loan for personal gain.
- Failure to establish clear ownership of a potential artifact or archives donation prior to acceptance into the collection.
- Inattention to national and international regulations with regard to collections items including, but not limited to, antiquities, Nazi-era loot, and Native American remains, funerary objects, sacred objects or objects of cultural patrimony.
- Providing **appraisals** to outside parties on items for any reason.
- Misrepresentation of a collection item's origin, history or condition.
- Use of collections (beyond reasonable handling as part of collections processing and exhibition) in a manner that threatens their preservation unless designated as part of the **hands-on** or **teaching collection**.

### **Resources**

[AASLH StEPs program](#)

[AASLH sample collections management documents](#)

[AAM Collections Stewardship](#)

[NAGPRA resources for museums](#)

[AAM Standards and Best Practices](#)

[AASLH Statement of Professional Standards and Ethics](#)



This publication from the Indiana Historical Society is a service of the

Hoosier Heritage Alliance. This project is made possible by a grant from the U.S. Institute of Museum and Library Services.

**This is a free publication. Anyone may subscribe.**

Collections Advisor is provided for the benefit of local historical societies and museums throughout Indiana. It is emailed to a subscriber list maintained by the [Local History Services](#) department of the Indiana Historical Society, 450 W. Ohio St., Indianapolis, IN 46202, (317) 232-1882.