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Deaccessioning in Small Museums: A Historical View and Lessons from the Past

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A Historical View and Lessons from the Past**

By
Kristin Lapos

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

Master of Arts in Museum Professions

College of Communication and the Arts

Seton Hall University

August 2016

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Abstract

Deaccessioning is a frequent topic of conversation in even small and mid-sized museums in the twenty-first century. With collections costs soaring, budgets dwindling, and space ever more limited, museums must deaccession to survive and prosper. However, deaccessioning and disposal have become hugely controversial, both among museum professionals and with the general public in the past few decades. Scholars like Stephen Weil and Marie Malaro argue that deaccessioning and disposal were non-issues prior to the 1970s. Is this true? If so, how did museum professionals handle deaccessioning and disposal of objects from their collections before this time?

This thesis explores the long history of deaccessioning in American museums prior to the controversies of the 1970s using examples from the published literature as well as a case study of pre-1970s deaccessioning campaigns at the Passaic County Historical Society in New Jersey. This mid-sized historical society adapted an evolving set of norms and values surrounding museum disposal to their own unique needs in the early twentieth century, long before governments and professional associations mandated compliance to specific sets of standards. I argue that small museum workers today should learn to view deaccessioning as part of a much longer tradition of disposal practices that dates back over a century, and that they should research and use this history in their own institutions to help justify future deaccessioning campaigns.

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Chapter 1:

The Roots of Deaccessioning: Ethics and Policy

Deaccessioning is a frequent topic of conversation in even small and mid-sized museums in the twenty-first century. With collections costs soaring, budgets dwindling, and space ever more limited, museums must deaccession to survive and prosper. However, as every museum knows, deaccessioning and disposal have become hugely controversial, both among museum professionals and with the general public. Scholars like Stephen Weil, Marie Malaro, and many others argue that deaccessioning and disposal were non-issues prior to the 1970s; Weil goes so far as to say that “the ways in which museums dealt with their collections was not a matter of any widespread concern, or even any particular public interest” prior to that time,¹ and Malaro and Ildiko Pogany DeAngelis joke that the word “deaccession” only recently appeared in dictionaries.²

Is this true? If so, how did museum professionals handle deaccessioning and disposal of objects before this time? After all, as Weil notes, “it was only in 1984 that AAM first made the adoption of a written collections management policy a pre-requisite for a museum seeking accreditation or reaccreditation” and museum scholars “characterized such written policies as highly desirable, but not necessarily imperative” as late as 1979.³ Yet many of the institutions that we know today managed to preserve outstanding collections from these “dark” ages without the layers of formal approval and sometimes-crippling fear of public backlash associated with the word “deaccession” or “sale” today. How museums operated in these earlier eras, before they were driven by fear and public overreaction, has lessons for museum staff today who know they

¹ Stephen E. Weil, “Introduction,” in *A Deaccession Reader*, ed. Stephen E. Weil (Washington, D.C.: American Association of Museums, 1997), 3.

² Marie C. Malaro and Ildiko Pogany DeAngelis, *A Legal Primer on Managing Museum Collections*, 3rd ed. (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Books, 2012), 248.

³ Weil, “Introduction,” 4.

need to cull their collections but feel paralyzed to take the first steps. The norms, values, and ethical strictures that surround deaccessioning today have their roots in an earlier and much different world.

This thesis explores the long history of deaccessioning in American museums prior to the controversies of the 1970s using examples from the published literature as well as a case study of pre-1970s deaccessioning campaigns at the Passaic County Historical Society in New Jersey. This mid-sized historical society adapted an evolving set of norms and values surrounding museum disposal to their own unique needs in the early and mid-twentieth century, long before governments and professional associations mandated compliance to specific sets of standards. I argue that small museum workers today should learn to view deaccessioning, not as an evil of the post-1970s world, but as part of a much longer tradition of disposal practices that dates back over a century, and that they should research and use this history in their own institutions to help justify future deaccessioning campaigns.

This chapter explores the origins and evolution of the ethical guidelines that form the basis of this long tradition. It also discusses how museums discuss deaccessioning today, and some of the reasons behind these attitudes.

The Fragmented Museum World

The American Alliance of Museums (AAM) lists fourteen categories of museums in its institutional membership list, including art museums, history museums, science museums, zoos, and botanical gardens.⁴ Although these categories seem to exist harmoniously alongside each other, the history of the AAM reveals a bias toward natural history and art museums in both focus and membership. The language in the AAM's Code of Ethics is a case in point. The AAM

⁴ American Association of Museums, *About Museums*, <http://www.aam-us.org/about-museums> (accessed June 1, 2016).

Code of Ethics, first promulgated in 1925, has been updated several times over the last century to reflect changes in museum theory and practice, most recently in 2000. Studying the original 1925 Code, however, provides insights into how museum workers viewed collecting at the beginning of the twentieth century. This original 1925 Code, for example, included a paragraph on “Collections and Exchanges” that was written by and for natural history museums. It proclaimed that “a museum should not ‘corner the market’ by refusing to dispose of duplicate specimens to other museums. It, however, should not release valuable specimens until after they have been studied and it should make those studies as promptly as possible so that an early distribution of material may be made.”⁵ This talk of “specimens” and especially of “duplicate” specimens in demand by other institutions is not only a concept almost unique to natural history and science museums, it is also a relic of a time in museum history when one person’s junk truly was another person’s treasure, and newly-formed museums were building their collections. At an early annual meeting of the AAM in 1914, Treasurer W.P. Wilson confidently stated that newly-organized children’s museums would be happy to accept the refuse of more established natural history institutions, stating that, “I can think in my own institution of nearly a roomful of things that we have put aside and shall not use anymore...and every large museum has more or less of that sort of material that has been discarded but yet would be of the greatest use to these new organizations.”⁶

The preference for transfers and exchanges of what is today called deaccessioned materials in natural history museums was born during this time and survives in today’s ethical codes and in the norms and values surrounding deaccessioning. The current AAM Code of

⁵ American Association of Museums, *Code of Ethics for Museum Workers* (Washington, D.C.: American Association of Museums, 1925), 5. Accessed at <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015059682297;view=1up;seq=1> (accessed June 1, 2016).

⁶ American Association of Museums, *Proceedings of the American Association of Museums*, vol. 8 (Washington, D.C.: American Association of Museums, 1914), 15.

Ethics, adopted in 1991, amended in 2000, and in many ways very different from the original 1925 Code, still states that “disposal of collections through sale, trade or research activities is solely for the advancement of the museum's mission.”⁷ Of the three methods of disposal mentioned in the Code, two are more applicable to natural history museums than any other type: trade and research activities. As the AAM, and the museum field generally, adopted a more overt public mission, these natural history-oriented preferences for deaccessioned and duplicate materials (natural history museums often had surplus samples of specimens like insects, for example) were adapted into “public domain” arguments; in other words, it is better to keep material in publicly-accessible non-profit institutions through transfer or exchange rather than selling it into private hands. The AAM’s *Considerations for AAM Accredited Museums Facing Retrenchment or Downsizing* states that “in [some] cases, the most responsible action may be to deaccession and transfer material to another suitable caretaker...Museums must carefully consider whether it is appropriate for the material to remain in the public domain at another nonprofit institution....”⁸

However, there are serious questions about the cost-benefit ratio of trying to keep objects in the public domain, especially at history museums where the exchange and transfer of duplicate specimens was never part of everyday practice. In the days of AAM’s Treasurer Wilson at the turn of the century, a much smaller museum world, a handshake culture, and a wellspring of hungry new museums meant that finding an exchange partner was likely easier than it is now.

Terri Anderson, the Director of Museum Collections at the National Trust for Historic Preservation, discusses how National Trust sites valiantly try to keep their deaccessioned objects

⁷ American Association of Museums, *Code of Ethics for Museums* (Washington, D.C.: American Association of Museums, 2000), <http://www.aam-us.org/resources/ethics-standards-and-best-practices/code-of-ethics> (accessed June 1, 2016).

⁸ American Association of Museums, *Considerations for AAM Accredited Museums Facing Retrenchment or Downsizing* (Washington, D.C.: American Association of Museums, 2008), 1-2.

in the public domain: “We try to find homes at other museums for our deaccessioned collections, starting with an offer to our own group of Sites [sic], next reaching out to museums within the home Site’s local community,” she says, but concedes that “contacting other museums, sending them information, arranging the physical pickup, completing transfer paperwork, and then updating all the records a final time is all necessary and worthwhile, but lengthy.”⁹ However, is this process really “necessary and worthwhile” for Anderson’s organization? Probably not, especially since Anderson admits that “despite best efforts to offer deaccessions to other sites, frequently we have no takers.”¹⁰ In privileging transfers and exchanges of objects to other museums, Anderson is following best museum practice, but a practice that evolved almost a century ago to serve a small group of natural history museums. It would arguably serve the public interest better if Anderson and her employees spent less time offering these rejected objects to other over-collected museums that do not need yet another type of widget, and more time developing programs, exhibits, and better collections management. Staff members are capable of making sound judgments about whether or not peer institutions will be interested in deaccessioned objects. If they believe there will be no interest, they should be free to send these objects straight to public auction in bulk or simply discard them. This saves staff time and allows the staff to focus on new initiatives.

The language in the AAM’s original Code of Ethics its original 1925 also reflects policies and practices common in art museums rather than history museums. A section in the 1925 Code called “Collection and Acquisition” regulates competitive bidding on collections among museums and mandates that “if a museum has under negotiation the acceptance or the purchase

⁹ Terri Anderson, “Too Much of a Good Thing: Lessons Learned from Deaccessioning at National Trust Historic Sites,” in *Museums and the Disposals Debate: A Collection of Essays*, ed. Peter Davies (Edinburgh: MuseumsEtc., 2011), 246.

¹⁰ Ibid.

of an object or collection of objects, another museum knowing of such negotiations may not with honor make an offer...until the first museum has reached a decision in the matter.”¹¹ Although history museums, even small ones, sometimes do negotiate for collections, the concept of competitive bidding clearly concerns objects like fine art for which a heady market exists. Even in 1917, several years before the original 1925 Code was adopted, a writer at the AAM’s annual meeting discussed the conflict of interest that would arise if a director worked for two museums and used an example of deaccessioned and traded artwork to illustrate the point: “If, for example, there comes an opportunity to secure a work of art, there is little question which museum would have first choice. The length of time that second museum is willing to consider objects already discarded by the first depends upon the size and quality of its collection.”¹² Again, the transfer or exchange of objects, this time artwork, is presented as an easy ideal for objects that would otherwise be “discarded” or deaccessioned. However, the fact that the writer couched this example in the language of the art world speaks to the biases of the early AAM. Even today, history museums must participate in discussions about competitive sales and the ethics of art market auctions that have little relevance to them. Trying to fit the realities of their practices with Codes of Ethics whose origins, at least, were not developed for them is one of the factors that can lead to “deaccessioning paralysis”: the hesitation of smaller museums to embark on badly-needed deaccessioning campaigns.

Deaccessioning Paralysis: Other Factors

The paralysis has many other causes. It also stems, in part, from the ways that museum workers talk about deaccessioning. Eric Abrahamson and David H. Freedman found that people avoid organizing collections of clutter until an elaborate set of time-consuming preparations have

¹¹ American Association of Museums, *Code of Ethics for Museum Workers*, 4.

¹² American Association of Museums, *Proceedings of the American Association of Museums*, vol. 10 (Washington, D.C.: American Association of Museums, 1917), 142.

taken place, treating the clutter “like nuclear waste – something that requires a massive, costly cleanup and until then must not be trifled with.”¹³ Unwanted collections objects in museums differ in several ways from the household clutter that is the focus of Abrahamson and Freedman’s study – there are ethical and legal restrictions on how a museum can dispose of its “clutter,” which do not generally exist for privately-owned property – but the two kinds of unwanted objects are similar in other ways. First, both kinds of unwanted objects exist because someone thought that buying or accepting them (into the home or the museum) was a good idea at the time. For homeowners, it may be a piece of technology that has become obsolete or old furniture inherited from a dear departed relative; for museums, it may be objects “desirable at one time but the reason for keeping them no longer apply, or no one on staff could say no, or a new museum needed to fill its galleries.”¹⁴ Second, the people in charge of both types of unwanted objects sometimes go to great lengths to avoid disposing of them, sometimes for sentimental reasons but often because of the fear that they may need the object again someday even if they have never used it.

The homeowners described by Abrahamson and Freedman avoid difficult disposal decisions through excessive planning rather than action, and reading through a list of requirements a museum must meet before even considering deaccessioning raises the question of whether museum workers also avoid disposal decisions in this way. Malero, for example, concludes her chapter about deaccessioning by ensuring museums that they should embrace deaccessioning as long as they have three things in place: first, “a collecting plan [which is] religiously followed”; second, a process to “demonstrate that your collections are periodically

¹³ Eric Abrahamson and David H. Freedman, *A Perfect Mess: The Hidden Benefits of Disorder – How Crammed Closets, Cluttered Offices, and On-the-Fly Planning Make the World a Better Place* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2007), 111-112.

¹⁴ Steven H. Miller, “Subtracting Collections: Practices Makes Perfect (Usually),” in *Museums and the Disposals Debate: A Collection of Essays*, ed. Peter Davies (Edinburgh: MuseumsEtc., 2011), 402.

and objectively reviewed for adherence to collecting goals”; and third, “written procedures” describing how deaccessioning decisions are made and who has the authority to approve them.¹⁵ Even small historical societies can satisfy the third requirement, an essential part of a basic collections management policy. The first two, however, can be daunting. What is a “collecting plan”? How can a smaller museum prove that it “periodically reviews its collections,” especially when the site is run by volunteers or, at best, one curator who also wears several other hats? Caution and due diligence are certainly necessary when conducting a deaccessioning campaign, but small institutions especially must be vigilant that planning does not become an obstacle to action.

Even more damaging to smaller museums than the burden of planning is the fact that the word deaccessioning so often appears alongside tales of financial distress at large institutions, making it appear to both the public and small museum workers that desperation for funds is the only reason that museums begin deaccessioning campaigns. Since small history museums are less likely than larger institutions to have collections of serious monetary value, selling collections – even if they were inclined to do so – is not an effective fundraiser. Other reasons for deaccessioning, like storage space improvement, are less likely to make it into the published literature. An example illustrates this point. In their discussion about deaccessioning at Glenbow Museum, a large anthropology and history museum focused on western Canadian culture and heritage, Betenia and his co-authors describe two deaccessioning initiatives at the museum. The first, in the 1980s, receives only a paragraph of attention, noting that this initiative focused on objects that were “reproductions or duplicates, not of museum quality, or lacked provenance.

¹⁵ Marie C. Malaro, “Deaccessioning – The American Perspective,” in *A Deaccession Reader*, ed. Stephen E. Weil (Washington, D.C.: American Association of Museums, 1997), 48.

Most were sold anonymously through Calgary auction houses.”¹⁶ The rest of the case study focuses on a later episode of deaccessioning in the 1990s, born out of the organization’s desperation for collections management funds in response to the near-bankruptcy of the museum. Only the later deaccessioning initiative, motivated by an impending bankruptcy, was considered worth the effort to report.

Even when a museum wishes to deaccession to increase its storage space or rid itself of out-of-scope objects rather than to avoid financial disaster, other obstacles stand in its way. Abrahamson and Freedman make another point about clutter that is also relevant to museums: people are ashamed of clutter, and that shame can prevent a person or organization from taking action to fix the problem.¹⁷ Best practices dictate carefully-followed plans and strategies, but many museum workers are faced with partially unmanaged collections and problems that they may have contributed to through basic human error. “It is exactly the same people that have been entrusted to build museum collections through selective acquisitions who are also responsible for the refining of those same collections,” Weil points out.¹⁸ In a bygone era, the museum professional need only feel shame about badly managed collections in front of colleagues, but in 2016, museum collections are in the news and talk of deaccessioning often brings embarrassing questions about the management of the collection. The story of how deaccessioning “went public” begins in the 1970s.

Deaccessioning Debate: How Did We Get Here?

No history of deaccessioning in the United States would be complete without a discussion of the two cases that triggered public reactions against the practice of deaccessioning

¹⁶ Daryl Betenia and others, “No Longer the Devil’s Handiwork: Deaccessioning at Glenbow,” in *Museums and the Disposals Debate: A Collection of Essays*, ed. Peter Davies (Edinburgh: MuseumsEtc., 2011), 198.

¹⁷ Abrahamson and Freedman, *A Perfect Mess*, 10.

¹⁸ Stephen E. Weil, “Deaccessioning in American Museums: I,” in *A Deaccession Reader*, ed. Stephen E. Weil (Washington, D.C.: American Association of Museums, 1997), 69.

in the 1970s: the sale of several nineteenth-century and early modern paintings by then-Director Thomas Hoving at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1972, and the questionable sales to Board members and donors of works from the Heye Museum of the American Indian (explained more fully at the end of Chapter 2), along with subsequent investigations by the New York State Attorney General. In the Metropolitan Museum of Art case, Hoving quietly made plans to sell “canvases by the likes of Gauguin, Manet, Cézanne, Renoir, and Picasso.”¹⁹ *New York Times* art critic John Canaday discovered Hoving’s plans, which he had not publicly disclosed, and wrote a scathing article in the *Times* lambasting the decision, arguing that Hoving’s plans were a money grab by the institution “now that cash is hard for them to find.”²⁰ Canaday objected to the secrecy surrounding the proposed deaccessioning – hence the word “quiet” – but he ultimately objected to even the concept of museum deaccessioning by sale, writing that “in spite of every exception, the rule is that selling from the collection is hazardous policy, and often unethical policy”²¹

The case attracted enormous amounts of attention in both the art world and the general public. The public reacted strongly to the controversy partly because the Met was a revered public institution, and the controversy erupted during a decade when people were less inclined to trust the expertise of the people at these institutions, as explained below. The high monetary values of the art on sale combined with the secrecy of the sales also invited skepticism about oversight of the process. People worried that, despite their advanced degrees and long experience with art, the curators at the Met were haphazardly raiding the world’s art heritage to sell to the highest bidder. When Met president Douglas Dillon responded to Canaday’s article in the

¹⁹ Donald Garfield, “Deaccessioning Goes Public,” in *A Deaccession Reader*, ed. Stephen E. Weil (Washington, D.C.: American Association of Museums, 1997), 11.

²⁰ John Canaday, “Very Quiet and Very Dangerous,” *New York Times*, February 27, 1972, D21.

²¹ *Ibid.*

Times,²² he sought to “counter the impression that the Met’s deaccessioning was capricious” by “[outlining] the institution’s deaccessioning procedures with its checks and balances.”²³

Whatever “checks and balances” the Met had in place before the controversy, it expanded them soon afterwards. In response to the controversy, the Met eventually developed a complete deaccession and disposal policy in the early 1970s that many other museums, fearing the same negative attention from the media and their state attorneys general, used as a guide for their own new policies. Discussions about the history of deaccessioning and disposal often begin with the Met’s scandal and the long-term repercussions for the nation’s museums, including subsequent ethical guidelines about deaccessioning developed by professional museum organizations.

However, two problems plague these narratives. First, these cases are framed as the beginning of the debate about deaccessioning, but it is more accurate to say that these cases represent the beginning of the debate about *selling* deaccessioned objects. This is a critical distinction since, as demonstrated above, museums have been deaccessioning objects to transfer to and exchange with other institutions since the early 1900s, and they certainly did not keep it a secret; it was openly discussed at national meetings. Second, since, as Hoving truthfully points out, museums have been selling objects from their collections to acquire more fashionable objects as far back as the 1880s.²⁴ The narratives do not explain why people began to care in the 1970s.

Malaro posits four developments that made deaccessioning, especially by sale, a controversial issue in the 1970s. They fit neatly into three categories: the art market boomed, tempting museum workers to sell some of their treasures; museums began hiring professional

²² Douglas Dillon, “The Metropolitan ‘Sets the Record Straight,’” *New York Times*, October 22, 1972, D29.

²³ Garfield, “Deaccessioning Goes Public,” 13.

²⁴ Thomas Hoving, *Making the Mummies Dance: Inside the Metropolitan Museum of Art* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993), 290.

staff members; and public interest in museums increased.²⁵ Julianna Shubinski echoes the third point, noting that federal government programs like the National Foundation for the Arts in the 1960s made more people than ever aware of the museums in their midst and the cost of funding them.²⁶ Lester M. Salamon describes the situation that emerged in the 1960s, as “nonprofit organizations in an ever-widening range of fields were made the beneficiaries of government support to provide a growing array of services—from health care to scientific research—that Americans wanted but were reluctant to have government provide directly.”²⁷ Both the National Museum Act of 1966 and the Museum Services Act of 1974, which opened federal funding to museums, were preceded by public lobbying campaigns that included museum professionals from across the country. Many of these professionals traveled to Washington to testify in favor of the Acts at public hearings, and the secretary of the Smithsonian publicly praised the Acts after they passed. Museums were more visible on the nation’s political and economic scene than ever before.²⁸

With increased visibility, however, came increased scrutiny. By the 1970s and 1980s, Americans’ faith in the government that had hitched its wagon so tightly to non-profits was crumbling, and non-profits felt the effects. Over 50 years of Pew Research Center surveying on the state of trust in the public sector shows a sharp decline in public trust in government: In 1964, 77 percent of Americans trusted the government just about always/most of the time. That number had already fallen to 53 percent by 1972, as the Met scandal boiled over; by 1980, the

²⁵ Malaro, “Deaccessioning – The American Perspective,” 43-45.

²⁶ Julianna Shubinski, “From Exception to Norm: Deaccessioning in Late Twentieth Century American Art Museums” (Master’s Thesis, University of Kentucky, 2007), 14.

²⁷ Lester M. Salamon, “The Resilient Sector: The Future of Nonprofit America,” in *The State of Nonprofit America*, 2nd ed., ed. Lester M. Salamon (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2012), 4.

²⁸ Karen A. Rader and Victoria E.M. Cain, *Life on Display: Revolutionizing U.S. Museums of Science and Natural History in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 370.

number had steadily declined to under 26 percent.²⁹ Salamon's research, which focuses specifically on the non-profit sector to which most museums belong, echoes these trends. He notes that, beginning in the late 1960s and continuing through the 1980s, there was a push to regulate museums on both sides of the aisle as conservatives became "concerned about what they see as an unholy alliance between the once-independent nonprofit sector and the state" and liberals "bewailed the sector's departure from a more socially activist past and its surrender to professionalism."³⁰ In this bitter climate, the informal disposal practices of museums came under scrutiny along with everything else in the public sector.

Malaro is correct in noting the booming art market and new professional practices as factors in bringing deaccessioning and disposal into the conversation within museums,³¹ but public distrust of institutions made the issue front-page news. When Canaday wrote his famous article about the Met deaccessioning scandal and titled it "Very Quiet and Very Dangerous," he exploited Americans' paranoia about secrets and backroom deals generated by the Nixon administration scandals. It is especially unhelpful that America's introduction to deaccessioning and one method of disposal – sale – was not merely questioning but outright hostile; Canaday boldly proclaims that "nothing worth buying or accepting as a gift in the first place ever becomes less than part of the record of a phase of our culture, even if it also represents a curatorial idiocy."³²

By 2011, governments in some states had their hands completely into museum collections; in the case of New York State, this took the form of actual legislation restricting the ability of museums to deaccession. On June 8, 2011, the New York Board of Regents Rule 3.27

²⁹ Pew Research Center, *Public Trust in Government: 1958-2014*, <http://www.people-press.org/2014/11/13/public-trust-in-government> (accessed June 1, 2016).

³⁰ Salamon, "The Resilient Sector," 5.

³¹ Malaro, "Deaccessioning – The American Perspective," 43-45.

³² Canaday, "Very Quiet and Very Dangerous," D21.

became effective, and codified in law what ethical codes had recommended since at least the 1980s. The law mandated three things: first, that museums only deaccession objects for one of ten reasons, including redundancy and collections refinement among many others; second, that proceeds from the sale of deaccessioned objects only be used for acquisitions or direct care, and not be used as collateral for a loan; and third, and most alarmingly, that museums in New York submit a list of all deaccessioned objects to the Regents each year.³³ Only a few decades prior, legislation regulating museum collecting practices would have been inconceivable, but increased government intervention was the price that museums paid for more government attention and funding. Paranoia about deaccessioning had reached its logical end point.

Although the 1970s was the beginning of serious public and professional discussions about deaccessioning, it was not the beginning of the practice. Museums have always disposed of objects, sometimes quietly and sometimes not quietly. Small museums especially must try to navigate the dangerous waters of today's deaccessioning landscape while also dealing with past accessioning, deaccessioning, and disposal decisions. The next chapter explores some cases in the literature of pre-1970s deaccessioning in museums in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States.

³³ Malaro and DeAngelis, *A Legal Primer on Managing Museum Collections*, 252.

Chapter 2:

The Roots of Deaccessioning: Early Case Studies

I once asked Steven Miller, the current executive director of Boscobel House and Garden in New York who has also published several articles about deaccessioning over the past twenty years, about writing on early disposal practices in museums. “You won’t find anything,” he told me. “Nobody talked about it.”³⁴ Research shows, however, that people did talk about it, both in the press and behind the scenes in the board room. In fact, the published literature from the decades before the 1970s are peppered with casual mentions of museums using the full range of options at their disposal to get rid of things they did not want. Although this literature is a fascinating view into how museums disposed of objects before the threat of serious public outrage, litigation, and legislation, it also demonstrates how the established tenets of deaccessioning – both the formal rules of the unwritten norms and values that surround it – were shaped by large museums with very little input from small institutions. A model developed by Chris Burgess and Rachel Shane that explains how these tenets were developed is used as a model through which to view several cases of pre-1970s deaccessioning from mid-Atlantic region museums that appear in the published literature.³⁵

Small Museums in a Big Museum World: A Deaccessioning Policy Model

The preceding chapter analyzed current museum attitudes and practices around deaccessioning, but it is useful to question how these practices developed and who was involved in shaping them. In one of the few treatises on the history of deaccessioning in the United States, Burgess and Shane discuss an “emerging deaccessioning subsystem” that evolved in response to

³⁴ Stephen H. Miller, personal conversation with the author, Spring 2015.

³⁵ Chris Burgess and Rachel Shane, “Deaccessioning: A Policy Perspective,” *The Journal of Arts Management, Law, and Society* 41 (2011).

the public outcry about deaccessioning in the 1970s.³⁶ They point out that “there were multiple policy theories and approaches already in play by the 1970s as the formative elements of this debate took shape”³⁷; in other words, the current tenets of deaccessioning did not appear overnight. They were based on norms and values that museum workers – or, as will be demonstrated below, museum workers in large museums – developed among themselves over the course of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Burgess and Shane describe players in this emerging subsystem as a triangle comprised of what they call “regulated interests,” in this case museums most vulnerable to scrutiny and possible regulation; “governmental actors” like the state attorney general or governor’s office; and “regulatory professional associations” like the AAMD and the AAM, with “external forces” like the media and academia also playing a role.³⁸ They then begin their narrative by describing the famous deaccessioning scandal at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York in the 1970s that triggered the first serious public debates and discussions about deaccessioning (see Chapter 1) and trace the development of deaccessioning in the United States from there, but their model is a useful lens through which to analyze early deaccessioning and disposal of museum collections before that time.

Several points about this model are worth noting before proceeding to a discussion of some early deaccessioning cases from the mid-Atlantic region. First, Burgess and Shane, although writing in an arts management journal, focus primarily on large generalist museums or art museums. The museums they list under “regulated interests” include the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Modern Art, the Smithsonian, the American Museum of Natural

³⁶ Ibid., 174.

³⁷ Ibid., 173.

³⁸ Ibid., 174.

History, the Whitney, and the Albright-Knox.³⁹ Another rare piece on deaccessioning history by Shubinski (2007) examines the history of deaccessioning specifically in American art museums, and the parallels of this history and the deaccessioning tenets that followed are in almost exact agreement with the rules that all museums now follow.⁴⁰ This is worthy of note because, in pure statistical terms, large generalist museums and art museums combined comprise the minority of museums in the United States. The Heritage Health Index Report, “A Public Trust at Risk” notes that eighty percent of the thirty thousand museums, libraries, and archives surveyed have no paid staff⁴¹ and sixty-eight percent budget less than three thousand dollars for conservation and preservation.⁴² This silent majority was almost completely absent in early published literature about deaccessioning, when norms and values were being formalized, so that finding information about them requires a long day in many small archives. Yet this silent majority lives in the world created by the interaction of the large “regulated interests” with the other two points on the triangle and, of course, with the media. As the below cases show, most of the published literature on deaccessioning focuses on these large institutions, and this historical bias affected small museums’ ability to adapt to changes in the 1970s that made formal deaccessioning rules a requirement, and continues to affect their ability to manage their collections today in a way that makes sense for them.

The second point on Burgess and Shane’s triangle, the “regulatory professional associations,” is discussed in the preceding chapter. The third point, “governmental actors,” was a newcomer on the scene in the 1970s. Shubinski notes that “deaccessions before this [the 1970s]

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Shubinski, “From Exception to Norm.”

⁴¹ Heritage Preservation, Inc., *A Public Trust at Risk: The Heritage Health Index Report on the State of America’s Collections* (Washington, D.C.: Institute of Museum and Library Services, 2004), 8. Accessed at <http://www.heritagepreservation.org/HHI/HHIsummary.pdf> (accessed June 1, 2016).

⁴² Ibid., 12.

were generally not regulated, and usually practiced at the discretion of a museum. However, as government funding for arts organizations and art museums increased during the 1960s and 1970s, so did the expectation of public accountability on the part of art museums.”⁴³ This echoes Malaro, who cites “more public interest in museums” as a factor in the development of deaccessioning tenets in the 1970s.⁴⁴ The cases discussed below show that people did indeed talk about deaccessioning and disposal before the 1970s, but that government people were rarely if ever invited into the conversation. Yet, despite being largely free of the threat of government intervention, the pre-1970s museum deaccessioning landscape was not the Wild West. The cases discussed below are a window into a time when directors and curators were less paralyzed by fear of litigation and media frenzy and, despite some unethical behavior, largely tried to use the resources they had to solve the problems at hand. One of those resources was deaccessioning by sale and exchange. Malaro, arguing against government legislation on deaccessioning, opines that the nonprofit system, largely free from the prying government eye, “encourages great diversity” and “has served us rather well.”⁴⁵ She notes that “we have museums that never dispose of anything, others that are free-wheeling, and every shade in between. Each can survive as long as enough people are willing to support it.”⁴⁶ The ability of museums to survive, largely intact, in a world almost free from government oversight is a useful history for museums to bring to the table today as they seek to take deaccessioning and disposal into the mainstream of public discourse.

Finally, one must question whether this triangle should be a square. The case studies below demonstrate a fourth powerful actor in the deaccessioning debate: collectors and the

⁴³ Shubinski, “From Exception to Norm,” 2.

⁴⁴ Malaro, “Deaccessioning – The American Perspective,” 44.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

market. Again and again, notions of connoisseurship, good taste, and changing fashions emerge as arguments both for and against deaccessioning. These notions spring from art history scholarship and the profit motives of dealers, and the culture wars and conflicts of interest that arise from this interaction. Malaro argues that “the very active and lucrative market for not only art but other collectibles has put added pressure not only on art museums but on all types of museums.”⁴⁷ One must question how true this is for the vast majority of small and mid-sized history museums in the United States. It was certainly true of the cases at larger museums described below, and so played an important role in shaping the deaccessioning reality of these smaller museums.

Below are several cases of pre-1970s deaccessioning that appear in published literature. They are organized into two categories: disposal by sale, and disposal by other means. Each case is viewed through the lens of Burgess and Shane’s policy model, with a discussion of how the different groups in their proposed triangle of players in the deaccessioning debate – leaders of large museums, governments, and museum professional organizations – influenced each case.

Selling Off the Attic: Disposal by Sale

The sale of collections in museums goes back centuries. The first case study dates to the early nineteenth century and involves one of the most controversial issues in the museum world today: selling collections to pay operating expenses. New York’s oldest museum, the New-York Historical Society, found itself in \$8,000 worth of debt in 1823 after money from a promised “lottery” failed to come through. In an eerie parallel to museums that accumulated debt on building additions in the early 2000s only to end up with the bill post-2008, the N-YHS decided to sell some of its collections to keep their doors open. They did so by advertising their shame in a newspaper. In his 1996 history of the N-YHS, Kevin M. Guthrie discusses the advertisement

⁴⁷ Ibid., 43.

that the N-YHS Board of Trustees placed in the *New York Commercial Advertiser* in 1825. The officers of the Society were forced to be blunt about the situation: “The undersigned, . . . a committee with full powers, appointed by the New York Historical Society for the purposes of extricating said Society from its pecuniary embarrassments, find themselves compelled, very reluctantly to offer for sale the choice and rare Library of that institution.”⁴⁸ Comparing the reactions to this early episode of deaccessioning to reactions today is illuminating. No AAMD or AAM existed to slap the already-shamed museum with sanctions, no editorials lambasted the Trustees for their negligence with the benefit of hindsight, and no public officials called for legislation. In fact, the Society’s troubles eventually led the New York State Legislature to bail out the Society to the tune of five thousand dollars in 1827.⁴⁹ It is easy to argue that these early troubles at the N-YHS prove the need for the strict rules surrounding deaccessioning to pay for operating expenses and the danger of government bail-outs of cultural institutions with no strings attached. Over the next two centuries, the Society continued to operate without an acquisitions policy, accumulating more and more objects until this backlog, among other things, forced the Society to consider closing in the early 1990s.

The N-YHS case is unusual; most instances of early deaccessioning involve art, not books. When the Met’s director DeForest decided to sell over six hundred objects from its collection to make room in its storage spaces in 1929, he was “denounced by the New York press,” according to Hoving.⁵⁰ The Met had avoided the sale for years by lending out the works to other museums, but by 1929, DeForest decided that more drastic action was necessary. According to Hoving, editorials in the press suggested that the museum should give away or

⁴⁸ Kevin M. Guthrie, *The New-York Historical Society: Lessons from One Nonprofit’s Long Struggle for Survival* (New York: The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, 1996), 10.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁵⁰ Hoving, *Making the Mummies Dance*, 290.

even burn some of the objects rather than sell them. DeForest responded by arguing that “we need the money to buy things we don’t have,”⁵¹ a kind of directness and honesty that museum directors today might do well to imitate.

Despite DeForest’s bristled tone, however, his actions are surprisingly consistent with the Code of Ethics promulgated in 2011 by the Association of Art Museum Directors (AAMD), which states that “a museum director shall not dispose of accessioned works of art in order to provide funds for purposes other than acquisitions of works of art for the collection.”⁵² Despite some blowback in the press, there was no government intervention, no legislative hearings, and no serious public outcry. In fact, a story called “Museum Cellar’s Treasures” in the arts section of the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* on February 3, 1929, mixes criticism of the sale with a certain sentimentality and even understanding. It also, unlike Hoving’s narrative, reveals what the museum actually sold. “A glance through the [auction] catalogue stirs old memories and induces some philosophizing on fashions, tastes, and standards in art. Two pictures, which were one of the major attractions of the Museum’s then provincial gallery will go under the hammer on Thursday – ‘Diana’s Hunting Party,’ by Hans Makart...[which] once hung in the rotunda” and 114 “bad copies of old and 19th century masters.”⁵³ The anonymous author waxes poetic about childhood memories of some of these paintings at the museum, but pragmatically concludes that the museum must sell the works, some simply because of their gigantic size: “The Museum must stand for esthetic quality; historical interest, unless linked up with a certain amount of this quality, has no place in a museum of art, especially to the tune of 32 feet [the size of the one of

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Association of Art Museum Directors, *Code of Ethics* (Washington, D.C.: Association of Art Museum Directors, 2011), <https://aamd.org/about/code-of-ethics> (accessed June 1, 2016).

⁵³ “Museum Cellar’s Treasures,” *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, February 3, 1929, E7.

the paintings].”⁵⁴ However, the author also cautions, in a tune very familiar to art museums today, that even art collectors and curators are fallible: “The ultra-sophisticated collectors of today are as liable to errors in taste, to say nothing of what stands for the best among the academicians. A museum sale catalogue of 1950 should be an interesting document.”⁵⁵

Unlike Hoving in the 1970s, the 1929 sale of art from the Met’s cellar was public and included a “catalogue” for the public to view as well as a three-paragraph justification for the disposal that was re-printed in several publications. More often, however, the investigator looking for records of early object disposals must venture beyond the press. The minutes of the Board of Trustees and Annual Reports are a good place to start. Early disposal practices are reported so casually in these documents, nestled among budget appropriations and awards dinners, that finding them can be like finding a needle in a haystack. The fact that these sales were reported in the minutes, however – especially in so casual a manner – reinforces the business-as-usual aspect of deaccessioning before the 1970s. The Heye Museum of the American Indian (MAI) is a case in point. Anti-deaccessioning advocate and former director of the MAI, Roland W. Force, dug through old archives and discovered that “by 1964, Dockstader [the director at the time] proposed that a gold pendant be sold for \$15,000 in order to acquire a piece of jade and two pieces of pottery that could be used for exhibition purposes.”⁵⁶ Once again, questions of changing tastes and connoisseurship come into play. Dockstader wanted to upgrade the museum’s collection of modern American Indian art, and was willing to sell a valuable anthropological specimen to do so. The collector’s impulse to change with the times lurked behind the decision. However, this 1960s sale did not violate even today’s more stringent

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Roland W. Force, *The Heye and the Mighty: Politics and the Museum of the American Indian* (Honolulu, HI: Mechas Press, 1996), 31.

deaccessioning guidelines since the proceeds were used for new acquisitions. Even so, the Trustees who approved the sale, living in the allegedly casual pre-1970s deaccessioning world, were uncomfortable with it and approved the sale only “with the understanding that the Museum not make a practice of selling specimens for cash” unless the cash was used to obtain “anthropological objects”; in other words, objects similar to the object sold rather than modern art.⁵⁷ The connoisseur’s reluctance to sell objects was already evident in the 1970s, and this reluctance would inform the deaccessioning tenets that began to evolve around this time.

“Guilt-Free?” Exchanges, Gifts, and “Retirements”

If tracing sales of museum objects is difficult, it is even more difficult to trace the fate of objects exchanged, gifted, placed on “permanent loan,” or otherwise migrated from one institution to another without much more than a handshake. When done correctly, these transactions are examples of what Miller calls “guilt-free deaccessioning.”⁵⁸ This is especially true of anthropological and scientific specimens. In the early 1900s, for example, the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. routinely gifted duplicates from its natural history collections, which included anthropological objects like Native American pots and baskets, to small libraries and historical societies across the United States. Catherine A. Nichols traces the odd journey of some of these artifacts to the Jackson Free Library in Tennessee.⁵⁹ Like museums today who use gifts and exchanges of their duplicates and other cellar miscellanea to smaller institutions to demonstrate their commitment to serving a broader public, the Smithsonian saw distributions of their duplicates “as both a practical and strategic measure used first to advance scientific knowledge in professional communities and later to engender popular support and

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Steven H. Miller, “‘Guilt-Free’ Deaccessioning,” in *A Deaccession Reader*, ed. Stephen E. Weil (Washington, D.C.: American Association of Museums, 1997), 95.

⁵⁹ Catherine A. Nichols, “A Century of Circulation: The Return of the Smithsonian Institution’s Duplicate Anthropological Specimens,” *Museum Anthropology* 37, no. 2 (2014).

education in natural history and anthropology.”⁶⁰ The Smithsonian divested itself of over four hundred thousand duplicate specimens through these distributions, freeing up its own warehouse space and, at the time, feeding the collecting frenzy of hundreds of small museums founded during the museum-happy years of the early twentieth century. Nichols notes that, while the duplicates were initially useful to the library for its children’s room and for its nature-based educational programs, they became superfluous by mid-century when the library focused its mission completely on collecting texts, and eventually the natural history duplicates disappeared altogether;⁶¹ some of the anthropological objects, mostly Indian pottery and basketry, eventually found their way into a local private collection.⁶² In this case, the Smithsonian itself is both a government actor and a regulated interest, but this exchange appears to have been beneficial for all parties at the time it was executed.

In the Smithsonian case, Nichols was able to track the objects through decades of history. In other cases, there is doubt about what actually happened to objects. One such case involves the University of Pennsylvania art museum. The University Museum in the early twentieth century found itself in possession of a number of fakes, forgeries, and other low-quality decorative arts objects. The Museum’s Board reported in its minutes that it had begun the “retirement of many of the least meritorious objects in the various departments” so that only the highest-quality objects were left on display for visitors.⁶³ “By this weeding out process many imitations, reproductions and counterfeits... such as unavoidably creep into every collection, have been withdrawn,” the report continues.⁶⁴ The wording of the report is instructive. It

⁶⁰ Ibid., 146.

⁶¹ Ibid., 152.

⁶² Ibid., 154.

⁶³ Steven Conn, *Museums and American Intellectual Life, 1876-1926* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 216.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

acknowledges that acquisition mistakes happen – inferior objects “unavoidably creep into every collection” – and that the museum has the responsibility to rectify those mistakes, in this case by simply “weeding out” the mistakes. This kind of language reinforces the business-as-usual tone of early deaccessioning and disposal. Still, the investigator is left to wonder about the phrases “retire” and “weeding out,” since it is not completely clear what happened to these objects. In all likelihood, some migrated to the education collection – the report mentions them being “displayed together” to help people learn the difference between authentic objects and fakes – but others probably ended up in the cellar and later on the auction block. However the museum staff decided to dispose of the objects, it is clear from the casual language of the report that they made and executed those decisions in a far less regulated environment than today. They certainly were not worried about the government preventing them from selling their fakes and forgeries. The overriding goal – collecting and showcasing only “genuine” art that appealed to a certain socioeconomic class⁶⁵ – was up for debate at the time but not the subject of government investigation or editorials.

Finally, it is useful to end with the MAI, already mentioned earlier. Most of the museums noted above sold and traded well before the “perfect storm” hit in the 1970s; when the hammer came down, directors and curators could excuse the imperfections of a different era and declare their willingness to enter a new one. Unfortunately for the MAI, their director and Board began a series of ill-advised exchanges, gifts, and sales to dealers in the late 1960s, just as the norms began to change. In doing so, they were ripe for scandal. Former MAI director Roland W. Force mentions that, like most museums, the MAI conducted some “inter-museum” exchanges with “reputable institutions” like the Boston Museum of Fine Arts.⁶⁶ However, he suggests that by

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Force, *The Heye and the Mighty*, 31.

1969, the pace of exchanges – sometimes with dealers and even allegedly with Board members – had dramatically increased: “A Niska mask, a Tlingit rattle, several ‘minor pieces,’ and an Alaskan house post were exchanged for Mexican and Central American objects,” he says, adding that, “There is evidence of an ongoing exodus of Northwest Coast and Eskimo pieces from the collection”⁶⁷ In 1967, the museum began working with private dealers to exchange objects from several of its collections, including the Northwest Coast and Eskimo collections, for other types of objects that they wanted for exhibition, including “Mexican and Central American objects.”⁶⁸ To the extent that these practices are considered unethical today, the concerns center around conflicts of interest: museums can still work with private dealers to acquire and dispose of collections objects as long as they are transparent about it, but the alleged exchanges with Board members explicitly violate conflict of interest policies. However, the MAI, along with the larger museum world, was rapidly entering an era when truth hardly mattered. The Met scandal in the 1970s generated scandalous headlines, and journalists immediately began rooting through the skeletons in other museums’ closets in search of the next sensational story to sell to the public.

When the *New York Times* closed in on the MAI in 1974, it was searching for a headline, not the truth. Were any of the charges about gifts of objects to Board members in return for cash⁶⁹ or backroom trades with dealers behind the backs of some disgruntled Board members⁷⁰ completely true, only partially true, or complete fabrication? Evidence suggests that the truth was a mixture of the three. However, the charges were accepted by a public disillusioned with public museums, tired of paying for them, and increasingly used to wielding the sledgehammer of government to solve perceived problems. Burgess and Shane’s “external forces” and

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 38.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 36.

“governmental actors” fed off the other’s hysteria to create a monster. It was in this atmosphere of threats of legislation, the scandals of large museums, and widespread distrust that the tenets of deaccessioning as museum workers know them today were born. It is a legacy with which small and mid-sized museums must contend as they try to deaccession in ways that make sense for them in the twenty-first century.

Chapter 3:

Deaccessioning and Disposal at the Passaic County Historical Society: A Pre-1970s Case Study

Staff at small museums and historical societies contemplating deaccessioning campaigns in the twenty-first century can feel overwhelmed. Large museum scandals and a hostile political environment make the task daunting if not dangerous. It is especially frustrating when the media – and sometimes museum workers – only discuss deaccessioning in the context of art museums or large natural history museums. In reality, smaller museums have a long history of deaccessioning and disposal. Although their stories never made it into the *New York Times*, the archives of these institutions reveal that staff members at these small museums have long been struggling with the evolving norms and values surrounding deaccessioning and disposal. A case study from the Passaic County Historical Society in Paterson, New Jersey, illustrates a long battle with over-collecting, sales, and political situations as revealed in the organization’s historic accession ledgers and the minutes of the Board of Trustees. The archives also reveal the Trustees’ attempts to solve these problems over the years using the limited means at their disposal. The archives, spanning the period 1926 to 1970, support Burgess and Shane’s assertion that various informal but generally accepted deaccessioning practices existed before the 1970s and that “there were multiple policy theories and approaches already in play by the 1970s.”⁷¹ The Trustees and staff drew from these emerging theories and approaches – largely created by larger museums – as well as their own best judgment and common sense when making decisions about collections. The results were hardly a free-for-all; rather, the staff members and Trustees at this small institution attempted to, and often succeeded in, making sound and ethical decisions. This case study is intended to provide evidence that common-sense disposal decisions in small

⁷¹ Burgess and Shane, “Deaccessioning: A Policy Perspective,” 173.

museums date to the early twentieth century, and did not begin with the deaccessioning panic of the 1970s or government intervention.

“The Property of This Society Remain Intact”: Early Attitudes toward Disposal at PCHS

The Passaic County Historical Society (hereafter PCHS) was founded and disbanded twice before several college-educated school principals founded the current organization in 1926. The original by-laws of the organization, passed on April 22, 1926, at a meeting at the local Y.M.C.A. in Paterson, New Jersey, defined the mission of the new organization as “the cultivation of a spirit of local pride and true patriotism, through the collection and preservation of material and data pertaining to Passaic County and its environs and the dissemination of knowledge of historical interest by periodical publication”⁷² Article VII of this same document empowers the executive committee of the new private organization to “acquire, hold, and *dispose of* property for the Society, such as relics, records, documents, curios, books, prints, maps, archaeological and topographical data, genealogical records” (italics mine).⁷³ Even at the earliest stage of the organization’s history, the founders recognized that they were running a business, not a temple, and acknowledged that both collection and disposal of collected objects might be necessary. It was also an acknowledgement, taken for granted during that era, that the Trustees could be trusted to run the affairs of their organization with minimal or no interference from outside parties like governments or professional organizations.

Before the Trustees could manage the organization, however, they needed a collection and a home for it. The Free Public Library of Paterson agreed to provide a room for the new Society in the summer of 1926, and by March 10, 1927, the “First Annual Report of the Curator” extolled the “collection of curios and memorabilia” that the first curator, volunteer Albert

⁷² The Passaic County Historical-Society: By-Laws, April 22, 1926, Board of Trustees Records, 1926-1928, Passaic County Historical Society Archives, Paterson, New Jersey.

⁷³ Ibid.

Heusser, was able to gather for the Society.⁷⁴ Unsurprisingly, anxiety about space in this “most suitable room” increased steadily over the years as the curator reported more donations and purchases at almost every meeting of the Board. Even in the March 1927 annual report, less than a year after the organization’s founding, Curator Heusser reported that “even at this early stage in our history, it would require six months to list every particular item now in our archives. Donations are accumulating from day to day.”⁷⁵ Shortly after Curator Heusser’s death in 1929, the situation had become critical. “The question of room for our museum is forcing itself on our attention,” reads “The President’s Report to the Society” on March 11, 1929. “Our present quarters in the library are not only full but already so packed that we cannot exhibit to advantage.” Typical of attitudes at the time, however, the President saw this problem as proof that the Society had done its job rather than as evidence of mismanagement. “This is no complaint,” he said, about the hopeless backlog, “but only stating a real problem due to the success of that line of growth.”⁷⁶

This growing collection attracted the interest of collectors, and the Trustees confronted their first offer from a member of the public to buy from the collections in 1929. By this time, Curator Heusser was dead, and a series of short-lived curators replaced him from 1929 to 1934, leaving the Trustees to handle day-to-day collections issues. Shortly after his death, Curator Heusser’s mother donated some of his Native American relics to the Society, and the Executive Committee of the Board of Trustees discussed an unusual offer for one of the objects at their November 21, 1929, meeting: “The President brought up the request of a Mr. Hayes, of Morristown, to be allowed to purchase an Indian relic from the Heusser collection, now the

⁷⁴ First Annual Report of the Curator, March 10, 1927, Board of Trustees Records, 1926-1928, Passaic County Historical Society Archives, Paterson, New Jersey.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ The President’s Report to the Society, March 11, 1929, Board of Trustees Records, 1931-1934, Passaic County Historical Society Archives, Paterson, New Jersey.

property of the Society.” D. Stanton Hammond, one of the founders of the organization, “moved that it be the understood policy of the Society that, except in advantageous circumstances, the property of this society remain intact.” Another Executive Committee member then recommended that “all such matters be referred to the Executive Committee.” Both motions were carried, and the Society refused the request.⁷⁷

This early request is interesting for several reasons. First, it reveals not only an early bias against disposal in general, but also a strong reaction against sales from the collection, long before ethical guidelines on these matters existed. The intent of Hammond’s stated exception – “except in advantageous circumstances” – is unclear, but it is peculiar given the Society’s desperate need for both cash and more space at this time. “The need for more money, if we are to enlarge any activities, is so urgent that we must consider means to raise the funds,” urged the “President’s Report to the Society” of March 11, 1929, written only a few months before the purchase request.⁷⁸ Even in this apparently cash-low era, the Trustees did not consider sales from the collection for operating purposes as a general policy, even when the opportunity literally presented itself in the form of a specific request. The roots of deaccessioning practices noted by Burgess and Shane, specifically the norms and values that eventually shaped today’s deaccessioning landscape, are clearly in evidence here: keeping collections intact whenever possible, suspicion about sales to private individuals, and Board oversight of all requests. Whether the Committee was influenced by the attitudes of colleagues at larger organizations or merely applying their own codes of honor to the issue is unclear, but considering that almost all of the men on the Committee were college-educated and had connections in New York, a mixture of the two seems likely. Given that the Society had no qualms about donating a special

⁷⁷ Executive Committee Meeting Minutes, November 21, 1929, Board of Trustees Records, 1931-1934, Passaic County Historical Society Archives, Paterson, New Jersey.

⁷⁸ The President’s Report to the Society, Board of Trustees Records.

gavel made in New Jersey to the MAI in New York in 1931, as revealed by the MAI's letter of thanks on April 8, 1931, and preserved in the Board of Trustees' minutes, Hammond may have seen donations to other institutions as an "advantageous circumstances."⁷⁹ As noted in the above chapters, exchange of duplicates and out-of-scope materials with other museums was considered a normal and honorable practice among museum workers in the early twentieth century.

Collecting, Discarding, and Scrapping: The Depression and War Years

In any case, the occasional gift to a peer institution certainly did not solve the Society's growing cash flow and space crisis. In fact, the Society continued to acquire objects at a rapid pace. The "Report of the Curator of the Passaic County Historical Society for the Year Ending March 30, 1931" notes the intention of the new (non-professional) curator to "carry out the policy of the former curators in accepting any and all gifts tendered to us."⁸⁰ The coming change in the Society's circumstances may have alleviated some of the concerns about the space crisis; in 1934, extensive negotiations resulted in the Society finally moving from the library to a few rooms in the Passaic County-owned Lambert Castle, the building that the Society occupies today. The larger space probably seemed endless, and a new collecting fever gripped the Society.

The most ardent collector in the Society's history was the new curator who took the reins from 1935 until his death in 1943, Rudolph C.M. Hartmann. According to County Historian Ed Smyk, who joined the Society in 1963 and heard stories from Hartmann's time, Hartmann was a cabinet-maker out of work during the Depression. The WPA Historical Records Survey paid his salary at the Society until that organization disbanded, forcing Hartmann to work at a near-volunteer basis during the last years of his life; eventually, his personal situation deteriorated and

⁷⁹ Letter, Museum of the American Indian to Dr. William S. Rauchfuss, Chairman, Church Committee, April 8, 1931, Board of Trustees Records, 1931-1934, Passaic County Historical Society Archives, Paterson, New Jersey.

⁸⁰ Report of the Curator of the Passaic County Historical Society For the year ending March 30, 1931, March 30, 1931, Board of Trustees Records, 1931-1934, Passaic County Historical Society Archives, Paterson, New Jersey.

he ended up living in the basement of Lambert Castle for a period of time.⁸¹ During the best of these years, Hartmann “accessioned” everything that came his way, including dirty and torn pages of books and pieces of broken furniture, noting everything carefully in handwritten accession ledgers. By the end years of his life, his cataloging system began to break down and objects accumulated at the Society with little or no order, as noted in a strange note at the end of Hartmann’s last handwritten accession ledger written by Board Secretary Edward Graf in 1943: “[Hartmann’s] lamented demise [was] preceded by a nearly six week stay at Paterson General Hospital. His ailing condition antecedent occasioned a let-down in the matter of records as well as some errors of consequence.”⁸²

Although Hartmann deserves credit for keeping conscientious records during his time as curator, it is clear that he accepted obviously out-of-scope objects (even by the lax standards of the time), and efforts began even in the late 1940s to dispose of some of them under the direction of President D. Stanton Hammond, Trustee (and, during this period, sometimes-acting curator), Edward Graf, and other assistants and staff members. Again, the Society went through a series of short-term curators in the period from Hartmann’s death in 1943 until the early 1960s, when Trustee Edward Graf officially took the job. This time period, however, was busy. Notes about objects discarded and scrapped are littered throughout Hartmann’s ledgers, written by later staff members attempting to dispose of the worst of Hartmann’s accessions. For example, accession number 5528, a few pages from *McGuffey’s Fifth Reader* accessioned by Hartmann, is crossed out with a handwritten note next to it that reads “discarded in 1953 – actually 6 pages – very dirty

⁸¹ Ed Smyk, telephone conversation with author, May 2016.

⁸² Accession Record Book #5, 1943, Accession Ledgers, Passaic County Historical Society Archives, Paterson, New Jersey.

and torn.”⁸³ The note is signed by President D. Stanton Hammond. Hammond also signed the “order” to scrap accession number 6417, two shutter boards accessioned by Hartmann, and accession number 6438, a broken reducing kit for a camera, both in 1949.⁸⁴ These disposals, marked with handwritten notes signed by the president, occur frequently in the 1940s and 1950s. There is no mention of any official approval process in the Board minutes, but the note at the end of Accession Record Book #5 is signed by the entire Executive Committee of the Board of Trustees and promises that Board members – including “acting curator” Edward Graf – would “devote such time and effort as are individually available” to sort through the backlog.⁸⁵

By discarding and scrapping broken and worthless objects, Hammond was helping to fulfill that promise. The objects that Hammond and Graf discarded during this time – some torn pages and broken objects – certainly would not make the front pages of the *New York Times*. None of it seems to have had serious monetary or historical value, and looking through the accessions ledgers today makes one question why they did not discard more. However, faced with the same problem that small museums still face today of too much junk in their storage spaces, the Trustees and staff did the only responsible thing: they threw some of it away. Even here, early practices foreshadow future policy: Hammond made sure to note the reasons for each deaccession, including “poor condition,” still a justifiable reason for deaccessions.

“Material Not of Value for this Society”: The Turn toward Disposal in the 1960s

Despite some discussion about disposal from 1926 forward, a notable change in tone about collections is apparent after 1960, when a space crisis forced the Society to consider some drastic actions. The anxiety centered on the packed basement of Lambert Castle, which was

⁸³ Accession Record Book A5055-A6499, August 27, 1936-December 16, 1937, Accession Ledgers, Passaic County Historical Society Archives, Paterson, New Jersey.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Accession Record Book #5, Accession Ledgers.

stuffed with shelves and boxes full of collections material. In 1961, the Executive Committee of the Board of Trustees recommended that “a museum committee be appointed to check into the museum and to see what materials in the basement are not suited for the Society or museum.”⁸⁶ The Board went one step further at its July 12, 1961, meeting, recommending that the curator “make [a] list of material not of value for this Society, to be discarded or sold if materials are saleable.”⁸⁷ No notes about disposals follow, but the crisis obviously deepened; by around April 16, 1964, the Board asked an unnamed staff member, probably Curator Edward Graf, officially on the job since the early 1960s, to make a comprehensive study of the mess in the basement and make recommendations about how to improve it. The undated report that follows makes several recommendations that all boil down to common sense: get rid of objects that do not support the mission. In fact, the concept of a clearly-defined “scope of collections,” and the mandate to eliminate everything that falls out of it, has its roots in recommendations like this passionate plea that appears in the 1964 report, worth quoting at length:

“Set up some committee or scheme by which, at long last, a proper interpretation of Article II of our constitution can be secured for the words ‘preservation of material and data pertaining to Passaic County and its environs.’ Thus it would be possible to eliminate hundreds of articles—mostly small but some large ones and thus provide much more space in packing cases and in sq. footage; and, at the same time, provide us with a quantity of real museum pieces showing the culture of the county. Should a shingle from the Dey mansion, a piece of iron long buried on the Dey farm, a pottery jar from Arizona, a mineral specimen from Colorado or Africa, an Edison phonograph, an old dish once used by a Paterson family but not classed as an antique, a set of books which had belonged to a prominent Passaic county family etc. etc., be saved, or sold, or traded, or scrapped [?]”⁸⁸

⁸⁶ Executive Committee Meeting Minutes, April 4, 1961, Board of Trustees Records, 1956-1963, Passaic County Historical Society Archives, Paterson, New Jersey.

⁸⁷ Executive Committee Meeting Minutes, July 12, 1961, Board of Trustees Records, 1956-1963, Passaic County Historical Society Archives, Paterson, New Jersey.

⁸⁸ Untitled report, 1964, Board of Trustees Records, 1964-1965, Passaic County Historical Society Archives, Paterson, New Jersey.

The same report also recommended gutting the Society's library, recommending that the Society "eliminate the hundreds of books in cartons" that "have little or no relevance to Passaic county [sic]."⁸⁹ With the direction of Curator Graf, who officially took the job in the early 1960s and remained in the position for well over a decade, the Trustees appear finally to act on at least the recommendation about the books by its January 12, 1966, meeting, where they appointed "a small working committee" to re-organize the basement and "dispose of such books which do not conform to Article 2 of our By-Laws and constitution." The motion spells out exactly what this means: "This motion is to be interpreted as selling, exchanging, giving away, [and] dumping the remainder in the trash disposal."⁹⁰ Deaccessioning norms since the 1970s still allow for destruction of collections materials, but the fact that many objects in historical societies lack monetary value is rarely discussed. Curator Graf, who had managed or helped to manage PCHS's collection for over two decades, simply selected the objects that he knew to be of no value (either monetarily or historically) and received Board approval to dispose of them. Although Graf was not a trained museum professional, he was typical for his time (and still for many small museums today): a longtime collections worker with great familiarity with the collections. Museums that lack professional staff but who have access to museum professionals for advice should certainly consult those sources, but even those without that access can make sound decisions through basic research, familiarity with collections, and common sense, as Graf and the Board of Trustees did. The Trustees commissioned the 1964 report that provided recommendations about scope of collections and mission that Graf and the Trustees appear to have followed. Even before the widespread availability of consultants and professional advice, they did due diligence in a relatively short timeframe.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Executive Committee Meeting Minutes, January 12, 1966, Board of Trustees Records, 1966-1967, Passaic County Historical Society Archives, Paterson, New Jersey.

The Board minutes do not specifically mention non-library objects going into the dumpster, but a letter written by D. Stanton Hammond in 1966 makes it clear that it was definitely happening, and not everyone was happy about it. According to County Historian Ed Smyk, who volunteered at PCHS during this time, D. Stanton Hammond and Curator Graf did not get along, and this animosity may have contributed to Hammond's criticism of Graf's disposal practices in 1966.⁹¹ In his 1966, "Report to Executive Committee," President-Emeritus Hammond lamented that "P.C.H.S. has quantities of objects in our basement that could be arranged tastefully for exhibits...don't sacrifice objects [underlining in original] on a house cleaning motivation. We have already lost some valuable history that way in recent past."⁹² What invaluable history did PCHS lose? Hammond spells it out: "The antique bathtub fittings I saved from an old Weavertown dwelling being demolished, the school desks Dietz got from Haledon or somewhere, the business antique-desk from [name illegible]'s home...[and] the Lambert coach harness have all mysteriously disappeared, evidently thrown out without proper supervision."⁹³ It is impossible to know without seeing the objects firsthand whether Graf or Hammond was in the right, but based on the laments about space by the Trustees for the six years preceding Hammond's letter – and the value (or lack thereof) of many objects – it is clear that Graf had to make difficult choices to keep the Society from losing all intellectual control over its collection. In fact, according to County historian Ed Smyk, the Society's biggest problem at this time was not the "house cleaning mission" that was long overdue, but the fact

⁹¹ Ed Smyk, telephone conversation with the author, May 2016.

⁹² Report to the Executive Committee by D. Stanton Hammond, president-emeritus, January 12, 1966, Board of Trustees Records, 1966-1967, Passaic County Historical Society Archives, Paterson, New Jersey.

⁹³ Ibid.

that objects, many never used by the Society for research or exhibition, were stacked in piles of barely-sorted boxes in improperly secured collections areas, leading to a few incidents of theft.⁹⁴

Another voice against the dumpster brigade came from one of the founders of the Society, who voiced a slightly different concern at the June 21, 1967, meeting of the Executive Committee: he recommended Board approval before any disposals. “Mr. Brooks cautioned haste in getting rid of so-called ‘junk’ because of the value of cash, if not necessarily for exhibit. It was agreed that if any material is not fit for exhibit that it be disposed of, such material to be set aside and to be passed on by the Committee As A Whole [sic] whenever there is sufficient quantity.”⁹⁵

Again, the concept of oversight of the deaccessioning process by the Board of Trustees, an essential part of deaccessioning policy today, makes a pre-1970s appearance. Although these early deaccessioning escapades were not documented as clearly as today’s policies dictate, it is difficult to argue that they were unethical. The Trustees faced a business problem: too many unnecessary objects clogging their collections storage spaces. In the face of the problem, they found a solution: they got rid of some of them. Although they faced internal struggles over the objects, they did not have to fear outside pressures; despite this lack of third party intervention or media coverage, they arguably showed too much restraint in disposal given that the Society’s current curator is still struggling with masses of clearly out-of-scope or badly damaged objects accessioned before the 1960s (see Chapter 4).

The modern concept of dedicating the proceeds from sales of deaccessioned materials to the direct care of existing collections also appears around this time as the Trustees struggled to sort through a half century of material. At a July 15, 1965, meeting of the Executive Committee, “the President reported certain paintings, now in the possession of the Society, required repair

⁹⁴ Ed Smyk, telephone conversation with the author, May 2016.

⁹⁵ Executive Committee Meeting Minutes, June 21, 1967, Board of Trustees Records, 1966-1967, Passaic County Historical Society Archives, Paterson, New Jersey.

and restoring, while others of no value or use to the Society might be disposed of possibly equalizing expense of restoration.”⁹⁶ It is notable that the subject arose in connection with the Society’s fine art collection, one of the more “salable” collections. As noted in previous chapters, large art museums and natural history museums shaped the earliest deaccessioning practices in ways that made sense for their types of institutions; for the Society’s painting collection, this approach clearly also made sense. However, the proceeds from the sale of Hammond’s bathtub fittings noted above would most likely not repair many paintings. Materials like bathtub fittings are more representative of many small history museums’ collections.

A New Era: The Society’s 1979 Collections Policy

Although PCHS had an informal set of policies and procedures that guided deaccessioning and disposal decisions during its early history, it did not have an official collections policy until January 17, 1979. The policy contained a brief “disposal policy,” obviously written in response to professional deaccessioning practices that were formalized after the Met scandal. However, the policy does not deviate greatly from the practices already developed or followed by the Board of Trustees prior to that time, proclaiming that “the Society may dispose of any item when, on the advice of the Director and professional staff, and with the concurrence of the Trustees, it is considered no longer appropriate to the collections.”⁹⁷ Interestingly, however, the policy only notes exchange and sale as acceptable means of disposal, with restrictions on sales to Trustees and requirements about documentation.⁹⁸ The language of the policy mimics the policies of the Met and other large art museums and reveals its roots in the early 1970s art museum deaccessioning scandals. The era of fear of deaccessioning had arrived.

⁹⁶ Executive Committee Meeting Minutes, July 15, 1965, Board of Trustees Records, 1964-1965, Passaic County Historical Society Archives, Paterson, New Jersey.

⁹⁷ Collections Policy, as adopted by the Board of Trustees January 17, 1979 and amended April 18, 1979, Records of the Curator, Passaic County Historical Society Archives, Paterson, New Jersey.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

Small museums today must deaccession more proactively if they are to survive and grow their collections. The next chapter will review today's deaccessioning norms and values and analyze whether they make sense for small history museums. It will also review the Passaic County Historical Society's current deaccessioning campaign and compare it to the Trustees' disposal decisions prior to the 1970s. Finally, it will make recommendations about how small museums can learn from past disposal and deaccessioning practices to move forward with more confidence.

Chapter 4:

Lessons from the Past

Museum workers hoping to deaccession today face challenges, but they also have powerful points of argument. First, as revealed by the Heritage Health Index Report, *A Public Trust at Risk*, most museum collections receive inadequate care due to budget constraints and space constraints,⁹⁹ and changing this situation will require a change in both mindset and practice. Second, museums always deaccessioned and occasionally did talk about it before the 1970s, both to each other and in the media. The case studies in the literature from the New-York Historical Society, the University of Pennsylvania Museum, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, as well as the archives of the much smaller Passaic County Historical Society, show that museums sold, exchanged, and scrapped objects when budgets or storage space became scarce. Third, and finally, the process is not nearly as daunting as it first appears. The complex legal, ethical, and professional framework – what Burgess and Shane called the “deaccessioning subsystem”¹⁰⁰ – that sprung from the 1970s deaccessioning scandals developed from practices already in existence decades earlier, even at small museums like the Passaic County Historical Society. Finally, small museums have the power to simplify the process. The art museums and large natural history museums that developed the earliest deaccessioning and disposal practices created a system that worked for them, and small museums can adapt the system for themselves. This chapter will show how small museums can adopt common-sense approaches to deaccessioning that encourage action and, in the process, compare the Passaic County Historical Society’s current deaccessioning campaign to its historical precedents. The differences – or lack of major differences – can inspire museum workers to see deaccessioning, not as an evil forced

⁹⁹ Heritage Preservation, Inc., *A Public Trust at Risk*.

¹⁰⁰ Burgess and Shane, “Deaccessioning: A Policy Perspective,” 174.

upon them by a post-1970s world, but as a continuation of a long tradition of practical decisions about collections management.

“Obstacles to Action”: Taking the First Steps at PCHS

The hardest part about a deaccessioning campaign is starting it. In his pamphlet about managing digital files in archives, Ricky Erway acknowledges that the task can seem daunting, especially since, in contrast to traditional paper files, digital files are stored on machines that quickly become obsolete and inaccessible. He advises archivists to approach the daunting task by adopting “four essential principles”:¹⁰¹

1. “Do no harm (to the physical media or the content).”
2. “Don’t do anything that unnecessarily precludes future action and use.”
3. “Don’t let the first two principles be obstacles to action.”
4. “Document what you do.”

Erway makes these recommendations for archivists, but the management of digital archives and deaccessioning in history museums share a crucial characteristic: the professional standards that guide both are evolving. Management of digital archives is a new field that changes with the rapid pace of new technologies, and archivists can find themselves hesitating to take the first step for fear that they are behind on current standards. Although deaccessioning has a long history in museums, it has become a controversial topic only in the last few decades and public perceptions and professional practices surrounding it are also evolving rapidly, leading to uncertainty and hesitation that can become inaction. Museum workers hoping to sort through the laws, ethical guidelines, media scrutiny, Board misunderstandings, and mountains of deaccessioning literature with which they are expected to be fluent could easily adapt these four principles to the

¹⁰¹ Ricky Erway, “You’ve Got to Walk Before You Can Run: First Steps for Managing Born-Digital Content Received on Physical Media” (Dublin, OH: OCLC Research, 2012), 3.

necessary task of deaccessioning objects from history collections. “Do no harm,” in the context of deaccessioning, means taking time to think about how to deal with potential obstacles. Who in the community may be offended? How public will the effort be? How will any criticism be addressed? “Don’t do anything that unnecessarily precludes future action and use” simply means justifying all disposal decisions, and the Passaic County Historical Society’s accession ledger notes from the 1950s show that this requirement has a long tradition. Erway’s fourth principle, “Document what you do” is, of course, the first principle of museum deaccessioning today. The third principle is perhaps most relevant to museum workers in the twenty-first century. Actually taking action and getting rid of unwanted collections objects despite the paranoia about the community’s reaction and the risk that the old plough will actually be worth millions of dollars a century from now is the real challenge. The Passaic County Historical Society’s history of deaccessioning and disposal reveals possible missteps, but it also reveals that small museum workers then had many of the same ideas about these topics as museum workers do now. When their collection began to overrun their storage spaces, they tackled the problem – imperfectly, but not disastrously. The Passaic County Historical Society and its collection still exist. In fact, its staff is still deaccessioning today. The following information is based on personal correspondence with the Passaic County Historical Society’s current curator, Heather Garside, in 2016.

When current Passaic County Historical Society curator Heather Garside came to the organization in 2011, she joined a long line of curators who wanted to start getting rid of out-of-scope and deteriorated collections objects. She started pushing for action when she found boxes of shells and minerals with no connection to Passaic County or PCHS’s mission. “It brought to light how far away from our mission much of our collection strayed,” she said. “The collection

management committee [an internal committee of Trustees] began to come around to my way of thinking.”¹⁰² Like her predecessor Edward Graf in the 1960s, she faced a storage dilemma.

PCHS was moving to a smaller storage unit at their off-site storage location, and she had no choice but to take action. According to Garside, the deaccessioned objects are almost all out-of-scope objects that her predecessors Walter Lucas and Rudy Hartmann accepted in the 1930s: shells, minerals, kitchen and household wares, and games that had no relevance to the Society’s mission. Garside did not hesitate to send found-in-collection objects through the deaccession approval process, either. Since 2012, PCHS has deaccessioned over 3,400 objects.¹⁰³

The Society has no official “collections plan,” nor has the collection had a full inventory any time in the recent past, but Garside and the Board did not allow that to preclude action. They thought through the process and made decisions. Garside generates a spreadsheet of deaccessioned objects from PastPerfect and offers everything to other museums in the region first. Like many history museum curators, she has already discovered that, except for niche collections, this endeavor is mostly futile. “We haven’t had much luck passing on the random items,” she admits. “The Franklin Mineral Museum took the entire mineral collection (they given them to kids so they can start their own collection). The rest of the items go to an auction, and whatever can’t be sold is discarded by the auctioneer.”¹⁰⁴ Also like many history museum workers, Garside and the Board worried about backlash. After four years of deaccessioning, however, she has only received one complaint: “We only received one letter asking why we had auctioned some machines rather than give them to the Paterson museum. Once I informed him that the Paterson museum had declined the offer, he was satisfied,” Garside said.¹⁰⁵ In fact, the

¹⁰² Heather Garside, e-mail message to author, July 1, 2016.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

greatest challenge PCHS currently faces in its ongoing deaccessioning campaign is speed: interns must photograph found-in-collection objects and sort through old accession ledgers and file indexes for as much original documentation as possible, and lists of proposed deaccessions must go before the Board for approval – an old practice that Garside’s pre-1970s predecessors supported, as the case study demonstrated.

In fact, it may surprise museum workers that PCHS’s current deaccessioning process is not radically different from the informal policies and procedures that its staff and Trustees followed prior to the 1970s. Garside still considers whether an object fits the mission of the Society and whether the Society has the space to store it, following in the footsteps of the 1964 PCHS writer who implored the Board to properly interpret the Society’s by-laws and “eliminate hundreds of articles-mostly small but some large ones and thus provide much more space in packing cases and in sq. footage; and, at the same time, provide us with a quantity of real museum pieces showing the culture of the county.”¹⁰⁶ She still justifies each deaccession, plugging the information into the PastPerfect database rather than scribbling the reason in the accession ledger as D. Stanton Hammond did in the 1950s. She still submits lists of deaccessioned objects for Board approval, although that process is much more formalized than it was in the 1960s. The century-old museum practice of offering deaccessioned objects to peer institutions continues as well; one hopes the Franklin Mineral Museum was as pleased with their acquisition of the mineral collection as the MAI was with the wooden gavel PCHS gave to them in the 1930s. Cameras, databases, and professionalization of documentation slow down the process, but the process continues much as it always has at PCHS.

¹⁰⁶ Untitled report, Board of Trustees Records.

Framing the Issue: Over-Collecting as the Greater Evil

A curator or collections manager about to embark upon a deaccessioning process hears advice from every colleague he or she meets: read this book or article, get familiar with the laws, and get the collections policy up to date. Aspiring deaccession campaign managers at small history museums should also, however, look through the history of their own organizations to see how their predecessors handled the same problems they face in the twenty-first century. Almost every small history museum deaccessioned in the past, and studying what they did right – and possibly quite wrong – is instructive in its own way. It reassures curators that they are not blazing totally new paths. It also inspires confidence, which museum workers need if they are to deal more effectively with the challenges of space and interpretation than their predecessors did. Museum workers still wrestle with the legacy of predecessors who accepted every donation offered with no consideration given to existing collections or future use. Deaccessioning in many small history museums today is often a matter of culling duplicate objects accepted by predecessors to make room for the collection to grow in new areas that reflect a changing society. “Most of America’s history museums are still struggling to adapt nineteenth-century collections to a twenty-first century world. We have an embarrassment of riches when it comes to Chippendale chairs and embroidery samplers, but embarrassingly few mezuzahs or intact pieces of colonoware,” according to Rainey Tisdale, an ardent proponent of deaccessioning in small history museums.¹⁰⁷

Ironically, for all the concerns about pre-1970s deaccessioning practices – as demonstrated in previous chapters, these concerns led directly to the strict policies of today – the main problem with these predecessors was reckless accessioning rather than disposal. Malara addresses this issue, admitting that she is “always rather perplexed by the amount of controversy

¹⁰⁷ Rainey Tisdale, “Do History Museums Still Need Objects?,” *History News*, Summer (2011): 21.

we see on the subject of deaccessioning as compared with the general apathy concerning the issues of mindless collecting with negligible documentation. Is the public better served by an undisciplined or poorly documented collection?"¹⁰⁸ It is true that perhaps a shingle or two from the Dey Mansion – a historic site close to PCHS – may have made it to the trash can in the 1960s without the approval of PCHS' full Board of Trustees, but as demonstrated by the hoard of out-of-scope objects from the 1930s with which the current curator must now contend, the pre-1970s PCHS staff certainly collected more than they discarded. Even in the collecting-happy 1930s, people in Passaic County worried about the growing piles of objects in the cellar. "There must be a stop to the truckload after truckload of material that is being brought into the Castle," Frederick W. Loede, Jr., chief executive of the former Passaic County Park Commission, wrote to PCHS curator Rudy Hartmann in 1938. "Kindly refrain from accepting any more material to be stored in the cellar."¹⁰⁹ As the current curator's efforts demonstrate, Hartmann did not heed this advice. Who deserves more criticism: Rudy Hartmann, who accepted the shells and minerals that PCHS staff and interns spent hours documenting, or the unnamed volunteers who tried to clean out the basement in the 1960s, perhaps with less than ideal oversight? According to Malaro, the museum world should worry more about the former situation than the latter.

Recommendations for Small Museums

What lessons can small museums learn from the history of deaccessioning and disposal? This section will provide a checklist of recommendations for small museum curators or collections managers hoping to begin a deaccessioning campaign but feeling hesitant. These recommendations are especially relevant if one is facing a Board of Trustees, a director, or another staff member with ethical or public relations concerns. This checklist is meant to

¹⁰⁸ Malaro, "Deaccessioning – The American Perspective," 47-48.

¹⁰⁹ Letter, Frederick W. Loede, Jr., Passaic County Park Commissioner, to D. Stanton Hammond, President of PCHS, June 13, 1938, Correspondence Records, Passaic County Park Commission Archives, Paterson, New Jersey.

supplement advice already given to curators and collections managers: becoming familiar with laws and ethical guidelines, especially the institution's own Code of Ethics, and adapting best practices to the specific needs of the institution.

One valuable first step for museum workers considering a deaccessioning campaign is to conduct some basic institutional archival research. Show the Board of Trustees or the director the institution's deaccessioning and disposal history. The minutes of the Board of Trustees and the historic curatorial files are good places to start. Some points to consider while conducting archival research are:

1. When did the institution first start talking about deaccessioning or disposal? It was most likely before the 1970s. Find the earliest mention. Show how long deaccessioning has been occurring at the museum, and emphasize that the museum's collection survived those episodes.
2. What methods did the museum historically use to dispose of deaccessioned objects? Were they sold, scrapped, or traded? Emphasize the "problem-solver" approach of earlier museum professionals to issues still facing the institution today. Usually these include space, funding for care of collections, or lack of intellectual control over collections. Note that the collection, and therefore the disposal methods, of small museums differ substantially from large art and natural history museums. This can supplement statistics about the institution's current space crisis or condition problems in high-value collections that require conservation.
3. Most importantly, show continuity between the methods of the past and current ethical guidelines. Most likely, the institution's past curators made mistakes – both judgmental and ethical – in past disposal campaigns, but the museum person today can show how the

risk of these mistakes is far less than the dangers of over-collecting. Most likely, the minutes, like those of the Passaic County Historical Society, will show people debating and constantly amending their deaccessioning practices as they carry out a campaign, more or less openly. Emphasize how this can continue today.

Conclusion

Shubinski titles her thesis about art museum deaccessioning “From Exception to Norm,” but this sentiment is far from the truth.¹¹⁰ The published literature about large museums going back to the early twentieth century shows a long history of deaccessioning and disposal, and the minutes of the Board of Trustees of a small museum shows the same history, with some creative adaptation. Deaccessioning has a long history in American museums, and based on the current space and budget crises in many museums across the country, this history must continue into the future. The Heritage Health Index Report *A Public Trust at Risk* challenges museums to find ways to “give priority to providing safe conditions for the collections they hold in trust,”¹¹¹ and small museums must re-claim deaccessioning and disposal as an important strategy on the path to achieving that goal and rectifying the over-collecting of their predecessors. Most importantly, curators and collections managers at small museums must be more vocal about the long history of deaccessioning in their type of institutions and emphasize how their needs differ from those of large art museums and natural history museums. Generations of small museum workers have “deaccessioned and lived to tell about it,” in the words of Mark Greene;¹¹² today’s generation of museum workers can follow in their footsteps.

¹¹⁰ Shubinski, “From Exception to Norm,” 1.

¹¹¹ Heritage Preservation, Inc., *A Public Trust at Risk*, 1.

¹¹² Mark A. Greene, “I’ve Deaccessioned and Lived to Tell About It: Confessions of an Unrepentant Reappraiser,” *Archival Issues* 30, no. 1 (2006): 1.

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