

Collections Management at the Historical Society of Palm Beach County

by Steven Erdmann
Curator of Collections and Exhibits



The Society has a policy on *Collections Management* approved by our Board of Governors. This policy includes statements on the scope of the Society's collecting activities and acquisition methods:

The Historical Society of Palm Beach County seeks to collect and preserve objects and archival material that document people, places, and events of Palm Beach County in its regional context: private, public, and community life; social and historical trends, themes, and change; natural and man-made events and phenomena. The Society maintains Permanent, Archival, and Educational collections. Though owned by the Historical Society of Palm Beach County, Inc., these items are held in public trust.

Archival material and objects may be added to the collections by gift, bequest, purchase, exchange, field acquisition, or any other transaction by which title is passed to the Society. Each acquisition must be considered for its relevance to Palm Beach County history and its relationship to other items within the Permanent Collection and Archival Collection. The Society must consider its ability to properly care for an item and provide adequate storage space.

Additions to the Historical Society's collections often begin with a telephone call from a member of our community. The first determination is that the potential donation fits within the scope of the Society's collections policy. When items are simply old, but

have little or no relevance to Palm Beach County's history, often times a more suitable institution for the donation is discussed. When relevant material is delivered (often personally) or picked up, the donor is issued a Temporary Custody Receipt. An important function of the Society's collecting process is that the material is accurately tracked and that *good title* is passed to the Society.

Items that are relevant to the Society's collections are next *accessioned*. Accessioning is the act of processing new additions to the permanent collections. A single accession may include one item or thousands of items; the word itself describes the formal transaction, processing, and passage of ownership to

the Society. Accessioning carries with it fiduciary responsibilities; as the item (or items) are held in the public trust. As part of the process the donor is issued a Deed of Gift to acknowledge the donation as well as the passage of ownership.

Many of the processing tasks are carried out using collections management system (CMS) software. This software allows us to track the flow of new material from its initial status being held in

temporary custody through the accessioning process. Cataloging of the individual items within the donation is the next task. When all is completed, the resulting database becomes a powerful research tool.

Throughout the history of the Society, nary a piece of paper [let alone a receipt] was ever thrown away. A great deal of time was spent during the 1970s and '80s matching receipts which included donor names and addresses with individual items in the permanent collections. From this *paper database* log books were reconstructed delineating the Society's acquisition history. In 2007 the first two phases toward a digital



This 19th century pharmacy cabinet was donated to the Historical Society in 1998 and is now on display at the Richard and Pat Johnson Palm Beach County History Museum. Courtesy HSPBC, #98/6-30/026A.

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cataloguing our library for nearly three years. We are down to the end thanks to summer intern Jennifer Brown, for which volunteer and project leader Sharon Freidheim is very thankful, as she can now take on a new project. It is also much easier to find one book out of the nearly 4,000 on the shelves. The end result of this cataloguing will be better public access. If you think this kind of work sounds intriguing, know basic computer skills, and have a few hours once a week to volunteer in the archives, please call Debi Murray at 561-832-4164, ext 105.

Debi Murray is a native of Palm Beach County, Florida, and has been Director of Research & Archives

at the Historical Society of Palm Beach County since 1999. She attended Florida Atlantic University where she graduated *magna cum laude* and eventually received her Master of Arts in history. Murray was the point person for the Historical Society's most recent project, the Richard and Pat Johnson Palm Beach County History Museum. She is co-author of *Palm Beach* (Arcadia Publishing, 2009); co-author of *Palm Beach County at 100: Our History; Our Home* (*The Palm Beach Post*, 2009); and executive producer and co-writer of the Historical Society's one-hour documentary "Puddle Jumpers of Lantana: The History of the Civil Air Patrol's Coastal Patrol 3" (2007).

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database were completed: the data entry of donor information and accession transactions.

Over the seventy-two year history of the Historical Society of Palm Beach County, the organization currently has accessioned over two thousand donations. These donations total over an estimated two million individual items.

Steven Erdmann is Curator of Collections and

Exhibits. He holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in cultural anthropology and an Master of Arts in museum studies. Erdmann has worked with museum collections, both in the private sector and non-profit world, for over twenty years. He joined the Historical Society staff in 2006. Erdmann was previously with the Museum of Northern Arizona.

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Ancient People of South Florida trunk. Teachers completed training in October 2009 and the traveling trunks were turned over to the schools on long-term loan from the Historical Society. Four Pioneer trunks have also been developed and are now available for loan.

Richard A. Marconi is Curator of Education and has been on staff with the Historical Society since 2002. In 2001 he graduated *summa cum laude* from Florida

Atlantic University with a Bachelor of Arts degree in history. Marconi is co-author of the Arcadia Publishing's Images of American series: *West Palm Beach 1893-1950* (2006) and *Palm Beach* (2009); co-author of *Palm Beach County at 100: Our History; Our Home* (*The Palm Beach Post*, 2009); and producer and co-writer of the Historical Society's documentary "Puddle Jumpers of Lantana: The History of the Civil Air Patrol's Coastal Patrol 3" (2007).

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applications. I started to go through them in 2004, but ran out of time. These forms provide the name of the office, the postmaster applying, and hand-drawn maps showing exactly where the new office would be in relation to others in the area. I made copies of the applications for local offices that I could find, but there are more to be unearthed. In addition, there may be other sources available and any clue could lead the way to more information.

Compiled from the Geer Family file; Post Office File in the HSPBC archive.

Printed Sources:

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Robinson, Tim. *A Tropical Frontier: Pioneers and Settlers of Southeast Florida, 1800-1890*. Port Salerno, FL: Port Sun Publishing, 2005.