



The Local Network

Volume 19, Number 1

2009



Hebron Museum Display
Hebron, North Dakota

* * * * *

The (Im)permanent Collection: Lessons from a Deaccession

Article excerpted from *Museum* January 2009
by Laura Katzman and Karol Lawson
© American Association of Museums.
All rights reserved.

On October 1, 2007, the president of a Virginia college, surprised the director of the college's Maier Museum of Art by arriving unannounced at the museum shortly before 5 p.m. with a phalanx of support staff, city police officers, an attorney and contracted art handlers. They were there to take away four paintings. At the direction of the college's trustees, the paintings were to be auctioned to raise money for the budget.

continued on page 2

In an earlier issue of *The Local Network* this building at the Myra Museum in Grand Forks was misidentified as an early jail when it actually was the original Grand Forks post office.



CORRECTION: The original Grand Forks post office is one of the oldest buildings in North Dakota. Built in 1868 as a stagecoach station by Sanford Cady and August Loon, it became an official U.S. post office when Cady was appointed postmaster in 1870. The cabin, made from oak logs, originally stood on today's 500 block of Reeves Drive. It has been moved several times. By 1900, it had been placed on the corner of Cottonwood Street and 2nd Avenue South. Clapboard siding covered the cabin's exterior, while the interior walls were covered with plaster. In time, its historic significance was forgotten - almost. In 1974 plans were underway to build modern apartment buildings on the block occupied by the cabin as part of the Urban Renewal Project. Workmen commenced the job of demolishing the old house, revealing the rustic logs which had been hidden for decades. The demolition was stopped while historians researched the building's history and confirmed its significance to the City. It was then moved to the grounds of the Grand Forks County Historical Society where it has become one of the society's most popular buildings to museum visitors.

The sale and removal of the works ran counter to the museum's administration-approved operational policies.

Guided by AAM's code of ethics, these state that deaccessioning must originate with the director and from curatorial imperatives and have as its purpose the improvement of the permanent collection.

The event, referred to as a "targeted heist" by the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, had elements of the absurd. As witnessed by museum director and staff, police warned away outraged bystanders by invoking a bomb threat, the museum's phone lines and computer lines were cut, and the four artworks were ignominiously carted out of the facility cloaked in bubble wrap. Further complicating matters was the Board President's public announcement in an email that evening that some auction proceeds would be used to endow the museum directorship, violating AAM standards yet again. Recognizing this, the Association of College and University Museums and Galleries responded: "It...significantly compromises the future leadership of the museum since no credible professional would take a position with the knowledge that the permanent collection is viewed as a savior for fiscal issues."

Soon after, a non-profit advocacy alumni group filed a lawsuit and secured an injunction to prevent the sale but the injunction expired when a \$1 million bond could not be met.

The repercussions of this decision have been far-reaching. More than two years of frequently contentious debate preceded the proposed sale of the artworks and all gifts that had been acquired to support the school's academic program. Swift condemnation came from the museum world's leading professional organizations, joined by prominent academics and curators who urged the college president and trustees to reverse the decision. The authors of this story, director of the Maier Museum and director of the college museum studies department, along with three long-time art department and museum staff members resigned

over this decision, and many patrons withdrew financial support from the college and museum and changed their estate plans.

The board's action attracted extensive press coverage and captured the attention of the art, museum, philanthropic and academic communities. Opponents have widely seen it as a breach of donor intent and public trust and as a blatant violation of the most basic tenet of the museum profession - the responsibility to nourish and preserve humanity's cultural common wealth. Along with other high-profile deaccessioning controversies, this case raises critical questions about how organizations can preserve their cultural patrimony in hard times. This is a compelling, cautionary tale of the vulnerability museums of any discipline face when their parent institutions treat their collections as financial assets rather than curatorial resources.

Family representatives of the original donors - who had never been contacted by college or museum officials - communicated their dismay to the state's attorney general, as well as to college leaders and the auction house handling the sales. One spoke out in a National Public Radio broadcast and has even threatened legal action. Museum supporters continue to appeal to elected officials and the attorney general to safeguard the rest of the museum's permanent collection for future generations.

The semantic transformation from museum objects for "education" to "commodity" set department professionals, allied college faculty and museum staff into both offensive and defensive positions, as they urgently sought to educate the board and senior administrators about AAM-sanctioned standards and best practices and to defend the key role object-based collection plays in school curriculum. Museum staff provided trustees and administrators with pertinent documents and codes and asked professionals to weigh in on the appropriate stewardship of museum collections.

© American Association of Museums.
All rights reserved.

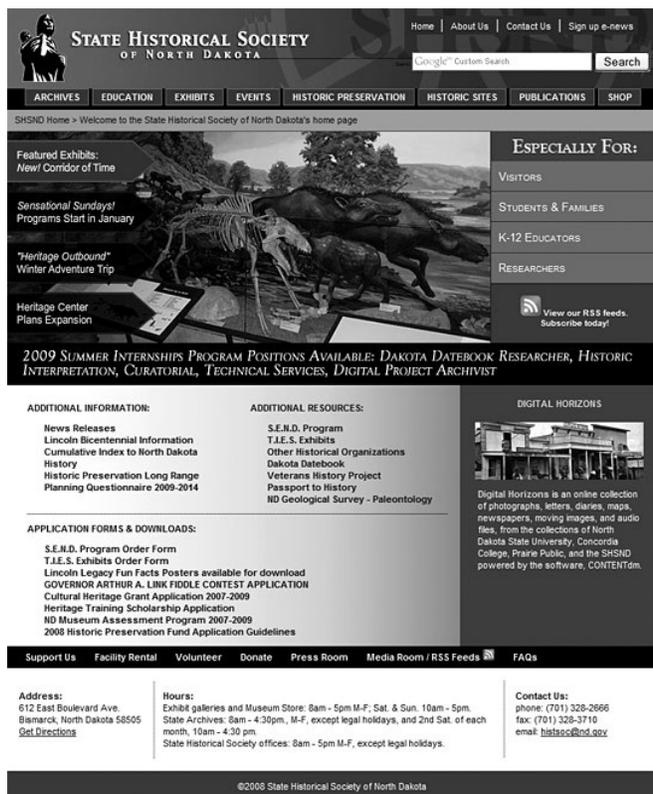
The community's good faith is also at stake. The decision to sell art or any part of a collection acquired as gifts and bequests for educational purpose disregards donor intent, thus undermining public trust in the institution.

The redesign was done by SHSND Multimedia developer Mike Froehlich. Check it out at www.history.nd.gov.

“The 3R’s in North Dakota: Education from 1870-1950”

Education is the topic for the 21st Annual Governor’s Conference on North Dakota History to be held September 25 and 26, at the North Dakota Heritage Center in Bismarck. The conference will focus on the beginnings of the school system from the educational programs on the early military establishments at the forts, the little one-room schoolhouse and the boarding school through the salad days of the Class B and C schools of the post-war years.

Documenting our educational history before it disappears will be a special emphasis of this first of two conferences focusing on how we have used the schools as the center of our social lives for over a hundred years. Friday, September 25, will be workshops and a field trip highlighting the documenting of existing school buildings and oral history emanating from those buildings while Saturday, September 26, will chronicle the history of the schools’ developing from the forts to the 50's classrooms. Save the dates!



New State Historical Society Website Launched

The State Historical Society launched its newly redesigned website in January. It features improved navigation and provides visitors with a new web experience. Among its many features are a site-wide search engine, podcasts and videocasts, with brochures and downloadable order forms prominent for both the agency S*E*N*D and TIES programs. “It’s rich with information useful to everyone, displayed in a highly attractive and easy-to-locate manner,” said SHSND Director Merl Paaverud.

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ ^ ^ ^ ^ ^

I can use some new up-to-date Historical Organization Images. Please send them to me in digital format. Email is fine but higher-resolution on a disc will work best. sschaffnit@nd.gov
Thank you, Scott

The Local Network

The state's history agency, the State Historical Society of North Dakota (SHSND), is seeking nominations for the four categories of awards that recognize outstanding achievements in the field of history on our state.

The deadline for nominations has changed to August 14,

due to the earlier date set for the 21st Annual Governor's Conference on North Dakota History in 2009. Nominations will then be reviewed by a SHSND committee. Presentation of the awards will be made during the award's banquet at the conference held at the North Dakota Heritage Center in Bismarck Friday, September 25. The theme of this year's conference, which takes place September 25-26, is *The 3 R's in North Dakota: Education from 1870-1950*.

Four Categories of Award Nominations:

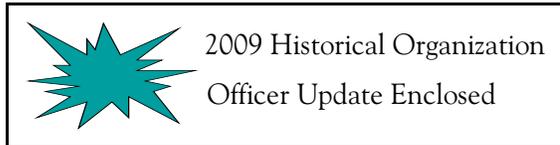
✓ **Excellence in Local History** - This award is

given to recognize and honor the many citizens who dedicated their time, talent, and efforts to local and state history.

✓ **Association for Excellence in Local History** - This award is given to the association or organization whose activity in local and regional history serves as a role model of excellence to others.

✓ **Heritage Profile Honor** - This award is given in recognition of those individuals who have made a lasting or significant contribution in preserving, interpreting, promoting, researching and/or otherwise extending the knowledge and understanding of the history of North Dakota.

✓ **North Dakota Person of History** - This award is given in recognition of those individuals who have had a prominent role in the history of North Dakota. The award shall posthumously honor those individuals who have made a lasting or significant contribution to the growth, development and progress of the state, or the social well-being of its citizens.



Address Service Requested

Bismarck, ND 58505-0
612 East Boulevard Av
North Dakota Heritage

58501
BISMARCK, ND
Permit #170
PAID
U.S. Postage
NON-PROFIT ORG.

