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# INDIANA HISTORICAL SOCIETY COLLECTIONS ADVISOR

A RESOURCE FROM IHS LOCAL HISTORY SERVICES

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## KEEPING COLLECTIONS SAFE AND HEALTHY DURING A PANDEMIC

By Karen DePauw, manager, IHS Local History Services

### WE'RE STILL ON THE JOB!

*Heritage organizations are facing an unprecedented situation. We're learning to work remotely, serve our communities digitally and preparing for a changed future.*

*Please remember that you and the other heritage organizations in your community have a support system. While the Indiana Historical Society is temporarily closed, Local History Services staff and Heritage Support Grants coaches are working remotely. We're checking our email and voice mail messages, and we're here to answer your questions, talk to you about your concerns and provide any resources we can.*

*We encourage you to be creative. Think of ways you may be able to reach out to your community and keep them involved with your work - documenting the current situation, doing historical research, providing information about collections objects and offering resources parents can use to teach their children from home. Look for remote partnerships with nursing homes, teachers, social service agencies and more.*

*Keep in touch and let us know how you're doing.*

*Take care and be safe,*

*The Indiana Historical Society Local History Services staff.*

It is impossible to ignore the effect the COVID-19 pandemic has had on the work of museums. Some museums have closed to the public and researchers, while others have not. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and World Health Organization (WHO) provide guidance on how to keep each other safe, but not how to keep our collections safe.

Most of us have heard the advice to disinfect any high-touch surfaces such as doorknobs. However, the solutions used to disinfect those surfaces can have a very negative effect on historical objects. So, how do we protect our objects, and those who come into contact with them, from COVID-19 as best we can? The museum field has been quick to disseminate advice and guidance for dealing with historical objects during the COVID-19 pandemic. These suggestions will be helpful now and once we reopen if there is still a threat of COVID-19 in our communities. Similarly, this advice can largely be followed during any other fight against infectious disease and might make a great start to an infectious disease section in your museum's emergency plan. Below are some suggestions pulled from various resources. You can find links to numerous online resources in the sidebar.

[APPLY  
FOR A  
HERITAGE  
SUPPORT  
GRANT](#)

### ONLINE RESOURCES

[Reviewing Cleaning and Collections Care Policies](#)  
(American Alliance of Museums)

[Pandemic Preparedness: Resources for Libraries](#)  
(American Library Association)

[Coronavirus Disease 2019 \(COVID-19\)](#)  
(CDC)

[Public Health Emergencies](#)  
(COSTEP MA)

[Coronavirus Resource Center](#)  
(Harvard Health Publishing: Harvard Medical School)

[The Impact of Hand Sanitizers on Collection Materials](#)  
(Library of Congress)

[Here's How Long the Coronavirus Will Last on Surfaces, and How to Disinfect Those Surfaces](#)  
(Live Science)

[Enhanced Cleaning Guidance \(COVID-19\) for Historic Properties](#)  
(Minnesota Historical Society)

[Information for the Museum Field on the COVID-19/Coronavirus](#)  
(New England Museum Association)

[COVID-19](#)  
(OSHA)



[Lillian Stevens](#) (Indiana Historical Society)

According to the WHO, COVID-19, like most other viruses, can live on surfaces for anywhere from a few hours to a few days. Studies show that some coronaviruses (which includes the common cold), can last on surfaces for up to nine days. It is currently unclear exactly how long COVID-19 specifically lasts on surfaces, but some lab testing says it can be at least 72 hours on certain non-porous surfaces.

Because museums cannot take the drastic disinfecting measures suggested to kill COVID-19 on surfaces, one of the best courses of action is to isolate potentially infected items and let the virus die naturally on their surfaces. If a staff member who frequently comes in contact with collection items becomes sick with COVID-19, consider quarantining the entire collection for a period of three to nine days to make sure that no one else will be infected by working with the museum collection. If other staff must work with a collections object, remember to wear nitrile gloves.

When handling any object that may have come into contact with the virus, wear gloves and then dispose of them and wash hands immediately. Wearing nitrile gloves to handle a possibly infected item can help ensure the virus does not transfer to you. However, wearing gloves will not protect the object from getting infected, so do not waste precious supplies on healthy objects. Use supplies you have on hand rather than purchasing additional boxes of nitrile gloves as they are also used by health care workers. Wash your hands thoroughly after touching items that have been used by the public.

If there is reason to presume that an object from the collection has come in contact with COVID-19, whether by a staff member, volunteer, or patron who has tested positive, quarantine the object for three to nine days. The object could be stored in an air-tight plastic tub or double bagged in zip top bags with the date on the outside and instructions not to open the tub until a date three to nine days later. If the object is too large for that approach, isolate it as best you can with a note on the object. According to the CDC and WHO, once the virus is on a surface the main way for it to be transferred is by someone touching it and then touching their face. The other way is that it could be disturbed and become airborne, so for this reason make sure to store any isolated items away from high-traffic areas or areas where you can feel the air circulation from HVAC systems. If the air movement can stir up dust, it can stir up the virus.

## UPCOMING TRAINING AND PROGRAMS

[Planning Safe Exhibits and Displays](#)

April 7 -  
LYRASIS webinar.

[Historic House Call: Mission](#)

April 23 -  
AASLH webinar.



[Emergency Hospital During Flu Epidemic, 1918](#) (Martin Collection, Indiana Historical Society)

The use of hand sanitizer has increased during the pandemic, as it often does during the winter months. However, [a study by the Library of Congress](#) suggests that both alcohol-based and water-based hand sanitizers can have a negative effect on paper objects in our collections. While washing hands with soap and water is the best way to remove viruses and other germs from our hands, if the museum does choose to offer hand sanitizer in research areas, aim for water-based over alcohol-based to provide at least some level of protection for objects. Also, refrain from touching materials until after the hand sanitizer has completely dried.

Not only can our collections already in the building become infected from contact with someone who has COVID-19, but new objects coming into the collection can also pose a threat. Consider putting a pause on potential donations coming into the building. We are used to dealing with items that come from questionable storage situations, like attics and barns, but not viruses. It would be best to explain to a potential donor that the museum is not currently taking in new potential donations but to please contact you later in the fall (or whenever the museum deems the major threat has passed). You could also ask the donor to provide a photo of the object(s) and a history of the items digitally so you can discuss the objects before they enter the building. That way you can determine if the item is something you want to accession and therefore are willing to quarantine on site as soon as it comes into the museum. Once new donations are being taken, consider quarantining them as discussed for potentially infected objects.



[Arthur Murray Dance Studio Booth at the Indiana State Fair](#) (Indiana Historical Society)

Another thing to consider with our collections is making sure that, where possible, even when our buildings are closed that there is a designated person responsible for checking on the collection occasionally. This time of year in Indiana brings frequent rain and we want to continue to watch for leaks, broken HVAC systems, and other potential emergencies when possible. If you need to leave the museum and close it for an extended period of time without anyone being able to go onsite to check on the collection, consider preventative measures you might be able to institute, like shutting off water to pipes that run near the collection. Just remember not to shut off HVAC systems as the temperature control they provide remains important to collections care.

Note that this is not specific medical advice; rather, it is a relay of information posted by the CDC, WHO and other reliable resources, as well as the elements of the information they have shared that might help our collections and those in close contact with them remain safe. What we know about COVID-19 is changing every day, so please check in frequently with the resources at right in order to get the most up-to-date information regarding the novel coronavirus.

This is a free publication. Anyone may subscribe.

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