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# Collections Care at Pond Spring in Courtland, Alabama

Ashley Pentecost

Pond Spring is unique among house museums in the scale of its collection. Many house museums, such as Belle Mont, simply consist of the structure and collections must be acquisitioned. However, when Pond Spring was donated to the state by the descendants of General Wheeler, they also donated the majority of the personal possessions of the Wheeler family. During my tenure at Pond Spring, I have undertaken many roles including tour guide, docent, housekeeper, and cashier to name only a few; however, my main job has always been working on the collection. So far there have been around six-thousand items accessioned and there could easily be double that amount waiting to be accessioned. In this article, I will discuss the process of accessioning objects, archival material, and books using examples of some of my work.

Unfortunately, budgetary restrictions impact which conservation measures can be taken and being owned by the state of Alabama, Pond Spring is no different. While the practices used at

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Pond Spring are considered "best practices," they are determined by the budgetary restrictions placed upon the site. In other words, while the practices mentioned below are safe for the artifacts, they may not be the same practices used by larger institutions with larger budgets.

At Pond Spring, the first step to cataloging an artifact is to conserve the object. The objective is to stunt any form of degradation as much as possible. There are numerous agents of degradation and conservation efforts depend on accurately recognizing the agent.

Agents include light, humidity, temperature, pollutants, pests (rodent and/or insect), and/or mold.<sup>1</sup>

Exposure to light can cause irreversible damage to artifacts. Fading and discoloration, can occur, while heat generated from exposure to light can cause warping as well as weakening of fibers and organic material. To combat these effects, artifacts need to not only be kept out of direct sunlight, but also protected from high levels of artificial light. At Pond Spring, UV filtering film has been adhered to all of the windows in addition to shades being drawn. In order to protect artifacts in exhibit areas safe from artificial lights, great care is taken not to keep lamps on for extended periods of time, as well as,

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<sup>1</sup> Buck, Rebecca A. *MRM5: Museum Registration Methods*. 5th ed. Washington, DC: American Association of Museums, 2010. 287-291.

keeping close eye on the artifacts themselves to ensure that they remain undamaged by their brief exposure to light.

As briefly mentioned, extremes in temperature is also a major agent of deterioration. Likewise, humidity, either excess or lack of, can cause deterioration to a collection.<sup>2</sup> To combat fluctuations in temperature and relative humidity at Pond Spring, they have installed five HVAC systems in the restored house. In a mixed collection, it is necessary to find a middle ground when determining humidity and temperature settings. At Pond Spring, the temperature is typically kept between 60 and 70 degrees Fahrenheit, while the relative humidity is kept around 50 percent (+/- 5 percent). Regulation of the relative humidity and temperature, can also prevent the presence of a major deteriorate – mold.

There are numerous contaminants that can damage the collection. While the number of contaminants is great, the solution is fairly simple – the goal is to keep artifacts away from all kinds of contaminants. Contaminants can be gases, liquids, and solids and they can damaged objects through disintegration, discoloration, and

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 288.

corrosion.<sup>3</sup> Gaseous pollutants create chemical reactions and can come from the artifacts themselves. Off-gassing is a reaction in which pollutants from one artifact damage another. Other pollutants include pollen and dust as well as fibers and so it can come from outdoors through the ventilation or clothing. These pollutants are abrasive and damage artifacts such as wooden furniture via mechanical abrasion. In addition, moisture and oils from human hands can damage organic materials, discolor archival material and textiles as well as corrode metals. As previously mentioned, the solution for preventing this kind of damage to the collection, as well as the materials needed, is simple. Mylar, cotton gloves, and frequent housekeeping can keep this kind of damage from occurring. Mylar is used to prevent off-gassing from one artifact to another. Any artifacts such as ceramics glass, etc. should be separated from the furniture on which it sits by a layer of mylar. Cotton gloves will prevent any form of moisture or oils from transferring to and damaging artifacts. Effective HVAC systems, as well as, frequent housekeeping in the form of dusting (with the cloth,

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 290.

not a feather duster) will prevent most of the damage incurred through the contact of particles such as pollen and dust.<sup>4</sup>

Pests such as insects and rodents can severely damage a collection. The most effective way of preventing this kind of damage is by preventing future infestation. Infestations can be prevented by frequent monitoring of the collection for insect and rodent activity, removing any kind of pest attractants and creating an inhospitable environment for pests. If damage has already been incurred, there are ways to minimize further damage to the artifact. At Pond Spring, we first remove all evidence whether that is the pest themselves, or the damage done to the artifact (for example, newspaper remnants destroyed by rodents). This is done most effectively by using a vacuum. In the case of artifacts which would not be damaged by freezing temperatures, we seal the artifacts in nonreactive plastic bags and freeze it for between six to ten days. Then we once again vacuum the artifact for any remaining evidence of past damage, usually this consists of insect carcasses. Note that for delicate artifacts vacuuming through a fine mesh screen is necessary.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 291.

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Accessioning is a multi step process and at Pond Spring specifically, a very exact process. We use a master log of all accession numbers and before any kind of cataloging can occur, an accession number must be assigned to the artifact and designated in the numeric order in the master log (for example 1993.1.5678, 1993.1.5679, 1993.1.5680 and so on). Let me take a moment and explain how accession numbers were created at Pond Spring. The home was donated to the state in 1993 and therefore the first set of numbers is the year in which the artifact was received by the state of Alabama. If an artifact was donated or loaned to Pond Spring in another year, the first set of numbers would designate that year instead. The second number is the donor number, so since most of the collection was donated in the same year and by the same donor the majority of the collection is designated as 1993.1.XXXX. After the number has been entered into the master log, it needs to be fixed somehow to the artifact itself, the goal is to designate the artifact with the number in semi-permanence in a location that is not easily seen but that is easily found. This means that, if necessary, the number can be changed or removed. If the artifact is archival such as paper or books then the accession number is affixed to the artifact using a number two pencil on either the first

page of the book in the top right corner or on the back of a sheet of paper on the bottom right side. The graphite is non-reactive and can be removed, if necessary. For ceramics or glass, the accession number is printed on acid-free paper and "glued" to the artifact. The adhesive used is non-reactive and water-soluble, therefore it can be removed with ease. Some artifacts cannot have an accession number affixed to them (for instance metal or oddly shaped artifacts). In these cases, it is necessary to place the number on an acid-free tag that can be tied to the artifact. While necessary, this method can be somewhat ineffective as tags can accidentally be removed. In the case of textiles, tags are written on twill tape using acid-free ink and then sewn using an open stitch onto the artifact. The open stitch prevents damage to the artifact as well as allowing the tag to be removed if necessary. At Pond Spring, we typically attach the twill tape tag in the same place that a tag would be affixed on a modern garment.

After accessioning an artifact, the artifact is catalogued using a catalog sheet which includes necessary and important details about the artifact. The catalog sheet is dated and the initials of the cataloguer is placed on the sheet. There is a description section on the sheet where important details about the artifact are listed. For instance, the

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description section of a newspaper article should include the title of the publication, the location of the publication, the date of the publication and a brief description of the subject matter. In the case of a newspaper clipping, one should also include information about other sections outside of the main article. These can include ads, comics, or other articles. It is also necessary to measure the artifact including at the very least it's height and width; however, the more detailed an artifact is the more measurements that should be included. For instance, a blouse should have measurements of the bust, waist, neck, yolk, and sleeve length, as well as, the length from the neck to the bottom hem. The location that the article was found with in the home should also be included on the catalog sheet. This helps determine who the original owner of the artifact was. Next, is the condition section. Any tears, discolorations, creases, or other pertinent information regarding the condition of the artifact need to be included in the section. If there is any information regarding the temporary storage location of the artifact, for example the box number, folder number or room, it is important to include this information on the catalog sheet.

Before an artifact can be housed in temporary storage, it needs to be wrapped in something non-reactive. In the case of archival

material, this means being separated from other artifacts using acid-free paper and then placed within acid-free folder. For most other artifacts, with the exception of oversized artifacts, this means being wrapped in acid-free tissue paper. These barriers help prevent further damage to artifacts through either mechanical, biological, or chemical degradation. For example, a blouse would need to have tissue paper fed through the sleeves and have the bust and neck area padded with paper. Using tissue paper retains the original shape of the garment. Once this has been accomplished, tissue paper is wrapped around the garment to protect it from any other artifacts that maybe housed in the same box. Not only are the artifacts housed in either acid-free tissue or paper, but the boxes are also non-reactive. When boxes are being placed in the storage area it is important to know the contents of the box in order to ensure that lighter boxes are placed on top of heavier boxes. In order to accomplish this, the accession numbers of the artifacts housed within the box are written on the label, along with the box number, and affixed to the outside of the box. Space is at a premium in house museums. To allow for temperature and humidity controlled storage area at Pond Spring, the attic was converted to a

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storage area during the renovation and numbered shelving units are used to house storage boxes.

Once an artifact is accessioned, cataloged, and housed the final step is to input the data from the catalog sheet into a database. At Pond Spring, like most house museums, Pastperfect is used to collate all the data regarding the collection, making it easily accessible as well as past perfect is used to collate all the data regarding the collection, making it easily accessible to museum administrators. Before any data can be input into the database, one must log in under their ID number in order to track who makes changes to in artifacts data. Then, one must choose between four categories: objects, books, archives, and photographs. Once the category has been selected, one must select the "add" icon. From there a lexicon is searched and the general name of the artifact is selected (for instance, a newspaper clipping would be selected as simply "newspaper"). This ensures that the artifact is easily searchable by type. Then, the exception number is added to the artifact name. A data sheet will be created in which all other data can be input. This data includes original location within the home, temporary storage location, the initials of the cataloguer and the date catalogued, a description of the artifact (to include dimensions and any other

pertinent information), and the condition of the artifact as well as the date that this condition was determined.