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# INDIANA HISTORICAL SOCIETY COLLECTIONS ADVISOR

A RESOURCE FROM IHS LOCAL HISTORY SERVICES

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Issue 114 | April 2021

## ADDING TO THE COLLECTION? IT'S A PROCESS.

By Karen DePauw, manager, IHS Local History Services

As museums increasingly open their doors and all of those who have spent the last year cleaning out their closets start bringing in potential donations, it seems like a good time to go through the process of accepting donations. Although what is outlined below is the "best case scenario," it is important to know the best way to handle things. Then when something comes at you that does not fit the perfect process, it is easier to make adjustments. A solid foundation and understanding of the process make you more flexible in any situation.

When a potential donor walks in the door and offers an item to the organization, the process of accepting or declining the item is set in motion. While it is tempting to just say "yes" or "no" in the moment, it is important to take a breath and follow your standard process. By doing so, the organization can help protect itself from needing to deaccession items a few years down the road that it never should have taken in the first place.



Last Minute Check of the Food Baskets Given to Needy Families. (Indianapolis Recorder Collection, Indiana Historical Society)

The first step is to fill out a temporary receipt form (for more on

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Van Horn)

Small Museum  
Toolkit, Book 6:  
Stewardship:  
Collections and  
Historic  
Preservation  
(Cinnamon Catlin-  
Legutko and Stacy  
Klingler, eds.)

### TRAINING AND PROGRAMS

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temporary receipt forms check out [this past Collections Advisor](#)). In short, a temporary receipt form collects pertinent information about the object and the donor and allows the organization to track the item while it is in their custody. Using a temporary receipt also allows the organization the time to work through the rest of the process rather than feeling as if they need to provide the donor an answer on the spot. The donor walks away with a receipt of the fact that they offered their items to the organization, and the organization walks away with contact information for the donor and a little bit of extra information about the item being offered. At this time, some museums, especially ones with high volumes of potential donations, will assign the object a temporary number in order to more easily track the item while it is going through the accept/decline process, but others do not. This is entirely up to the museum, but is certainly something to consider.

Collections Care  
webinar.

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Society.

After the museum has filled out the temporary receipt and placed one copy with the item and sent another copy home with the donor, it is time to consider the item for possible acceptance into the collection. The first step in this is to do an internal review. This is often done by someone who works with and/or is familiar with the current collection and the collection policy. The information about the item can be compared to other items in the collection and to the collection policy to make sure it is a good fit for the institution. Also, take into account any other considerations that should be made before an item is taken into the collection (such as condition, provenance, etc.).



[Executive Committee, Flanner House Guild Tea, 1946.](#) (Indiana Historical Society, M0649)

The next step is to take the recommendation, whether it be to accept or decline, to the Collections Committee (for more information on those, check out [this Collections Advisor](#)). The Collections Committee then discusses the recommendation and either agrees or disagrees. At some organizations, the process of review ends here; at others the Board must also approve the recommendation. There are many reasons to include or not include the full Board in this process, and it is a determination that each organization should make based on its own needs.

If it is decided that the item should be accepted into the permanent collection, a Deed of Gift must be issued. The Deed of Gift is the legal document that transfers ownership from the donor to the organization (more about the Deed of Gift can be found in [this Collections Advisor](#)). Once the signed Deed of Gift is received by the organization, the object

is officially part of the organization's permanent collection. The item should now be assigned a permanent number, catalogued, and appropriately housed.



Main Street, Columbia City, Indiana. (Indiana Historical Society)

If an item is declined, whether by the internal review, the collections committee, or the board, the next step is to contact the donor and return the item. Some museums have a place on the temporary receipt for the donor to indicate what they would like done with the item if it is not accepted, such as dispose of or return to donor. If this was indicated by the donor and recorded on the temporary receipt, then those instructions should be followed at this time. If the donor's wishes were not already captured, then contact the donor and move forward with either returning the item or disposing of it as indicated by them. Sometimes it can be difficult to get a donor to retrieve their item from the organization. In this case, follow the outlined portion of the Indiana Property Law that applies to the situation (find out more about the Indiana Property Law in [this Collections Advisor](#)).

Organizations should all have an agreed upon process for accepting and declining items for their collections. This process might be part of, or separate from, the Collections Management Policy (need to learn more, go to [this Collections Advisor](#)). If you do not have one already, there is no time like the present!

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