

# But You Promised: A Case Study of Deaccessioning at the American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

Laura Uglean Jackson and D. Claudia Thompson

## Abstract

This paper is a case study of an active deaccessioning program at the American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming. The essay discusses decision making and methods for incorporating deaccessioning as a collection management tool. It reasons that a structured approach on the part of the repository can increase the value of the remaining collections, mitigate the anger and disappointment of donors whose material is being deaccessioned, build relationships with other repositories, and make more collections accessible.

## Literature Review

The Society of American Archivists *Code of Ethics* guides archivists through most of their professional activities. It addresses what and how archivists should collect, how they should protect the documents under their care while making them available for use, how they should treat each other, and how they should protect their donors' privacy.<sup>1</sup> But the code does not address how archivists can ethically remove collections from their repositories, even though many, if not all, repositories house some collections that are out of scope or that do not contain sufficient content to warrant the cost of preservation.<sup>2</sup>

© Laura Uglean Jackson and D. Claudia Thompson.

<sup>1</sup> Society of American Archivists, *Code of Ethics*, 2006 revision, available at [http://www.archivists.org/governance/handbook/app\\_ethics.asp](http://www.archivists.org/governance/handbook/app_ethics.asp), accessed 4 April 2006.

<sup>2</sup> At the time of writing, SAA's Deaccessioning and Reappraisal Development and Review Team was developing guidelines for reappraisal and deaccessioning.

In comparison with literature published in the library and museum fields, articles on deaccessioning within the archival profession are few. Still, the archival literature provides a basis for discussion of deaccessioning within the profession over the last thirty years. The discussion and disagreements over deaccessioning can be traced to Leonard Rapport's 1981 article and Karen Benedict's response three years later, both published in the *American Archivist*.<sup>3</sup> Focusing on public records, Rapport argues that archivists do not have the resources to keep everything and proposes that repositories periodically reappraise holdings and deaccession material no longer thought to be of enduring value. Benedict disagrees with Rapport. Viewing reappraisal and deaccessioning as "crisis management techniques that may seriously undermine an archival program if they are applied,"<sup>4</sup> she supports reappraisal and deaccessioning only if the original appraisal was faulty, or if accessioning new material affected the appraisal of previously accessioned collections.

Since then, the majority of reappraisal and deaccessioning literature has appeared as case studies.<sup>5</sup> These case studies demonstrate how both manuscript and institutional repositories can use reappraisal and deaccessioning as collection management tools for various problems. Most often, institutions begin deaccessioning projects when out-of-scope records are identified and when the need arises to better use limited resources such as stack space and staff time.<sup>6</sup> Without professional guidelines for reappraisal and deaccessioning, each repository creates its own process based on type of repository (institutional or manuscript), administrative structure, and available resources. Interestingly, repositories take similar steps in all of these documented projects: forming a committee, identifying material for review, analyzing and describing material, contacting donors, and disposing of material by transferring, returning, or destroying records. While disagreements between donors and the repositories

<sup>3</sup> Leonard Rapport, "No Grandfather Clause: Reappraising Accessioned Records," *American Archivist* 44 (1981): 143–50; Karen Benedict, "Invitation to a Bonfire: Reappraisal and Deaccessioning of Records as Collection Management Tools in Archives—A Reply to Leonard Rapport," *American Archivist* 47 (1984): 43–49.

<sup>4</sup> Benedict, "Invitation to a Bonfire," 44.

<sup>5</sup> Richard L. Haas, "Collection Reappraisal: The Experience at the University of Cincinnati," *American Archivist* 47, no. 1 (1984): 51–54; Charlotte Brown, "Deaccessioning for the Greater Good," *Wilson Library Bulletin* 61 (1987): 22–24; Sheila Powell, "Archival Reappraisal: The Immigration Case Files," *Archivaria* 33 (1991): 104–16; Todd Daniels-Howell, "Reappraisal of Congressional Records at the Minnesota Historical Society: A Case Study," *Archival Issues* 23, no. 1 (1998): 35–40; Mark L. Shelstad, "Switching the Vacuum into Reverse: A Case Study of Retrospective Conversion as Collection Management," *Archival Issues* 23, no. 2 (1998): 135–53; Michael Doylen, "Experiments in Deaccessioning: Archives and On-line Auctions," *American Archivist* 64 (2001): 350–62; Caryn Wojcik, "Appraisal, Reappraisal, and Deaccessioning," *Archival Issues* 27, no. 2 (2002): 151–60; Helmut M. Knies, "Reappraising and Reaccessioning Wisconsin State Government Records: An Agency-Wide Approach," *Archival Issues* 30, no. 1 (2006): 35–43.

<sup>6</sup> Haas reports relocating to temporary quarters; Powell explains that her repository (the Government Archives Division of the National Archives of Canada) reappraised a body of like records (Immigration Case Files) because the original appraisal was faulty. She does not report deaccessioning in her study.

occasionally develop, none of these projects reports permanent damage to donor relations. In fact, many of these repositories report benefits such as strengthening remaining collections by making them more accessible, improving general acquisitions practices, and even raising money through the sale of items on eBay.<sup>7</sup>

The term *deaccessioning* is used differently throughout the archival literature. Some authors, particularly those working with institutional records, equate deaccessioning with destruction of material.<sup>8</sup> Others use the term for item-level weeding.<sup>9</sup> However, Mark A. Greene defines *deaccessioning* as “the process by which an archives or manuscript repository formally removes a collection or record group from its custody,” and this is the definition used here.<sup>10</sup> In two recent articles, Greene appeals to archivists to “embrace reappraisal and deaccessioning as basic, important, and effective collection management tools” and to make the practices as “normal a part of standard archives administration as cataloging and reference.”<sup>11</sup>

The American Heritage Center (AHC) began to embrace reappraisal and deaccessioning fully during a grant-funded project. In 2006, the National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC) awarded the AHC a two-year grant to reduce a 29,500-cubic-foot backlog.<sup>12</sup> The grant included use of a wide range of collection management tools including cataloging, creating finding aids, and deaccessioning. This paper discusses the grant-funded work that used deaccessioning as a collection management tool. It also considers some of the questions raised by deaccessioning, including notification of donors, documentation, and future impacts.

<sup>7</sup> Daniels-Howell, “Reappraisal of Congressional Records,” 35; Wojcik, “Appraisal, Reappraisal, and Deaccessioning,” 151; Doynen, “Experiments in Deaccessioning,” 360.

<sup>8</sup> Rapport’s (“No Grandfather Clause,” 146) discussion on arguments against deaccessioning consistently refers to the destruction of records and never mentions other outcomes for deaccessioned materials, such as transfer or return to donor. For Wojick (Wojick, “Appraisal, Reappraisal, and Deaccessioning,” 151–60), deaccessioning means destruction or returning the records to the creating agency.

<sup>9</sup> In his article (“Experiments in Deaccessioning, 350”), Doynen reports on the sale of items from collections “accumulated routinely from the careful weeding of accessioned collections during processing, and from the reprocessing and reappraisal of current holdings.”

<sup>10</sup> Mark A. Greene, “What Were We Thinking?: A Call to Embrace Reappraisal and Deaccessioning,” *Provenance* 20 (2002): 33. Greene is the director of the AHC.

<sup>11</sup> Greene, “What Were We Thinking?,” 33; and Mark A. Greene, “I’ve Deaccessioned and Lived to Tell about It: Confessions of an Unrepentant Reappraiser,” *Archival Issues* 30, no. 1 (2006): 7–22.

<sup>12</sup> American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming, “Beating Backlogs through Cataloging and Deaccessioning: An Example for the Archival Profession,” project narrative, NAR06GRANT-074, available at [http://ahc.uwyo.edu/about/nhprc\\_grants.htm](http://ahc.uwyo.edu/about/nhprc_grants.htm), accessed 14 April 2010. The holdings of the American Heritage Center totaled about 87,050 cubic feet before this reappraisal and deaccessioning project.

## Background

Between 1960 and 1985, the AHC acquired, on average, a thousand collections a year through an aggressive, but not focused, acquisitions program.<sup>13</sup> Few collections were accompanied by a deed of gift or other ownership agreement. In addition, some of the collections were largely or entirely composed of secondary material. Because the director and staff then were not trained as archivists, appraisal was not performed according to archival principles.

In the late 1980s, a new administration ended this collecting process, immediately slowed the pace at which collections were acquired, and changed the acquisition process. The AHC, however, held a backlog of thousands of collections that either did not contain archival materials or would be more useful to researchers at other repositories. The AHC wished to implement a controlled deaccessioning policy, but believed it important to balance the concerns of the donors, the resource allocators, other archival repositories, and the AHC itself. Due to the lack of models for a project of this size, the AHC sought and secured grant funding toward this goal.

## Methodology

### *Creating a Collecting Policy*

To decide which collections to keep and which to deaccession, the AHC needed to establish a more formal collecting policy. It operated previously under a broad statement of collecting interest that encouraged a preference for primary material and that categorized collections by general subjects such as Transportation or Wyoming and the West. The AHC undertook to narrow these definitions. For this aspect of the project, the staff was formed into task forces to study and report on several subject-based collecting areas including geology, journalism and writers, popular culture, military, United States politics, and Wyoming and western history. The director, assisted by the department heads, created a collecting policy on the basis of these reports. The final version defined seventeen topical collecting areas and identified activities, subtopics, and issues within each. For example, the collecting scope for Architecture and Civil Engineering was narrowed to focus on architects and city planners noted for social activism or making the built environment more amenable to human life and society. The Architecture/Engineering and Science Task Force recommended this change based on the AHC's existing collection strength, previous use of the collections, and the location and holdings of other architecture collections in the United States. Conversely, the task force recommended that the

<sup>13</sup> Shelstad, "Switching the Vacuum into Reverse," 135–53.

AHC not pursue collections of scientists because of a lack of strength in the area and coverage by other institutions.

As shown in Table 1, the AHC's collecting policy is laid out in spreadsheet format and each topical area is broken down further to clarify what will be accepted, solicited, and deaccessioned. It also includes limits on formats.<sup>14</sup> This policy seeks to preserve and extend the American Heritage Center's strengths in some subject areas, while discouraging the use of resources to maintain collections that do not support the center's strengths.

A comprehensive collecting policy has multiple benefits. In addition to guiding and controlling a repository's collecting, the policy is also valuable in dealing with donors. Donors and their heirs can more easily understand a repository's decision to deaccession if the policy clearly places their material out of scope. Potential donors who wish to donate inappropriate material can be deflected by citing an established policy.

### ***Surveying and Reappraising the Collections***

Before the grant project began, the American Heritage Center undertook a retrospective survey of about 3,500 unprocessed collections from its backlog. Between 2000 and 2006, staff and student employees recorded basic information about each collection onto a standard worksheet.<sup>15</sup> During the grant-funded phase, the head of the Arrangement and Description Department evaluated these worksheets. If a collection clearly fit within the collecting policy, it was cataloged. The remaining collections, about two thousand total, were identified as possible candidates for deaccession.

The deaccessioning phase of the grant occupied fifteen months (October 2006–December 2008) and employed approximately one-and-a-half full-time staff. Staff members began by once again evaluating individual collections marked as candidates for deaccessioning. Additional information, including ownership status, collection content, and processing status, was gathered at this time so that the acquisitions committee could make a well-informed decision to retain or deaccession.<sup>16</sup> Information was gathered from accessioning records, inventory and catalog records, the internal collection management database, and donor correspondence. This information was recorded on an evaluation

<sup>14</sup> See "AHC Manuscripts Collecting Policy" (15 October 2008), available at [http://ahc.uwyo.edu/documents/about/administration/AHC%20Collecting%20Policy%20\\_3\\_%20rev%20\\_2\\_.pdf](http://ahc.uwyo.edu/documents/about/administration/AHC%20Collecting%20Policy%20_3_%20rev%20_2_.pdf), accessed 14 April 2010. In this article, only deaccessioning is discussed. The effect of the collecting policy on new acquisitions is not covered here.

<sup>15</sup> Basic information such as collection name, accession number, cubic footage, occupation of the creator, subjects covered, legal restrictions, and content were recorded.

<sup>16</sup> The role of the acquisitions committee is codified in the AHC's "Collection Management Policy," available at <http://ahc.uwyo.edu/about/policies.htm>, accessed 13 April 2010.

**Table I.** Examples from the AHC Collecting Policy

Subject Area: Architecture and Civil Engineering				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collect the records of Wyoming and nationally significant architects and city planners who are noted for their social activism or for their work in making the built environment more amenable to human life and society.</li> <li>• Also accept records of architects and city planners responsible for architectural or planning landmarks in Wyoming.</li> <li>• (No Sub-categories)</li> </ul>				
Geographical Area	Accept new colls?	Actively solicit?	Retrospective deaccession?	Limits on formats?
United States	Yes	No	Yes, partial (not re local Wyoming architects)	Website
Subject Area: Journalism				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In addition to documenting the business and practice of journalism in Wyoming, the AHC will seek to document journalism regionally in the areas of agriculture and travel/tourism, and nationally in the areas of war correspondents, women journalists, "adventure travel," and coverage of national politics.</li> <li>• To be considered for AHC collections, journalists must have spent a significant portion of their careers in the areas specified, but need not have worked exclusively in those areas.</li> <li>• The AHC will not collect journalism nationally or regionally in the areas of medicine, science, technology, economics, entertainment, religion, foreign affairs.</li> <li>• <u>Under documented communities:</u> African American women journalists.</li> </ul>				
Geographical Area	Accept new colls?	Actively solicit?	Retrospective deaccession?	Limits on formats?
Wyoming; Regional: travel/tourism, agriculture, sports; National—war, women, national politics, "adventure travel."	Yes	Yes	Yes	Generally will not accept drafts of published articles. Will not accept collections that in their entirety consist of copies (draft or printed) of articles.
Subject Area: Transportation				
<p><u>Sub-category, Aviation and Aerospace:</u> Collections—of individuals, companies, and trade groups—that contribute to the broader interpretation of the history of aviation and its impact on the US or the state of Wyoming. Avoid highly technical construction, maintenance, or operations material.</p>				
Geographical Area	Accept new colls?	Actively solicit?	Retrospective deaccession?	Limits on formats?
United States	Yes	Yes	Yes	Technical materials regarding construction, maintenance, and operation will normally not be collected.

Downloaded from <http://meridian.allenpress.com/doi/pdf/10.17723/aarc.73.2.297691q50gk844> by guest on 25 June 2022

Sub-category, Railroads: Collections relating to construction and economic/social impact of and travel on railroads that traverse Wyoming; so long as there is a clear and significant connection to Wyoming in the content of the collection, collections that extend beyond Wyoming are included in collecting scope.

Geographical Area	Accept new colls?	Actively solicit?	Retrospective deaccession?	Limits on formats?
Wyoming	Yes	Yes, but only for 19th century	Yes	Technical drawings of engines and rolling stock will not be collected; blueprints, maps, and drawings of trackage, yards, bridges, buildings, etc. will be accepted only if directly related to Wyoming.

Sub-category, Road Transportation: Collections relating to pre-1950 construction of and travel on trails and roads that traverse Wyoming; so long as there is a clear and significant connection to Wyoming in the content of the collection, collections that extend beyond Wyoming are included in collecting scope.

Geographical Area	Accept new colls?	Actively solicit?	Retrospective deaccession?	Limits on formats?
Wyoming	Yes	Yes	Yes	Uncontextualized, scattered, or large and disorganized ephemera collections/series will not be accepted

Sub-category, Water Transportation

Geographical Area	Accept new colls?	Actively solicit?	Retrospective deaccession?	Limits on formats?
None	No	NA	Yes	

Note that this example is only a portion of the policy and has been reformatted for publication. The complete policy on the AHC website is found at [http://ahc.uwyo.edu/documents/about/administration/AHC%20Collecting%20Policy%20\\_3\\_%20rev%20\\_2\\_.pdf](http://ahc.uwyo.edu/documents/about/administration/AHC%20Collecting%20Policy%20_3_%20rev%20_2_.pdf), accessed 13 April 2010.

worksheet (Appendix A) and supplemented with a brief written biography and content summary. The grant-funded staff attended the weekly acquisitions committee meetings and presented their findings in brief reports. These meetings allowed the committee (made up largely of department heads) to ask questions and discuss any issues. Although it was easy to determine the destiny of most collections, the committee sometimes disagreed about the interpretation of the collecting policy. Many collections had components that fit within the policy but included material that did not. The collecting policy does not seek to “cherry pick” selections from a person’s life work, so decisions were made to keep or deaccession papers as a whole. For example, the papers of a historian were reappraised. This individual wrote several books pertaining to land use and public policy in the West, but the collection included over fifty cubic feet of publisher correspondence, research for other works having little to do with public policy, and materials from his college years. Because this individual’s major work related to our collecting policy, the committee retained the whole collection.

**Establishing Ownership Status**

Identifying and reappraising collections to be deaccessioned constitute only half the equation. The other half is disposition. To dispose of a collection, a repository first must establish legal ownership of the material. A deed of gift makes deaccessioning and disposal much easier. Ideally, the deed of gift transfers ownership unconditionally to the repository. Alternatively, the deed of gift may specify whether unwanted items are to be destroyed, transferred, or returned. However, many repositories (including the AHC) acquired material without a deed of gift, making it difficult to manage legacy collections.

Between 1989 and 1991, under the direction of the University of Wyoming's legal affairs office, the AHC conducted a project to solicit deeds of gift from previous donors. Letters were sent to about three thousand donors who had not signed a deed of gift. Although the center gained ownership of about a thousand collections through this process, several hundred donors had died, and many others were no longer at their given address.<sup>17</sup> The project cleared up ownership for many collections, but, predictably, not all.

The center considered the Wyoming Abandoned Property Act as a possible way to gain ownership of collections that lacked a gift agreement. At the time, the act required that a certified letter be sent to the donor's last known address, and if the letter did not result in a contact, three advertisements had to be placed in newspapers likely to be read by the donor. The AHC estimated this process would cost over \$300,000.<sup>18</sup>

To deaccession collections under these circumstances, the AHC decided the best option was to try to change the law. Fortunately, it found a sponsor in the minority leader of the state senate. During its 1992 budget session, the fifty-first state legislature of Wyoming amended the abandoned property law. The amended law stated that if the repository acquired material before 1982 and had been out of contact with the donor and the donor's heirs for at least ten years, the repository owned the collection. If a collection had been accepted after 1982 or if there had been contact with the donor during the last ten years, a certified letter had to be sent to the last known address with the offer to return the collection. If the recipient made no contact within sixty days, or if the letter was returned, the repository could legally claim the collection as a gift.<sup>19</sup> Currently, thirty states have abandoned property laws addressing archival

<sup>17</sup> *American Heritage Center Annual Report, 1990–1991*, page 5 of unnumbered sixteen-page report; Shelstad, "Switching the Vacuum into Reverse," 135–53.

<sup>18</sup> Shelstad, "Switching the Vacuum into Reverse," 135–53.

<sup>19</sup> Wyo. Stat. § 34-23-102.

material. A list of these states is available on the SAA website under the Acquisition and Appraisal Section.<sup>20</sup>

Ownership status established the options for disposition of a collection. With a deed of gift or if the collection could be claimed under the abandoned property provisions of the law, the AHC could discard the material, offer it to a more appropriate repository, or offer to return it to the donor or the donor's family. If ownership did not reside with us, the only disposal option was to return the collection to its legal owner.

### **Collection Content**

Collection content was another important factor in determining disposition. For example, we usually discarded collections composed entirely of secondary material, such as newspaper clippings. Those rejected as unusable due to privacy concerns, such as a lawyer's case files or a doctor's medical records, we usually shredded. Collections with good content that did not fit into the collecting scope we offered to other repositories. Collections of personal or genealogical information might be offered back to the family (if a family could be found), even if ownership was clearly vested in the repository.

### **Recordkeeping Worksheet**

To ensure consistency in the deaccessioning process, we used a recordkeeping worksheet (see Appendix B). The worksheet included a checklist of actions to be taken and decisions to be made. For instance, not all collections had been kept together physically over the years, and the disparate components had to be accounted for.

Although the majority of deaccessioned collections were unprocessed, a few had legacy finding aids. A very few had catalog records or other electronic metadata. These rare cases generated much more work. We removed finding aids from public view (although master copies were kept in the repository's files), overwrote catalog records, and removed other metadata. However, because the AHC is a public repository, and its records are public, the disposition of any collection is available to the public on request.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Society of American Archivists, *Abandoned Property in Cultural Institutions Law Project*, available at <http://www.archivists.org/saagroups/acq-app/abandonedlist.asp>, accessed 17 September 2009.

<sup>21</sup> We considered that it would be confusing to patrons to maintain catalog records for collections that we no longer had. In the rare cases of inquiries about deaccessioned collections, it is easy for the reference staff to redirect patrons to the new home.

All of the collections had associated accessioning records, case files, and donor correspondence.<sup>22</sup> We offered copies of these records to the receiving repositories, but the original records (including master copies of finding aids) we retained. Regardless of the value of the collection, they are a part of our history. The records tracking a collection's acquisition, management, and disposal are all crucial for maintaining our own institutional past and, more importantly, for informing individuals of what happened to a deaccessioned collection.

## Results

During the course of the grant, we were able to review only 396 of the identified two thousand collections; however, we tackled all collections larger than ten cubic feet. Of these, we determined that sixty-nine collections (17%) fit within our collecting scope and retained them.<sup>23</sup> We deferred twenty-four collections due to insufficient information.

We deaccessioned the remaining 303 collections, totaling 8,500 cubic feet. We sent twenty-eight collections back to donors, and eight we sent to the University of Wyoming library. We transferred the majority of deaccessioned collections, 209, to other repositories—the preferred outcome stated in our “Collection Management Policy.”<sup>24</sup> The purpose of the grant was to provide faster and better intellectual access to collections in the backlog. Transferring collections to an appropriate repository, we hoped, would “increase the likelihood of their being made accessible and visible to researchers.”<sup>25</sup> The AHC relied on the Internet to find other repositories' collecting interests. The grant-funded staff used Google and the *National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections* to search subject terms and individuals' names. If we thought one of our deaccessioned collections matched well with another repository's collecting scope, we approached that repository. Otherwise, we began with the alma maters of the creator or looked for a repository close to the creator's primary residence or workplace.

Collections totaling more than fifty cubic feet were difficult to place in any repository. Some of the smaller historical societies and public libraries considered ten cubic feet too large to take. Often, we had to contact several repositories before finding one able and willing to take a collection. However, since the

<sup>22</sup> As a side note, this documentation was necessary to know when the collection was acquired, and therefore, if we owned it.

<sup>23</sup> American Heritage Center, *NAR06GRANT-074 FINAL Narrative February 1, 2007–December 31, 2008* (January 2009), compiled and written by Mark A. Greene. Unless otherwise noted, all numbers and percentages relating to the results of the deaccessioning grant were taken from this report.

<sup>24</sup> American Heritage Center, “Collection Management Policy.”

<sup>25</sup> American Heritage Center, *Interim Report, Aug. 1, 2005 to Feb. 28, 2006, Grant #NARA40490; NHPRC Proposal No.: 5608-WY, 1.*

NHPRC grant included funding for shipping, cost was not a major factor. Also, these funds allowed us to send several collections entirely composed of newspaper and magazine clippings, which would otherwise have been discarded, to public libraries and schools.

We preferred to communicate using email because it allowed other repositories to answer our requests at their convenience. Email also allowed us to easily track those we contacted, if they responded, and when. By the end of the grant, we had transferred collections to 164 repositories in forty-two states, two Canadian provinces, and five countries outside of North America.<sup>26</sup> We destroyed thirty-four collections made up entirely of secondary material. We also reclaimed 8,847 cubic feet of space, although space saving was not a primary concern of the project.

To learn the status of the transferred collections, we sent 117 surveys to ninety-two repositories three months after transferring a collection to each. Surveying repositories was not a part of our original plan, and resources allowed us to run the survey for only six months, so not all repositories received the survey. The survey asked about the collection's processing and cataloging status, and if it had been used.<sup>27</sup> Fifty-seven surveys were returned, showing that about 50 percent of the collections were still in the other repository's backlog. However, we attributed this high percentage to the short period of time between the transfer and the survey. Some repositories estimated that it would be more than a year before they would process or catalog the collections. The good news was that about 38 percent of collections had been cataloged or processed, and 5 percent had an EAD finding aid.<sup>28</sup>

## Impacts

Deaccessioning does not take place in a vacuum. It impacts, or has the potential to impact, relations between a repository and its donors, between an institution and its fellow institutions, and between an archivist and his or her successors at the organization. Responsible deaccessioning requires an archivist to be aware of all of the individuals and institutions affected.

<sup>26</sup> *Deaccessioned Collections Transfer Locations*, Google Map (6 January 2009), available at <http://maps.google.com/maps/ms?ie=UTF8&hl=en&msa=0&msid=110406564829210660935.000453a5b723f146310a6&z=2>, accessed 16 September 2009. See Figure 1.

<sup>27</sup> A survey was sent for every collection transferred from October 2006 to December 2007, meaning some repositories filled out more than one survey.

<sup>28</sup> American Heritage Center, *NAR06Grant-074 Final Narrative*.

### **Donor Relations**

Although the American Heritage Center sought to obtain ownership of as many collections as possible before undertaking the deaccessioning project, it was still frequently desirable or necessary to contact a donor or a donor's heirs. In some cases, the donor remained legal owner of the collection. In most cases, we contacted a donor as a courtesy before transfer of the collection to another repository. In still other cases, we contacted a donor because no other repository could be located for the collection, and we preferred to return it to the donor rather than to destroy it.

Donor reaction ranged from enthusiasm to disappointment. A few donors, or their heirs, were eager to have the materials returned or transferred to a different repository. Some even assisted in the search for new and more appropriate homes. Only three donors expressed real anger. The director mollified two donors by explaining the project and our collection management techniques. The third donor was able to point to language in our acquisition agreement from the date of the original acquisition that committed us to retaining the material "in perpetuity." On the advice of our legal counsel, we agreed to maintain the collection.

Explaining our project has been a key factor in maintaining cordial relationships. We have done our best to promote understanding of the grant project by publicizing it in our newsletter, which is distributed to donors and resource allocators.<sup>29</sup> There has been no stampede of donors fearful we are going out of business, although some have approached us wanting to know the status of their donations. In such cases, we either answer honestly that we value the papers and intend to keep them, or we use the opportunity to start a discussion about where the papers should go instead.

### **Relations with Other Repositories**

The SAA *Code of Ethics* entreats archivists to "respect each institution and its mission and collecting policy,"<sup>30</sup> a statement interpreted to mean that archival collecting policies should not overlap and compete, and that archivists should not try to beat each other out for donors or collections. This idealistic appeal is not 100 percent effective. Many collecting policies overlap in part with the collecting policies of other institutions. Ethical deaccessioning does not require an institution to divest itself of every collection containing material that fits another institution's collecting policy.

<sup>29</sup> Greene, "I've Deaccessioned and Lived to Tell About It," 10–11.

<sup>30</sup> Society of American Archivists, *Code of Ethics*, Article 2.

Collecting policies may change as institutions change and develop. During the phase of its greatest growth between 1970 and 1985, the American Heritage Center acquired collections in many new areas. Sometimes these subject areas grew and developed as hoped, but occasionally they did not. For instance, although the AHC received one excellent collection of a national-level sports journalist, holdings in that area never grew substantially. Because the new policy confines collecting in that area within the borders of our state, we chose to transfer the materials to an institution with substantial strength in national sports. The transferred collection gained strength by association with related collections, and the AHC's collections as a whole gained focus.

Focused collecting and transferring collections to another repository are ultimately intended to aid researchers. A legitimate objection can be made that moving collections confuses researchers and makes older citations obsolete. However, this point must be weighed against the increased access achieved by moving collections to the institution where they are most likely to be used. In the age of national bibliographic databases and Internet searches, moreover, collections are much easier to find, even if they have moved from their original locations.

#### ***Relations with Successors***

Responsible deaccessioning also requires that an institution maintain records of its activities to inform future staff of what was done. Someday, long after we are gone, a researcher or donor's descendant will come to the American Heritage Center asking for a collection that was disposed of long ago. If we have done our job correctly, our successors will be able to say why the collection was deaccessioned and what happened to it. In the course of the grant project, we created forms to track both our evaluation process and the details of record-keeping.<sup>31</sup> We placed these forms in the case files for the collections, along with any other relevant documents (including prints copies of emails) tracking our contacts with donors and other repositories. By using these protocols, we ensured that our recordkeeping was consistent and thorough. Our goal has been to make both our process and our actions transparent.

We continue to implement deaccessioning as a regular collection management tool, albeit less frequently than during the grant-funded phase. Since the grant's end, the AHC has reappraised about a dozen collections and deaccessioned seven. We use the same forms and methods developed during the grant-funded phase.

<sup>31</sup> See Appendixes. Collections Manager William Hopkins created the original forms. It should be noted that our records were not maintained in an integrated collections management system such as Archivists' Toolkit, so it was necessary to track multiple record sets.

**Conclusion**

Like many repositories, the American Heritage Center had acquired collections without using professionally sound appraisal tools such as a collecting policy or an acquisitions committee. A new administration, a changed abandoned property law, and the creation of a collecting policy altered how we acquired material and allowed us to fix a major collection management problem using reappraisal and deaccessioning.

Because we chose not to be bound to the ways or decisions of the past, the AHC was able to eliminate a huge backlog, make more collections accessible, and do it without sacrificing important relationships with donors and colleagues. In our experience, the benefits outweighed the potential risks raised by reappraising and deaccessioning. Change does not often occur without controversy, but archivists are not and should not be immutable to change. Agreements that our predecessors made in good faith may cease to be practical. At some point, the needs of the present may become incompatible with the decisions of the past. We need to trust ourselves to make the changes that new situations require. And, if the new situation calls for making collections more focused and accessible, then we should use the tools and resources available to assist us.

**Appendix A: American Heritage Center—Collection  
Deaccession Evaluation**

Collection Title: \_\_\_\_\_

Accession Number: \_\_\_\_\_

**Accessing Records:**

	Accession Number Control Cards	
	Accession Logs	
	Collection / Donor Cards	
	Deed of Gift Files	

**Arrangement and Description Records:**

	Archives Record Cards	
	Inventory Files	

**Cataloging Records:**

	OCLC (WorldCat)	
	Local Catalog	

**Collection Management System Database:**

	Accretions	
	Shelf Locations	
	Use Records	
	Collection Status Database	

**Administrative Records:**

	Correspondence Files	
--	----------------------	--

**Miscellaneous Records:**

	Digital Files	
	Vertical Files	

Comments: \_\_\_\_\_

Recommendations: \_\_\_\_\_

Evaluation conducted by: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Appendix B: American Heritage Center—Deaccessioning Record-Keeping Worksheet**

Collection Title: \_\_\_\_\_

Accession Number: \_\_\_\_\_

Collection Subject Area: \_\_\_\_\_ Cubic Feet \_\_\_\_\_

Deaccession Requested By: \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Reason: \_\_\_\_\_

Deaccession approved by: \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Director / Associate Director

**Accessioning**

- Collection
- Accretions
- Shelf Locations
- Constituents
- Art
- Content Lists-Electronic Files
- Deaccessioned Collections
- Shelf Locations List
- Tracking List
- New Review Lists
- Deaccessioned Collections
- Deaccessioned Collection
- Yearly List
- Concluded List
- Deaccessioned Collections
- Collection Material Transfer
- Master List
- Destination List

Donor Name(s):	D.o.G.	Accretion Trailer(s)	Last Contact Date

Completed by: \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Manager / Collections

**Arrangement and Description**

**Status:**

- Processed
- Unprocessed
- Listed

**Finding Aids retrieved from:**

- Backup
- Reading Rooms
- Archives Record Cards
- Card Catalog

**Alternate locations checked:**

- Vertical Files (Paper)
- Vertical Files (Photographs)

**Electronic Record updates:**

- Local Catalog
- Metadata
- Digital Files
- OCLC
- Server
- Collection Status Database

Completed by: \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Manager / Arrangement and Description

BUT YOU PROMISED: A CASE STUDY  
OF DEACCESSIONING AT THE AMERICAN HERITAGE  
CENTER, UNIVERSITY OF WYOMING

**Administration:**

- Notification of Deaccession Sent to the Donor(s) Last Known Address
- Donor(s) Could Not Be Contacted
- Donor(s) Requested Deaccession
- Donor Contact List(s) Updated
- Original Donor(s) Deceased
- Donor's Heirs Contacted
- Donor(s) Were Not Contacted

Completed by: \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_