

INDIANA HISTORICAL SOCIETY
COLLECTIONS ADVISOR
A RESOURCE FROM IHS LOCAL HISTORY SERVICES

Issue 152 | June 2024

So, This Box Comes In: Unpacking Collections Donations

By Tamara Hemmerlein, Director, Local History Services

It's spring and people are in the mood to clean out attics, basements, and garages. That means a lot of yard sales and a lot of boxes of things left at museums. If we're lucky, they're handed to us personally and we can ask about the items in the box, talk about the donation process, and fill out a Temporary Custody Receipt. If we're not so lucky, we come to work and find a box on the doorstep. Either way, we have a box to unpack.



Truck at loading dock, men loading crates (Bass Photo Co Collection, Indiana Historical Society)

Hopefully, these tips will make the unpacking job a little bit easier.

Be very careful about how you carry the box. Don't assume that the bottom of the box will hold together even if it's sealed. Adhesives lose their effectiveness over time and flaps can open easily. Be sure to fully support the bottom of the box as you move it from place to place.

Put on some personal protective equipment (PPE). A pair of disposable gloves and a mask will protect your hands and lungs. A mask is especially important if you have any sort of respiratory issues. In addition to protecting you, PPE will also help to prevent cross contamination between objects. The mold, dust, and any animal detritus will be on the gloves so you may need to don new gloves when you switch between objects. Once you're done with the gloves, take them off, put them in a garbage bag, and throw them away.

Open the box in an isolated area – a dedicated room, an airlock in your doorway, even a covered porch. If you bring the box into your museum, whatever in that box is now inside your office, storage, or exhibit space. Mold, moths, and other pests will be happy to make a home among your collections objects.

Use a table that can be wiped down and sanitized when you're done unpacking the box. You can cover the table with a light-colored washable cloth or a plastic cover. That will help you see if anything falls from the object. Gather up anything that comes from the object and place it in an envelope with identifying information.

Carefully unpack each object one at a time. Examine the area around each object to be sure that you're only picking up one object. If the objects are wrapped, unwrap them and inspect the wrapping for any loose objects or materials. People will often wrap multiple objects in one piece of paper.

As you lift the object from the box, be sure to fully support it. Don't lift anything by the handles or by the edges. And don't assume that the object is empty. It's not unusual to find one object packed inside another one.

Unwrap the object slowly and carefully. Don't tug on the wrapping and stop if you feel any resistance. Take time to figure out what's causing the resistance and make a plan for avoiding any damage.

Take notes about the condition of the objects and take photos if possible. The notes and photos will help you make decisions about whether you will accept or decline the object as well as minimize handling.

Expect the unexpected. Sometimes there are surprises in the boxes. Sharp objects may have rusted and fallen to the bottom of the box. Old cosmetic and medicine containers may have leaked. There are all sorts of stories about museum staff and volunteers finding sweating dynamite, hand grenades, loaded guns, poisonous materials, and the occasional snake in boxes.

Remember to always be careful and prepared for anything when that box comes in.

Resources

- [Collections Advisors](#) (Indiana Historical Society)
- [Timely Tips](#) (Indiana Historical Society)

Collection Trainings

[Practical Strategies for the Care of Film and Glass Negatives](#)

June 4 (Connecting to Collections Care Online Community)

[Writing a Disaster Plan Webinar Course \(2 sessions\)](#)

June 6 (Northeastern Document Conservation Center)

[Digital Preservation Storage 101 Webinar](#)

June 18 - (Northeastern Document Conservation Center)

Webinars

[No Budget Preservation Tips](#) (Northeastern Document Conservation Center)

[Recorded](#) – (Indiana Historical Society)

This is a free publication. Anyone may subscribe.

Read past issues of Collections Advisor [here](#).

[Local History Services](#)

(317) 232-1882 | localhistoryservices@indianahistory.org

