ARCHIVES AND MUSEUMS

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ABSTRACT: Despite striking differences in methods and techniques, archives and museums—especially history museums—share much in common. Moreover, recent developments in both fields are increasing the area of commonality. Although it is hardly startling, I reached this realization only as a result of on-the-job experience—on the museum’s collections committee (which approves all major acquisitions), in developing registration procedures with the museum’s registrar’s office, and through participation in seminars, colloquia, and informal discussion. Like many archivists, I suspect, my understanding of the museum world had previously been exclusively from the perspective of a visitor to museum exhibitions.

Based on my more recent experience, I would like to identify some of the areas common to museums and archives, and to encourage archivists to seek out greater involvement with colleagues in the museum community.

At the outset, it is essential to acknowledge that a good deal of inter-professional contact already has occurred. A decade ago the Smithsonian Institution sponsored a seminar on museum archives that drew together leaders in both fields and issued guidelines for museum archives programs. Periodically since then the Smithsonian has sponsored week-long training programs for museum professionals in archival practice.

In 1981 the Society of American Archivists (SAA) created a Task Force on Museum Archives which has since evolved into an active roundtable with an excellent newsletter that reaches 273 readers and, most recently, into a formal “section” within SAA.1 In 1984 the SAA published Bill Deiss’s basic manual on museum archives.2 The NHPRC has lent its support to this cause by awarding 33 grants, totalling three-quarters of a million dollars, for “archival development projects” in museums since 1978.3

The museum community itself has initiated important steps. For example, the New England Museum Association last year held its second annual archives institute. The 1989 annual meeting of the American Association of Museums (AAM) included two archives-related sessions. One, entitled Manuscript Collecting in Museums: Issues and Strategies, addressed what the printed program described as “an area of museum collections that has long gone unrecognized.” The description continued, “We are discovering that there are few standards available to guide the museum community in the care and interpretation of these collections.” This session, which drew an audience of ninety, represents a significant expansion of archives-museum contacts beyond a focus on museum records.4
For archivists, perhaps the best known professional activity within the museum field is the AAM accreditation program. Begun in 1970, the program consists of a rigorous self-study element, an on-site accreditation review, and periodic reaccreditation. More than six hundred museums, including a majority of the nation’s largest museums (those with budgets over $500,000), are accredited despite the significant direct and indirect costs to applicants. Most of them prominently display the accreditation sticker and plaque. From first-hand experience, I know that even a large and prominent federal museum can take this process very seriously.

The AAM’s Museum Assessment Program (MAP) is a separate but closely related activity. Funded by the Institute of Museum Services, a federal government agency, MAP is “a consultation service designed to assist the leadership of an institution in planning for the future.” Well over 1,600 museums have participated in MAP’s general evaluation program and in its more recent program emphasizing care of collections.

The museum community’s success in establishing and—in part—federally funding these two programs stands as a highly relevant model for our own efforts to improve archival institutions. Archivists, of course, have made substantial progress in this area already. The SAA publication, Archives Assessment and Planning Workbook (1989), edited by Paul McCarthy, culminates a decade of labor in identifying principles by which we can evaluate archival programs and in linking these principles to data about the actual performance of archival institutions. SAA’s new Committee on Institutional Evaluation and Development, chaired by Tom Wilsted, now faces the challenge of creating programs by which we can put this evaluation tool to work. In the next decade archivists should carefully scrutinize institutional accreditation, especially as practiced in the museum field, to determine if it is an appropriate means to improve our professional practice.

One of the most significant aspects of accreditation is its role as a spur to articulation of new standards for the field. Although the basic framework of the AAM’s accreditation program remains unchanged, it has incorporated new standards as they emerge. For example, much greater attention is now given to the care of collections, including registration, and to professional ethics. Of special note to archivists, the AAM has incorporated into its accreditation review questions about the management of the applicant museum’s archival records.

The major professional organization in the history museum field, the American Association for State and Local History (AASLH), has renewed its attention to the issue of standards. David Crosson, of the State Historical Society of Iowa, reported on his committee’s first year of work in words strikingly similar to the initial efforts of the SAA’s Task Force on Archival Standards chaired by Tom Hickerson. Crosson’s group attempted to define what we mean by the term “standards,” to identify existing standards in the field—they located at least 38—and to identify areas where new or revised standards are needed. The committee pledged to work with the various professions within the historical agency field (including the SAA through its national office) and to focus on standards for institutions rather than for individuals. Finally, the committee is considering ways to enforce standards without making AASLH a regulatory body. Suggestions include publicizing standards widely and requiring organizations to agree to abide by them as a condition of membership.
The development and implementation of standards for individual and institutional activities is a basic responsibility of every professional group. Today, because both archivists and museum professionals are deeply involved in this task, we have a great deal to learn from one another. In some areas there is a direct overlap of professional practice: for example, in the treatment of archival materials (both institutional records and acquired collections) within museum registration systems. In other areas, such as individual and institutional ethics, we should strive for consistency both in concept and expression. (The SAA Task Force on Ethics is now reexamining the code of ethics for archivists and developing related teaching materials.) We will strengthen our status and our ability to achieve our larger professional goals by acknowledging and building upon interests shared with other keepers of our cultural heritage.

Although the development and enforcement of standards is an active, continuing concern of the museum community, it is not the area of greatest intellectual ferment and debate. Within the history museum community, at least, that ferment and debate surrounds a group of issues that emerge from a critical rethinking of the fundamental purposes of the history museum. This new thinking about history museums is of special interest to archivists because many of the issues are the same ones that now engage our own profession: information exchange, collecting in the post-World War II period, and the adequacy of our collections to document our history. Each of these areas presents opportunities and challenges for greater collaboration with museum colleagues.

The rethinking of American history museums has its own long history, but the Conference on A Common Agenda for History Museums (February 1987) represented a significant movement toward an organized discussion of the topic and toward concerted action on the critical issues. The conference participants—directors, curators, historians, registrars, and one archivist—came from many of the major, and some of the smaller, history museums across the United States. From this two-day conference, Common Agenda has evolved into a grant-funded “core program” of the AASLH, with an office and staff in the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of American History, a series of published proceedings and special reports, and a mailing list of more than 1,200. But the essence of Common Agenda is more difficult to define. One founder calls it “a state of mind,” others call it “catalytic,” “issue-oriented,” “interdisciplinary,” “collaborative,” and “a vehicle...for action.”

What motivated so many well-known (and busy) leaders in the history museum field to create and support this new and difficult-to-define “Common Agenda”? The first factor, perhaps, is a growing consensus within the field that the first priority for history museums is to teach people about history. As Roger Kennedy, the sometimes flamboyant director of the National Museum of American History, told Newsweek, “I’ll teach history to anybody I can get my mitts on....I don’t care if they come in here to see Archie Bunker’s chair. Once we get ‘em in the door, there are innumerable other things they’ll catch out of the corner of their eyes.”

Although the simple proposition that history museums exist to teach history seems quite undramatic, in fact it flies in the face of much past practice. For one thing, it presumes a history that is based on research—in artifacts, archives, books, and other relevant sources. This is “history” in the way the term is used by scholars, not in the popular sense of received knowledge and common under-
standing. It also is history that accepts nonelites and diverse cultures as integral parts of the stories museums tell.

This commitment to teaching history places museum collections in a new light. Steven Hamp and Michael Ettema of the Ford Museum and Greenfield Village put it this way: “Collections of objects are tools for implementing the educational mission of a history museum....History museums cannot collect by personal whim, market value, or aesthetic exceptionalism.” Historian Michael Wallace makes a similar observation: “Museums have shifted away from focusing taxonomically on explicating or enshrining objects toward using objects to explain social relations.”

This shift in perspective was brought home to me in a recent conversation with a military history curator. In line with his own research interests, and with his museum’s interest in the social history of the American people, this curator wished to expand the collecting scope of his department. In particular, he sought from World War II veterans the memorabilia that they had held on to for so many years. Taken together, these worn snapshots, postcards, mementos, and trinkets would reflect the lives of ordinary soldiers and the ways their memories were tied to material objects. The curator’s colleagues resisted, however. To them the proper objects of military history are the technology or hardware and the official uniforms.

The military history example illustrates an essential corollary of this approach to collections. The odds and ends of memorabilia that a veteran has carried about for nearly half a century have meaning only as they are linked to that individual and to his or her story. Nicholas Westbrook, formerly of the Minnesota Historical Society, makes the general point when he observes: “Lives rather than things are increasingly the focus....We need to be collecting not only fine objects...but also the stories of the lives that gave meaning to those objects.” Westbrook calls this “collecting context as well as object.”

A deep concern over the quantity and quality of information about the objects in history museum collections is widespread in the field. Lonn Taylor, a seasoned museum professional now at the National Museum of American History, calls the problem “an endemic disease in history museums.” He writes: “The one area [of museum practice] in which much improvement has not been shown is the core of our existence: researching and documenting our collections.” Taylor describes the current problem and several promising documentation efforts. He calls for additional research projects, funded by new or redirected federal grant funds, to consider what actually constitutes adequate documentation and to devise model systems to acquire, record, and make documentary information accessible. Taylor concludes on a hopeful note, recognizing that numerous historic American buildings have been “investigated, recorded, and placed on a national or state register that guarantees them [at least] some degree of protection and makes their documentation available to the public.”

As the concepts of “collecting context” and “documentation” gain currency in the history museum community, museum acquisition activities easily and inevitably spill over into collecting what most of us consider “archival” materials. The formerly clear distinctions between museums and archives, based on the type of materials they collected, have grown terribly blurred. Indeed, a Common Agenda report on collecting recent and contemporary history adds recordings as a “new category” of objects that museums might acquire. These
recordings (audio or video), along with "flat material: visual and/or written," now take their places alongside more traditional three-dimensional objects on the list of potential museum acquisitions.16

Even those archivists who have kept up only slightly with the professional literature recognize that these developments in the history museum field have close parallels within our profession. We already have a substantial literature explaining documentation strategy as a theoretical concept as well as case studies of its actual application.17 Indeed, Melinda Frye, director of the Common Agenda project on collecting, acknowledged the influence of archival thinking in a panel discussion reported in Museum News. "Driven in part by some of the things archivists are discovering," she says, "we're realizing that it's not just collecting facts anymore, but it's documenting human experience of the recent past and today."18

The convergence of these intellectual interests provides a framework for future cooperation between archivists and museum professionals. For example, archivists who have grappled with the process of developing collection plans might join with museum colleagues to sponsor a national conference on that topic. The results of such a conference should be disseminated within the archival community to add to our all-too-thin literature on this topic. Archivists and museum colleagues could come together, perhaps with librarians, documentary photographers, and oral historians to undertake exemplary documentation projects that no single discipline could accomplish on its own. A model project, which developed a workable methodology, would be a valuable addition to the archival bag of tools. Certainly archivists can learn more from museum colleagues about the kinds of records they find useful for research in material culture. And perhaps as archivists we can learn to improve our own techniques for documenting the contexts that are essential to understanding our collections.

My own limited and ad hoc experience confirms that museum and archives professionals can cooperate to produce a richer historical record. Last year, for example, an archival colleague and I joined with museum specialists in small tools and machinery and in pianos to select records and artifacts from a defunct manufacturer of ivory products and piano key actions. Their assistance was essential in appraising the voluminous technical drawings and the industry reference files among the company records. Our collaboration also assured that archival documentation of the artifacts they selected would be as complete as possible.

The archival profession has a legitimate concern that museums adopt appropriate practices for management of archival materials. The growing number of museum archivists is one reassuring sign, as is the appearance of annual meeting sessions such as the one at AAM. At this year's AASLH meeting two former staff members of the Kansas City Museum, an archivist and a registrar, reported on their adaptation of museum registration procedures to accommodate the needs of archival practice. The intense discussions that their efforts generated within their museum had forced both professionals to examine the fundamental concepts and principles upon which their respective practices were based. The resulting system, which wed the flexibility of archival procedures with the precision and concern for accountability of museum registration, may prove a model for both archives and museums.19
The museum community’s concern over documentation (in its several senses) has heightened interest in another kind of collaboration: sharing information within and among museums. The concept of documentation and the ubiquity of mass-produced goods, among other things, encourage museums to view their present and prospective collections as parts of a whole and to view knowledge about them as essential to all other museum activity, especially collecting and interpretation. Summarizing the need for communication and collaboration, Nick Westbrook put it succinctly: “Perhaps we don’t all need to collect toasters of the 1930s!”

The importance of information exchange to the museum world was evident in the creation of a Database Task Force as one of the first two activities of Common Agenda. The task force has published its final report, including a listing (with definitions) of the minimum data fields for describing museum objects. Perhaps the most notable feature of this report is its call for creation of a “historical information file, separate from the object catalog, to accumulate information about people, organizations, places, events, and concepts.”

This idea is quite similar to a proposal by David Bearman and others for archival information systems. A file such as this would be of immense value, especially in an institution with both archival and museum functions, or shared regionally or nationally among archives and museums.

The notion of a MARC format to describe history museum objects remains a lively item of debate despite the hesitation of the Common Agenda Database Task Force about this option. Certainly the idea of linking museum object information with library and archives information is appealing. Many of the archives, library, and museum representatives at a Common Agenda conference on collections information automation (June 1989), believed that this is technically possible, although politically difficult. Participants in the SAA annual meeting in 1989 heard a report on efforts by the Research Libraries Group to develop an integrated information system for all these forms of information.

Before concluding, I want to recommend four specific actions that archivists and history museum colleagues can take in a spirit of collaboration.

First, as I have suggested, we should maintain a dialogue on the perennial issues of standards and ethics. Perhaps we even need to establish a “joint committee” structure to facilitate such communications.

Second, archivists should look carefully at the applicability of the principles of museum registration practice in archival settings. Of course we are not about to number items, but a centralized, secure information file for each archival unit, physically separate from the actual holdings, may be an appropriate strategy to assure security and accountability.

Third, archives and museums should explore our common interest in history education. Many archivists recognize that teaching about the significance and use of archival materials (and of the institutions that care for them) is essential to a public understanding of our larger mission. Local activities in this vein might include a session on archival sources in a museum lecture series, archival participation in popular museum activities such as “bring your stuff in to the curator days,” and explicit acknowledgment of archival documentation within interpretive exhibits.

Fourth, we can look to Common Agenda as a structure in which collaboration can be fostered. The Common Agenda is specifically charged with creating such
collaborations and its advisory committee includes archival representation. Individuals interested in Common Agenda can follow its activities by receiving special mailings—just ask to be put on the mailing list—and through regular reports in AASLH's newsletter, History News Dispatch, and in articles in the AASLH journal History News.

In summary, then, I have suggested several ways in which internal developments in the museum and archives fields have created a greater commonality of thought and raised issues of common concern. And I have suggested some modest steps to address these issues and concerns.

A different paper—or one twice as long—would have focused on the external forces impinging on both communities. Here it is only possible to briefly mention these forces, some of which have been suggested previously. Changes in historical scholarship over the past several decades have legitimized inquiry into a wide range of topics once largely ignored. At the same time scholars gradually have come to accept material culture—the stuff of history museum collections—as an appropriate object of study in itself and as a legitimate kind of historical evidence, especially when illuminated by documentary evidence.

Thoughtful historians also have come to recognize that only a small portion of what Americans learn about history occurs in the classroom. Scholarly collaboration in teaching history through museum exhibitions and other activities and scholarly acceptance of such “public history” activities is gradually growing. The availability of funding for such alternative ways of doing history has been important. In particular, the National Endowment for the Humanities has encouraged interpretive exhibitions and the collaboration of museum and academic professionals in their creation. Additionally, the structure of NEH has lumped archives and museums together in its programs to increase access to research collections and to preserve them. The sharp lines that the two fields traditionally draw about themselves seem not to be terribly important when viewed from a larger, different perspective of the humanities as a whole.

Increasingly rapid changes in information technologies and communications also contribute to greater museum and archives interaction. Much of the activity in archives, museums, and libraries involves the creation and use of information about their collections. The vast capacity of modern computers to store and make this information available offers an enormous incentive to institutions in these fields to adopt common standards and definitions and thereby realize both improved service and economies of scale and efficiency that these technologies can produce.

A final factor must be the constant scramble for funding throughout the non-profit sector. This creates pressures for greater productivity, efficiency, and service, and undermines parochial appeals to traditional distinctions and “ways we have always done it.” This pressure also forces all institutions to justify their existence more frequently and more convincingly.

It is my hope that both the archives and museum communities will respond to these opportunities and challenges with a new, clear vision and a recognition of our shared commitment to understand and to preserve our cultural heritage.
ABOUT THE AUTHOR: As chief archivist at the National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution, John Fleckner directs a manuscripts and special collections program that he helped to establish in 1982. As an archivist at the State Historical Society of Wisconsin from 1971 to 1982, he had a variety of responsibilities. This paper is a slightly revised version of a plenary address to the Midwest Archives Conference in East Lansing, Michigan, in September 1989.

NOTES

3. NHPRC, Federal Funding for Museum Archives, 7.
8. "Report to the Membership: Standards in Historical Organization" (Unpublished presentations by David Crosson and H. Nicholas Muller, III, at the annual meeting of AASLH, 8 September 1989).
Community-centric Collections: Reassessing John Fleckner’s Perspectives on the Commonalities Between Museums and Archives


*By Selena Ortega-Chiolero, Museum Specialist, Chickaloon Village Traditional Council (Palmer, Alaska)*

In the 1990 article, “Archives and Museums,” John A. Fleckner, archives scholar, past Society of American Archivists (SAA) president, and former senior archivist at the National Museum of American History, shared his thoughts on the commonalities between museums (especially history museums) and archives, as well as his vision for how archivists and museum professionals could collectively respond to opportunities and challenges confronting the cultural heritage sector. Fleckner encouraged archivists to broaden the way they approached their work by seeking out “greater involvement with colleagues in the museum community” (p. 67). In considering the article today, I see many parallels between Fleckner’s recommendations and practices often applied in what we now consider to be community-centric collections where decisions are driven by community voices, for community voices. Community archives stem from a commitment to promote community stories and experiences that are often disparaged or misrepresented in history.¹ Because of this, community archives are driven by communities and in some sense, according to Andrew Flinn, are the embodiment of activism.² This suggests that Fleckner’s dialogue was not that removed from today’s practices. Although Fleckner based his discussion on his experience working in history museums, a more holistic way to consider the commonalities between archives and

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museums is to view them from a community-centric perspective. For me, that would be from an Indigenous perspective.

Fleckner begins his article by describing professional activities that demonstrated an awareness of sector overlaps between museums and archives, such as the archival-related programming and conference sessions hosted by the New England Museum Association and the American Association of Museums, now the American Alliance of Museums (AAM). Although we have seen an increase in this type of intersectional programming at both AAM and SAA annual conferences, there is no better example of complete, ongoing integrated programming than at the Association of Tribal Archives, Libraries, and Museums (ATALM) annual conference. Each year, ATALM hosts an array of conference sessions related to projects, programs, and innovative research occurring in Tribal archives, libraries, and museums (TALMs), often through institutional and sector collaborations. Sessions are structured to provide attendees with the opportunity to fully engage in areas such as archives, historic preservation, language, libraries, and museums. These focus areas are further divided into secondary topics such as archives development and management, organizational capacity, collections care, historic preservation and repatriation, marketing and community outreach, oral history, partnerships and collaborations, and technology that allow attendees to concentrate on building specific skills or gaining strategic knowledge. The conference programming indicates a national organization that understands the needs of its audience and is aware that cultural heritage management in TALMs involves cross-sector collaboration and support.

Fleckner continues his discussion by proposing that archivists should spend the next decade scrutinizing institutional accreditation, specifically in the museum field, to determine whether it is an appropriate means to improve professional practice. Fleckner felt that accreditation stimulated “the articulation of new standards for the field” (p. 68). A fresh perspective at the time, Fleckner was beginning to identify overlaps in archivists and museum professionals’ work and the critical need, particularly in history museums, to rethink their fundamental purposes. Fleckner proposed that we could “strengthen our status and our ability to achieve our larger professional goals by acknowledging and building upon interests shared with other keepers of our cultural heritage” (p. 69).

Basing many of his conclusions on the national framework for professional standards that existed at that time, mainly those from AAM, SAA, and the Association for State and Local History (AASLH), it was still too early for Fleckner to see, let alone fully understand, just how close the lines between archives and museums are and how those lines can sometimes blur. The founding of the Institute

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of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) in 1996 further demonstrated the awareness, at the national level, that museums, libraries, and archives are institutions of learning and inspiration-keepers of the nation’s natural and cultural heritage whose ability to connect community members promotes the enhancement of a collective sense of place. IMLS has since contributed millions of dollars each year toward pioneering projects that have driven significant changes within the museum, library, and archival sectors. An example is the specific funding that IMLS has provided over the last decade to institutions within African American, Native American, and Native Hawaiian communities, which has led the emerging discussion of community-centric approaches to collections management. For instance, this year, Sealaska Heritage Institute, the Alutiiq Museum and Archaeological Repository (Koniag, Inc.), and Hui Mauli Ola will begin collections management projects funded through IMLS’s Native American/Native Hawaiian Museum Services Grant. The projects will be guided by community consultations, and community cultural practices will be implemented into management plans and workflows. For many Indigenous communities, archives often fall under the umbrella of a Tribe’s library and/or museum, which explains why Tribal archival projects are often funded through both library and museum services grants.

Fleckner noted that archivists in his time should have taken a special interest in the critical rethinking that history museums were taking regarding their fundamental purpose. He felt that history museums and archives were both engaged in issues regarding information exchange as they collected materials from specific periods and considered how collections in their care document history. Fleckner explained how the conference on A Common Agenda for History Museums was a catalyst for more organized discussions about rethinking American history museums’ purposes and history and acting on critical issues affecting these museums. According to the “Common Agenda,” the first priority for history museums was to reach people about history (p. 69). Although this remains true in today’s history museums, the COVID-19 pandemic and the sociopolitical movements of a post-COVID world, have shined a light on museums, specifically on how they tell their stories, what stories they are sharing, and how museum and archival collections are managed.

Westernized collections management methodologies place the librarian, the archivist, the collections manager, and the curator as administrators responsible for the management of the material culture found in permanent collections and archives. In this context, cultural heritage professionals must abide by a professional code and follow industry standards that are rooted in colonial theories and practices that evolved out of European conquest and expansion. However, according to friend and colleague, White Earth Chippewa (Anishinaabe) professor Dr. Jessie Ryker-

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Crawford, director of the Cultural Administration program at the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe, New Mexico,

We are much more than simply stewards of inanimate objects that are held within our collections. We are also servants of the cultures and communities from which we gather knowledge, insight, and both personal and professional enlightenment. For we are here to help share the stories that have been for so many years silenced, miscommunicated, disfigured, and misapprehended.⁶

Collecting objects is not enough; recording the stories of the communities that give them meaning—their context—is just as significant. Fleckner quotes Nicholas Westbrook, formerly of the Minnesota Historical Society, who wrote that “we need to be collecting not only fine objects . . . but also the stories of the lives that gave meaning to those objects” (p. 70). Fleckner sought to learn from his museum contemporaries how archivists could improve their own techniques and methodologies for preserving these stories. However, he also should have looked to the source communities from which the materials in his care originated. Those of us in Indigenous communities know that archival and museum collections (cultural expressions) are living, by nature, and to bring real value to them, it is important to document their connection to their source communities.

The Ahtna Dene communities of Alaska, like many other Native American communities across the United States, First Nations communities across Canada, and other Indigenous communities around the globe, understand that the Westernized approach to collections management not only does not align with our community cultural values and traditions, but also contradicts our understanding of our intimate responsibilities to our communities and the landscapes that we have called home since time immemorial. The emergence of cultural resources projects led by Ahtna Dene communities of Alaska demonstrates the increasing desire for Alaska Native communities to steward their own cultural expressions in a manner that is culturally relevant and respectful. This means that Ahtna Dene communities are developing their own unique methodologies for collections management. Due to the immediate need to establish these practices, Tribes have chosen to adapt current established Westernized institutional practices using an “Indigenized” manner that implements Indigenous ways of knowing. In doing this, they are choosing to integrate aspects of collections management from Westernized libraries, archives, and museums that will inevitably lead to an amalgam of institutional convergence with Indigenous worldviews.

The cultural resources projects discussed at the first Ahtna Language and Culture Gathering in February 2023, hosted by the Cheesh’na Tribal Council, the governing

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body of the Ahtna Dene village of Chistochina, are examples of this approach. During the gathering, Chistochina Elder, Agnes Denny, and Denny’s daughter, Jessica Denny, shared the Cheesh’na Tribal Council’s current work, which is focused on addressing the need and desire to formalize the Tribe’s cultural expressions in a manner that aligns with the Tribe’s cultural values and lifeways. As part of their infrastructure development, the Tribe has visited external repositories to learn how and where cultural materials from their community are managed and housed. Their goal is to integrate some of these institutional practices with Tribal traditional stewardship practices. The Tribe is focused on caring for their materials according to the Ahtna seasonal wheel. This will be achieved through the assignment of cultural protocols to help determine levels of access while dictating what time of year materials will be accessible. This approach to collections management and access honors the Tribe’s legacy and respects their history and culture. However, this methodology is not widely accepted among Western museums, libraries, and archives.

In tandem with Cheesh’na Tribal Council’s efforts, representatives from Chistochina Village, Native Village of Cantwell, and Chickaloon Native Village, in partnership with the Smithsonian Arctic Studies Center at the Anchorage Museum, are working on a cultural belongings sovereignty project. The project involves the Tribal representatives visiting several Smithsonian institutions that have Ahtna Dene and Ahtna Dene-related materials in their holdings to determine how the materials were acquired and how they are being managed. One of the main goals of the project is to restore control over these cultural expressions to their source communities, thus enforcing the sovereignty the Tribes innately possess. Throughout the project, the Tribal representatives are regularly consulting with other members of their communities to broaden their understanding of the materials and to provide guidance in how to improve their care and management.

Fleckner too recognized the importance and value of collaboration, even if he approached it more from an institutional standpoint than a community-centered one. In a demonstration of how archivists and museum professionals could begin to collaborate, Fleckner proposed that both sectors maintain a dialogue on standards and ethics within the industry, explore their common interest in history education, and consider the AASLH Common Agenda Documentation Project as a structure in which collaboration could be fostered. He also encouraged archivists to investigate the applicability of museum registration principles and practices in archival settings. These suggestions encouraged archivists and museum professionals to work together, not against one another, and collaborate to redefine their work so that they could bring stronger meaning and greater use to the collections in their communities.

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7 Agnes and Jessica Denny, “Cheesh’na Tribal Council” (Virtual Presentation, Cheesh’na Tribal Council’s Ahtna Language and Culture Gathering, Anchorage Sheraton Hotel, February 17, 2023).
8 Melissa Shaginoff, “Creating Sovereignty of Cultural Belongings” (Virtual Presentation, Cheesh’na Tribal Council’s Ahtna Language and Culture Gathering, Anchorage Sheraton Hotel, February 17, 2023).
care. As previously noted through the professional development offerings of TALMs and the cultural resources projects currently being conducted in Ahtna Dene communities, many of Fleckner’s recommendations have already been put into practice within Indigenous communities. In fact, there are now numerous institutions throughout the country, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, like the Chickasaw Cultural Center’s Holisso: Center for Study of Chickasaw History and Culture and Chikasha Poya Exhibit Center, that house both archives and materials collections and have some structural or organizational overlap in their operations.

Fleckner concludes his article by acknowledging how information technologies and communications contribute to greater museum and archives interaction. Three decades later, this statement could not be more true. Virtual and social platforms, most notably, have become essential, due in part to how organizational responses to the COVID-19 pandemic pivoted how they operate. Post-pandemic, these platforms have been adopted into regular organizational operations within the cultural heritage sector for the purposes of holding organization meetings, professional training opportunities, organizational programming, collections documentation, and improved access. According to past IMLS Director Robert S. Martin, “In the digital environment, the distinctions among libraries, museums and archives that we take for granted are artificial,” and as the boundaries between libraries, archives, and museums begin to blur and they begin to work more closely to “realize their common missions [, our] communities will be strengthened and [our] heritage ensured.”

Fleckner’s position on the commonalities between museums and archives is still valid and, in fact, more evident than ever. However, where he proposed the use of history museums as the focus of his analysis of industry similarities and the potential of development through cross-sector collaboration, he also should have been looking into community-centric collections like those found in Indigenous communities. Indigenous cultures and languages are not remnants of the past but rather exist in the now, and the materials that have and continue to be created through Indigenous lifeways are living extensions of the people who created them. As such, they are to be respected, acknowledged, and shared appropriately so that those cultural expressions can continue to help the community to thrive. An Indigenous community’s need to preserve and share community histories and culture (through stories) empowers their community to be active partners and participants. This intimate relationship creates more authentic and meaningful collections management practices, which leads to stronger and more effective repositories. This approach is not synonymous with only Indigenous communities but applies to other communities as well. Amidst a post-COVID world immersed in a variety of sociopolitical movements, communities across the nation want and need something more. In listening to these community voices, cultural heritage

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professionals must begin to understand that the path forward will most likely not look like the one of the past. Indeed, it will consist of what Fleckner earlier proposed as a “critical rethinking,” though this is far more extensive than he originally considered (p. 69).