

INDIANA HISTORICAL SOCIETY  
**COLLECTIONS ADVISOR**  
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## **“Skeletons” in Our Closets: Museum Inventories**

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Many museums are closed, have reduced hours, or experience decreased visitation in the winter making the season a good time for collections inventories. We can set up work tables throughout the museum. We don't have to move stacks of archival housing materials from place to place to accommodate visitor traffic. And, while visitors often like a behind-the-scenes view of our work, we are able to focus on collections stewardship without having to stop and explain what can look a bit chaotic to them.



*Children Viewing Museum Items, Congregation Achduth Vesholom, 1948 (Indiana Jewish Historical Society Collection of the Indiana Historical Society)*

### **Collections inventories:**

- Give insight into the contents of the collection, including areas of surplus as well as areas of potential growth. This will help as you review or develop your scope of collections and determine if you need to look at any collecting initiatives to fill gaps.
- Supply necessary information to make a plan for the future of the collection. Think about how you might need to change your storage configuration. Consider whether you need to make a plan to deaccession objects that don't fit your mission, are too physically degraded to hold together, or are duplicates of other objects.
- Provide an idea of what is housed appropriately and where it's housed. As you inventory your storage spaces, you can take note of what should be moved from short- to mid-term storage. You can also consider environmental conditions and determine whether objects should be moved to other areas.
- Help you make a case to funders for collections stewardship expenses. If you've identified a need for better photographic image storage, an inventory will help you ascertain what kind of and how many storage materials you need. You'll also be able to identify the subjects and topics in your collections and can match funder priorities and interests with your collections objects.

### **Remember:**

- An inventory should be taken from the PHYSICAL objects in the collection, not from paperwork. The goal is to know what is actually in the museum.
- Provide object handling training to everyone who will be helping with the inventory. Clearly set rules for who can touch or move objects. It may be possible to begin your

inventory with a shelf read instead of any hands-on effort.

- Create forms with specific information that needs to be completed for each object and explain how to indicate any unknowns.
- Check all of the drawers and closets. House museums are notorious for not having enough storage. Drawers, cabinets, and closets are often used for object storage.
- Give guidance for how to report object damage, potentially hazardous materials, and objects that are in particularly poor condition.

## Resources

- [Collections Stewardship Standards](#) (American Alliance of Museums)
- [Ethics and Best Practices in Museums](#) (American Alliance of Museums)
- [National Park Service Museum Handbook](#) (National Park Service)

## Further Resources

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

## Collection Trainings

[Caring for Paper-Based Collections](#)

**Jan. 8** (Northeast Document Conservation Center)

[Digitizing Scrapbooks](#)

**Jan. 13** (Northeast Document Conservation Center)

[Digitization: Planning for Success](#)

**Jan. 15** (Northeast Document Conservation Center)

[Strategies for Acetate and Nitrate Negatives and Film](#)

**Jan. 20** (Northeast Document Conservation Center)

[Fundamentals of Photograph Preservation](#)

**Jan. 26 – Mar. 9** (Northeast Document Conservation Center)

[Starting and Archive: Preservation Basics](#)

**Jan. 27** (Northeast Document Conservation Center)

[Preservation 101](#)

**Jan. 29 – Apr. 16** (Northeast Document Conservation Center)

## Recorded Webinars

- [Connecting to Collections Care](#)
- [Indiana Historical Society](#)
- [Texas Historical Commission](#)

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