# Curatorial Safety

## Proper Lighting for Museum Safety

Although total darkness is the best "lighting environment" from a museum collection preservation standpoint, it precludes the effective use of the collection in exhibits, research, publications, etc. At the same time, while total darkness may be best for the collection's preservation "safety," it is not the best prescription for the safety of staff or visitors.

To protect collections and provide a safe environment for people, museums have diminished light levels on exhibited objects (sometimes using darkened exhibit cases with automatic switches that turn on a light when a visitor nears the exhibit and turn it off again when the visitor passes by) while at the same time attempting to keep visitor and staff areas, aisles, walkways, etc. well lit for safety. For storage areas, most museums specify that lights should always be kept off, unless someone needs to view, inventory, or retrieve an object.

But what about acceptable light levels for people in museum offices, as well as historic structures used as storage and/or exhibit areas? Sometimes offices may be located in small, cramped, out-of-the way areas such as basements, attics, or other buildings that lack windows or other natural lighting. The artificial lighting currently in place may not be sufficient to ensure your safety if you cannot adequately see:

- all exits and potential obstructions between you and the exit
- all obstructions and tripping hazards in your path (low ceilings, beams, exposed nails and bolts, worn stair treads, electrical power cords, etc.)
- what you're working on (materials with sharp edges, heavy loose parts that could drop on your foot, etc.)

At the same time, portable electric lights can be a tripping and fire hazard if someone trips over an extension cord or forgets to turn them off when not in use. This is especially the case for historic structures without modern wiring or effective lighting.

**Suggestions:**

1. Do not use areas without effective lighting for staff offices. If you cannot adequately illuminate the area for staff to work effectively, it's undoubtedly an unsafe area. Find another workspace.
2. Do not allow visitors to access areas without effective lighting, it is not safe.

3. Do not use portable electric lights with extension cords in historic structures (this also applies to other portable electric devices that can generate heat and be a fire hazard too, such as space heaters). They can easily be a fire and tripping/injury hazard. Also, someone may forget to turn them off.

4. For tours of historic structures without safe, code-compliant, overhead electric lights, use battery powered flashlights and lanterns if needed to supplement natural lighting. If there are no light sensitive museum objects in the room (watercolors, prints, animal furs and hides, textiles, tapestries, etc.), perhaps you can temporarily open window shutters, curtains, or blinds on overcast days. If you can't adequately see in areas such as stairways, basements, attics, etc., do not access those areas: it isn't safe for you or the visitors.

5. Discuss possible solutions with your park's Safety Officer, Chief of Maintenance, Buildings and Utilities Foreman, Electrician, and in the case of historic structures, your park's Section 106 Compliance officer, other cultural resource management staff, and the Regional Historical Architect.

Remember: To be safe you require adequate lighting to effectively illuminate what you're working on, your pathways through the building, all potential obstructions and hazards, all exits, and your pathways to various exits.

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