

INDIANA HISTORICAL SOCIETY COLLECTIONS ADVISOR

A RESOURCE FROM IHS LOCAL HISTORY SERVICES

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ONE OBJECT, MANY STORIES

By Karen DePauw, manager, IHS Local History Services

Museum collections are often equally expansive and limiting. Since so many museums tend towards reactive collecting rather than proactive collecting, the result can produce collection gaps. Although you might know where the gaps in your community story are in terms of the collection, it is not always possible to just "go out and get them." So, what do we do when we have a valuable story of our community that needs telling but lack the objects who have those stories directly connected to them? We think outside the box.



[Products Made From Indiana Wood on Display at the 1935 Indiana State Fair.](#) (Indiana Historical Society, P0490)

Try this exercise: take an object from your collection and sit it at the center of the table. Ask other staff, volunteers, interns, or even board members to join you. Have everyone take a piece of paper and write down everything they think of when they look at the object. Then have them write down any questions they have when they look at the object. Now, take a look at all of those potential stories this object can help tell or illustrate.

Take for example an 1850s sugar bowl. Things people might think when looking at it: I love tea. Mmm, I could really use a cup of coffee. That's pretty. I like the decoration on it. I would never have that in my house.

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It's so modern looking. Looks like the one my grandmother owned.

Questions it sparked might be: how was it made? Who made it? Was it hand painted? How much did it cost? Who owned it? Why would they own it? Was it special or ordinary? Where did they get the sugar to put inside of it?



[Children Viewing Museum Items, Congregation Achduth Vesholom, 1948.](#) (Indiana Jewish Historical Society Collection, 1845-2002, Indiana Historical Society)

We all see objects through our own lenses and bring our own experiences to the table when visiting museums. Using these various lenses to explore objects from the museum perspective is also useful. Sometimes we want to address certain stories but do not think we have the items in our collection to tell them and create an exhibition or program. But look again.

Maybe you want to tell the story of enslaved peoples but there were no known enslavers in your area, or you simply do not have any objects that you know were owned by either the enslaved or the enslavers. Think again, a little out of the box. Remember that sugar bowl on the table? The sugar kept inside of it may easily have come from an American sugar plantation that used enslaved peoples to do the work. Maybe you have a quilt or garment made from cotton. Cotton that was likely picked by enslaved people in the South and sent as a raw material to a Northern factory.

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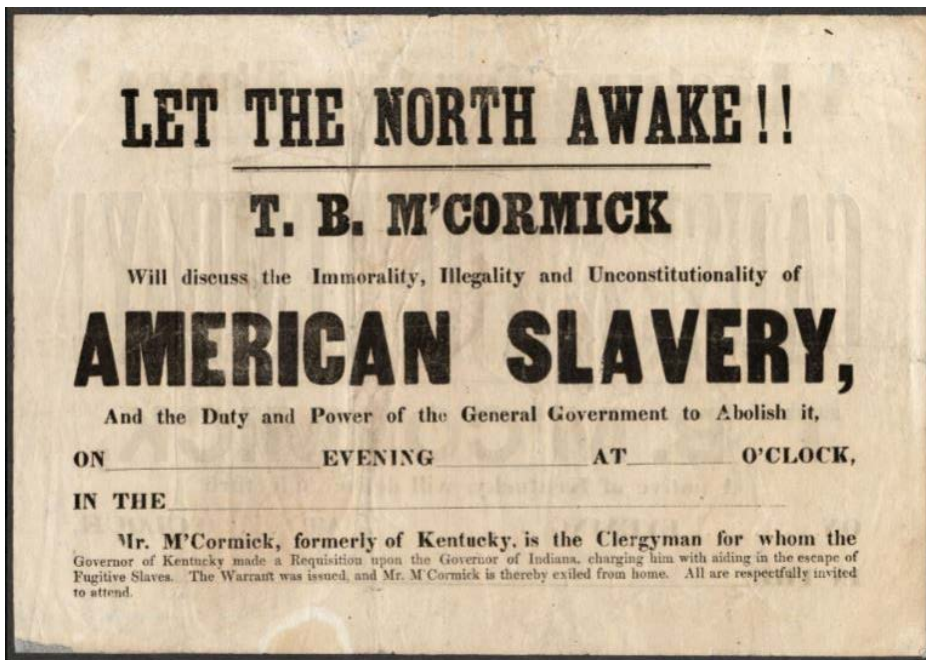
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[Let the North Awake!](#) (Indiana Historical Society)

The museum field is fast moving towards the concept of collecting only objects with strong stories that tie it to your collecting mission. And, I agree wholeheartedly. However, it can take a while for that amazing object to appear, and it may never appear.

So, what do we do in the meantime? How do we tell the stories that are important to tell when we do not yet have objects that directly tell them? Well, take a look at your collection again, but differently. Maybe the story that came with the sugar bowl is simply that it was owned by a local family, but what about all the other stories that come embedded within it. Was sugar easy to get in your area? Where did you buy it? How did sugar affect what people ate or drank? Someone made the sugar bowl, tell the story of how it came to be. Even if all you can determine at this point is the general story of the creation of flow blue china, it is a story the object can effectively help tell.

Next time you want to engage with a story or want your visitors to interact with a part of history, take another look at your collection and think creatively. Look for the hidden stories, the broader stories. Maybe you already have something that would help.

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[Local History Services](#)

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