Curation

Erika K. Hartley  
*Western Michigan University*, erika.k.loveland@wmich.edu

Miro Dunham  
*Western Michigan University*, miya.k.dunham@wmich.edu

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Archaeological collections and their provenience information together provide a picture of the past. Animal remains, for example, can tell us what types of animals were found at a site. But if we know their three-dimensional location, researchers can also determine the time they were deposited and if they were associated with other objects or buildings. Collection management ensures that information is recorded properly and is kept together with the curated materials.

Curation is simply the collection and care of data and material items that are housed in museums, archives, and repositories. This includes the indefinite management, organization, and preservation of physical objects and information crucial to maintaining a collection’s research value.

Common Curation Challenges

Many repositories, large and small, struggle with collection management. Resources required for secure storage space, routine conservation assessments, data updates, and full-time curation staffing are difficult to obtain. Archaeologists often conducted excavations without a detailed plan for long-term preservation.

It is not as if collections are left for dead after archaeological excavations take place. Instead, curation takes a back seat to other more pressing needs such as building improvements and public outreach initiatives. The Fort St. Joseph collection is no exception to this scenario.

Public outreach initiatives include providing site tours, attending community events and markets, creating informational display cases, hosting a lecture series, and publishing documents about the archaeology. Photos courtesy of the Fort St. Joseph Archaeological Project.

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FORT ST. JOSEPH COLLECTION

The Fort St. Joseph collection relates to the archaeological site of Fort St. Joseph, an eighteenth-century French mission, trading post, and garrison located in present-day Niles, MI.

Specifically, the collection consists of artifacts, geophysical data, historical documents and translations, field notes, photographs, soil samples, carbon-14 samples, and numerous publications. These items are permanently housed, displayed, and managed at the Niles History Center.

DID YOU KNOW?

There are over 300,000 artifacts in the collection!

Who can access the collection?

Anyone!

Stop into the Niles History Center for more information.

Collection Challenges

Currently, we face several curatorial problems. First, improvements must be made in how we store and organize artifacts. Second, consistent protocols are needed to enhance data collection and digital recording. Finally, we want to make the public and scholars more aware about how to access the collection for research purposes.
Beyond preserving the collection for the future, we aim to promote a greater awareness of and access to the collection. We live in a fast-paced, digital world which calls for the collection’s easy accessibility.

The mission of the Niles History Center is to connect the past, present, and future, focusing on Niles and the surrounding region. The Fort St. Joseph collection plays a critical role in this mission.

To continue to prepare and preserve this collection for future research, interpretation, and education, the Fort St. Joseph Archaeological Project and Niles History Center are conducting a thorough assessment of current curatorial practices, suggesting and implementing improvements as needed. The Fort St. Joseph Curatorial Fellowship was developed specifically for this purpose.

Currently, a plan is being developed to address some of our curation challenges. This plan will reflect new and proven collection management practices, including artifact rehousing, reorganization, cataloging, and digitization.

An exhibit in the Niles History Center displays artifacts and information about Fort St. Joseph, an important aspect of Niles and Michigan history. Photo by Hannah Rucinski.

Collection storage boxes are often overcrowded, which can compromise preservation and cause difficulties in locating artifacts. Photo by Hannah Rucinski.

Artifacts are closely examined in order to prepare them for exhibit installation. Photo by Erika K. Hartley.

Thus far we have identified several areas for improvements and are prioritizing them accordingly. First, we will be conducting an extensive inventory to assess the condition of the collection. The most pressing need is for funds to defray costs associated with rehousing materials, conservation work, and an environmental control system. By identifying financial support for these efforts, we can preserve the history of Fort St. Joseph for the future! Will you join us?