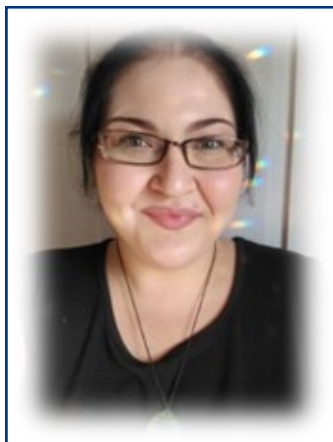
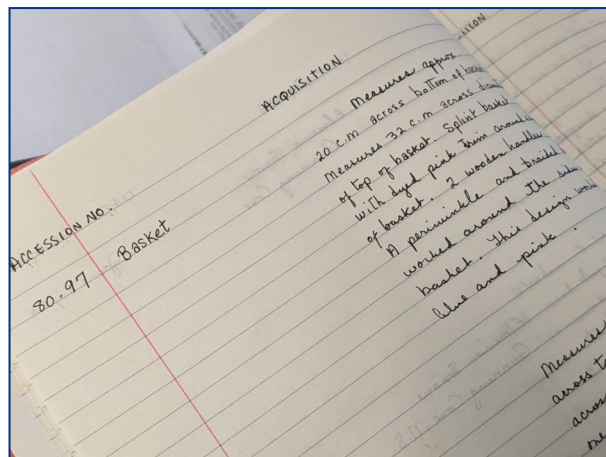


Curator's Corner — Cady Berardi



In the spring newsletter, I wrote about the museum aphorism that less than 10% of our collections are on display at any given time. So how do we keep track of the other 90%? Having 'intellectual control' over your collection - knowing what you have, where it is, and being able to retrieve that information readily - is crucial for healthy museum function. This is especially important because museums hold these objects in the public trust, responsible to our donors and the public at large to be good stewards. As standards of

record-keeping change over time, we are constantly working to improve our intellectual control over the Shelburne County Museum collection.



Accessions register entry for a Mi'kmaw fancy basket.
Photo courtesy of Cady Berardi

The earliest format of museum record-keeping, still used today, is the accessions register. This generally constitutes a ledger book (and, over time, a series of ledger books) in which is recorded each object coming into the collection, accompanied by a description and other information, including donor, dimensions, and storage location. Crucially, it is in the register that an object is assigned its unique identifier, a number which is applied to the object itself so that it can always be connected back with its information. The strength of the accessions register is that it is a complete chronological record of incoming collections. A weakness, however, is that it is not easy to edit over time. It is not uncommon in our registers to have extra information stapled to a certain page, or for storage locations to be crossed out and replaced multiple times. At some point you run out of space in the margins! Although it is easy to find an object's entry if you know its unique identifier, it is difficult to search the registers to discover objects with certain qualities. Attempting to find all the baskets in the collection, for example, would necessitate flipping through thousands of pages.



The same basket in the "Object Retrieval File" card catalogue, one of several developed by long-time Curator Finn Bower, staff and volunteers.

Photo courtesy of Cady Berardi

To make it possible to search the collection, card catalogues were developed. Index cards with a basic set of facts about each object were sorted into categories or arranged by donor. Using the card catalogue, it is much easier to discover an object, but only if the collection manager has anticipated the nature of your query beforehand. Referring back to the above example of finding baskets, this becomes quite easy when all their records are grouped together. But what if you are looking for objects in the collection associated with a certain shipwreck? Or any material having to do with one individual? Card catalogues are seldom able to accommodate specific searches like that. The expertise of the Curator and their deep familiarity with their collection would have to bridge the gap.

Since the 1990s, the computerised database has been the main way museums manage collection information. Each object has a record which can hold a large amount of information and is infinitely editable. The records are linked to one another by donor, storage location, category and many other factors. They can be browsed by those factors or searched using keywords. Successful retrieval, however, depends on the quality and completeness of the information entered in the system.

At the Shelburne County Museum, we continue to work towards a database that captures our full collection. Of the estimated 25,000 individual objects we hold, fewer than 6,000 had records entered into our database as of 2018. These represented the majority of our three-dimensional objects, but excluded most of our photographs and archival documents. We have been actively correcting this omission in recent years and have 15,587 objects recorded at the time of writing. More than 5,000 of those were added just this summer by our returning summer students, Soren and Elsi Himmelman. Among the documents they created records for were 390 deeds and a massive collection of business papers from Shelburne Shipbuilders Ltd., which are now searchable on the collections database. I owe a great deal of thanks to these two, whose diligence and attention to detail made for a very successful summer here in the research room.

A partial view of the basket's record in our collections database. This is the 'back end' that only authorized staff may access. (The object's number was changed at some point in time but, since the change is noted in the record, the object remains findable using the original number).

Photo courtesy of Cady Berardi

While the records added this year require some cleaning up before we are ready to make them available to the public, most of our records can be found alongside those from other museums in the province on NovaMuse.ca.

The basket's record as it appears on NovaMuse, the 'front end' of our database that allows the public to search and browse collection records from museums across Nova Scotia.

Photo courtesy of Cady Berardi