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FIREARMS SAFETY IN COLLECTIONS

By Lauren Baker, curator, Indiana State Police Museum

Managing a collection with firearms comes with its own set of considerations. Beyond the normal woes of ensuring the collection space is the correct temperature and humidity, there are also legal issues to consider as well as how to store them in a way that's safe for both the object and the museum staff and volunteers. As the Curator of the [Indiana State Police Museum](#), I oversee a wide variety of firearms, each with their own considerations. Here's a look into our collection of firearms and how we ensure the health and safety of these items in our collection.

As with any collection, our first concern is with the health of the object. Firearms can be tricky in this area since many include materials that are vastly different from one another. For us, this means understanding the age of the object and what materials were used to produce it. Our older firearms are often made of wood and an alloy metal. Both materials don't like moisture, making it important to keep the relative humidity in the room where they are being stored at the recommended 45%. For temperature, we keep the museum around 68 degrees Fahrenheit, an acceptable temperature for both materials. Some of our newer firearms have handles made of a plastic/synthetic material, although less temperamental than wood, the materials used to make these plastic handles have the same concerns as other plastic items in our collection - they can break down over time and there really isn't much that can be done to reverse the damage once it happens. At the moment, all we can do is monitor these objects and take note of any changes.

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We usually make each box or tray out of coroplast, an inert material that is very stable. We also use a type of foam block to make stabilizers within the tray or box to keep the item from moving and hitting other objects within the same space.

Storing firearms in a sense is very similar to how you would consider storing other objects in your collection. For us, we store our firearms alone, meaning we remove any carrying device such as a holster or box the item might have come with when it was initially donated to the museum. This ensures each individual item is being cared for based on its needs while documentation and labeling of these items carefully allows us to know which pieces belong together when it comes time to display these objects. In our collection, we often create a box or tray to house items on our moving shelf units. This allows for more security when items are being moved.

Beyond how to store these items with collections care in mind, there's also the consideration of securing these items safely. For us, that meant purchasing a firearms safe. This made sense for our institution due to how many firearms and similar weapons we house and the setup of our collections space. This was an investment for us that might not necessarily make sense for other museums. Other good options are keeping these items in a location where the room or area can be secured by a lock.



Our safe includes a humidity and temperature detector that helps us ensure the climate in the safe is reasonable for our firearms.

Provenance and ownership of firearms is incredibly important. Beyond the internal documents used to ensure a museum has legal ownership of objects, understanding your state laws for transferring ownership is key. Our institution is spoiled in this sense since we have access to a wide variety of experts in this field. My suggestion would be to consult your local police (city, county, or state) about firearms laws. Another great resource is the [Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives](#) for federal laws; this agency will often have local offices that can be contacted for these types of questions. Beyond ownership laws, these agencies will have information on what types of firearms are legally allowed in your area. If you take away anything from my suggestions, please understand the importance of utilizing the resources you have in your area - these officers and specialists will help you ensure your collection is safe and legal.

Another important consideration is how to safely handle these items. For us, this means rendering the firearms unusable. To do so, we have the firing pins removed from each weapon. This ensures the object cannot be used immediately in the unfortunate situation that it is stolen from our collection. For our rifles and shotguns, this means plugging the barrel,

which was done by a firearms expert to ensure it was done securely and safely. Please do not attempt either of these if you are not trained to do so, rather consult an expert. The decision to alter the usability of your firearms should be based on research and consultation with experts. **Regardless, it is ALWAYS important to ensure your firearms are unloaded and safe to handle.** This is another situation where having a local police department come in and examine your firearms, both for safety reasons and to further your knowledge about the pieces in your museum's collection is incredibly important.

Lastly, determining who should be allowed to handle and transport your collection's firearms is important. There should be set protocol in place for how they should be handled, who is allowed to handle them, and what steps need to be taken if they are being transported to another location. For our museum, this means having someone who is connected to our museum hold a **firearms license**. This ensures legality when transporting firearms. Even if this doesn't happen often, it's important to know who to go to in these circumstances. For instance, I've had to transport firearms to the Indiana State Police Laboratory. I do not have a firearms license, but many of my volunteers do since most are retired police officers. This meant one of our volunteers accompanied me during transportation and assisted with handling these firearms.

Although there's a lot to consider when it comes to having firearms in your museum's collection, it is not such a daunting task if you take the precautions of handling, storing, and researching the laws and regulations around firearms.

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