



HOME CURATING GUIDE

Introduction

- Are you a historian/author/heritage consultant with a collection of books, manuscripts, artefacts or digital data and you are looking to hand it on for the appreciation of future generations?
- Are you the keeper of the family archives, or have had material handed on to you through a deceased estate, and have books, clothing, photographs, school records, family heirlooms etc. and don't know how/where to place them for safe keeping for your children, grandchildren?

Although we will always keep up our interest in the heritage field, there comes a time when you want to step down, or retire, or simply not want the responsibility of handling the archive, and let the next generation take over. It is a nerve-wracking time. All that which you or others around you hold most dear or valuable has taken years, sometimes a lifetime to accumulate, and you/they may be reluctant to let go. As we have heard before, one person's junk is another person's treasure. There can be a fine line between collecting and hoarding. Most collectors, whether individuals or institutions, will acquire, research, document, organise, exhibit and/or share their collections. A hoarder can be very good at the acquisition part of collecting but may fall down on the other actions. Maybe you are somewhere in between, or simply are storing artefacts for others.

Family curators have been organizing and saving family history for a long time, but the trend today is to declutter, and finding family history tossed in the rubbish bin, however, is not so wonderful. If you find that you can't keep everything, keep the photos, documents, and artefacts that tell your family history or the local history, and err on the side of caution. Think like a historian, looking for recurring themes such as jobs, family, immigration, travel or war.

Where do you go to seek help in this regard? Look around the family to see who of the next generation is developing enough interest to take it on.

You have the options of keeping and storing the material or artefacts yourself or passing them on to a formal organisation for safekeeping.

Doing it yourself

This all about keeping the items safe, preserving them, and managing their ongoing preservation. Thinking like a curator means remaining aware of things when they aren't in use, so it is helpful to apply museum procedures and principles to our everyday activities and things. Think like an archivist or a researcher or a professor.

The word 'curate' derives from the Latin *curare*, 'to care for', and storage is an unavoidable part of life. What you own says a lot about you, in ways you might not even be aware of.

You can always give something away. But if you change your mind, it might be hard to get that treasure back again. Or, if new information comes to light, you might wish that item were still available. This isn't to ignore the reality that most of us don't have room for a dedicated family archive, or heirs waiting to step in and take over one day. It's wise to make plans for the future. To digitize, to seek out a good fit for donation, and, most importantly, to write up our research so our work isn't lost. The job of a family curator is flexible. It will grow and contract to fit your needs and time.

One guide in the literature is set out as follows:

1. Things that mean something to you – keep.
2. Things that mean something to someone else – donate or throw away.
3. Things that have monetary value – sell.
4. Things that are still useful – keep, either yourself or give away.

However, sentimentality kicks in here, and this guide could be a bit brutal. But it is your own personal preference.

If you decide to attempt to conserve and store the collection yourself, you may need to purchase acid-free archival boxes and document cases included a mix of different shapes and sizes to store papers; boxes that fit your storage shelves are usually the easiest to handle. Shoebox-size boxes are handy for photos and artefacts and large acid-free archival banker's boxes for items waiting to be processed. Choose a size that fits whatever you need to preserve and that fits your storage area.

Every box needs a label, and little label holders can be purchased which stick on the side of archival boxes. Box contents can be listed on the acid-free card and easily inserted into the plastic sleeve. You may have clothing on hangers inside garment bags, boxes with textiles, photo albums, oversize documents, rolled photographs, film, and more. It doesn't all fit in one space. So, a purpose-built cupboard with plastic coated wire shelving is ideal. Allow plenty of space for air to circulate.

Handing it on

Private family history archivists may first look around the family to see who of the next generation is developing enough interest to take it on. If the family collection relates to settlement outside your local area, you may be contacting organisations or family members elsewhere in the State, country or even overseas.

If you should be considering disposal, many first thoughts lean towards approaching your local historical society, family history group or museum, library or even the op shop! Before you do this, you should be aware that these organisations, even the op shop, will probably have collection policies to guide them in regard to what and how much they can take into their collections in the future.

Collection policies

In the July-August 2024 issue of *Heritage* the Editorial elaborated on collection policies generally, and then provided details in regard to the various policies across the Blue Mountains which are held by museums, historical societies, family history groups and so on. **See Appendix A.** If you wish to donate an item to an organisation you should know where you stand, and what options you have locally.

Museums, family history groups and historical societies are among the most trusted of all public organisations – up there with the local library. Trust is trust, and it's one of the most valuable things a person can be given, whatever their walk of life. When someone gives an institution its trust, what responsibilities ensue? How can an organisation maintain the trust of its public, which can bring conflicting demands to its doorstep, such as in deaccessioning?

These are difficult problems, to be sure, and over the past year or so, such organisations have had to contend with them as never before. If they have a natural advantage over other types of organisations, it's in the solidity of the objects under their care. A museum in particular is defined by things and the people who care for them. There's a sense of duty.

Each organisation will have a collection policy, a set of guidelines which governs collecting, loans, deaccessioning, collection care and access for collecting agencies. They are invaluable in situations where well-meaning donors want to give objects to a group which do not fit the organisation's aims. Handling such offers requires tact and diplomacy and having a written policy provides clarity for both the organisation and the donor without offence. Collection policies should always be publicly accessible.

A collection policy usually addresses:

- The purpose or mission of the organisation
- What the organisation collects
- How, from whom, and under what circumstances the organisation collects
- How it documents its acquisitions
- How it cares for the collection
- How it deals with removing objects from the collection
- What kind of loans it will enter into and what conditions will apply
- How the collection and records are made accessible to researchers and members of the general public
- How often the policy is reviewed

Most organisations greatly appreciate the many kind offers they receive each year from people looking to donate items to cultural collections. Unfortunately, the space and curatorial capacity they have for new collection items may be very limited.

Please note that the decision whether or not to acquire an item does not hinge solely on its artistic or cultural significance, but on a whole range of issues that may be specific to the organisation, which is why it is important to access their collection policy and be familiar with their aims and objectives. However, where appropriate, the organisation may be able to assist you in identifying alternative collecting institutions that would be a better match for your proposed donation.

Collection solutions

The difference between museums and other agencies is noted, in that museums are the main collectors of objects. All agencies appear to accept, within their stated criteria and the storage space available, research material and photographs. Most do emphasize that acceptance may be on a case-by-case basis.

All agencies appear to operate under similar acquisition criteria. Amongst the criteria surrounding a decision to accept a donation, the following considerations would be taken into account in the acceptance of acquisitions and deposits:

- Provenance and authenticity
- Consultation
- Condition and care
- Conditions or restrictions
- Conflict of interest.
- Ownership of the item

The organisation may ask for certain information about the item/s or collection, such as:

- Photographs of the item(s)
- How did you come to own the item?
- Does it have a relationship to one of the properties or collections?
- What condition is the item in?
- What is the history of the item?
- Who were the previous owners (if known) and do you have any documentation to confirm this?

There may be other community organisations who would be interested in your collection, especially if it is theme based eg. stamps, coins, railway memorabilia, armed forces artefacts and so on.

eHive: Online cataloguing and publishing for cultural heritage

One solution for you may be to make use of *eHive*. The following information is provided from their website www.ehive.com

eHive is a web-based collection cataloguing system. The system is used worldwide by hundreds of museums, societies and private collectors to catalogue objects, store images, manage acquisition information and publish their collections online.

It can be accessed from any computer or device running a web browser, including PCs, Mac and mobiles. You can catalogue objects, store images, manage acquisition information, and publish your collections online. The company, Vernon Systems, take care of hosting and backing up your data, so your collection information is both secure and readily accessible. They also perform all of the system upgrades so any enhancements to eHive are made immediately available to you.

eHive has seven different object record types: Archives, Archaeology, Art, History, Library, Natural Science, and Photography and Multimedia. Each record can capture both descriptive and administrative information about your object. eHive also supports the tracking of acquisition information.

No training or specialist knowledge is required to use the system. The built-in help will guide you through the system. Because it's web-based, you don't need to worry about installing or upgrading any software. They take care of secure hosting, backups and software and hardware upgrades. This makes it ideal for collectors or smaller institutions who don't have dedicated IT staff.

You can create your own profile page and publish your collection online with eHive. When you save a record, you are presented with publishing options. It is a tick of a checkbox to publish the key details of a record online. eHive also has tagging and commenting features. Adding tags to your records makes them easy to find, and the commenting feature means that you can encourage community participation around an object.

Publishing to eHive is optional. If you don't want a record to be publicly visible, untick the 'Publish to eHive' checkbox when saving the record. You can set all, or some of your records as private.

eHive accounts are available on an annual subscription basis covering use of the software, storage and ongoing development. The amount of storage you use determines the level you need to purchase. See the eHive Pricing page for more details.

Conclusions

The above may seem quite daunting and it can be intimidating to approach an agency to discuss the future of your precious collection, or to undertake an eHive adventure. However, you will never know unless you begin!!!

Do not disregard the possibility that you can undertake the task yourself. There are many agencies and online references where you can seek guidance. If all you do now, is sort and store the material safely for the next generation, that is a beginning. If you have time, catalogue it as well. The next generation who takes up with the collection may not be immediate family, but maybe a friend or colleague, fellow historian or researcher. The base

work which you carry out now will lay the groundwork for establishing the significance of the collection. You will place significance as it relates to you, but a future curator will add layers to that original story, enhanced through the possible use of eHive, and a wider understanding will ensue.

Appendix A

Collection Policies in the Blue Mountains Region*

- **Everglades, Norman Lindsay Gallery, & Woodford Academy:** These groups are guided by the National Trust Collection & Development Policy 2018: the policy provides guidance on collection development and management functions and activities, principally acquisition and deaccessioning. The collection of the National Trust has been predominantly acquired through donations, bequests, financial gifts, and fundraising, usually conditional. The National Trust will accept objects on a permanent basis only if they are relevant and consistent with its organisational aims and objectives. Their policy lists each of its properties and documents specific collection criteria for each premises, and they may collect objects for comparative research purposes to enhance knowledge and interpretation of the permanent collection.
- **Hawkesbury Community Archives 2015:** Records will remain permanently in the custody of Hawkesbury City Library's Local Studies Collection and accessible to the community and future researchers. The types of records that can be donated to the Community Archives may include minutes, newsletters and journals, reports, correspondence, photographs, videos or movies, diaries, personal papers, newspaper clippings and scrapbooks, maps and plans. In addition, individuals can make donations of material to the Local Studies Collection via a donation or a bequest, as part of an estate, subject to assessment.
- **Lithgow & District Family History Society 2022:** The aims are to collect, index and conserve for posterity, records and items useful in the study of family history including their stories, from the Lithgow City Geographical Area, and includes any State, national and international areas involved directly with this research. They collect BDM records, church & cemetery records, family trees, digital records, books and records relating to social history, industrial, building and commercial records and photographs, oral histories and maps. They may accept objects that reflect significant periods within the above area and within the ability of the Society to store and preserve same.

- **Lithgow Learning Centre and Eskbank House:** Museum Collecting Guidelines: The item must fit within the museum's purpose, collection aim and collection areas, and must be historically significant. It should have a clearly established provenance (i.e. history) and be in good condition. There must be an assurance that the item can be adequately looked after and stored. The intending donor must have legal title to the item, and the item should be free of encumbrances. The item must not unnecessarily duplicate items already in the collection, and the acquisition of the item must not unduly compete with the collecting areas of other museums.
- **Local Studies Collection Policy, Blue Mountains City Council:** To preserve and make available a wide range of research material covering all aspects of the Blue Mountains region and make it accessible in appropriate formats both within and outside the library. The collection includes new and second hand material, relating to the Greater Blue Mountains, council rate and valuation records, minute books, books, reports, guidebooks, directories and souvenir booklets, vertical files, BM newspapers, a limited number of newsletters and journals of local groups, postcards are accepted, and copyright free photographs in slide, negative print and digital.
Blue Mountains City Council has a separate collections policy for the City Library.
- **Mt Victoria & District Historical Society – statement only – 2024:** The Museum collection must relate to the district of Mount Victoria and its directly surrounding area. No longer taking items on loan, except for specific exhibitions.
- **State Mine Lithgow Collection Management 2014:** To guide decision making regarding acquisitions, documentation and disposal of collection items. The Museum collects objects and documents of direct relevance to the mining and industrial history of the Western Coalfield. The Museum collects machinery, transport equipment and vehicles, tools, personal protective equipment, lamps, geological specimens, documents, books, maps, plans, banners relevant to the history of mining and industry in the Western Coalfield. Larger collection objects may be accepted from other New South Wales coalmining districts where there is no capacity to conserve these items within their own areas, subject to assessment on merit.
- **Valley Heights Locomotive Depot Heritage Museum Donations Policy 2017:** This group has reached the point where they can no longer accept items into their collection. Their website states:
Offers of unsolicited donations of printed matter and other “memorabilia” may place Museum members in a difficult position. Following an upturn in such offers, the Museum’s resources have become strained by the influx. In February 2017 the Museum adopted the policy: “No further donations of books, magazines, timetables, railway publications, plans, drawings photographs and small exhibits

of any kind shall be accepted by any member or volunteer on behalf of the Museum UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE.”

➤ **Blue Mountains Historical Society collections policies:**

Archival material and donations to Blue Mountains Historical Society is governed by several policies, and not a Collections Policy as such.

They accept donations of archival materials, historical books, journals, magazines, images and other objects which have historical significance to the Blue Mountains and surrounding areas, subject to assessment based on established criteria.

An object of the Society is:

To acquire and preserve books, documents, manuscripts, newspapers, maps, photographs, photographic images, paintings, drawings, digital images, and all and any objects and materials as may be considered to have a bearing on the history of the Blue Mountains and Australian history in general, and to establish and maintain a library and resource centre on the Society’s property, where these objects and materials are made available for study and research by members of the Society and to members of the public. To manage this objective the Society has formal acquisition procedures in place, to enable assessment of proposed donations to ensure the item is not duplicating material already held.

An Archives Working Group was established to manage this process, and it preserves the right to decline the offer of some materials which may fall outside this collecting ambit, or which pose significant difficulties in terms of long term storage, preservation and conservations.

**It should be noted that the abovementioned Policies are those known to be current at the drafting of this document. Contact directly with the agency will establish whether any more recent reviews have been undertaken.*

Further research established collection policies at State and Federal level, which are worth reviewing:

- Museums Australia Collection Policy 2014
- Australian Museum Cultural Collections 2024
- MAAS Acquisitions and Accessions Policy 2020
- Sydney Living Museums - Collection Management 2014