



Donation Decisions: An Inside Look

Video Podcast Transcript

Minnesota Historical Society

I'm Matt Anderson, and I'm standing in one of the collection storage spaces at the Minnesota Historical Society. Since its establishment in 1849, the Society has collected objects, books, maps, fine art, posters, manuscript materials, and government records. While some materials – government records, for example – come into our holdings on fixed schedules set by government agencies, much of what we have comes to us in the form of donations from the public. Space, time and resources are limited, and acquiring an item into the collection isn't quite as simple as taking it and putting it into a display case or on a storage shelf. Several steps are involved.

The typical donation begins when a donor submits an online form about the object. The curator reviews the form and can often make a decision then and there. If the object has an interesting story, if it isn't duplicated in the existing collection, if it's in good condition, and if it has strong ties to the state of Minnesota, then arrangements will be made to bring the item to the History Center. During the meeting, the curator asks the donor for information about the object, and then issues a Temporary Deposit Receipt, which the donor signs. This form gives the Society temporary custody of the object while it is evaluated.

After meeting with the donor, the curator may conduct additional research, or compare the item with other pieces in the collection. If the object still has strong potential, then it's taken to the Acquisitions Committee for formal approval. This committee, consisting of curators, librarians, exhibit developers, and other specialists, listens as the curator makes the case for the object, explaining its story, its significance, how it complements other materials in the Society's holdings, and how it might be used for exhibit or study purposes. The committee then debates over and votes on the item. If a majority is in favor, then the object will become a part of the collection.

After the positive vote, the curator writes a catalog record for the object, noting what it is, how it was used, the nature of its significance, and the name and contact information of the donor. The curator then sends a Deed of Gift form to the donor. This form transfers legal

ownership of the object to the Minnesota Historical Society. The donor signs the paper, and the returned document is placed into the Society's permanent file.

The Collections Manager then assigns a permanent accession number to the object, and passes it on to a volunteer who labels the item with that number. This identification number follows the object forever, and ties it to its computer catalog record and its paper file. A photograph of the object is then taken, both for inventory purposes, and for use in the Society's publically-accessible Web-based catalog.

Finally, the Collections Manager finds a permanent home for the object among the shelves and cabinets in the climate-controlled storage rooms. There the new acquisition stays, safe and secure, until needed for research or exhibit purposes.

As you can see, a good deal of careful thought goes into deciding what we take for the permanent collection, and the typical donation passes through many hands. We take these steps to ensure that the collection is of high quality, and that limited space and resources are used prudently. Not everything can be added to our holdings, but the process helps to ensure that those materials we do take will be available to future generations as they explore Minnesota's past.