

The Museum Collection of the National Park Service

A vast wealth of material culture is held in trust for the American public by National Parks. Virtually every one of our parks has a collection of museum objects for which it is responsible. Museums in National Parks existed even before the National Park Service was established in 1916, and there is abundant Legislation (including the NPS Organic Act; the Antiquities Act, Historic Sites Act; etc) which provide the National Park Service with the authority and responsibility for safeguarding these collections of museum objects,

As a result of this long history of museum development, the Service now administers over 250 museums, with almost 100 acres of floor space; making the Park Service one of the largest museum facilities in the United States. The Service owns an estimated 10,000,000 museum objects. Less than 2,000,000 of these objects have any sort of catalog documentation at all; only about 540,000 objects have been catalogued according to NPS Standards.

Most of these objects may be classified as "rare". Many of these objects are truly "irreplaceable" as they are unique and one of a kind. Many items have intangible values far in excess of their market value (such as George Washington's tent and the Lincoln darringer), making it quite impossible to assess a true dollar value. Most Service curators feel that the current \$150,000,000 figure used for Service collections is very conservative.

Comparison of values might be helpful at this point. The Service owns about 100,000 dollars of "accountable property" (such as pick up trucks, cameras and typewriters), and employees about 400 people to look after these things. These items are all replaceable: If lost or destroyed, new ones can be purchased. Service museum collections are non-replaceable, and are worth at least 150,000,000 dollars, yet there are fewer than 40 curators working for the Service, and only 15 of these curators are actually working on the park level.

When the Service accepts museum objects, it also accepts both a legal and moral obligation to provide perpetual care for those objects. Yet recent surveys indicate that as many as 75,000,000 objects are presently in sub-standard storage; and as many as 60,000,000 objects may require some degree of professional conservation care.

In an attempt to balance the need for professional conservation treatment of museum objects, the Service has established the Division of Museum Services at the Harpers Ferry Center in West Virginia. Operating out of a condemned school building, 10 professional conservators manage to treat approximately 6,000 objects a year. This is a phenomenal output when you consider these conservators also assist with writing Collection Management Plans for parks, instruct classes such as Curatorial Methods I, and work individually with park employees in Curatorial Methods II. Phenominal as this rate of work is, it is still only a drop in the bucket.

This is a general overview concerning the present status of museum collections within the Service. What is the remedy for this deplorable state of affairs.

It is deceptively easy to assume a large transfusion of budget dollars will correct the deficiency. Deceptive and wrong, for the real root of the problem goes deeper than a simple lack of funding. Look behind the painting that is falling off its canvas: look behind the historic wagon under a pile of junk in an open pasture: look behind the 8 million plus items that remain uncatalogued and largely ignored. The real problem is attitude, and how the individual staff member, from Director to summer seasonal, perceives the role of Cultural Resources within the Service, and Service commitment to preservation of these resources.

The preservation of all resources, both natural and cultural, is the reason we are all employed by the National Park Service. The public enjoyment of these resources in future generations depends entirely upon our capacity to maintain them properly at the present time.

The Composition of National Park Service Collections

The museum collections of the National Park Service are composed of approximately 10 million objects roughly divided into the following categories:

Sculpture & Statues	3,000
Oil Paintings	5,500
Textiles & Costumes	100,000
Books (of Museum Quality)	200,000
Natural History Specimens	200,000
Weapons	200,000
Historic Furnishings	750,000
Amerind Artifacts (Ethnological)	1,500,000
Paper (Documents, Art Prints, Photographs)	1,500,000
Archaeological Specimens	5,000,000