

INDIANA HISTORICAL SOCIETY COLLECTIONS ADVISOR

A RESOURCE FROM IHS LOCAL HISTORY SERVICES

[LOCAL HISTORY SERVICES](#) | [INDIANA HISTORICAL SOCIETY](#) | [PAST ISSUES](#) | FOLLOW LHS ON:  

Issue 121 | November 2021

INDIGENOUS BELONGINGS IN MUSEUM COLLECTIONS

By Karen DePauw, manager, IHS Local History Services

While many in the museum field are familiar with the [Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act](#), there may be items in the collection that have an Indigenous story, connection, or history but do not fall under repatriation guidelines. Although belongings can be successfully repatriated to a group without it being legally required, there are also times when a museum remains the caretaker. At that point, the question becomes, how does the museum honor these belongings in the way intended by those who made them and whose histories they tell? Additionally, how can the museum make sure that people in search of these belongings can find them?



[Mound 4, New Castle Group](#) (Indiana Historical Society, P0609)

In recent years, more organizations, groups, and individuals have set out to help solve these questions. Below are some brief introductions to the work they have done and the ideas captured in these very valuable resources. The most important thing, as with working with any group's history, is to involve members of that group who are likely much more familiar with the histories. Working with various tribes helps to ensure belongings are catalogued, made accessible, and stored properly, not only by museum standards, but also by the standards of tribal traditions. Forming a strong partnership around tribal belongings is also a great way to make sure that both the museum and the tribe are fully aware of what resources and knowledge are available to them.

[APPLY FOR A HERITAGE SUPPORT GRANT](#)

ONLINE RESOURCES

[Collections Advisors](#)
(Indiana Historical Society)

[Association of Tribal Archives, Libraries, and Museums](#)

[Journal of Western Archives: Volume 6: Issue 1](#)

[Local Contexts](#)

[The Sustainable Heritage Network](#)

[United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples](#)

TRAINING AND PROGRAMS

[Long Term Storage for Large Functional Objects: Vehicles Nov. 16](#) - Connecting to Collections Care webinar.

[Webinars Recorded](#) - Indiana Historical Society.

When it comes to cataloguing tribal belongings, it can mean adjusting some of the standards the museum might have in place. Consult with tribal representatives to make sure that how tribal belongings are catalogued is suited to the way they search for them. For instance, include any major key words describing the item in both English and the tribe's own language. Make sure tribal names are spelled correctly and presented in both the traditional English spelling, but also any other accepted spellings used by the tribe.

Remember that Indigenous knowledge is real knowledge and oral histories are valid. Many tribes have Elders or Knowledge Keepers who hold the histories of their tribes, not in published resources, but within themselves. These sources of knowledge should be shown as much respect as the most highly regarded scholarly journals.



[Group of Sioux Indians from North Dakota at the 1938 Indiana State Fair](#) (Indiana Historical Society, P0490)

There may be instances where an item should only be viewed by tribal members or during specific seasons. Although museums often shy away from restricting access, remember that these restrictions are to honor the history and importance of the item. Make sure to fully document the reasons behind these restrictions so any refusal to access can be met with the opportunity to educate researchers and the public. When it comes to making Indigenous belongings available to the public through exhibitions or programs, make sure to consult with the tribe about the best way to present the belonging and the accompanying tribal knowledge to the public.

If an organization ever feels like it cannot fulfill the needs of the tribe and its belongings held in the museum, remember that repatriation is always an option.

For continued and in-depth learning regarding Indigenous belongings in museums, check out the following resources.

[Digital Stewardship Curriculum](#)

["Images of the Surreal: Contrived Photographs of Suggested Best Practices"](#)

[Implementing Reparative Description for Indigenous Collections - Slides](#)
[Implementing Reparative Description for Indigenous Collections - Video](#)

[Mukurtu CMS 2.1 Digital Heritage Item Metadata](#)

[Protocols for Native American Archival Materials](#)

[TK Labels Workshop](#)

["Tribal Archives, Traditional Knowledge, and Local Contexts: Why the 's' Matters"](#)

This is a free publication. Anyone may subscribe.

[Local History Services](#)

Indiana Historical Society, 450 West Ohio Street, Indianapolis, IN 46202
(317) 232-1882 | localhistoryservices@indianahistory.org

**WE DO
HISTORY.**
INDIANA HISTORICAL SOCIETY



Smithsonian
Affiliate



PROUD MEMBER OF THE
International Coalition of
SITES of CONSCIENCE

Indiana's Storyteller™, Connecting People to the Past