



# Reparative Description

## How to Promote Equity and Inclusion in our Historical Collections

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**Juls Sundberg, MSLIS**

Metadata Librarian, Vermont Historical Society

LLHSM Annual Conference, May 19, 2023

# Introduction



**Juls Sundberg**  
(they/them)

## **Metadata Librarian at VHS**

Past work experience: Cataloger at a public high school, Archivist for a newspaper, Local History Librarian/Cataloger at a public library

## **Education**

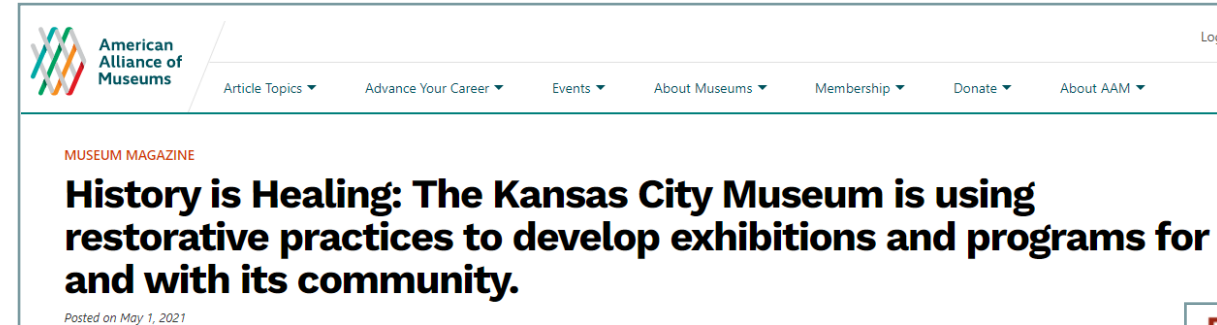
B.A. in Theatre and History

University of Vermont

Master's Degree in Information and Library Science

Syracuse University School of Information

# What is reparative description?



American Alliance of Museums

Article Topics ▾ Advance Your Career ▾ Events ▾ About Museums ▾ Membership ▾ Donate ▾ About AAM ▾

MUSEUM MAGAZINE

## History is Healing: The Kansas City Museum is using restorative practices to develop exhibitions and programs for and with its community.

Posted on May 1, 2021



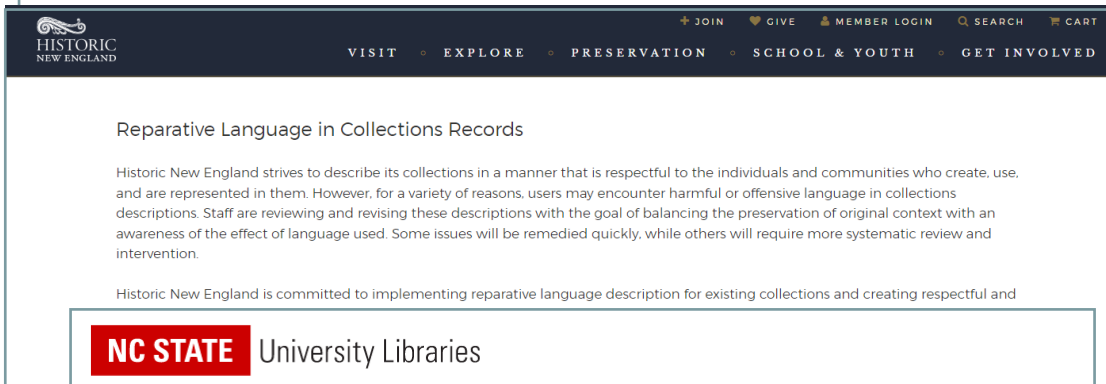
Libraries

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## Reparative Description at Special Collections



HISTORIC NEW ENGLAND

JOIN GIVE MEMBER LOGIN SEARCH CART

VISIT EXPLORE PRESERVATION SCHOOL & YOUTH GET INVOLVED

### Reparative Language in Collections Records

Historic New England strives to describe its collections in a manner that is respectful to the individuals and communities who create, use, and are represented in them. However, for a variety of reasons, users may encounter harmful or offensive language in collections descriptions. Staff are reviewing and revising these descriptions with the goal of balancing the preservation of original context with an awareness of the effect of language used. Some issues will be remedied quickly, while others will require more systematic review and intervention.

Historic New England is committed to implementing reparative language description for existing collections and creating respectful and



RARE BOOK SCHOOL

COURSES ADMISSIONS & AV

HOME > PROGRAMS > REPARATIVE DESCRIPTION IN ACTION WORKSHOP

### Reparative Description in Action Workshop

Date: 13 March 2023  
Time: 2:00 p.m. ET  
Location: Zoom  
Presented by: The Andrew W. Mellon Fellowship for Diversity, Inclusion & Cultural Heritage at Rare Book School



NC STATE University Libraries

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Home / Special Collections Research Center (SCRC) / About Reparative Archival Description

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## About Reparative Archival Description

# Reparative Description

College of Charleston Archival Repositories

## What is description?

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Recording the attributes of an item (such as title, author, date, publisher, contents, etc.) so a user can **find** and **identify** an item.

## How do historical societies use description?

- Catalog records
- Exhibit labels
- Articles
- Programming
- & More



# What is reparative description?

## National Archives

“The process of assessing and **contextualizing** or **updating** harmful descriptions and **establishing** standards and policies to guide staff in future description work.”

[Source](#)

## Society of American Archivists

“**Remediation of practices or data** that exclude, silence, harm, or mischaracterize marginalized people in the data created or used by archivists to identify or characterize archival resources.”

[Source](#)

## Yale University Library

“Reparative archival description aims to **remediate** or **contextualize** potentially outdated or harmful language used in archival description and to **create archival description that is accurate, inclusive, and community-centered.**”

[Source](#)



“

“When we find harmful language that was created by a library employee, we update it. When we identify harmful language by the original creator, we provide additional context.”

**NC State University Library**

# How can you practice reparative description?

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**Develop a Harmful Content Statement**

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**Establish and revise cataloging policies that include updated best practices**

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**Apply revised policies to past and ongoing description**

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**Engage with your community and fellow historical societies**

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**Practice cultural humility**





# Harmful Content Statements

**Harmful content statement:** A statement acknowledging that language or imagery in materials and descriptions may be harmful, offensive, or promote bigotry.



Middlebury

## Statement on language in archival and library catalogs

Middlebury Special Collections works to describe materials in a way that is respectful to the communities we serve. We recognize that some of our catalog records and finding aids—created years or decades ago—may contain offensive or harmful language. Such language represents biases that have long contributed to the silencing of underrepresented and marginalized voices, and may require updating.

Library

[Source](#)



# Harmful Content Statements

[List of Statements on Bias in Library and Archives Description](#)

[Recollection Wisconsin: Content Statement Toolkit](#)

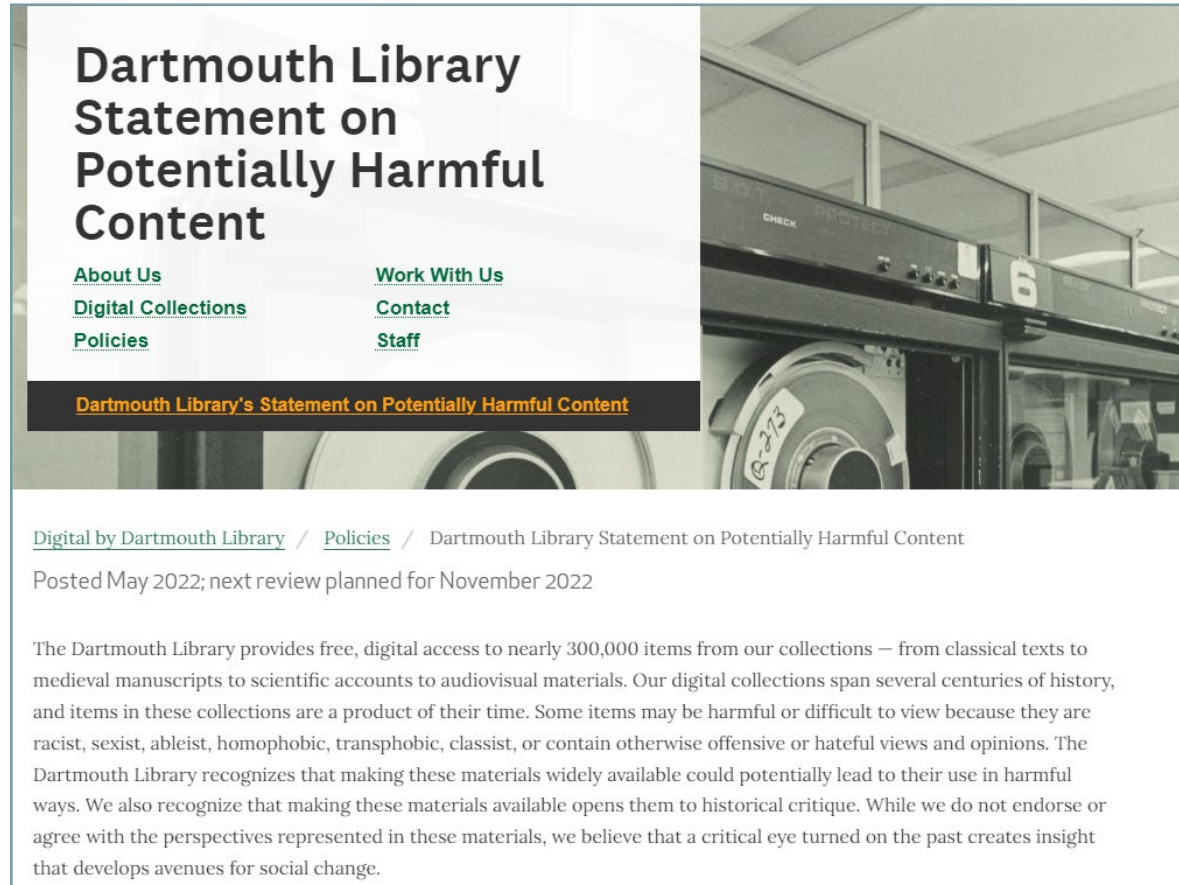
CURATING THE BLACK WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE DIGITAL COLLECTION

**Materials in this collection and the language that describes them may be harmful.**

Libraries and archives collect materials from different cultures and time periods to preserve and make available the historical record. As a result, library materials, such as those presented here, may reflect racist and misogynoir views that may be harmful and difficult to view.

The content featured in this collection explores linkages between Black women's suffrage and other social causes of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (anti-slavery, anti-lynching, education reform and civil rights) as well as racism within the Suffrage Movement. These materials are presented here to recognize and celebrate the important contributions of Black women and their resiliency in the face of ongoing racism and exclusion.

[Source](#)

A screenshot of the Dartmouth Library's website page titled "Dartmouth Library Statement on Potentially Harmful Content". The page features a header with the title and navigation links for "About Us", "Digital Collections", "Policies", "Work With Us", "Contact", and "Staff". Below the header is a dark banner with the title "Dartmouth Library's Statement on Potentially Harmful Content". The main content area includes a breadcrumb trail: "Digital by Dartmouth Library / Policies / Dartmouth Library Statement on Potentially Harmful Content", a post date "Posted May 2022; next review planned for November 2022", and a paragraph explaining the library's commitment to providing digital access to its collections while acknowledging that some items may be harmful or difficult to view due to their historical context. The background of the page shows a library interior with bookshelves and a circular reading area.

**Dartmouth Library Statement on Potentially Harmful Content**

[About Us](#) [Work With Us](#)  
[Digital Collections](#) [Contact](#)  
[Policies](#) [Staff](#)

**Dartmouth Library's Statement on Potentially Harmful Content**

[Digital by Dartmouth Library](#) / [Policies](#) / Dartmouth Library Statement on Potentially Harmful Content

Posted May 2022; next review planned for November 2022

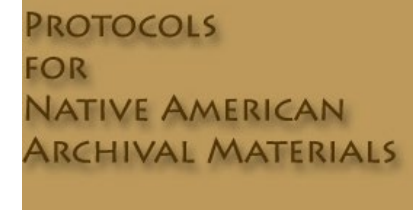
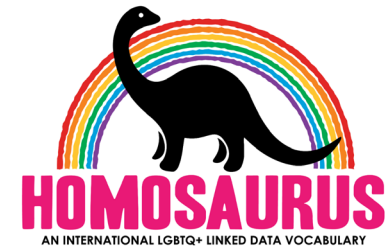
The Dartmouth Library provides free, digital access to nearly 300,000 items from our collections – from classical texts to medieval manuscripts to scientific accounts to audiovisual materials. Our digital collections span several centuries of history, and items in these collections are a product of their time. Some items may be harmful or difficult to view because they are racist, sexist, ableist, homophobic, transphobic, classist, or contain otherwise offensive or hateful views and opinions. The Dartmouth Library recognizes that making these materials widely available could potentially lead to their use in harmful ways. We also recognize that making these materials available opens them to historical critique. While we do not endorse or agree with the perspectives represented in these materials, we believe that a critical eye turned on the past creates insight that develops avenues for social change.

[Source](#)

# Guidance for cataloging practices

- [Anti-Racist Description Resources](#)
- [Anti-Racist Digital Library Glossary](#)
- [Understanding Racism Glossary](#)
- [Protocols for Native American Archival Materials](#)
- [Glossary of Disability Terminology](#)
- [Disability Language Style Guide](#)
- [Guidelines for Writing about People with Disabilities](#)
- [Chronic Poverty Research Center Glossary](#)
- [The Women's Thesaurus](#)
- [Homosaurus](#)
- [Metadata Best Practices for Trans and Gender-Diverse Resources](#)
- [GLBT Controlled Vocabularies and Classification Schemes](#)
- [Digital Transgender Archive: Global Terms](#)
- [Digital Transgender Archive: Glossary](#)
- [Marshall Project – What words we use](#)

Anti-racism Digital Library



Institute on gender  
equality and women's  
history

# Example



## Describing Slavery Records

- » Use “enslaved” or “captive” [person/woman/man/child/laborer] rather than “slave” when describing people held in bondage.<sup>43</sup> Use “enslaver” to describe people who held others in bondage.<sup>44</sup>
- » Avoid lumping the experiences of all people of African origins or descent in the early Americas together. Use “free [person|man|woman] of color” (often abbreviated as “f.p.c,” “f.m.c,” or “f.w.c” on documents), “freed[person|man|woman],” or another term to describe those who were not enslaved during a period when slavery existed in that society. Note that terminology differs depending on geographic location or language, and conduct research to avoid using anachronistic or geographically or linguistically inaccurate terms.<sup>45</sup>
- » If you have item-level description for a deed of purchase for an enslaved person and the seller and purchaser’s names are included, include the name of the person being sold. Humanize these documents from all sides -- not just from the side of the creator.
- » Use available information to name enslaved people; in most cases, this information will be incomplete. This means that describers may have to push past their discomfort in creating what the profession views as incomplete records or description.<sup>46</sup> Whenever possible, record names by which enslaved or formerly enslaved people identified as the primary part of the name rather than using an enslaver’s name as the primary entry. Enslavers’ names may be included as supplemental information to support the identification of enslaved individuals but should not supplant the names of enslaved people, even when only their first names are known.<sup>47</sup>

# Example

Action to take:  
Change the subject  
heading “Slaves” to  
“Enslaved people”

The screenshot shows a library catalog record for a speech by Frederick Enoch Woodbridge. The record includes fields for Author, Title, Published, Physical Description, and Subject Term. The Subject Term field contains 'Slavery--United States--Speeches in Congress.' and 'Slaves--Emancipation--United States.', which is the target for the edit.

**Start**   **Search** ▾   **Lists** ▾   **Help**

The extinction of slavery : speech of Hon. F. E. Woodbridge...

← Return to Search

**Detail** Actions ▾

**Author:** Woodbridge, Frederick Enoch, 1818-1888.

**Title:** The extinction of slavery : speech of Hon. F. E. Woodbridge, of Vermont, in the House of Representatives, January 12, 1865, upon the motion to reconsider the vote by which the House, on the 15th of June last, rejected a joint resolution (S. no. 16) submitting to the legislatures of the several states a proposition to amend the Constitution of the United States, abolishing slavery.

**Published:** [Washington] : [publisher not identified], [1865]

**Physical Description:** 7 pages ; 22 cm.

**Subject Term:** Slavery--United States--Speeches in Congress.  
Slaves--Emancipation--United States.

**Items**

	Call Number	Collection Type	Location	Copy
1.	<input type="checkbox"/> Speeches in Cong. Woodbridge, F.	Pamphlet	Pamphlet Drawer	1



# Example

Action to take: In the summary, change “Slave” to “Enslaved people”

## Letters of Abel B. Conant, M.D., 1860–1864.

[← Return to Search](#)

 Detail

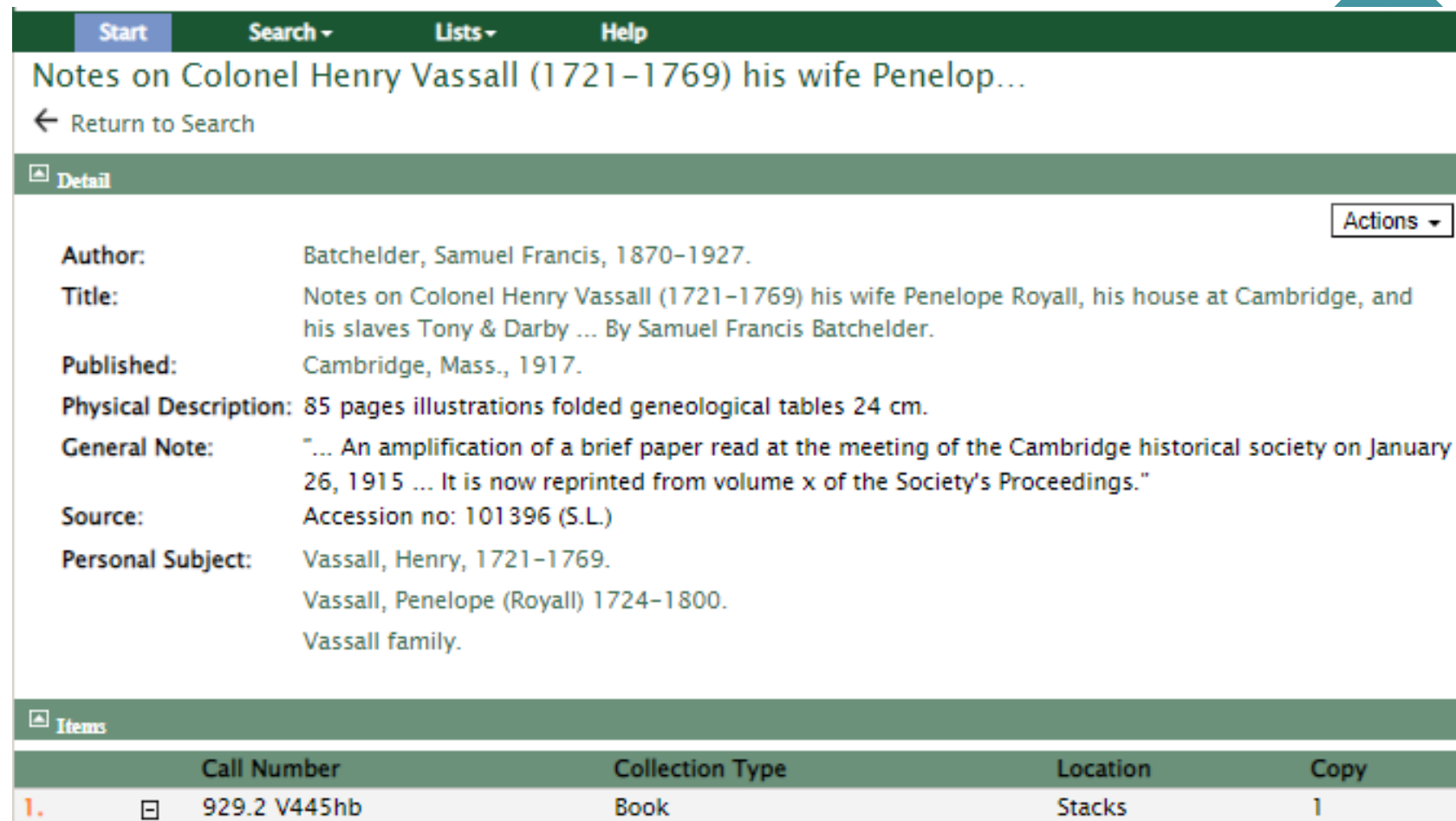
Actions ▾

<b>Author:</b>	Conant, Abel Blood, 1837–1864.
<b>Title:</b>	Letters of Abel B. Conant, M.D., 1860–1864.
<b>Physical Description:</b>	1 volume.
<b>Location of Originals:</b>	Originals in possession of David Conant, Charleston, N.H.
<b>Biographical or Historical Data:</b>	Abel B. Conant, of Thetford, Vermont, was born on 5 January 1837 in Lyme, New Hampshire, the son of Jonathan and Clarissa (Dimick) Conant. He studied at the Thetford Academy and then attended lectures at the University of Vermont in 1860. He moved to New York City later in 1860 to study medicine with his brother, Dr. David S. Conant. As well, he studied at Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons from which he graduated in March, 1862. He then entered into the service as a contract surgeon on 4 May 1862. He was then appointed assistant surgeon of the 7th Kentucky Infantry Regiment (originally the 3rd Kentucky Regiment) in August, 1862 and served with that regiment until 24 September 1864, having been promoted to surgeon on 10 June 1864. He returned to New York City, where he died of diphtheria on 22 December 1864. He is buried in Greenwood Cemetery, Brooklyn, New York.
<b>Summary:</b>	Transcription of the letters of Abel Blood Conant from April 20, 1860 to November 22, 1864, addressed to members of his family, primarily in Lyme, New Hampshire and Thetford, Vermont. The bulk of the letters were written while Conant was an assistant surgeon in the 7th Kentucky Infantry Regiment. Conant served in Kentucky, Tennessee, Mississippi, Arkansas, and Louisiana, and the letters contain information on daily life in camp, treatment of the sick and organization of the hospitals, and accounts of dealing with former <b>slaves</b> and Confederate sympathizers. The last section contains a memoir written by Dr. Abel B. Conant shortly before his death on December 22, 1864 titled “Three Year’s Experience in the Army, 1862–3–4.” In the front of the typescript are found genealogical information, and information on the provenance of the letters and process of transcription

# Example

Action to take: Add a harmful content statement to the record.

Action to take: Add subject headings “enslavers” and “enslaved people”.

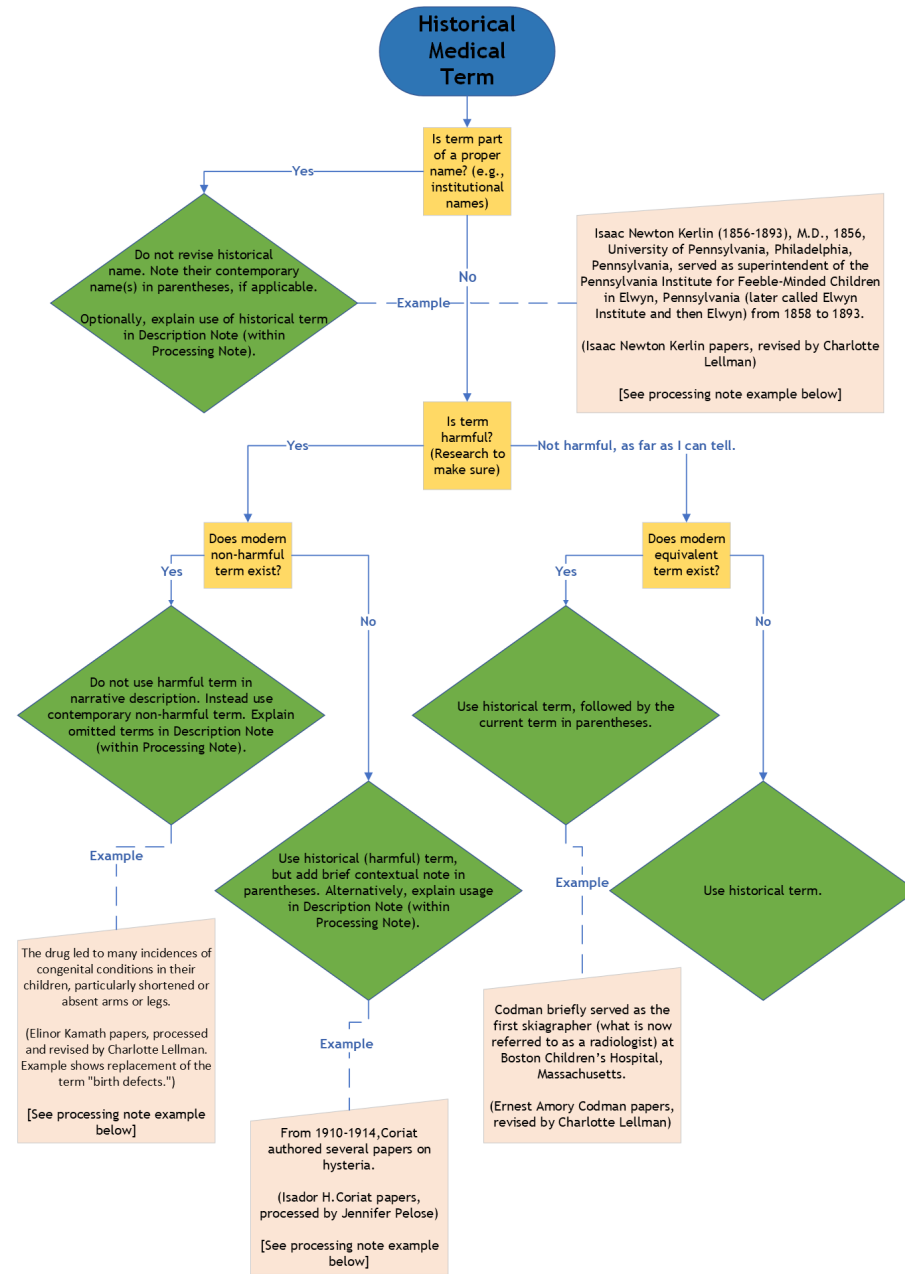


The screenshot shows a library catalog record for a book. The record is titled "Notes on Colonel Henry Vassall (1721-1769) his wife Penelop...". The record includes a "Detail" section with the following information:

- Author:** Batchelder, Samuel Francis, 1870-1927.
- Title:** Notes on Colonel Henry Vassall (1721-1769) his wife Penelope Royall, his house at Cambridge, and his slaves Tony & Darby ... By Samuel Francis Batchelder.
- Published:** Cambridge, Mass., 1917.
- Physical Description:** 85 pages illustrations folded geneological tables 24 cm.
- General Note:** "... An amplification of a brief paper read at the meeting of the Cambridge historical society on January 26, 1915 ... It is now reprinted from volume x of the Society's Proceedings."
- Source:** Accession no: 101396 (S.L.)
- Personal Subject:** Vassall, Henry, 1721-1769.  
Vassall, Penelope (Royall) 1724-1800.  
Vassall family.

Below the detail section is an "Items" table with the following data:

	Call Number	Collection Type	Location	Copy
1.	929.2 V445hb	Book	Stacks	1





### **Processing Note Example:**

It is the Center's standard descriptive practice to include historical medical terminology along with any equivalent contemporary terms in archival description of collections in order to support researcher discovery. However, given the [harmful, racist, etc] nature of the term "[XXXX]", the archivist has chosen to omit this term from the archival description in favor of the contemporary preferred term "XXXX" (except in cases of proper names). Please note that the term "[XXXX]" will appear in creator-supplied folder titles transcribed in this finding aid and in the papers themselves to refer to [list parallel terms]. Please contact [chm@hms.harvard.edu](mailto:chm@hms.harvard.edu) with any questions or concerns.

# Cultural humility

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# **Check in**

**How can your organization implement reparative  
description practices?**



# Engage and reflect

- This work can be scaled to your capacity and it's okay to start small.
- Don't discount the importance of seemingly small changes.
- Keep track of the work you do and share it – you are not alone in this!
- Try to keep judgment of yourself and others out of it. People operate with the information they have at the time and guidance will continue to change.
- Doing this work is worth the possible discomfort of addressing or engaging with topics you may find uncomfortable.
- You can't describe what you don't have, and engaging with reparative description practices will help you identify gaps or poor representation in your collection.





“

In his 1970 address to the Society of American Archivists annual conference, which was later published as, *Secrecy, Archives, and the Public Interest*, Howard Zinn cautioned against the prioritization of professionalism and neutrality by archivists. He said, and I quote, “The archivist, even more than the historian and the political scientist, tends to be scrupulous about his neutrality, and to see his job as a technical job, free from the nasty world of political interest: a job of collecting, sorting, preserving, making available, the records of the society. But I will stick by what I have said about other scholars; and argue that the archivist, in subtle ways, tends to perpetuate the political and economic status quo simply by going about his ordinary business. His supposed neutrality is, in other words, a fake. If so, the rebellion of the archivist against his normal role is not, as so many scholars fear, the politicizing of a neutral craft, but the humanizing of an inevitably political craft.”

**Bergis Jules quoting Howard Zinn in Jules’ 2016 Keynote  
“Confronting Our Failure of Care Around the Legacies of  
Marginalized People in the Archives”** [Source](#)

# Thank you!

Resource List



Use your phone camera to scan

Contact me!

[juls.sundberg@vermonthistory.org](mailto:juls.sundberg@vermonthistory.org)