



Schenectady County Historical Society

Collections Development Plan

Contributors:

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I. Introduction

The act of collecting and preserving objects is a cornerstone of all historical societies. Museums and archives answer a basic human need to collect, identify, and understand patterns in our world.

This document describes the present collections of the Schenectady County Historical Society (SCHS) and offers guidelines for their development. This document will guide the SCHS staff and Board of Directors in making collections acquisition and deaccession decisions. Additionally, this document will guide SCHS towards more inclusive community collaboration in terms of collections, oral histories, and other historical resources. Community partnerships are essential to museums and libraries. As SCHS seeks to explore new subject matters, develop new, complex interpretations of history, and to share historical authority with our community, it is clear that we can't do it alone. Partnerships and collaborations are vital to SCHS' mission and collections vision.

This document was developed following the 2018 SCHS Strategic Plan, which outlined numerous goals for SCHS. Among those were the following:

- Develop a collections plan that includes priorities for collections acquisitions and deaccessions, and methods to diversify collections;
- Actively document transitions and developments currently underway in Schenectady;
- Expand and strengthen our working partnerships and community engagement to better achieve our mission, and to position SCHS as a vibrant, outward facing organization.

At the intersection of these goals is this Collections Plan; a guideline for thoughtful and systematic collections growth for SCHS. It is based on an examination and analysis of our current collections, and gaps there within, and on surveys from the community. Together, this creates an intellectual framework and vision for collecting and collections management in the future.

The overriding rationale for the guidelines set forth in this document is that we are not collecting the past so much as collecting for the future. While the collection needs of the future cannot be wholly anticipated, it is certain that the future will encompass change in our region. One common concern expressed by the community is that SCHS document change as it has occurred and continues to occur. Furthermore, the collection of new, diverse objects is needed to engage different parts of our community. Accompanying all objects should be a thorough documentation, whether through oral histories, written stories, or other accompanying data. Ultimately, objects derive meaning only from the stories they can tell.

Purpose of Collections Development Plan

This document is one of two documents that describe and shape the SCHS collection. The first, the Collections Management Plan, outlines the ways that SCHS manages collecting and caring for the collection of artifacts and archives. It notes SCHS' adherence to all applicable laws relating to the acquisition and purchase of art and artifacts, policies for acquisition and deaccession, and the like.

This document, the Collections Development Plan, provides guidance for the content of those collections. It serves as a guide for building a permanent collection that supports the mission of SCHS while balancing SCHS' physical and fiscal constraints. It asks questions about and suggests new directions for the collections such as:

- What is in the collections?
- What should be in the collections?
- What artifacts does SCHS need to “share stories, inspire dialogue, and encourage understanding of the history, people, and cultures of Schenectady County?”
- How does that relate to the collections created over the previous century?
- Which items no longer fit SCHS' mission, and should be considered for deaccession?
- What areas of the collection need to be created or expanded to meet its current mission?
- How can SCHS ensure it is collecting for the future?

To be useful, this document must be consulted when staff, committees, and the Board of Directors consider new acquisitions and deaccessions. It should shape the ongoing work of SCHS as professional staff consider the value — or lack of value — of existing collections and proactively consider deaccession. It should shape the ongoing work of SCHS as professional staff consider which communities, cultures, or periods of history require more active collecting.

Of course, no plan can encompass all future possibilities, and the plan must allow for flexibility, for unforeseen opportunities. This document is based on a snapshot of SCHS' collections, exhibition, and education trajectory. It should be evaluated and revised periodically. An evaluation each year, as part of the rolling strategic planning process, will help to keep SCHS' collections aligned with its mission.

This plan balances historical and contemporary collections and the research and exhibition uses of artifacts, to provide guidance to staff as they go about their work of shaping SCHS' collecting. This plan outlines SCHS' collecting priorities, and suggests how SCHS should make the best use of existing collections. SCHS needs to respond to community needs and interests, diverse representation, and the realities of storage space.

SCHS Mission

The Schenectady County Historical Society shares stories, inspires dialogue, and encourages understanding of the history, people, and cultures of Schenectady County.

SCHS Vision

The Schenectady County Historical Society strengthens our community as an increasingly vital destination and resource for exploring history.

II. Collections

Library and Archives

The collections of the Grems-Doolittle Library and Archives at the Schenectady County Historical Society are comprised of a large reading room and a lower level close stack archival room of the same area. Our collections are comprised of over 6,000 books and periodicals, 30,000 photographic prints, 750 maps, and 65 linear feet of newspaper clippings and surname files. Our archival storage holds approximately 2,000 linear feet of archival records, legal documents, maps, and photographs pertaining to Schenectady County's history. The library and archives also hold oversized and large format items like maps, photographs, broadsides, and architectural drawings.

Our library and archival collections are particularly strong in the early colonial history of the area, mainly in the 17th and 18th century. This time period is mainly represented in the Historic Manuscript Collection, which documents the various sorts of trade that occurred in Schenectady through accounts, deeds, ledgers, and correspondence. The papers of the Mabee Family in the library document life on an 18th century Mohawk Valley farm (the Mabee Farm Historic Site in Rotterdam, NY managed by the Historical Society).

Diaries, letters, maps, and photographs describe the impact of the Erie Canal on Schenectady, and the impact this river trade route has had on the transport of people and goods to and from the Great Lakes Region in the early years of the United States. Business records, civic organizational records, and church records are additional examples of the many library primary source documents used by researchers to explore, understand and document the changes in the United States from agrarian society to industrial giant in those years. Schenectady became an early technology center, home to General Electric and the American Locomotive Company (ALCO). The library collections about these industry giants complement the holdings in other Schenectady repositories, including the Schenectady Museum, the Edison Exploratorium, Union College, and the Efner History Center of Schenectady City Hall.

Our library, photograph, and archival collections are cataloged in PastPerfect, which is our content management system. All of our library collection is cataloged with 6,316 titles, and we are working towards digitizing our photo catalog on PastPerfect. We currently have 14,539 images digitized and cataloged in PastPerfect. We have found that PastPerfect is not the best way to catalog our archival collection, and while we try to make sure that there is a record in PastPerfect, we often create additional finding aids and indexes for these collections. Our collections are showcased in several different ways. The Grems-Doolittle Library Collections Blog highlights collections in our library and archives, and tells the history of Schenectady County through our collection. Our New York Heritage website has collections ranging from images of postcards, photographs of street scenes, a correspondence collection, and a variety of other photographic collections.

Museum

The Schenectady County Historical Society has been collecting objects of artistic, cultural, and historical significance to Schenectady County and the surrounding region since its foundation in 1905. Throughout a century of collecting, SCHS has amassed a large and diverse collection containing over 12,500 objects across a broad range of categories: art and decorative art, toys, clothing and textiles, farm equipment and tools, archeological artifacts, as well as objects related to Schenectady industry and trade, local clubs, and civic organizations. The following collections are of particular historic value to SCHS: the Mynderse Collection, received from the Schenectady Museum (now MiSci), which contains mostly textiles and decorative art from the late 18th to mid-19th century; the Glen Sanders Collection, purchased from Colonial Williamsburg and made up of items from the Glen Sanders Mansion, containing the majority of the Society's colonial artifacts; and the Mabee Farm Collection, artifacts deeded to SCHS with the Mabee Farm, including objects owned by the family and an extensive collection of 19th century farming equipment and other agricultural related artifacts. SCHS collections are stored at two primary locations: the Museum at 32 Washington Ave and the Franchere Education Center (FEC) at Mabee Farm Historic Site.

Great effort has been made in recent years to relocate artifacts previously stored in outbuildings at Mabee Farm to temperature controlled facilities in the FEC. SCHS has nearly completed this goal with over 95% of our collection housed in storage areas that meet museum standards for environmental and security conditions. Oversized items, such as large agricultural equipment which are too large to store inside, will continue to be stored in other buildings at Mabee Farm. As SCHS consolidated artifact storage to the FEC, this has led to an overcrowding of the temperature controlled storage room. A solution for this is to install hanging rolled storage for textiles such as flags, quilts, etc. These artifacts are currently being stored folded in acid free boxes on the moveable shelving units. Rehousing textiles to rolled storage is better for long term preservation and will free up much needed shelving for other 3D objects in the collection.

Prior to 2006, SCHS converted the 3rd floor of the Museum at 32 Washington from exhibition space to storage space. In addition to these rooms, SCHS utilizes several closets throughout the

19th century home for object storage. Several of these spaces have become overcrowded leading to poor storage and preparation conditions. For example, the majority of SCHS' 2D art collection is housed in a large closet on the second floor of the museum. This space is overpacked, making access difficult and increasing the risk of damage to artwork and original framing. A possible solution to help to mitigate these issues would be to install new mobile painting racks in the area of the library archives already set aside for artwork.

SCHS has made great strides in obtaining intellectual control over its collections. SCHS has successfully cataloged approximately 90% of its artifacts and will reach its 100% goal by 2020. While new donations are quickly accessioned using the museum database software PastPerfect, many of the artifacts collected in the early years of the museum are not well documented and have little or no provenance information. Subsequently these are listed as "found in collections," and designated with a "XXXX.00" accession number.

III. Collections Analyses

Library and Archives

Collections in the Grems-Doolittle Library and Archives are used in a few different ways. The main use is for genealogical and local history research. Our library has a robust genealogical collection, which aims to assist patrons with finding their local ancestors. Genealogical resources include our family files, church records, cemetery records, city directories, and yearbooks. Our local history resources include collections from town, city, and county historians, published history books, and our newspaper clippings files. Our archival and photograph collection supports both genealogical and local history researchers. Items in our archival collection have been used in exhibits both at the Schenectady County Historical Society and in other cultural organizations. Our library collections are also used to research exhibits in the SCHS museum. Our library and archival collections have also been used by archeologists in the area in order to be more informed about where building foundations and other archeological features are.

Colonial Schenectady is strongly represented in our archival collections, especially in our Historic Manuscript Collections, which documents life in 17th and 18th century Schenectady through accounts, deeds, legal matters, and wills. We have several photographic collections that document life in Schenectady from the late 1800s up through the 1980s. We also have a large postcard collection with many of the postcards dating from the 1910s. Schenectady's immigrant groups are represented in collections like the Abruzzese Society Collection.

Our collections are particularly weak on documenting underrepresented groups throughout Schenectady County. This includes Schenectady's African American population, and more recent

immigrant groups. Our goal for the library and archives is to be representative of the various groups that make up Schenectady County history.

Museum

Objects in SCHS' museum collection are used primarily for exhibition purposes. SCHS exhibits are displayed at 32 Washington and the FEC at Mabee Farm Historic Site. In addition to semi-permanent exhibition space, SCHS debuts two rotating exhibitions per year, one at each site. A select number of artifacts are also on permanent display in the Mabee House. SCHS maintains several ongoing, long term loans with the New York State Governor's Office, Albany County Historical Association, Empire State Development, and Amtrak which are reviewed every two years.

The museum collection is open for research by appointment, however, SCHS receives few requests for access. The painting collection, particularly those by artists Samuel Sexton and Len Tantillo, generate the most public interest.

The museum collection is especially strong in 19th and 20th century artifacts documenting life during those time periods, particularly Schenectady's "Golden Age," roughly defined as 1880-1930. This includes artifacts related to ALCO and General Electric, Schenectady's two major industries, ephemera pertaining to social immigrant organizations, textiles and garments, and domestic artifacts. The acquisition of the Mabee Farm and related farming tools and equipment strengthened SCHS' agriculture collection from 19th century. Time periods which should be strengthened are the 17th and 18th century as well as the 21st century.

IV. Vision for Collections

The vision of the SCHS is to develop a permanent collection that is representative of Schenectady's diverse communities and industries, and positioned so that it can be collaborative and non-competitive with other area museums and archives. The goals for the SCHS collection are to:

1. Be representative of Schenectady's communities, past and present, with an emphasis on diversity and underrepresented communities.
2. Be representative of Schenectady County's variety of industries.
3. Actively document changes in Schenectady County, over the years, and contemporarily.
4. Develop -- through acquisitions and deaccessioning -- a collection which tells dynamic stories and demonstrates a clear significance to Schenectady County.

5. Serve the community by connecting people to the collections, through exhibitions, social media, and outgoing loans of artifacts.

Community Input

SCHS conducted community surveys in 2015 and 2018, asking constituents what issues or topics they were most interested in learning more about. These interests should be taken into account when collecting for the future, or determining which artifacts should be interpreted where and how.

The most popular topics the community is interested in (25%+) include People's Stories, Native American History, Culture (daily life, food, clothes), Immigration & Ethnicity, Architecture & Preservation, Industry & Business, Women's History, and Genealogy. Over 50% of people identified a strong interest in the time periods of 1600s, 1700s, and 1800s.

Recommendations for Acquisitions

In determining recommendations for acquisitions, we considered what gaps exist in the collection, and which areas need to be amplified to meet the current mission and vision. Over the next three years SCHS will concentrate its collecting primarily in these focus areas:

1. Artifacts and documents that tell the story of the colonial time period in Schenectady, c. 1660-1775.
2. Artifacts, documents, and oral histories that tell the story of the African American community and experience in Schenectady.
3. Contemporary artifacts or documents that pertain to Schenectady's diverse communities and current events, or are related to contemporary issues in the region.
4. Contemporary artifacts or documents that pertain to locally manufactured goods (e.g., handmade items by local crafters and items produced locally).

SCHS' focus in these areas does not mean that it will not collect in other areas, but rather that it will focus its collecting initiatives in these areas.

Recommendations for Deaccessioning

Deaccessioning is as important to shaping a collection as new collecting is. SCHS should, of course, deaccession with great care; it should continue to leverage its eclectic collections. But a century of collecting means that SCHS has artifacts that do not fit its mission as it is defined today. SCHS also has space limitations which is a factor when seeking or offered large objects. Therefore, SCHS should undertake a concerted plan to deaccession objects that match the following points:

1. The object is inconsistent with the vision of SCHS' Collections Development Plan;

2. The object has failed to retain its identity;
3. The object is redundant or a duplicate;
4. The object's preservation and conservation needs are beyond the capacity of SCHS to provide
5. The object is deaccessioned to accomplish refinement of collections or does not relate to Schenectady County;
6. It has been established that the object is inauthentic;
7. The object presents a hazard to people or other collection items; and/or
8. The object has been lost or stolen and has not been recovered.

Deaccessioning will take time and effort, but the end result — space and funds to build and care for a collections that meets the needs of SCHS and the community in the 21st century — make the effort worth the trouble. Culling the collections will allow for room and funding for collections that SCHS needs to tell the stories it wants to tell, and to document the history that is important for the community and the region in the present and future.

V. Collections Management Goals

Cataloging and Inventory

1. Organize and consolidate all collection records and attach Museum and Library objects' database records to deeds of gift.
2. Catalog all incoming objects as they are received.
3. Complete an inventory of all museum and library items, ensuring database records align with objects.

Conservation

1. Identify which objects are in need of conservation, and compile a list with rankings.
2. Identify funding sources for objects in need of conservation

Environmental Conditions

1. Install new HVAC system in Library/Archives.
2. Address fluctuation in temperature at Mabee Farm's FEC.
3. Monitor conditions in Mabee House.
4. Install and analyze data loggers.

Storage

1. Install and upgrade shelving (including rolling shelving) in all collections storage areas.
2. Install flat files to properly store our oversized paper items.
3. Rehouse collections that are not properly stored, including hanging storage solutions for rolled items, and archival items that need more support.
4. Investigate off-site storage for potential large donations.

Accessibility and Sharing

This report focuses on collections, but collections do not exist separate from the educational mission of SCHS, and it is important to keep that mission in mind in all of the SCHS' work. SCHS should continue to find ways to show off collections as much as it can, including:

1. Develop digitization plan for Museum and Library.
2. Increase visibility of collections by creating object-related social media posts , blog posts, newsletter articles, or online exhibits.
3. Continue publishing finding aids, indexes, and bibliographies to help researchers access the information that they need.
4. Optimize and index PastPerfect records for easier searching.