

THE DIFFICULTIES OF DEACCESSIONING

A curation crisis is forcing museums and archaeologists to grapple with the vexing problem of how to responsibly dispose of unwanted archaeological items.

By Tony Reichhardt

The items in these boxes at the David L. DeJamette Archaeological Laboratory are awaiting rehabilitation to bring them up to museum-quality standards. Some institutions, lacking resources for proper curation, are considering deaccessioning.

Brick crumbs. Pounds and pounds of ordinary brick crumbs. In the 1970s, archaeologists working at a historic brickyard near Albany, New York, boxed up a quantity of rubble from disintegrating bricks, which they dutifully recorded and entered—“accessioned” is the technical term—along with other, more valuable artifacts into the New York State Museum’s collection. And there they sat for years, gathering dust. Lynne Sullivan, a University of Tennessee archaeologist who was then curator of the museum’s collections, remembers coming across them during an inventory in the late 1980s. The rubble was “completely unidentifiable, and pretty much worthless,” she says. Nobody wanted it. But the museum couldn’t get rid of it, either.

Some archaeologists prefer it that way. In fact, “deaccessioning,” or permanently removing, objects from archaeological collections turns out to be a pretty difficult thing to do, as well as a hot-button issue for many research archaeologists. In 1990, when regulations for the curation of federally owned archaeological collections were being written, arguments about a section on deaccessioning became so contentious that it was never finalized. To this day there is no legal policy



Bob Sonderman and Terry Childs examine unprovenienced prehistoric ceramics. Childs heads a working group that is drafting deaccessioning regulations for federal agencies.



These unprovenienced hammerstones may be deaccessioned because of their limited research value.

governing how curators can dispose of federal archaeological materials in their possession.

Even suggesting that they should rile some people. Bob Sonderman, a National Park Service archaeologist who’s been preaching the value of deaccessioning for years, says that in the 1990s he got “blistograms” from other archaeologists convinced that no artifacts in federal safekeeping should ever be thrown away, under any circumstances.

But as the so-called curation crisis continues to get worse, with ever-expanding archaeological collections trying to fit in ever-shrinking museum space (see “A Curation Crisis,” *American Archaeology*, Winter 2001-02), the question of how to deaccession low-value items won’t go away. Julie King, an archaeologist at St. Mary’s College of Maryland and former director of the Maryland Archaeological Conservation Laboratory, tells her students that deaccessioning is something they’ll have to face at some point during their careers. “It’s a real-world issue,” she says, “contested, important, emotional, and economic.”

That’s why, 16 years after their first attempt, federal archaeologists are taking another crack at writing regulations to define how it should be done. National Park Service (NPS) archaeologist Terry Childs leads an informal inter-agency working group that will recommend a draft of the



These objects were recovered during a metal detector survey of a Civil War fortification near Washington, D.C. The objects, which include bottle caps and aluminum pull tabs from more recent times, are of questionable research value. Nonetheless, similar items are sometimes kept in collections.

rules. The NPS is unusual among federal agencies in that most of the millions of artifacts collected from national parks over the years are stored in the agency's own facilities. Other federal agencies rely heavily on various other museums and repositories to curate their collections. These facilities may house the artifacts, but the government owns them. And any decisions about how or whether to deaccession will have to be made by the government.

Curators have many reasons for wanting to limit their collections. Some artifacts may be redundant, and therefore keeping 100 won't yield significantly more information than keeping 10. Some objects have lost their provenience over the years as the accompanying field notes have been lost or destroyed. And sadly—embarrassingly—some artifacts have deteriorated past the point of scientific usefulness due to sheer neglect.

A 2000 report from the Army Corps of Engineers was sobering. In 1998, the Corps' Mandatory Center of Expertise for the Curation and Management of Archaeological Collections (MCX-CMAC) in St. Louis began an assessment of the agency's holdings. A total of 166 facilities in 44 states held nearly 50,000 cubic feet of artifact collections owned by the Corps, representing millions of objects—enough to fill a dozen tractor trailers. In too many cases, the artifacts had been stored in improper conditions and were quietly disintegrating. "If not properly cared for soon," the

report concluded, "many will lose their educational and research value." It will cost an estimated \$20 million to bring the collection up to an acceptable state of curation, which, at the MCX-CMAC's current level of funding, will take approximately 15 years to do, says Chris Pulliam, deputy director of the MCX-CMAC and a member of Childs' working group.

Then there's the stuff that probably never should have ended up in museums in the first place. Sonderman knows of archaeological surveys associated with highway projects where "everything was collected—that meant cigarette butts, coffee cups, all those kinds of things. And those are in boxes. Do we need to keep those?"

Obviously not, says Sullivan, who, beside the brick crumbs in New York, can point to all the bags of soil from archaeological sites that have no scientific value, but are still taking up space in museums and archaeologists' offices. "There has to be a way to get rid of stuff that is literally trash," says Sullivan, who chairs the Society for American Archaeology's curation committee. But until someone writes a regulation clarifying the rules, few federal archaeologists or curators will risk throwing out artifacts entrusted to their care, no matter how worthless they may be. In fact, in the absence of such regulations, deaccessioning by federal employees would likely be illegal.

Childs wasn't involved in drafting the 1990 regulation, but she expects some of the objections raised then will resurface this

time around, too, starting with: What if some new scientific technique comes along that enables researchers to get valuable information from that “worthless” 1,000-year-old rock you just threw out?

In fact, archaeologists are coming up with more powerful analytical tools all the time, whether it’s electron spin resonance spectroscopy to date bones more precisely, or spectroscopic analysis of blood residues on ancient stone tools. Childs herself participated in a project on Cape Cod, Massachusetts, where analysis of marine shells revealed all kinds of new information about prehistoric practices, including determining in what season the shells had been harvested.

It doesn’t have to be an exotic new technology, either: sometimes it’s just a matter of taking another look at an ordinary object with a fresh pair of eyes. King offers the cautionary tale of Mattapan, the 17th-century home of Charles Calvert, the proprietary governor of Maryland, which was excavated in the 1990s. In the course of digging, the archaeologists found lots of broken brick pieces they assumed weren’t valuable enough to keep. Before discarding them, they called in a restoration brick mason, who, to their surprise, extracted critical new information from the sherds. The mason showed the archaeologists how, in some instances, the surface of the brick had been rubbed as a kind of decorative technique. This was the earliest evidence of this technique in the Chesapeake region. He saw mortar joint marks where the original 17th-century mason had tried to give very low-grade, irregularly shaped brick a much finer appearance. The expert “identified all sorts of stuff that helped us interpret what that building had looked like,” remembers King. And she and her colleagues “were scared out of our wits” at the thought of

having nearly thrown the evidence away.

Childs admits “we can’t predict the methods” that might, years in the future, turn today’s archaeological dross into gold. She understands why that leads some archaeologists to save every last item they collect as a matter of strict policy. But, she counters, the ability to extract important new data from marine shells doesn’t mean that archaeologists have to keep everything they recover. After talking to the masonry expert, the archaeologists at Mattapan ended up saving about 10 percent more brick sherds than they might have otherwise. But they still threw most of it away, says King.

In other words, say proponents of deaccessioning, some redundant objects really can be disposed of without compromising the overall integrity of a collection. “You can put puzzles together without a couple of pieces,” says Sonderman. “Chances are your interpretation won’t change.” Sullivan agrees. “Something to consider is that once modern mass manufacturing began, there was little or no variation in objects made at the same factory,” she says. So in judging whether artifacts like nails or metal hinges should be removed from a collection, she would ask, “If all the items are exactly alike, what is the point in curating mass quantities of them?”

Still, Childs and her working group want to assure nervous archaeologists that valuable objects—even potentially valuable objects—won’t be deaccessioned. For example, several years ago the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation hired Paragon Research Associates, a cultural resources management firm in Seattle, to assess one of their archaeological collections and make recommendations as to what items might be deaccessioned. Among the candidates the consultants identified were soil samples that had been sitting in paper bags for 15

TEXAS ARCHEOLOGICAL RESEARCH LABORATORY/MONICA TREJO



This pile of debitage, recovered from the Conejo Shelter in west Texas, is housed at the Texas Archaeological Research Laboratory (TARL). TARL has 13 large boxes of debitage that came from that site alone. TARL’s curator, Laura Nightengale, said her facility is running out of space, but they aren’t seriously considering deaccessioning items to help solve the problem.



Dozens of similar early 20th-century bottles were recovered from an exposed refuse dump near Washington, D.C. They are now being kept at a nearby National Park Service repository. Some officials believe that keeping a sample of redundant collections like these bottles would save space without diminishing the collections' research value.

years. It didn't amount to much of the overall collection—maybe one percent, according to Paula Johnson, who heads the company. And if there was any doubt about whether to deaccession, they tried to “err on the side of keeping,” she adds.

Proponents of deaccessioning say experts should always be involved in those decisions. Everything should be documented, and “the process needs to be open,” says Pulliam. Ideally, says Johnson, the field archaeologist who originally collected the artifact should be involved. Childs agrees that's desirable, although in many cases the person is no longer alive. In other cases, she says, the archaeologist who did the fieldwork doesn't have the knowledge necessary to judge its current value to researchers. The important thing, Childs thinks, is to consult an expert who knows the research value of the collection and also knows how to determine an appropriate sample of any redundant materials that are slated for deaccessioning.

Having decided it's okay to remove an artifact from a collection, the next question is what to do with it. The best kind of deaccessioning, the one most people prefer, doesn't result in the destruction of the object. Another facility takes

the item to add to its own collection, perhaps in exchange for something else. Such trades are already happening informally, and the American Association of Museums has set up an online Collections Exchange Center (www.aam-us.org/museumresources/cec) to make them even easier. Of the 265 listings posted over the past three years, approximately 16 percent were in the category of archaeological and ethnographic objects, according to the association.

These win-win trades may prove to be the exception, however. When it comes to deaccessioning artifacts of very low research value, one institution's castoffs may have little or no appeal to other institutions. So rather than going to another museum, the objects might be used for educational, rather than research purposes. School children could learn what a fire-cracked rock looks like, and it “doesn't matter if it gets dropped or broken,” says Sullivan.

Another obvious destination for deaccessioned objects is Native American tribes. In fact, human remains and funerary objects already are being repatriated—a kind of deaccessioning—as a legal requirement of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act. In many cases tribes rebury the remains, with no input from archaeologists as to how or where it's done.

Archaeologists have reburied artifacts, too, in a few rare instances. In the 1950s, Joel Shiner of Southern Methodist University reburied boxes of small and broken artifacts he excavated from Fort Frederica, a Colonial-era site on Georgia's St. Simons Island. No one's quite sure why. Perhaps he thought of them as not worth keeping, and didn't want to go to the trouble of boxing them up and turning them over to a museum. Today the cache of reburied material is used as a training site for archaeology students.

Some archaeologists have proposed reburial on the original site as a way to preserve low-value deaccessioned material, though at a much lower standard of conservation. The problem with that approach, says Childs, is that an agency like NPS would still have legal responsibility for the material. Also, it could create a new archaeological site that may be misunderstood in the future. So her working group is not likely to include reburial as a way to deaccession.

Removing archaeological objects from federal protection, with no strings attached, raises the ugly prospect that some of them could end up for sale on eBay. That doesn't bother some

Revisiting the Curation Crisis

Deaccessioning is one of the results of curation problems that many institutions are facing (see "A Curation Crisis," *American Archaeology*, Winter 2001-02). National Park Service archaeologist Terry Childs is one of several archaeologists and museum curators who have been working to remedy these problems. Childs believes that, during the last several years, the general state of curation has improved in several ways.

She says the Society for American Archaeology's Committee on Museums, Curation, and Collections published a set of guidelines for its members. Many federal agencies are making progress on cataloging their collections, so they have a better knowledge of the items they possess. A few new repositories have been built, and several others have expanded. Many museums have created online exhibits of archaeological collections that may be used for research and other purposes.

But Childs adds that problems persist. A number of repositories are filling up. Several museums risk being closed due to lack of funds. As a result, there are more archaeological projects that purposely yield no collections. "Such 'no-collection' projects have the potential to significantly alter the overall archaeological record and the research value of that record in the future," she says.

"Resources to properly curate and—this is particularly important—make collections accessible remain limited, and will always be so," says archaeologist Julie King. Keith Egloff, the assistant curator for the Virginia Department of Historic Resources, is faced with the challenge of maintaining 7,000 boxes of artifacts and their field records, and doing public education outreach on an annual budget of less than \$10,000. Consequently, a lot of their collections haven't been catalogued or washed. "Anything behind the scenes that isn't seen by people doesn't get money," he says.

Egloff's facility has raised its curation fees from \$150 to \$350 a box. This was done to raise money and also to discourage archaeologists from amassing huge collections.

"It's not just the artifacts, it's the relationships between the artifacts that are the critical contribution of archaeology, and those relationships can only be reconstructed if a collection's records are available," says King, addressing another curation challenge. "And we know that neither paper nor film are stable media. How do we protect the information contained in these records for the long haul?"

There is also a "digital crisis brewing in our discipline," she says. "Archaeologists are using digital media much more often—digital photography, geographic information systems, databases—but few have really thought about the long-term costs of preserving this information."

"The (curation) problem existed 50 years ago," Egloff observes, "it exists today, and it will probably exist 50 years from now." —*Michael Bawaya*

people. The public sale of lumps of coal from the Titanic helped finance other explorations, they argue. But when the NPS initially sold pieces of concrete removed from Alcatraz prison, says Sonderman, "it sent people into apoplexy."

King is personally against the idea of selling artifacts that were once held in the public trust, but thinks it's a discussion the archaeological community should have nonetheless. Childs also worries about a market developing for objects deaccessioned from federal collections, but isn't sure it can be prevented entirely. "We just hope it won't [happen] very much," she says.

If another museum or school system doesn't want a deaccessioned object, and it can't be sold or reburied, the alternative is destroying it. "That sort of scares me," admits Sonderman. But it may be an inevitable consequence.

Opponents of deaccessioning fear that some federal agencies would use any new regulatory authority to dispose of archaeological objects as a license to start discarding items wholesale from their collections. Sullivan—and those involved in crafting the deaccession regulations—says that's a

fear based on ignorance. But it's also true that some federal archaeologists feel pressure from their managers to solve their curation problems, and solve them soon.

King, who's an advocate for responsible deaccessioning, notes that assembling panels of experts to judge whether items should be kept or not comes with a cost. Sullivan says that some major funding agencies, including the National Science Foundation, still don't include enough money for curation when funding archaeological projects, a situation her committee "has complained loudly about."

Fans and foes of deaccessioning agree that something has to be done. The curation crisis continues. When the Maryland Archaeological Conservation Laboratory, where King once worked, opened in 1998, the curators projected they'd have enough storage capacity to last 15 years. Now they figure the lab will be full in 10 years. Archaeologists in some states, like Colorado, are already hard pressed to find any museum to store the artifacts they recover.

Deaccessioning won't come close to solving that larger problem. "We'll just be cleaning up around the edges," says Sullivan. But even if it doesn't, it should be part of a responsible, modern approach to curation, say proponents. To those critics who question the ethics of disposing of archaeological artifacts, they ask whether it's ethical to keep objects without taking good care of them.

The issue goes beyond the federal government. Maryland and Texas have both moved recently to create legal guidelines for deaccessioning of state-owned artifacts. Giselle Rahn, a student of King's at St. Mary's College, recently did a survey of state and tribal deaccessioning policies around the country. She found that people who had a policy in place tended to be more confident that it could be done responsibly.

More people are coming round to that point of view, says Sonderman. In 1990, archaeologists were "much more rigid...and the ruling mantra was 'collect everything,'" he says. Back then people went ballistic at his pro-deaccession arguments, but when he published a similar article in 2003, he says, "I didn't get a peep."

If a new regulation can be hammered out, Sonderman thinks state and private curators will likely follow its guidelines along with federal archaeologists. Pulliam says the Army Corps of Engineers would like for the matter to be resolved. "There is no authority for us to deaccession [now]," he says. "We're waiting for those regulations."

For those who still oppose the idea outright, Childs and Sonderman have a chilling warning. If archaeologists can't agree on a plan grounded in scientific ethics, deaccessioning decisions might still be made for reasons of cost and expediency. "There's not a god of archaeology that can tell us what to do," says Sonderman. If researchers and curators don't sort out the issue themselves, "some bureaucrat will start making these decisions for us."

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