

“Function and Fascination Found in New York State Archives:  
A Comparative Study of the Potsdam Public Museum and the New York State Historical  
Association Research Library”

Elizabeth Vitek  
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It is a common misconception that archives, special collections, and research libraries are in danger of being shut down in response to electronic databases becoming more easily accessible. Archive guidebooks are being actively published by various companies in order to assist a collection's staff on the most effective way to manage an archive. Based on a comparative analysis of New York State Historical Association (NYSHA) Research Library and Potsdam Public Museum, it can be proven that effective archive management should be structured around specific external and internal factors instead of general literature. No two archives are alike; therefore, no two archives should be managed under the same principle guidelines.

There is a certain fascination attached to the term rare when it is applied to any field of study. It is intriguing and exciting to see something that has been classified as one of a kind because of historical significance. Archives and special collections are unique because it allows the viewer to handle a rare object that would never have been possible otherwise. This type of fascination for a rare object is applied to furthering knowledge, but the function of these objects is not the same as the information it contains. As long as there is a motivation to expand knowledge, there will be a need for archives both electronic and hard copy. Now that the function of archives has combined with museums and libraries, it has become more difficult to distinguish how an institution should be run.

It is helpful to think of a research library in terms of an art museum that has replaced priceless paintings with textual objects. An art museum serves a clear function, where a staff is

hired to collect, display, and store a series of objects for educational purposes.<sup>1</sup> The main responsibility is determined by how something is viewed and branches out to establish the proper way to catalogue an item after it has been used.<sup>2</sup> The mission of a research library has maintained a clear understanding of its function within a museum, where it preserves text in order to be used in the future.<sup>3</sup> It is a separate identity from other library systems due to the mass quantity of collections it houses.<sup>4</sup> Using the term research classifies the information housed to serve the needs of scholars.<sup>5</sup> These objects may include books, manuscripts, artist books, or illustrations that contain text that is useful in furthering research projects. However, the text comes secondary to the value of the object.<sup>6</sup> It forms an interesting relationship where an archive cares for an object, only to fulfill its purpose of advancing a scholar's work with the text inside.<sup>7</sup> In addition to text, collections require constant maintenance so that items can remain in good/fair conditions.

It appears that guidelines for archive management are published consistently in order to ensure the stability of cultural institutions of all sizes. New editions of reference databases are being updated on a regular basis, resulting in endless variations of similar information.<sup>8</sup> They are meant to function as a textbook that covers the economic, social, and theoretical information that could be applied to any degree of institutions.<sup>9</sup> Libraries will often include supplements in new editions, thus changing any formalities previously used.<sup>10</sup> When comparing local and

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<sup>1</sup> Boyd W. Rayward, "Electronic Information and the Functional Integration of Libraries, Museums, and Archives," in *History and Electronic Artefacts*, ed. Edward Higgs (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 210.

<sup>2</sup> Rayward, 210.

<sup>3</sup> Rayward, 209.

<sup>4</sup> Rayward, 209.

<sup>5</sup> Rayward, 209.

<sup>6</sup> Rayward, 209.

<sup>7</sup> Rayward, 209.

<sup>8</sup> Rayward, 217.

<sup>9</sup> Rayward, 217.

<sup>10</sup> Rayward, 217.

private collections it makes sense to analyze individual success based on a broad understanding. Both Potsdam Public Museum and NYSHA research library function within the confines of a museum; therefore, they need to be viewed as arts organizations.

The primary goal of an archive existing within a museum should be adaption, regardless of an institutions overall size. An arts organization must adapt like any other business in order to keep up with changing external and internal environments.<sup>11</sup> While archives may not be concerned with the competitive marketplace, they still need to adapt to aspects within a social context.<sup>12</sup> For example, museum viewers and members of a given community will provide social and cultural concerns.<sup>13</sup> Having an organized strategic plan for addressing external environments found assists in furthering information for any department within an arts organization.<sup>14</sup> The functions of such departments can be broken down into four basic categories: planning, organizing, leading, and controlling.<sup>15</sup> It is a director or department head's job to balance these categories so that the mission and vision of an arts organization is achieved.<sup>16</sup>

The basic structure of an art museum begins with the board of trustees and moves down into the executive committee and the museum director.<sup>17</sup> The sections below the Director are arranged between three main department heads: Deputy Director (Administration), Chief Curator (Collections), and Associate Director (Exhibitions, Programs & Development).<sup>18</sup> The number of sub-sections within each department will vary based on the size of a museum. The Associate Director oversees Collections Management, which most commonly will contain the museum

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<sup>11</sup> William J. Byrnes, *Management and the Arts* (Burlington, MA: Focal Press, 2009), 84.

<sup>12</sup> Byrnes, 84.

<sup>13</sup> Byrnes, 85.

<sup>14</sup> Byrnes, 85.

<sup>15</sup> Byrnes, 86.

<sup>16</sup> Byrnes, 86.

<sup>17</sup> Byrnes, 166.

<sup>18</sup> Byrnes, 166.

library, digital images and slide collection, and archives.<sup>19</sup> Although the collections department is considered it's own separate division within a museum, there are still forms of daily correspondence between the librarians and curators.

Up until the establishment of smaller museums became economically feasible, curators were in charge of managing collections as well. Maintaining the research aspect of collections would be tasks a curator would address with any remaining free time.<sup>20</sup> Research libraries began in large museums that could provide the necessary fees for salaries, but they did not necessarily guarantee how the two departments would interact with each other.<sup>21</sup> As a result, research libraries established a series of policies in order to secure the use and maintenance of collections housed.<sup>22</sup> A museum would use a policy to formulate how scholars would use detailed displays and publications to reach the highest level of efficiency.<sup>23</sup> A larger institution with an endowment might link itself with a university to expand its resources through educational prospects.<sup>24</sup> This was the case for the NYSHA when the research library partnered with the Cooperstown Graduate Program in 1964. Unfortunately the Potsdam Public Museum is unable to do the same because it is located in a village that already contains both a private and public university.

Regardless of size, a museum's primary goal should be focused on opportunities to spread education and not economic issues.<sup>25</sup> For museums that are not fortunate enough to have a connection through means of a higher education, such a Potsdam, other types of primary

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<sup>19</sup> Byrnes, 166.

<sup>20</sup> Alexander Fenton, "Collections Research: Local, National and International Perspectives," in *Collections Management*, ed. Anne Fahy, 224-232 (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 224.

<sup>21</sup> Fenton, 224.

<sup>22</sup> Fenton, 225.

<sup>23</sup> Fenton, 225.

<sup>24</sup> Fenton, 225.

<sup>25</sup> Fenton, 227.

sources can be gathered to attract public usage.<sup>26</sup> Some of the most popular classifications used by over 350 museums in twenty-two countries are documents that address the history of community life, domestic and family life, personal life, and working life.<sup>27</sup> The staff at Potsdam Public Museum maintains a strong collection that fits these classifications by means of manuscripts and images. The collections have been catalogued with specific family names to serve the local community, while large archives are organized with a focus on scholarly research. Contemporary social movements have created categories within research libraries such as labor history, urban history, industrial/working life history, women's emancipation history, and more.<sup>28</sup> An abstract sense of documentation serves as a better fit for scholars who frequently require text over object.

It is easy to forget that librarians are scholars as well and deserve support for dedication to publications and preservation of collections.<sup>29</sup> A librarian goes through a qualified training in order to prepare for long-term research and should be regarded as a scholar. The role of an archivist is established based on the governing institutions he or she works for. Personal regard or national guidelines have little value compared to the classification of being a private or public organization. Due to these labels, it is debated if an archivist can be considered a scholar. All individuals have the ability to create a collection from thin air, but it is the value placed on the objects that place the status of a scholar. With recent trends in collecting leaning towards scholarly digital work, the role of a scholar is becoming more relatable to an archivist.<sup>30</sup> While

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<sup>26</sup> Fenton, 228.

<sup>27</sup> Fenton, 228.

<sup>28</sup> Fenton, 229.

<sup>29</sup> Tanya Clement, Wendy Hagenmaier, and Jennie Levine Knies, "Toward a Notion of the Archive of the Future: Impressions of Practice by Librarians, Archivists, and Digital Humanities Scholars," *The Library Quarterly*, vol. 83, no. 2 (2013): 119.

<sup>30</sup> Clement, Hagenmaier, Knies, 114.

the electronic environment is appealing in theory, archivists are required to reevaluate their practices and methods for editorial value.<sup>31</sup>

What goes into an archive is directly related to the institution it is affiliated with. Whether it be privately funded or a non-profit organization, all material needs to fit into a specific category that has been predetermined by a higher power. In the case of the Potsdam Public Museum, all of the data collected is based on having an association with areas surrounding the town of Potsdam, NY. The research library affiliated with the New York State Historical Association in Cooperstown, NY is faced with more limitations. Since most archives are located within a library that is attached to an art museum, it can be assumed that the materials housed are related to each other regardless of size or funding.

William J. Byrnes textbook *Management And The Arts* provides different variations of strategies for organization within a cultural institution. NYSHA fits into the category of stability strategy and is what Byrnes describes as “We are doing pretty well with our current operations, and there is no reason to any big changes.”<sup>32</sup> The stability strategy does not imply that an organization does not have any goals for making improvements, just that there is no need to make any immediate changes.<sup>33</sup> In the case of NYSHA, their operating systems were all up to date and all mistakes made in previous cataloging were addressed and recorded to avoid problems reoccurring in the future. It can be assumed that most archives would enjoy following this system because an institution will have the ability to develop its programming into an annual pattern.<sup>34</sup> Potsdam Public Museum falls into the opposite category known as the growth strategy. An institution will typically use the growth strategy when it is looking to develop new programs

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<sup>31</sup> Clement, Hagenmaier, Knies, 116.

<sup>32</sup> Byrnes, 136.

<sup>33</sup> Byrnes, 136.

<sup>34</sup> Byrnes, 136.

or expand to reach a wider demographic.<sup>35</sup> A typical arts organization might use special events or traveling exhibitions to increase public interest groups.<sup>36</sup>

The Potsdam Public Museum is a non-profit educational institution located in the rural community of Potsdam, NY. Although the town is home to both a private and public university, the Public Museum is a separate organization within the village of Potsdam. Founded in 1940, the Museum's mission is to collection, preserve, and study materials and artifacts that represent Potsdam, NY.<sup>37</sup> Since the museum is small and has no annual publications there are few sources that pertain to the history of the museum. It is listed in *2007-2009 Directory of Archival and Historical Document Collections in Northern New York* in order to service as a reference for the multiple types of libraries within the region. The Potsdam Public Museum lists its collection: local history, including businesses and schools; research publications of local area; materials belonging to St. Lawrence Valley Genealogical Association. Lending library of research books on antiques, collectibles, and decorative arts.<sup>38</sup>

The museum contains a wide range of permanent and traveling exhibitions on its ground floor that have been acquired mostly by donations. The upper level of the museum holds archives, photographs, and library, some of which are available for lending. Archival material that can only be viewed in-house consists of historical and genealogy records but are still available for public use. All these items can be viewed on site; however, practically all items in the archive can be accessed online. According to an informational tour with the museum's head director Mimi Van Deusen on April 4, 2013, official title being Museum Director, Curator, Village Historian, and drastic changes had been made to the museum in the past five years. The

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<sup>35</sup> Byrnes, 137.

<sup>36</sup> Byrnes, 137.

<sup>37</sup> *Potsdam Public Museum*, accessed May 7, 2013, <http://www.potsdampublicmuseum.org>.

<sup>38</sup> *Directory of Archival & Historical Document Collections: 2007-2009 Edition Available for Public Use* (Potsdam, NY: Documentary Heritage Program, Northern New York Library Network, 2007), 53.



museum only has a staff of three; however, they have material has been digitally catalogued into their Internet database.

Van Deusen explained that the museum was currently in the process of transferring all of its history collections into a digital record by using the computer program PastPerfect. She chose PastPerfect because it is an inexpensive basic computer program that still meets public needs. It also requires exact detail when digitally cataloging items, making researching easier in the future. All of the museum's archival material had just been recently moved from the basement storage area to an upstairs location with better airflow. The archives include collections of local hotel ledgers, glass plate negatives, and family genealogy. There is also a collection of photos, 5,000 of which have been digitalized with the appropriate information and the 1,000 remaining lack the necessary records to be placed in an online database.

Van Deusen also revealed that the museum has an annual budget of a mere \$500 for preserving the museum archives. The money is primarily used to replace paper and boxes that are no longer suitable for proper archival storage. In the case of the Potsdam Public Museum, a greater emphasis was placed on the reconstruction of the collections instead of expansion. It is clear that Van Desuen recognized these conditions and found alternative ways of improving the museum's mission to serve the Potsdam community. Physically transporting collections to a new location and producing an electronic database would have required an immense amount of time and dedication. The result was a success, making Potsdam Public Museum an ideal example of how archive management in museums.

The New York State Historical Association Research Library is located next door to the Fenimore Art Museum in Cooperstown, NY. It was designed to function as a research library and contains the following collections: American art history (19<sup>th</sup> century), folk art, genealogy,

history of agriculture and rural life, local history, material culture, museum studies, Native American art and culture, and New York State History.<sup>39</sup> An interview conducted with head librarian Wayne Wright on April 15, 2013 revealed that the NYSHA research library was strong in collection quantity and quality but had a limited role in planning for the future.

Wright explained that the library was late in digitalizing their collections compared to other research libraries across the country. The NYSHA only began the process of making items accessible online within the past ten years. At this point in time, all books have been catalogued into the database but not all manuscripts because they require more attention. All online information has been listed with finding aids so that sources can be easily accessible to the public. It was interesting to discover that the library still uses a card catalogue index for single manuscripts. It serves the library as a backup resource when a manuscript does not fit into one of the specific categories previously mentioned. All manuscripts are made available to the public; however, appointments are required for access. While analyzing the library's manuscript collection, Wright explained why an individual couldn't come in and browse the manuscripts.

All manuscripts have been organized and catalogued alphabetically into these main categories: account books, autograph albums, churches, diaries, local government records, military, imprint collection, rare books, ephemera, and more. Each group has been organized based on geographical location to better serve the NYSHA's mission to engage in the preservation of New York State history. Geographical classification has also proved useful in serving the needs of public interest. Similar to Potsdam Public Museum, the NYSHA research library has a steady amount of foot traffic dedicated to the pursuit of genealogy research. According to Wright, the practice of genealogy as a hobby became popular in the 1970's and has led to an increase in usage of the library's manuscripts.

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<sup>39</sup> *NYSHA/TFM Research Library*, accessed May 7, 2013, <http://library.nysha.org/collections/>.

Wright frequently acknowledged manuscripts or objects that were in poor condition throughout the duration of the tour. These items had custom-fitted soft cases clasped around them in order to keep the material intact. Given how there were a large number of manuscripts with cases, it can be assumed that the research library does not have an employee on staff that specializes in rare book conservation. While the library may be in good financial standing considering the current economic climate, the research library could not afford to hire a full-time rare book conservationist on staff. Instead, the library installed a compact conservation space within the library for all repairs to be made on a volunteer basis. Using volunteers creates a learning community within the NYSHA because conservators will hold classes on bookbinding. Unfortunately it appeared that the objects in need of repair, both manuscripts and browsing material, were beginning to pile up.

Although not discussed on Wright's tour, various publications on how archives should operate include sections that are designated to storage and handling fragile items. Detailed directions show archivists how to make storage containers based on custom measurements, such as the one-piece enclosure with corner flaps.<sup>40</sup> A list of constructions, diagrams, and supply vendors will be included to assist in the construction of these items.<sup>41</sup> The images are concise and are highly emphasized on the importance of measurement in order to fit the object perfectly. According to Richard Horton's publication "Card Stock Enclosures For Small Books," "enclosures are easy to make; student workers or trainees can make either without difficulty in

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<sup>40</sup> Richard Horton, "Card Stock Enclosures For Small Books," in *Preservation of Library & Archival Materials: A Manual*, third edition, ed. Sherelyn Ogden, 277-283 (Andover, MA: Northeastern Document Conservation Center, 1999), 279.

<sup>41</sup> Horton, 281.

about fifteen minutes.”<sup>42</sup> Horton’s level of optimism shreds light on how archives and special collections need constant up keep and it is getting harder to find individuals who can do it.

Wright concluded his tour of the library’s manuscript collection with the golden rule of archives: never divide a collection. When the library receives a collection it is catalogued based on authorship and should remain as such. It is important for an archive to maintain the condition of a collection so that it may serve as a valuable resource. Since the library was established to serve the public, it is limited when acquiring manuscripts. An example of this limitation took place when a local resident presented the library with a collection of 19<sup>th</sup> century French literature. Wright successfully defended his decision based on grounds that the collection did not fit into the category of New York State history. If the library accepted all donations it would result in reversing the library’s progress made after combining with the Fenimore Art Museum.

The NYSHA research library was not given it’s own identity from the Fenimore Art Museum until 1969 when the Cooperstown Graduate Program was founded. Students required access to a variety of academic sources and the Historical Association partnered with the Museum to deliberate what items should be housed.<sup>43</sup> At the time of construction, the NYSHA and the art museum were primarily focused on collecting items that represented American folk art. The term folk was a new classification in art history when the museum was founded at Cooperstown, NY in 1944. The term was used for defining decorative, such as furniture, ceramics, silver, or textiles.<sup>44</sup> Little material had been published on American folk art; therefore, the library could not provide sources that discussed the art presented by the museum.

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<sup>42</sup> Horton, 277.

<sup>43</sup> Roger Butterfield, Alice Winchester, Carl Carmer and Bruce R. Buckley, “The New York State Historical Association Library,” *New York History*, vol. 51, no. 2 (1970): 186.

<sup>44</sup> Butterfield, Winchester, Carmer, Buckley, 193.

Lacking in material was an issue for the Association's library because its primary function, aside from assisting graduate students, was to aid the curatorial staff in the field of Fine Arts.<sup>45</sup> The library began collecting series of exhibition catalogues and monographs that focused on American folk art.<sup>46</sup> Items acquired were not necessarily limited to rare books, which meant there was still room to expand the collection. Interest in American art grew into an appreciation for cultures within NYS regions. The library began acquiring items such as account books, trade practices, and farm records that surround Cooperstown, NY.<sup>47</sup> The research library continued to acquire sources pertaining to central New York State until drastic changes were required to be made in 1995.

The Fenimore Art Museum was given a generous donation by Eugene and Clare Thaw in 1995.<sup>48</sup> It was an impressively large collection of American Indian Art and required an addition to be built onto the back of the museum to house it. The collection contains over 850 objects from North American Indian cultures such as: Northwest Coast, Woodlands, Plains, Southwest, Arctic, California, and Great Basin regions.<sup>49</sup> The contents are not connected to NYSHA's mission to house items that coincide with the history of New York State. However, the collection was a major gift and the museum was required to expand on its programming to feature American Indian Art by publishing new research, new touring exhibitions, and collaborations with American Indian specialists.<sup>50</sup> The collection also had an immense effect on the research library and it took over ten years to restructure.

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<sup>45</sup> Butterfield, Winchester, Carmer, Buckley, 195.

<sup>46</sup> Butterfield, Winchester, Carmer, Buckley, 196.

<sup>47</sup> Butterfield, Winchester, Carmer, Buckley, 197.

<sup>48</sup> *Fenimore Art Museum*, accessed May 7, 2013, [http://www.fenimoreartmuseum.org/fenimore/exhibitions/eugene\\_and\\_clare\\_thaw\\_collection\\_of\\_indian\\_art\\_anniversary](http://www.fenimoreartmuseum.org/fenimore/exhibitions/eugene_and_clare_thaw_collection_of_indian_art_anniversary).

<sup>49</sup> *Fenimore Art Museum*.

<sup>50</sup> *Fenimore Art Museum*.

Wright was part of the library staff in 1995 and explained how the addition of the Thaw Collection seriously altered the materials housed in the research library. While an underground tunnel in fact connects the research library and Fenimore Art Museum, the library was required to feature information regarding the history of American Indians. Since the library's mission as an institute is to serve the NYSHA and the Thaw Collection was officially donated to the NYSHA, the library had to adapt. According to Wright, the library staff approached by establishing the Steiner Collection of glass plates that feature early twentieth century Native American basketry. The librarians seemed to stick to their intentions of not dividing a collection and decided to simply add items to the library. It was suggested that prior to receiving the Thaw Collection in 1995, there were few records that indicate a strong Native American presence in the history of Cooperstown, NY or any neighboring New York State counties.

In July of 1995 The New York State Historical Association released its quarterly publication of *New York History*. One of the articles featured titled "The Great Change Begins: Settling the Forest of Central New York" is a comprehensive study of how Native Americans fit into the history of the area surrounding Cooperstown was settled.<sup>51</sup> Historian Alan Taylor, a major contributor to the history of Cooperstown, wrote the article. Taylor's essay examines how settlers expanded into New York State with a special focus on the environmental process surrounding Otsego County.<sup>52</sup> He begins with a disclaimer that addresses how Native Americans lost land and independence through American colonization between 1780 and 1820.<sup>53</sup> Taylor incorporates quotes from Susan Fenimore Cooper regarding her reaction to settlers taking Indian

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<sup>51</sup> Alan Taylor, "The Great Change Begins: Settling in the Forest of Central New York," *New York History: Quarterly Journal of the New York State Historical Association*, vol. 76, no. 3 (1995): 265.

<sup>52</sup> Taylor, 269.

<sup>53</sup> Taylor, 265.

land and how it affected Otsego County.<sup>54</sup> The remainder of Taylor's article discusses the various environmental effects animals and farming had on Cooperstown in great depth.

Taylor's article is an example of how the NYSHA had to adjust to the donation of the Thaw Collection. Seeing how the article was published in the same institution in 1995, it can be assumed that it was no coincidence that Taylor included issues pertaining to Native Americans. He also incorporated a primary source that allowed a new connection to be fostered between a founder of Cooperstown and Native Americans in his article. It is a small reference in comparison to the remainder of Taylor's article and makes no argument about their rightful place among American Folk art in the Fenimore Art Museum. Regardless if tribes were in fact found in Cooperstown, Taylor's article eludes to the idea that he was being pressured to push for Native inclusion from the scholarly side.

Some of the changes made in both the Potsdam Public Museum and NYSHA Research Library are visible to the public. Due to the Thaw Collection requiring an addition be built onto the Fenimore Art Museum, all of the American Indian objects are exhibited together in the back of the museum. The space features aspects of a modern art museum such as high ceilings, low lighting, and glass doors to separate the two clashing motifs within. Going upstairs into the original building shifts from an art museum into a cohesive historical representation of American folk art and its contributors. Since the museum was once a home, the genre paintings hung feel natural in the interior space as opposed to the harsh contrast of the American Indian wing. In the case of the Potsdam Museum, the director took note of genealogy becoming a national trend and made sure to expand the archives collection of family photos. Their website was also restructured to better fit the goals of the museum a list of collections and posts that provides information for upcoming events relevant to Potsdam history.

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<sup>54</sup> Taylor, 266.

In conclusion, with information becoming more easily accessible through electronic databases it is a reasonable concern that libraries will become extinct all together. This is not the case for New York State archives. NYSHA Research Library is a privately funded organization; however, the internal decisions made are based on external factors. Potsdam Public Museum is also a non-profit organization, but it has more freedom because it does not house private collections. Based on research conducted in both a private and public archives housed within museums, the world of conserving printed matter may not be flourishing but it is absolutely alive and well.



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