

## EVALUATING THE COLLECTION FOR POSSIBLE DEACCESSION

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### **Introduction**

As with nearly all museums, the collection of the Vermont Historical Society faces some dilemmas. The Society's collection policy has evolved over time, meaning that some accessioned objects no longer fit with the mission. The collection has also outgrown the Society's storage capacity, meaning that as further additions are made to the collection, preservation concerns will need to become secondary to spatial concerns, potentially causing damage to the objects. In order to be in a position to continue accepting objects and store the collection in a safe manner, the collection needs to be reduced by approximately [30]%.

In order to achieve this reduction without sacrificing the integrity of the collection, I have developed the following rubric for evaluating objects. The goal of this rubric is not only to determine which objects do not belong within the Society's collection under its current mission, but also to create a standardized system for evaluating potential donations and later accession/deaccession projects.

## Grading System

The result of applying this rubric to each object will be the assignment of a letter grade, based on the American educational grading system. The letter grades can be used to quickly and easily compare objects both already within the collection and under consideration for adding to the collection. The grading system is based on that used at The Indianapolis Museum of Art.<sup>1</sup> The system is standardized in such a way that the determined letter grade of the object will not change over time unless the Society's mission changes or there is a catastrophic change in the market, meaning it can continue to be used for later evaluations.

Objects receiving a letter grade of C or lower will automatically be presented to the Curator as possible deaccessions. The Curator will then make the decision whether to advance the deaccession process of each object. Objects with letter grades of A or B will only be presented to the Curator as part of groups of duplicates.

Note: while the letter grades are assigned on a 100-point scale, it is theoretically possible for an exceptional object to receive a total of 115 points.

### *Letter Grades and Explanations*

#### **A:** 90-100 points

These objects should be kept without question. Objects that receive this grade will largely be objects with known Vermont histories that tell compelling stories and are in exhibitable condition.

#### **B:** 80-90 points

These objects will most likely be kept. Objects that receive this grade will largely be objects with known Vermont histories that tell compelling stories and are not in exhibitable condition or objects with Vermont histories that do not contribute to the telling of a story that are in exhibitable condition.

#### **C:** 70-80 points

These objects are in the lowest tier of those to be kept, or the highest tier of those to be deaccessioned. This grade will likely represent the hardest decisions during the initial push but will be useful for future waves of deaccessioning and for comparison with potential incoming accessions.

#### **D:** 60-70 points

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<sup>1</sup> Lyndon French, "Clean House to Survive? Museums Confront Their Crowded Basements," *New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/03/10/arts/museum-art-quiz.html>, published 12 Mar. 2019, accessed 4 Dec. 2019.

These objects will most likely be deaccessioned. Objects receiving this grade will either be common objects with Vermont provenances that do not contribute to stories and are in poor condition, or objects with possible Vermont provenances that are in poor condition.

**F: Below 60 points**

These objects should be deaccessioned. Objects receiving this grade will largely be objects outside of our mission or objects that have been destroyed.

**Assigning Points**

Objects receive or lose points based on whether it has a Vermont history, its condition, its rarity, and other conditions as they become important to the Society. Because an object's association with Vermont is the most important factor determining its place within the collection, it is weighted the highest. Since the collection is largely used for educational purposes through exhibition rather than individual examination and research, condition metrics within this rubric are tied primarily to exhibitability.

Whether an object is duplicated within the collection does not affect its letter grade. Instead, duplicate objects will be grouped together for comparison in a process detailed further on.

*Part One: Vermont History*

If an object has a verified, significant Vermont history, give it **90 points**.

- “Significant” in this context means associated with a famous Vermonter, famous Vermont event, significant historical event, Vermont “first,” or exceptionally rare in a Vermont context
- “Verified” includes oral histories that are not disproven by available records or other research

If an object has a verified Vermont history with a story attached to it or can enhance the telling of a story, give it **80 points**.

- This could include objects used by a known person during a known event or significant period; objects used/owned in Vermont during a particularly significant time (i.e. American Civil War), objects that illustrate ideologies or movements within Vermont; objects with a particularly engaging or interesting appearance or function

If an object has a verified Vermont history and does not contribute to the telling of a story, give it **70 points**.

- This could include objects owned by a known person about whom little can be found; objects that changed little over time and are thus almost undatable; objects that are standard and non-rare examples of unengaging objects

If an object has a possible, but unconfirmed, Vermont history, give it **60 points**.

- This could include objects owned by the donor's "great-grandmother" who could not be identified by may have been a Vermonter; objects donated by Vermonters that likely descended in the family within Vermont but without recorded provenance prior to donation
- This only includes objects with oral histories tying the object to Vermont if attempts to prove the history have led to it seeming more false than true

If an object has no Vermont history, or the oral history indicating a Vermont provenance has been disproven, give it **0 points**.

- This includes objects donated by Vermonters with no provenance prior to donation that likely descended in the family outside of Vermont; objects purchased at antique stores with no obvious or claimed ties to Vermont

### *Part 2: Condition*

If an object is in good, exhibitable condition, give it **10 points**.

- An object is in good, exhibitable condition if it does not need any conservation to be exhibited, researched, handled, stored, or loaned. In this case, conservation does not include light cleaning of the type that can be done in-house (i.e. dusting, vacuuming) or standard exhibition prep (i.e. lacquering).
- Archaeological objects that have been cleaned or otherwise treated are considered in good condition once no more work is needed from a preservation standpoint.

If an object is in fair but exhibitable condition, give it **5 points**.

- An object is in fair, but exhibitable condition if it is stable and mountable, but putting it on exhibition may lower perceptions of the collection (i.e. crushed shoe, stained and cracked plate, extensively foxed print). These objects do not need conservation from a preservation standpoint but could use conservation from a display standpoint. The conservation of these objects is of the type that can largely be done in-house.
- This does not include archaeological objects, unless they need work for the sake of the case and surrounding objects (i.e. dirt removal).

If an object needs conservation, **subtract 10 points**.

- An object needs conservation if it cannot be exhibited in its current state and without work from an outside conservator. This includes objects that need conservation for storage purposes or cannot be stored with other objects prior to treatment.
- This includes archaeological objects that need treatment, such as untreated iron.

If an object is destroyed, **subtract 20 points**.

- An object is considered destroyed if it cannot be exhibited, researched, or handled without causing significant further damage, and conservation would not restore the object's education value (i.e. shattered prints, shattered silks)

### *Part 3: Other Considerations*

If the object is rare, give it **5 points**.

- An object is considered rare if comparable objects cannot easily be obtained on the open market without considerable cost and effort. Contributing factors to an object's rarity can include association with a famous individual or event, materials, object type, age, and craftsmanship.

If an object contributes to telling the stories of a disenfranchised or underrepresented group, give it **20 points**.

- Disenfranchised groups are any group that has not historically held widespread power either internationally, nationally, or at the state level. This can include groups such as women, people of color, immigrants, countercultures, non-dominant religions, and lower economic classes.
- Underrepresented groups are any group for whom the museum collection has few associated objects. These do not necessarily also have to be disenfranchised groups.

### **Determining and Processing Duplicate Items**

An Object is considered duplicated within the collection for several reasons: it is identical in all senses to another object; it tells the same story in the same way as another object; it does not benefit from being part of a larger collection of like items. Exception to this can arise as the Museum pushes to create collections of like items, such as beer bottles or political signs.

Examples of duplicated objects include

- Two matching medicine bottles with the same provenance
- Traveling trunks from the same time period whose original owners represent similar demographics
- Unmarked stoneware crocks of similar forms with no specific stories attached to the them
- Women's day dresses from the 1950s that are not attached to specific stories or events
- Teacups that are similar in appearance, date, and provenance, but are not part of the same set

Whether the object is duplicated within the collection does not affect its letter grade; instead, objects that are determined or suspected to be duplicates of each other should be grouped together and presented in tandem. This does mean that some objects may be presented multiple times as duplicates are discovered. (For example, an object with a C grade was not deaccessioned but has since been found to be a duplicate.)

When choosing how many duplicates of an object should be retained, attention should be given to rotation needs for permanent exhibits. Textile and paper objects will need a minimum of three options for rotation; wood objects and paintings will need a minimum of two options for rotation; glass and ceramics do not need rotation options.

## **Recording the Grade**

An object's letter grade will be recorded in PastPerfect on the Custom screen view in the "Eval. Score" field. The field contains an Authority File for the sake of standardization. To enter a score, right click within the field and select the letter grade from the list.

If an object with a grade of C or lower is retained, a short note explaining why (along with the date) should be added to the Notes field on the Notes & Legal view in case the object comes up for deaccession in the future.

## **Processing Low-Graded Objects**

If an object is determined to have a grade of D or F, it should be removed from its place in permanent storage and placed in temporary storage to await assessment for deaccession. If an object is determined to have a C grade, it should remain in place, but be marked with a shelf card to be easily removed to temporary storage for the assessment process.

A list of objects with grades of C or lower should be presented to the Curator no less than [2 weeks] prior to the next Collections Committee meeting. At that time, all the proposed objects should be removed from their place in permanent storage (if possible) and be made easily accessible for analysis by the Curator. If the Curator determines that an object will not be presented to the Committee at large, it should then return to permanent storage.

If an object has been analyzed recently or multiple times, as in the case in the newly discovered duplicates, the object may be evaluated for deaccession without being moved into temporary storage.