

INDIANA HISTORICAL SOCIETY COLLECTIONS ADVISOR

A RESOURCE FROM IHS LOCAL HISTORY SERVICES

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HUNTING FOR COLLECTION INFORMATION

By Karen DePauw, manager, IHS Local History Services

One of the most frustrating moments when managing a museum collection is coming across an item and after looking at every inch of it not being able to find a number. So, what to do next? How do you move forward confident that you are doing your best not to miss a thing? Below are some tips to help you feel more confident in your quest to find that number...if it exists at all.

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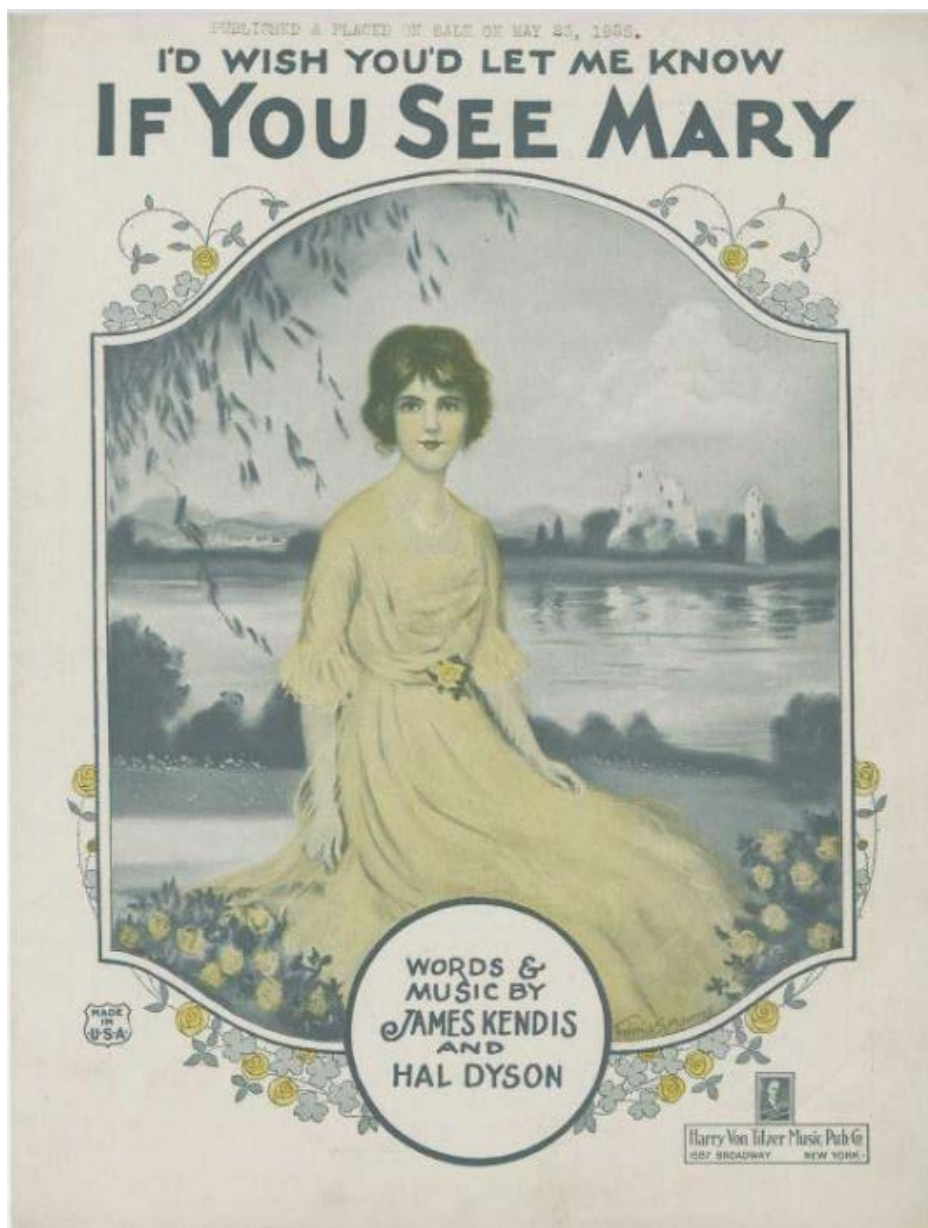
[Archives for the
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[I wish you'd let me know if you see Mary.](#) (Indiana Historical Society)

Almost all museums have had a series of ways to track items coming into their collections. When looking for information on an un-numbered item, make sure to check all of the pertinent potential places. The first step to making sure you check the right places is to make a list of anywhere the information could be hiding. Create a simple document that captures:

- Record type - accession book, board minutes, collections management system, card catalog
- Date range for that record type - 1953 through 1977, 1980 through 2001, 2007 through present
- Location of the resource - archives room, director's office

This list will help you keep track of whether you have checked all reasonable resources for finding information about the item. If you have checked all known resources and still come up empty handed, you are unlikely to find the information at all (not impossible in the future, but increasingly unlikely).

[Unmanaged Collections: A Practical Guide for Museums](#)
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[St. Anthony's Hospital Library.](#) (Martin Collection, Indiana Historical Society)

If a number cannot be found, whether because it was never assigned or because it has simply been lost, the next step is to assign the item a number for use from this point forward. Many museums refer to this as a Found in Collections Number. How this number is assigned can be done a variety of ways, and as long as that way is documented and followed each time by the museum, it does not matter what the numbering system is. Like all systems in museums, there are pros and cons for each option. Some museums choose to use a designation at the beginning of the number that comes next in line for their regular numbering system. For example, if 2021.15.1 is the next available number then you might choose to use FIC 2021.15.1 or X.2021.15.1. Other museums designate the first number of the year as a catch-all for any item where the museum is the "donor." This may be everything from purchases for the collection to found in collection items. For instance, you might use 2021.1 to designate items this year.



[Laboratory at Hooks Drugstore.](#) (Martin Collection, Indiana Historical Society)

It can be helpful to come to terms with the idea that the item might not have a number or any documentation. Most museums had a period at the beginning of their founding where the concept of using numbers to track items in the collections either did not exist or was not followed all of the time. The best way to deal with this inevitability is to create a process for what to do when that happens. Then you can move confidently towards tracking the item appropriately from this point forward.

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[Local History Services](#)

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