

THE MUSEUM COLLECTION OF THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

A great wealth of material culture (such as oil paintings, sculptures, American Indian artifacts, historic documents, and natural history specimens) is presently in the custody of the national parks. Almost every one of our parks has a museum collection for which it is responsible. There is abundant legislative background (Antiquities Act, Management of Museum Properties Act, etc.) which provide the National Park Service with the authority and responsibility for safeguarding this historical resource.

There is also a long history of museum development in the National Park Service. Museums in national parks existed even before the National Park Service was established in 1916. As a result of this long history of museum development there are now over 250 museums occupying 53 acres of floor space. This is one of the largest museum facilities in the United States.

These 250 museums now hold more than 4,000,000 museum objects. Only about 1/3 of these artifacts are catalogued. All of them should be. The estimated dollar value of this resource is currently set at \$150,000,000. Since most of the objects are truly irreplaceable and since many of the objects have intangible values far in excess of their market value, it is quite impossible to assess a true dollar value on the entire collection. The \$150,000,000 estimate is probably a very conservative value.

When each of these objects was accepted into the museum of a national park, that park also accepted the eternal responsibility for their continuous care. It is also true that time and environmental factors tend to destroy all artifacts and it is, therefore, necessary to provide continuous maintenance (professionally called preservation treatment) on a cyclical and continuous basis. This is the only way to save these historic properties for future generations.

The five-year old Division of Museum Services at Harpers Ferry Center has established a nucleus for a professionally acceptable conservation laboratory. For the first time this gives the National Park Service the ability to give professional treatment to its museum artifacts. Although the Division now handles approximately five to six thousand museum specimens a year, that rate of production is not enough. As new parks are added to the system, hundreds of thousands of new artifacts have also been added. In order to catch up to the tremendous backlog of specimens needing treatment and to keep pace with the additional properties coming into National Park Service possession, a greatly enlarged emphasis must be placed on this resource preservation program. Like all programs, this one desperately needs money and manpower; but unlike most, if this program is not undertaken, serious resource loss will occur.

Even with National Park Service commitment to carrying out the conservation program on historic properties, the actual fulfillment of this task will not be easily achieved. Only a handful of educational institutions in the United States turn out trained people in the conservation sciences. Many of the skills required for this sort of work cannot be developed in an academic atmosphere. Some conservation skills can only be acquired through a long apprenticeship-type training program. Much of the work of the conservator is easily compared to that of an artist or a craftsman, requiring great skills which are not learned from textbooks. The National Park Service must embark now on a strong apprentice program to the few professional conservators now employed by the Park Service.

In addition we must direct a great deal more of our resources toward adequately sensitizing and training the park managers who have the ultimate responsibility for the welfare of the historic properties in their custody. The Division of Museum Services, working with the Division of Training, conducts curatorial training sessions at Mather Training Center, in the conservation labs, and in the future, intends to provide training in regional situations or at parks. We need desperately to train lower-graded field employees in the intricacies of proper curatorial maintenance.

Another point that must be made is the dire need for adequate property accountability for this valuable resource belonging to the National Park Service. The present method of accountability for the valuable museum specimens in the custody of the National Park Service is found solely in the Form 10-254, Museum Catalogue Card. Since the cumulative value of all the National Park Service museum properties approaches \$150,000,000, we are not meeting our responsibilities if we do not begin to control these properties with more fiscal responsibility.

It is strongly recommended that the completion of the cataloguing be accomplished forthwith and a permanent record be maintained at the central office (WASO or Region) of all properties having an estimated value of over \$50 or \$100. In addition, properties of a particularly sensitive nature (e.g., old coins, Civil War collectables, and art prints), but perhaps worth less than \$50 should also be accountable to a central office. We would further recommend that these properties be inventoried annually and the Superintendent be required to certify as to their presence or loss. This would put these valuable properties on the same par with other forms of accountable property such as typewriters, cameras, and cars.

The number of conservators available to do the work in the National Park Service should be tripled. An apprentice system should be established immediately which would allow for low cost, on-the-job training to be acquired by budding young conservators. Enough operating funds should be made available so that equipment, materials, and supplies can be made available for these specialists to carry on the work.

One must understand the similarities between our natural resources, our historic structures, and our historic objects (or, if you will, material culture). These are the resources of the National Park Service. The protection of these resources is the reason that we are all employed within the National Park Service. The public enjoyment of these resources in future generations entirely depends on our capacity to maintain them and to deal properly with them at the present.

ALLIGATORS AND MUSKETS

Do you ever stop to think of the similarities between the natural and historic resources found in the National Park System? Sure, there is a big difference between an alligator and a flintlock musket, but there are striking parallels in how we must relate to each of them.

Both are irreplaceable; once gone, they cannot ever be replaced. Both have intangible values; a price tag cannot be placed on values derived from seeing or studying either. Both depend upon a quality environment for their survival; an environment which man somehow determines. Both have been considered important enough to our culture to have park areas established for their preservation. Both require a commitment of money and manpower to insure their survival; we staff parks to prevent poachers and to provide methods which will prevent theft of historical objects.

Ah, there's the rub! It is my belief that we have not recognized our responsibility toward historical objects to the same degree that we have toward preservation of natural resources. A forest fire threatening our tree resource bears a close analogy to rust and/or mold slowly destroying an important collection of historical artifacts. Although we unhesitatingly will spend hundreds of thousands of dollars to extinguish the fire, we find it difficult to budget even small amounts of time or money to protect our historical artifacts. A Southern Pine Beetle infestation in a forest brings forth an army of experts with bulging checkbooks to the battle, but Dermestid beetles in a collection of American Indian artifacts hardly brings on a raised eyebrow.

When a natural park is established, we irrevocably commit ourselves to the continuation of the ecosystem we were entrusted to protect. Likewise, when the Service accepts either a historical park or a single historical artifact we have committed ourselves to its perpetual care.

So come all you curators, historians, and interpreters who have responsibilities for managing our museum collections; speak up loudly when you see your collections being neglected. After all, you bear the same responsibility to the museum collection that the firefighter does to the forest. Speak up to have adequate funds programmed that will give you the necessary storage equipment to properly house your collection. Speak up so that your managers will be aware of your minimum staffing needs to properly manage your collection, and so he can plan and budget appropriately. Read the NPS Activity Standards as they pertain to the management of your museum collections; you will be surprised to learn how well we are supposed to manage our collections in order to be considered adequate!! Learn to fill out Form 10-238's asking for improvements for your museum collection. Finally, don't be bashful, let's look to the day we can unashamedly ask for money and manpower to take care of our museum collections on the same basis as any other manager of any other resource.

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