



From Holdings to Beholdings: Changing How We View Our Historical Collections

By Tova Mellen

In May 2017, fifteen member organizations of the Friends of Island History (FOIH)—a consortium of nonprofit historical organizations on Mount Desert Island and neighboring islands—committed to participating in an in-depth assessment of their collective holdings. The collections were all assessed by a Portland-based company, HistoryIT, as part of an ongoing effort by FOIH to increase its knowledge of the condition and scope of the area's historical collections, and to develop strategies for the protection of these materials. The assessments revealed that these fifteen organizations, which include seven historical societies, three libraries, three museums, and two community non-profits, contain at least:

- 56,000 photographs, slides, and negatives
- 1,100 linear feet of bound and unbound archival materials
- 1,880 scrapbooks and albums
- 2,760 audio/visual items
- 7,150 3D objects
- 14,150 oversized items such as maps and architectural drawings¹

These figures are impressive and reflect an incredible level of dedication to local historical preservation, but what do they mean for the futures of these organizations, and of how much benefit are these holdings to the public?

If you visit a historical society's or a museum's website, or browse one of their brochures, you will likely not need to look very far for a description of the size of the organization's collection. Figures describing the number of volumes or the number of linear feet of historical materials that are held by an organization are often used to impress visitors, and to attract researchers and donors. The volume of a historical organization's collection is pointed to as an indicator of its success—a figure to celebrate, and, if possible, to grow. For historical societies in particular, this preoccupation with size is logical; the collection and preservation of historical materials is central to a historical society's mission, and, arguably, was the very reason for its founding. However, today's historical society and museum professionals are grappling with the reality that collection and preservation of historical materials are the means but not the ends of their work.

Contemporary discourse challenges the reverence with which we view our historical holdings, and encourages greater balance between a collection's care and its ability to encourage visitor engagement. We need to treat our collections not as holdings, but as beholdings. While holdings are items we collect, protect, and keep, *beholdings* are materials with which we (both professionals in historical societies and museums, and the general public) can meaningfully and actively engage. Although professionals are still asking, "How large are our collections?" they are also asking, "How relevant, and how *accessible* are our collections to the public?"



Author Tova Mellen (right) examines a map at the Islesford Library History Room with Nanette Hadlock (left) and Gail Grandgent (middle), members of the Islesford Historical Society Board. *Photograph by Amy Gwinn-Becker*

Lack of space and lack of resources to care for large collections is an additional concern for local historical societies, who have been referred to as "community attics"² and "historical hoarders."³ The questions of how to overcome "the tyranny of collections"⁴ and stop "the collections avalanche"⁵ have become the subject of conference panels, professional workshops, blog posts, and academic articles. But how did we get to this place? As early as the late-eighteenth century, approaches to collections management, interpretation, and the very act of collecting have not been without their critics.

In 1791, the first historical society in the nation—the Massachusetts Historical Society—was formed. Its objective was "to collect and preserve everything" that could trace the progress of society

in the United States, and, in so doing, "to rescue the true history of this country from the ravages of time and the effects of ignorance and neglect."⁶ For more than two centuries, historical societies in the United States have been established with the express purpose of housing and preserving historical collections. In 1944, Leslie W. Dunlap provided a definition of a "historical society" as, generally, a group that is "organized primarily to collect, preserve, and make available the materials for the history of the United States or a section of it."⁷ This definition reflects the common, material-centric aims of historical societies during the

preceding century and a half, which have continued to be the prominent aims of historical societies to this day.

The growing attention paid to the preservation of American history in the late-eighteenth century was a natural byproduct of the nation's new independence and an eagerness to cultivate a stronger sense of national identity. As "interest in the growth of the American nation was sufficiently strong and widespread to cause men in all sections of the country to seek historical records,"⁸ and, as libraries did not have sufficient capacity to care for the growing collections of materials, historical societies were developed to perform this function. The commitment to collect physical materials was most prevalent in New England. While New Englanders were a "documentary people," this was not as true outside the region.⁹ Professor David van Tassel described America's earliest historical societies as having an almost aggressive character, recounting their origination "as a weapon to dominate the writing of national history."¹⁰ Historical societies were needed to defend against perceived inauthentic or untrue portrayals of the nation's past and character. Historical materials were powerful resources, valued not for the physical items themselves, but for the perspectives they could provide and the stories they could be used to tell.

The desire to create an authentic or "true" history of the nation was accompanied by a common sense of partiality among early historical organizations, which were often

managed by educated men of financial means. Societies were not generally places of objectivity and empirical dispassion, but of personal pride and emotional connection. Strewn with terms like "patriotism," "honor," "pride," and "glory," early historical societies were far from unbiased reservoirs of historical materials. More than spaces for research, these organizations were meeting places for local amateur historians who "shared a wish to commemorate the honor and glory of the past."¹¹ Historian Worthington C. Ford believed that many society publications glorified local residents "beyond their relative merits."¹² These statements illustrate that historical societies were not solely aimed at preserving all facets of a community's past with equal care; instead they chose to protect and emphasize those aspects that could be celebrated, particularly by the educated and the elite.

The Massachusetts Historical Society acted as a prototype for most of the societies that were established in the years after its founding.¹³ Despite the society's role as a model for subsequent organizations, many less-celebrated institutions were envious of its dominance. Founded in 1820, the Maine Historical Society "led the way in objecting to the dominion of the Massachusetts society over New England's past."¹⁴ Endeavors to control historical narratives speak to a sense of ownership over regional history, and present a distinction between *the* historical truth, and *their* historical truth. Efforts to overthrow a particular society's dominance also point to the perceived importance of being able to tell one's own story.

Today, the strong desire to tell highly specific geographical stories is apparent when we take a simple tally of historical societies on and around Mount Desert Island. In addition to the Mount Desert Island Historical Society, there are separate historical societies for Mount Desert Island's distinct villages and neighboring islands, including



Dan Fink, a metadata specialist at HistoryIT, inspects a map showing Blue Hill Bay at the Northeast Harbor Library archives. *Photograph by Amy Gwinn-Becker*

Tremont Historical Society, Southwest Harbor Historical Society, Bar Harbor Historical Society, Otter Creek Historical Society, Islesford Historical Society, Great Cranberry Island Historical Society, and Swan's Island Historical Society. All of these organizations have missions to collect, and, in some fashion, to preserve historical materials. Most of these societies attempt to keep their collections within their specific geographical purview, but their proximity and shared regional history lead to unavoidable overlap in the subject matter and the physical materials of their collections. Among organizations with collections that

are likely to overlap, an organization's defining characteristic remains its ability to interpret its materials from a specific geographical vantage point.

While all early historical societies "were organized to collect, preserve, and diffuse" historical materials in some fashion,¹⁵ the central aim of collecting artifacts (for both archives and museum displays), and the sheer volume of material being collected, was met with some criticism throughout the nineteenth and into the twentieth century. "Undiscriminating antiquarianism" was said to be the plague of historical societies.¹⁶ The broad missions of these organizations to collect materials relating to the natural, civil, literary, ecclesiastical, aboriginal, etc. history of a region made accumulating materials with a discerning eye difficult. Some professionals believed

Tova Mellen and David Neikirk view a negative showing Swan's Island children, which has been digitized at the Osher Map Library in Portland, Maine. *Photograph by Amy Gwinn-Becker*



that too many historical societies collected "for collection's sake," leading to "unmeaning museums" and the collection of relics with little "actual scholarly value."¹⁷ For example, Christopher C. Baldwin, librarian of the American Antiquarian Society from 1829 to 1835, wrote that his daily experience revealed that it was impossible to determine what was valuable to the collection and what was not.¹⁸

Nearly two centuries later, these concerns remain. Today, some professionals suggest that too much emphasis is placed on the collections of historical organizations—one consequence being that the quality of care given to the collection may be jeopardized when organizations are over capacity. James Vaughan, Executive Director of the

Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, believes "many sites are poor stewards because they keep much more than they can care for."¹⁹ The recent assessments of the collections of Mount Desert Island's organizations revealed that 100 percent of participating organizations were at, or over, capacity, and that the security of the area's historical materials were compromised as a result.²⁰

In 2007, more than thirty leaders and representatives of historic sites, grant-making agencies, and national history and museum organizations met for the second time at Kykuit in Tarrytown, New

York to discuss the sustainability of historic sites. According to the findings of the Kykuit participants:

Responsible site stewardship achieves a sustainable balance between the needs of the buildings, landscapes, collections, and the visiting public. Undefined collecting coupled with a lack of professional standards and inconsistent practices regarding deaccessioning are an impediment to change and sustainability.²¹

This contemporary observation parallels earlier criticisms of the "undiscriminating antiquarianism" of early historical societies. However, recent discourses diverge from the old by citing negative impacts to visitor engagement as a major consequence of undefined acquisition by historical organizations.²² Professionals are not proposing that societies do away with or mistreat their collections, but rather, are arguing "for greater balance; for a balance that gives the visitor experience equal footing with our other objectives."²³ While the organizations on and around Mount Desert Island have amassed impressive collections, less than 20 percent of the historical holdings are cataloged, and even fewer of the holdings are accessible to the public online.²⁴

Despite today's widely held belief in the importance of public involvement, attendance to historical sites is declining.²⁵ As historical society, museum, and library workers, we must ask ourselves not only how well our collections are protected, but also how meaningful they are, and how beneficial their preservation is to the public. Digitizing historical materials is by no means the only way to engage the public with local history. Imaging materials represents just one step for historical organizations participating in the complex adaptation necessary to keep up with societal and

cultural change. In addition to increasing electronic accessibility to collections for twenty-first-century audiences, we must reconsider modes of interpretation such as restrictive "velvet rope tours," and seek more varied and personal ways to engage and enrich our visitors' lives.

Historical collections and spaces are not valuable in and of themselves, and the materials cannot tell their own stories. An object safely stored on an archive shelf is just that—an object. It is the human gaze—our engagement with the objects we strive to preserve—that enables their stories to unfold. From historical holdings to beholdings, the way we view our collections must change.

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