

## **Building Common Ground on Collections: An Initial Glossary of Collections-Related Terminology**

**Submitted by the Archaeological Collections Consortium (ACC)**

In 2012, the Archaeological Collections Consortium (ACC)<sup>1</sup> was formed as a national group of representatives from the Society for American Archaeology (SAA), the Society for Historical Archaeology (SHA), and the American Cultural Resources Association (ACRA). The ACC's goal is to instill collaboration among and between these organizations to address overlapping collections-related challenges. Specifically, the consortium is charged with (1) identifying overall objectives relating to archaeological and museum collections; (2) serving as a unified voice for collections-related issues that are relevant to SHA, SAA, ACRA, and their constituents; and (3) developing and acting upon a common platform of goals and objectives designed to benefit the discipline and ultimately the general public for whom collections are curated in the public trust.

Since 2012, the consortium has met quarterly via conference call and once in-person each year. One early meeting outcome was a collective realization that the use and interpretation of key terms was highly variable. In some instances we found ourselves talking past each other simply because of differences in interpretation of seemingly basic terms such as “deaccession” or even definitions of what a “collection” is. Furthermore, there were terms regularly used by some ACC members that were effectively not in other's lexicon (e.g., “orphaned collections”). The

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<sup>1</sup> The current ACC members and authors of this “white paper” are Ralph Bailey, Danielle Benden, S. Terry Childs, Teresita Majewski, Christopher Pulliam, Kevin Smith, Michael “Sonny” Trimble, and Mark Warner. The ACC completed the document in November 2015, and it was published in the Winter 2015 *SHA Newsletter* (48[4]) and in the January 2016 *SAA Archaeological Record* (16[1]). The document was placed on the ACRA website in February 2017. The only editorial changes made to the “original” ACC version are this expanded footnote and some punctuation edits.

realization that unfolded was that the sector in which each ACC member worked (e.g., academic, government, museum, CRM industry) had a direct impact on the vocabulary used in discussions of collections management.

To address this basic semantics challenge, ACC has developed working definitions for a glossary of key terms used in management of archaeological collections. The ACC product is presented below and is not intended to replace the widely used glossary of terms that the National Park Service has previously published (<http://www.nps.gov/archeology/collections/glossary.htm>). Rather, our intent is to capture the subtle variability in the terms that archaeologists from different sectors use to discuss issues surrounding curation and collections management.

While we recognize that the ACC glossary is not intended to be the definitive source to which all archaeologists refer, we propose it as a living document that should be periodically reviewed, and a guide designed to help those working in different stages of the archaeological process communicate more effectively. Our hope is that by sharing our experiences and presenting these definitions of key terms, we can build common ground to collectively address the challenges we face in managing our archaeological heritage.

### **accession, v.**

#### Definition

The formal, documented process of legally adding an object or group of objects and associated records to a repository collection.

#### Discussion

The accession process begins with assigning a unique control number to a collection received from one source at one time, for which the repository has custody, right, or title. Accessioning usually involves documentation of ownership and long-term responsibility of a collection. There are many cases in which repositories accept physical custody of collections and accession them to document that custody arrangement.

Accessioning does not always equate to legal ownership. Clear distinctions about ownership must be established during the accessioning process. This is typically done through an agreement document.

### **acquisition, n.**

#### Definition

The act of taking physical possession of objects and associated records.

#### Discussion

This process involves preliminary evaluation of and negotiating for the care of objects and associated records prior to undertaking the legal accessioning process. Methods of acquiring collections may include field collection, transfer, donation, and exchange.

### **collection, n.**

#### Definition

The objects that are excavated or removed during a survey, excavation, or other study of a prehistoric or historical-period resource and associated records that are prepared or assembled with the investigation.

#### Discussion

There are two basic types of collections, new and existing. New collections are those that are currently in the process of being systematically excavated and recovered, analyzed, prepared for curation, and/or in the process of being accepted into a repository. New collections become existing collections once they have been formally accessioned into a repository. Some older, existing collections are referred to as legacy collections, which may or may not be processed according to professional curatorial standards (see also **orphaned collection**, defined below).

### **associated records, n.**

#### Definition

The original records (or copies thereof) that are prepared and assembled and document efforts to locate, evaluate, record, study, preserve, or recover a prehistoric or historical resource (adapted from 36 CFR Part 79.4(a)(2)).

#### Discussion

Associated records (paper and/or electronic formats) may include field notes and site forms, artifact inventories, maps, photographs, scopes of work, permits, project reports, laboratory records, historical documents, repository curatorial forms, and other related documents.

### **collections reburial, n.**

#### Definition

The re-interment of a collection, or portion thereof, previously recovered from an archaeological investigation. This does *not* include cultural items subject to the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA).

### Discussion

Legally sanctioned collections reburial began with the enactment of NAGPRA legislation. However, archaeological professionals have adopted this process to rebury collections not subject to NAGPRA. There are currently no standards and best practices for this process, which may be in conflict with Federal law and the ethical standards adopted by professional archaeological organizations. This is an area of critical urgency that requires attention.

### **curation, n.**

#### Definition

The long-term process of managing and preserving objects and associated records according to professional standards.

### Discussion

This process involves documenting, cataloging, preserving (e.g., storage in secure and environmentally controlled facilities, and conservation), periodic physical inventory, and providing access so that the collection can be used for research, education, interpretation, heritage uses, and other functions by a variety of publics. It is preferable that objects and associated records from a single investigation are curated in the same repository.

### **deaccession, v.**

#### Definition

The formal process used to remove permanently a collection or portion thereof, from a repository.

### Discussion

Decisions to deaccession a collection or portion thereof should be undertaken judiciously and must be made by a committee that does not benefit in any way from the deaccession. A deaccession determination must be fully documented and made after careful review and advice from professionals. At a minimum, documentation should include the reason for the deaccession, the specific objects slated for deaccession, the method(s) of disposition, and the location of any records associated with the collection, including those associated with the deaccession action. The proposed Federal deaccessioning regulations were published in the Federal Register in November of 2014 and are currently in the process of revision for final publication.

### **museum, n.**

#### Definition

A permanent collections-based, non-profit institution with a public outreach mission that employs professional staff to care for, manage, interpret, and exhibit collections.

### Discussion

Museums are a type of repository. A museum that serves as an archaeological repository must have appropriate language in their contracts or agreements to document and preserve collections that they curate on behalf of other entities such as the government.

## **no-collection strategy, n.**

### Definition

A deliberate decision to leave objects in the field and conduct in-field artifact analysis on-site.

### Discussion

No-collection strategies have been employed for nearly 40 years without extensive study. The implications of this practice on the archaeological record are not fully understood but preliminary studies have identified detrimental impacts. There are currently no standards and best practices for this strategy, which is in conflict with Federal law and the ethical standards adopted by professional archaeological organizations. This is an area of critical urgency that requires attention.

## **orphaned collection, n.**

### Definition

A group of objects and/or associated records with unclear ownership that have been abandoned in a repository, museum, or other facility, such as a laboratory in a cultural resource management firm.

### Discussion

There are several reasons that collections become orphaned. These include lack or loss of documentation; the collection owner was never identified or notified; closure or merger of CRM firms; closure of museums; retirements in academia; and loss of staff and “institutional memory.” In some cases, those legally responsible for orphaned collections refuse to assume financial responsibility for their curation.

## **repository, n.**

### Definition

A facility or institution that professionally manages collections on a long-term basis.

### Discussion

A broad range of institutions may serve as repositories, including federal, state, tribal and local museums, university departments, historical societies, and archives.

## **sampling, v.**

### Definition

The deliberate process—often based on mathematical probability theory, a regular pattern, or existing knowledge of data patterning—of identifying and selecting a representative subset of data and accumulated physical collections that are recovered from an archaeological investigation.

### Discussion

Sampling of archaeological artifacts may occur in the field or during laboratory analysis and prior to depositing and accessioning a collection into a repository. This is done by applying specific criteria to the collection, such as identifying objects that have relatively limited scientific or historical value or those that are profoundly deteriorated. Other terms, such as culling or

selective removal, are used as synonymous terms for sampling, but do not apply a deliberate scientific selection process.

**For further information on the ACC or this “white paper,” please contact [Ralph Bailey](#), chair of ACRA’s Collections Management and Curation Committee.**