

INVENTORYING AND CATALOGING MUSEUM ARTIFACTS (A Primer)

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BASIC PRINCIPLES

- Inventorying museum artifacts is the process of systematically assigning a unique number to every artifact, locating the artifact within the building and matching the artifact with its historical or legal documentation. Inventorying organizes and establishes a collection.
- A computer database is THE link between the actual object and its written or photographic documentation. The database becomes a useful tool when it can consistently tell you where the object and its documentation files both are.
- Unlike a library, location, description and a unique number organize museum artifacts. For a museum artifact collection to work there must be a unique number that joins the object to its paper record file and its computer database of information. What that number is, is not as important as that the same number appears on the object, the paper files and in the database. The worst thing is to have a different number on the object from the number on the paper file or in the database.
- Accessioning artifacts is the process of adding artifacts to a collection.
- Circumscribe the material and physical areas of the inventory project. To do this, first identify every artifact storage space and if possible consolidated the areas into the smallest number. If you have five aprons in one closet and six in another try to put all eleven in just one. In other words, it's hard to count cattle when they are roaming all over the range. Do a roundup and get them in one field before you count. Do the same with all objects written documents.

BEFORE YOU INVENTORY

- A. Physically identify where all artifacts for inventorying are.
 - All rooms, all cabinets, drawers, and closets where artifacts are stored.
 - Are there artifacts stored off-site or on loan to other organizations or lodges?
 - Are there artifacts displayed in administration offices, hallways, or apartments?
- B. Has the artifacts ever been inventoried before?
 - Do any of the artifacts have numbers written on them, or tagged with numbers?
 - Are there any files or card catalogs that list the items and who donated them to the museum?
- C. Limit the goals of the inventory project.
 - The purpose of an inventory is to quantify what your museum holds, where it is located and to link it by numbers to documents.

- If you attempt to create more than three or four goals the process will bog down in details. After you have unified the physical artifacts with the files and the database, then you can always go back and add more information.

INVENTORYING

A. Establish a numbering system that uniquely identifies each artifact.

Accessioning objects is the process of assigning unique numbers to artifacts,

Most museums use a three-part system:

“Year + Order of Accession + Item in Accession”

- 1999.025.006 = the 6th artifact in the 25th gift of 1999.
- 2001.002.001 = First (and perhaps only) artifact in the second donation of 2001. (Zeros are added before numbers to better sort within databases.)

Why use three-part system?

- Because it is easy to insert or add artifacts to a donation.
- It is easier to keep track of donations by year and date of acquisition.
- The lower the number the easier it is to maintain uniqueness. It is easier to remember that the next number to use is “10” rather than “2,158”

EXAMPLES

- You have a donor who is continually bringing things in to the museum, rather than scattering his donations through out several accession numbers you can just add them to them to his first donation.
- Also, say you find a box of aprons and you number them 1-10, then you catalog several gavels 11-20. Several days later after you are up to number 116 of different artifacts you come across a letter telling you that the 10 aprons were part of a donation of 2 jewels, 2 badges and 2 truncheons. Two months later when you are up to the numbers 521, you discover the box of jewels, badges and truncheons. How do you add them or connect them to the aprons numbered 1-10? Numbers 11-16 are gavels. Do you really want to change all the numbers of every object from number 11 up to 521? If you are using the three-part system the aprons are numbered 2001.001.001-010 and the gavels are 2001.002.011-16. The jewels, badges and truncheons are easily inserted and become a part of the total accession by numbering them 2001.001.011-16.
 - Say you are inventorying a case of aprons and you number the first apron “1” and the apron label says it was donated by Bro. Smith. Then you continue you on numbering all the aprons, 2, 3, 4, etc. but when you get to the last apron you discover it was also given by Bro. Smith. Using the three-part numbering system you can simply number the last apron as the second item in Bro. Smith’s donation.

Examples of how to accession new donations.

- In 1999 the museum acquired 25 donations between Jan. 1 and Dec. 31. Within the 25th gift were six artifacts, therefore 1999.025.006
- On January 1, 2001 Bro. Smith donates a Masonic apron, the apron is given the number 2001.001.001.

- The museum doesn't receive any more donations until March 4th, when Bro. Jones donates 3 aprons, 2 watch fobs, and a lapel pin. Bro. Jones' donation receives the accession number 2001.002. Each artifact is then numbered .001-006. 001, 002, 003 are the aprons, 004 & 005 are the fobs and 006 is the label pin; = 2001.002.001-006
- The museum's next donation is on March 5th 2001, when Bro. Hiram donates three items: A pair of leather gloves, an apron and silver tea set. The whole donation is given the number 2001.003. The leather gloves are numbered 2001.003.001a-b (The a-b is to distinguish left and right glove). The apron is accessioned with 2001.003.002. The tea set consists of a pot, creamer, sugar bowl, five cups and five saucers for a total of 13 artifacts. The pot, creamer and sugar bowl all have lids so they would be numbered with "a's and b's" to distinguish the parts. Although the cups sit upon the saucers they are not numbered together. Each cup and each saucer are numbered separately.

B. Establish a numbering system for all storage areas of your artifacts.

- Is there already a numbering system that is in place?
- Is that numbering system consistent and unique? Are there more than one drawer or case or shelf with the number "5"?
- Find a floor plan or blue print or draw a map of all the display or storage areas of museum artifacts. Assign a unique number to each area. For example if you have a series of cases with drawers full of aprons, number the cases then number the drawers within, so the case 1 drawer 5 might be numbered "1-5" or you can use letters for the individual drawer, i.e. 1-b = first case, second drawer.
- Once you have developed the storage numbering system on paper, next physically label each storage unit. Remove all past numbers or identification. This part of the project must be completed in its entirety before proceeding to the next step.
- If you are replacing an old and inconsistent storage numbering system keep a record of it for it may help you to identify objects later. You might enter the old system into the database or keep a paper record that compares the new to the old, i.e. "Case 12-A was formally known as 56"

C. Gather all records and archives that list donations of artifacts.

- This is not wholly required prior to beginning an inventory but is still useful if possible. If you have an old existing artifact numbering system with lists of donations and short descriptions you should use it as the foundation of the inventory process. For example if you have correspondence files of thank you letters sent to donors which list the items donated, and annotations of numbers assigned to the artifacts it will help identify the object during the inventory process.
- By gathering what records you can and making photocopies of letters and other correspondence you are building evidence to link artifacts to donors, creating provenance and object histories. For example, if you have an apron that is believed to be owned by George Washington, by searching for and organizing all documentation related to the apron, the year it was donated and by whom you

may discover that the apron was simply donated by Washington Lodge #25 or the donor's name was George Washington Carver.

D. Create a computer database

- You should choose a computer database that will stand the test of time, be useful and accessible in the future and one that is easily created and manipulated. For these reasons I recommend Microsoft Access.
- There are numerous databases specifically created for museums that do all fancy and wonderful things, but they are quite expensive and complicated.
- For most Masonic library and lodge collection who have less than 10,000 objects there is no reason to work try to develop something to sophisticated when all you want it an ability to quickly and easily know what you own and where it is.
- Attached are basic instructions for creating an Access database and a primary list of information fields.

E. Enter all written records into the database

- This is not a vital part of the inventorying process, but if you know your collections was preciously inventoried or there are a substantial and significant lists of donors and artifacts then it helpful to translate that information from paper to the computer.
- Again, this information may have old and outdated numbering systems, but they still provide clues that will help you reconnect the artifact to its history.

F. Begin physical inventory of all artifacts

- After you have identified where all the objects are that you going to inventory and you have assigned a location numbering system to those location, you can then processed to inventory each artifact within that location.
- Start with first object and examine it for old accession or inventory numbers. If it has an old number record it in the database, but assign it also a new number. Otherwise just assign the artifact a new unique number, write the numbers on a paper tag with pencil and attach it to the object, either by tying it or even simply laying under a flap or placing it within the object, such as a punchbowl. Make sure, however, the tag is visible.
- DO NOT write the number on the object with a permanent marker and if you wish to write a number on an object use a pencil and place the number in an unobtrusive locations- such as on the back of a lithograph in the bottom right hand corner.
- When tagging or physically writing numbers on artifact be consistent in their locations, i.e., all lithographs are number in on the back lower left corners, all aprons have sewn on tags under the lap or on the back in top left corner, etc.
- No one should have to hunt guess where the accession number is on an object. The more the object is touched and moved the greater risk of damage.
- Describe the object according the fields established in the database. (see below).

G. Recommended database fields of information for inventorying purposes.

H. As stated above, inventorying is the first pass through you collections. You are not trying to record every piece of information about the object. Limit the inventory to five or six fields of information will keep the process moving forward and provide the foundation to add more information later.

I. FIELDS:

- J. Accession number of object
- K. Physical Location (Room name or number, shelf-number, case number etc.)
- L. Title of object, i.e, “Past-Masters Jewel” or “Royal Arch Apron”
- M. Short Description of Object, 15 words or less, i.e.: “Past-Master’s silver jewel; compasses, sunburst, arc, with “Presented to Hiram Ball, Zenith Lodge #25, 1956” engraved on back.”
- N. Dimensions; height, width, depth, and/or diameter. Chose English or Metric system and stay with it.
- O. Materials, i.e, oil painting of canvas, wood, silver, porcelain. List only the 2 or three primary materials. In a pair of pants with a zipper you do not have to list metal as a material- just say textile or cloth or wool or cotton.

J. Unify physical inventory to computer and written inventory.