

INDIANA HISTORICAL SOCIETY COLLECTIONS ADVISOR

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How Do We Decide?: Collections Donation Questions

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Museums are often inundated with object donation offers. People email us, call us, stop us as we're walking through our exhibits, and even just leave things on our doorsteps. It's vital that we have policies and procedures in place for deciding which objects we will say "yes" to, and which offers we should decline. A helpful way to guide our decisions is to develop a set of questions that we can use to discuss the objects and their fit for our organizations. **Here are some questions to ask when you're considering accepting an object donation.**



Furniture Movers in Spiceland, Indiana (Indiana Historical Society, P0159)

What is the provenance of the object? – Knowing the history of an object is important. It gives us information that we need to determine whether we're going to continue discussions about accepting the object into our collections.

- What is it?
- How was it used?
- When was it used?
- Where was it used?
- By whom?

How does the object connect to our mission? – Considering how an object connects to our mission helps us to determine whether we can use the object effectively. If our museum's mission is to interpret the history of ABC County, then a spinning wheel made, owned, and used by someone in XYZ County is most likely not a good fit for us.

- Is the object unique to our community?
- Are we the best organization to tell its story?
- If ABC County were a book, would this object (or the history it represents) warrant a chapter, a paragraph, a sentence, or footnote? If the object or the history it represents would be a chapter, consider adding it to your collection. If the object would warrant a footnote, consider photographing it and recording the information but not adding it to your collection. (Thank you to Stew Lauterbach, curator, Howard County Historical Society for this question.)
- Are people going to look for this object and the history it represents at our organization?

Can we properly care for the object? – Providing good collections stewardship is one of the most important tasks of a collecting institution. When we accession objects into our collections, we make a promise to follow collections standards and best practices in order to preserve the objects in our care. If we can't provide proper care, then we should consider declining the donation.

- Do we have adequate resources? Funding? Storage materials?
- Do we have room to safely store the object?
- Do our storage and exhibit spaces have the appropriate environmental controls?

Are there legal, ethical, or cultural considerations for accepting the object? – Learning more about the history of an object can lead to the need for further research. Knowing about any laws or regulations that concern the title of the object, considering ethical issues involved in the provenance of the object, and determining cultural sensitivity in regard to the collecting, care, and exhibit of the object should be part of acquisition discussions.

- Does the donor hold clear title to the object?
- Do NAGPRA (Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act) regulations attach to the object?
- Can we follow cultural guidelines for storing, exhibiting, and providing research access to the object?
- Could this object have been looted or stolen from its original site?

These are just a few of the questions to ask when we're thinking about adding an object to our collections. Seeking out the answers and having thoughtful and intentional discussions will lead to better acquisition decision-making.

Resources

- [Museum Handbook: Chapter 2. Accessioning](#) (National Park Service)
- [Collections Advisors](#) (Indiana Historical Society)
- [Timely Tips](#) (Indiana Historical Society)

Collection Trainings

[Handling Book and Paper-Based Collections: A Primer For Staff, Interns, & Volunteers](#)

March 12 (Northeast Document Conservation Center)

[Video Killed the Radio Star: Making Effective Collections Care Videos](#)

March 20 (Connecting to Collections Care)

[Introduction to Audio Preservation](#)

March 26 (Northeast Document Conservation Center)

[Local History Services Webinars](#)

Recorded (Indiana Historical Society)

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