Reappraisal and deaccessioning are topics that barely register within the archival profession in the United States, Canada, and Australia. It is truly, as a colleague of mine at the University of Wyoming, Mark Shelstad, bemoaned a decade ago, the case that deaccessioning is "a word never to be uttered aloud" in our profession. And if rarely uttered, it seems even more rarely practiced—or at any rate rarely reported. A major appraisal bibliography created by Terry Cook in 2000 contained 315 entries for articles, manuals, and books; of those, 11 (3.5 percent) were specifically about reappraisal and/or deaccessioning. As the most recent study of reappraisal and deaccessioning (a paper by May Chan for the University of British Columbia M.A.S. program, 2004) notes, "Until archivists examine and address these issues in greater detail either through archival literature or professional forums, the approach to deaccessioning will continue to remain ... confusing and inevitably, ineffective in the management of archival records." Why this silence?

This article postulates that our profession's reluctance to confront reappraisal and deaccessioning is both theoretical and practical, but that on both counts we have
inadvertently weakened our repositories and our professional standing by our unwillingness and lack of action. Further, the essay will argue not only that reappraisal and deaccessioning should be as normal a part of standard archives administration as cataloging and reference, but that it can be. Most surprising, perhaps, this piece will present evidence that reappraisal and deaccessioning can be as public and transparent a part of our work as cataloging and reference, without harming the reputation of the repository—in fact, being open and honest about reappraisal and deaccessioning can positively help a repository in its relationship with not only resource allocators and peer institutions, but also with donors and researchers.

The author bases what he has to say about reappraisal and deaccessioning on a study of the appraisal, reappraisal, collection development, and collection management literature, on 15 years of considering the theory and trying to change the practice of appraisal, reappraisal, and collection development, and on direct experience reappraising and deaccessioning—often hundreds of collections and thousands of cubic feet of material in two institutions. This is not an exaggeration: the specific numbers are 510 collections and just about 5,650 cubic feet through the 2005–2006 fiscal year. In the 2004–2005 fiscal year alone, my repository, the American Heritage Center (AHC) at the University of Wyoming, deaccessioned 30 collections totaling 2,027 cubic feet. None of the implementation presented in this article was assisted by grant funds, it was accomplished by shifting internal priorities and changing work flows. It would appear there is not a defensible argument that we can’t institutionalize reappraisal and deaccessioning, rather the more significant question is should we.

Some of what appears in this essay is drawn from the articles listed on the bibliography. Some of what is contained herein has been put in print for Provenance, the Journal of the Society of Georgia Archivists. That piece focused largely on how to institutionalize reappraisal and deaccessioning—the creation of policy and the need to approach these activities strategically rather than on a case-by-case basis. These issues are vital, because they are integral to bringing reappraisal and deaccessioning out of the closet and into the mainstream. But this essay goes beyond the previous article, particularly in arguing for reappraisal and deaccessioning as more than a necessary evil. Rather they are distinct benefits to any well-run repository.

Before getting into the meat of the matter, however, this is a topic that requires a few moments to clarify terminology. First and most importantly, reappraisal and deaccessioning are not synonyms, though they are sometimes treated as such. Reappraisal may lead to deaccessioning, but it may not. And deaccessioning will often result from reappraisal, but may be driven by other forces instead. It is also important to note that deaccessioning is the decision to remove something from a repository’s holdings, and does not carry with it any further specifics about disposition—a deaccessioned collection can be transferred to another repository, returned to the donor, sold at auction or on eBay, or destroyed, to name just the most obvious options.

The new Society of American Archivists (SAA) archival glossary, by Richard Pearce-Moses, makes the distinctions in terminology clear.

It is also important to note that reappraisal is not the same as weeding. Weeding, as it is commonly applied in our profession, is the removal of duplicates and “junk” from a collection, usually during processing. Every repository does it, and we, rightly, do not
equate it with deaccessioning. For deaccessioning is normally associated with removing entire collections or record groups from a repository. It can also be applied to decisions to remove, based on reappraisal, whole series from collections or record groups.

Now that it is clear what reappraisal and deaccessioning mean, an important question remains: why are we scared of them? One reason is theoretical. Critics have argued that reappraisal is a necessary evil, necessary only in emergencies when space has literally run out in a repository. This argument is based on the premise that original appraisal decisions are more valid than any reconsideration of those decisions, and that without such a premise archival holdings would fluctuate wildly in a rush to reflect whatever was the latest historiographic trend or cultural obsession.6

It is thus ironic that Gerry Ham, who issued a famous jeremiad against archivists becoming “nothing more than a weathervane moved by the changing winds of historiography,”7 a decade later embraced reappraisal and deaccessioning as a “creative and sophisticated” act “that will permit holdings to be refined and strengthened. It allows archivists to replace records of lesser value with collections of more significance, and it prevents the imposition of imperfect and incomplete decisions of the past on the future.”8 Ham puts it in a nutshell—there is no reason to believe that original appraisal decisions were perfect or complete, and thus no reason not to reevaluate them. His change in thinking reflects a larger philosophical shift within the archival profession.

To be sure, there is also a fundamental premise underlying this argument in favor of reappraisal: that appraisal is a subjective decision, based on a given institution’s assessment of material relative to contemporary archival practice, the institution’s goals, clientele, and resources at a given moment in time, and the individual personalities and proclivities of any given set of staff. Collections in repositories—museums, archives, libraries, and other cultural institutions—are part of an overall mission and set of priorities for the institution. Over time, missions, priorities, and resources change, if the institution is to remain strong and relevant. For the same reasons, therefore, the collections may need to change. Done well, the changes in collections happen gradually, thoughtfully, and as the American Association of Museums (AAM) has it, “in accordance with standards and best practices in the field, and with the museum’s own code of ethics, collections planning, and collections policies.”9

There is a second theoretical premise against reappraisal and deaccessioning, and it is that archives have symbolic importance and that some of the symbolic weight of archives is carried by their presumed “permanence.” But an argument that this importance will be undermined or destroyed by judicious reappraisal does not logically follow. As we all should know by now, the concept of permanence is and always has been an illusion. Most importantly, it is not within our power to make human documentation “permanent” in a literal sense—whether on paper or in electronic form, the material will degrade and eventually disappear no matter what heroic measures we employ. Thus our profession’s scholars began some 15 years ago to clarify that we could only accurately talk about “enduring preservation,” rather than providing permanent preservation.10

Beyond reluctance based on theory, two other restraints seem to operate against widespread application of reappraisal and deaccessioning as standard collection management tools. One is the fear that, even if theoretically sound, reappraisal and deaccessioning must be political suicide. If our collection donors or benefactors ever
caught wind of the fact that we get rid of collections, the reputation of our repository would collapse. One need only look back at the media flap concerning deaccessioning by the New-York Historical Society (N-YHS) in 1994, or the frontal assault by Nicolson Baker on deaccessioning microfilmed newspapers as recently as 2001, to find an ostensible reason for believing that we should “be afraid, be very afraid” of reappraisal and deaccessioning.

Let me note three things in regard to this aspect of reappraisal and deaccessioning. First, N-YHS came under fire in large measure because it flouted a central tenet in deaccessioning ethics as defined by AAM—proceeds from any sale that results from deaccessioning can be used only for acquisition or care of collections, not for general operating expenses. Second, Nicolson Baker, so very wrong on so very many points, preyed in part, as Richard Cox among others noted, on the very fact that we have not owned up to the impermanent nature of our collections and the subjective nature of our decisions. Culture—and accountability—are increasingly contested arenas, with museums, libraries, and archives as central actors. We need to be active and articulate participants in the contest, including owning up to our messy and difficult decisions, our frustrating but real resource constraints, and our heretofore hidden or unuttered activities.

Third, and most important, being open about reappraisal and deaccessioning doesn’t mean automatic controversy and ruin. This is true, and the author is a living testimonial. In the mid-1990s, while curator of manuscripts at the Minnesota Historical Society (MHS), he oversaw a reappraisal of six congressional collections, applying new appraisal criteria that reduced those collections by between 60 and 80 percent of their appraised size. In four cases the donors were deceased, or had given us in their deed of gift carte blanche to make any decisions we wished about their collections. In the others, however, we were obliged to contact the donors and seek their permission for actually applying the reappraisal decisions.

We did that, setting the decisions in the larger context of a formal reanalysis of all congressional collections. We also noted that our intention in all instances was to create collections that, because they were smaller, would be more useful to and more used by researchers. Politicians, by and large, have healthy egos, and it had long been an assumption not only at MHS but across the congressional papers repositories universe, that the only safe way to deal with these donors was to do everything they wanted and to never, ever imply in any way that they or their papers weren’t vitally important. But guess what. Not a single one of them so much as asked a question, much less raised an objection. All gave us permission to destroy the reappraised material.

At AHC, we have gone farther. Appendix A contains a copy of a “From the Director” column that was part of our newsletter, distributed to every collection donor, every monetary donor, many researchers, and all our major resource allocators—about four thousand people. It is about reappraisal and deaccessioning. It says we do it. On a routine basis. The feedback? Two collection donors sent the author notes commending him for talking about this and remarking that they had always figured such reassessment was necessary. Two other collection donors contacted the author very nicely to inquire whether their collection in particular was going go be reappraised and deaccessioned. (In one instance he could say no, based on a recent comprehensive analysis of that
collecting area; in the other instance he could only say he did not know yet, because we hadn't completed that part of our collection analysis.)

Moreover, while most of the deaccession decisions (about 60 percent) at AHC result in placement of collections at other repositories, a fair percentage (perhaps 20 percent) is returned to the donors per deed of gift (or because of the absence of a deed of gift). In three years and more than two hundred deaccession decisions we have had exactly one donor who was irate when informed that we had reappraised and deaccessioned his collection. On the other hand, five of these donors actually went so far as to thank us for how we handled the whole matter, and three of those went so far as to send us checks in appreciation! It seems clear that archivists have simply not given our constituents enough credit, when we presumed that they would be hostile to us in response to any whiff of reappraisal and deaccession. Rather, there is convincing evidence that such problems arise when reappraisal and deaccessioning are “uncovered” as if we believed we were doing something wrong all along.

Archivists are shy about speaking openly about appraisal—much less about reappraisal and deaccessioning—fearing the wrath of donors and users. In part because there can be posited theoretical use of any collection or item in a collection, so criticism is nearly guaranteed. But hypothetical use is only one factor in the equation; others are the very real constraints of staff, space, and the demands of users. In this situation, archivists and curators are constantly forced to make difficult decisions. This is something that our constituents, including donors and resource allocators, can and do understand if we’re willing to own up to it. The archival profession is difficult (and necessary) not because we are good at saving things, but because we are able and willing to decide what does not get saved. Of course, we have a responsibility to explain as clearly as possible why we make the decisions we do, and we have to be willing to accept responsibility for our professional decisions.

There is no single or simple formula for appraisal or reappraisal. It is a messy, subjective, context-driven process for which a clear definition in simple words is extraordinarily difficult. Our explanations must simultaneously have meaning to the audience and be true to the complexity of the task. This makes discussion daunting enough, but it is only within the last five years that archivists in the United States have also begun to grapple with the related fact that we are not, as we have long liked to imagine, objective and passive guardians of “the recorded past.” Archivists have begun to understand, accept, and work within the reality that we—through our selection, through our description, and even through our marketing—do as much to create the documentation of the past as the individuals and organizations that generated the records in the first place. Appraisal and reappraisal are deliberative acts, so it is inescapable that we shape the historical record in a deliberate fashion. This has been a daunting proposition for many of us, both because it places a significant responsibility on our shoulders, but also because it robs our most important decisions of the illusion of impartiality and certainty. The difficult, messy, contingent nature of what we do is why the education, skill, imagination, and experience of archivists and curators are so important.

Rather than fearing open discussion of reappraisal and deaccessioning as an admission of utter failure in the appraisal, collection development, and possibly space allocation decisions of the past, we can and should embrace these difficult conversations as
important to defining the significant, difficult, rigorous, professional, and necessary work of archivists and curators. We should see this as a way of enhancing rather than undermining the stature and status of what we do.

And we can begin that process by rejecting the notion that—and no longer behaving as if—reappraisal and deaccessioning are words never to be uttered aloud. They are responses to the organic nature of repositories, part and parcel of archival work and the archival mission. Sadly, the Society of American Archivists has never provided its members with the same clear rationale for reappraisal and deaccessioning as has AAM, which states quite nicely, “Deaccessioning is part of a long-term, thoughtful decision on the part of the museum about how to best fulfill its mission with available resources.”

So if reappraisal and deaccessioning are theoretically sound and politically judicious, are they also practical collection management tools? How does all this get done? Is it worth it? Reappraisal and deaccessioning, done properly, require development of formal policies and procedures, which are generally designed to ensure that such decisions are not made informally, hastily, or for indefensible reasons (thus underlining the need for documentation and accountability). We all already have more to do than we can accomplish in a day, week, month or year—how do we add reappraisal and deaccessioning into the mix and not spontaneously combust? It is not easy, but it is possible. Like so many things, it requires a plan, a re-evaluation of priorities, and a certain leap of faith—that the changes will result in better work rather than more work.

Reappraisal and deaccessioning make sense as concepts only if set against clear, formal, and realistic statements of institutional mission, broad collecting policy, and narrower appraisal standards. This is not the place for an extended discussion of mission statements and collecting policies—suffice it to say that, basically, one cannot make intelligent decisions about what to deaccession if one is unclear about what to be accessioning in the first place. For more than 20 years, professional best practice in archives administration has included creation, dissemination, and implementation of a formal collecting policy for manuscript repositories. The only recent survey on the subject, however, found that barely half of even the most elite special collections repositories in the United States had formal collection development policies.

The processes of defining collecting policies and appraisal standards involves (among other things) reviewing a repository’s current holdings—or substantial subsets of the holdings—in a systematic way. This in itself is an activity that may seem wholly impractical, but enough repositories have done it that its practicality should be above question. It is important to remember that collecting policies and appraisal standards—and any other acquisition or appraisal limits you develop for your repository—will apply to both appraisal and reappraisal.

At the American Heritage Center, because of our once-notorious past acquisition habits, we established as a priority in our five-year academic plan an analysis of every one of our major collecting areas, with the primary goal of redefining—or in some cases defining for the first time—what we wanted to collect and why. Each task force was charged with (1) analyzing the quantity and quality of AHC holdings in its assigned topical areas, and where necessary breaking that analysis down into more workable subcategories, (2) determining the location and holdings of other repositories in the United States with
collections directly related to AHC holdings, (3) analyzing use records for materials in
the major subcategories, and analyzing and prioritizing likely user groups for current
and future collections (including discussion with relevant UW faculty), (4) recommend-
ing a specific collecting policy for each of the subcategories, (5) recommending, based
on that collecting policy, extant collections at AHC for deaccessioning or significant
reduction, and (6) recommending, based on that collecting policy, appraisal guidelines
for retained and yet-to-be-acquired collections.

An institutionally approved reappraisal and deaccession policy in writing is absolutely
required. To prepare for creating a formal deaccession policy, the easiest avenue is to
review the deaccession sections of the ethics statements of the International Council of
Museums, the American Association of Museums, the Association of Art Museum Direc-
tors and the Association of Canadian Archivists, all of whom have directly addressed
the ethics and practice of deaccessioning. There is little reason for archival deaccessioning
policies and procedures to differ significantly from those recommended and employed
by museums. Indeed, the AHC’s deaccession policy is drawn largely from the American
Association of Museums, and is reproduced in Appendix B (with some further thoughts
on disposition in Appendix C). It is part of the AHC’s larger Collection Management
Policy, which was reviewed and approved by the university’s vice president for academic
affairs. Deaccession policies and procedures, especially, need the imprimatur of the high-
est level possible in an institution.

Reappraisal itself, at its simplest, is the application of collecting and appraisal criteria
to material already in the repository. The decision to actually apply the criteria—to do
the reappraisal and thus to reach the stage of actual deaccession—will be based at the
practical level on the “bang for the buck,” or basically on whether implementing a re-
appraisal project will produce some sort of “gain” for the institution equal to or greater
than the resources put into it. That “gain” may be monetary (from the sale of deaccessioned
collections); it may be staff time (not spent recataloging or providing reference service
to deaccessioned collections); it may be stack space; it may be clarifying the institution’s
mission; it may be (as it partly is for the AHC) restitution for past sins; it may be, too, an
altruistic desire to see collections placed where they will be best curated and most used.
For the AHC, the benefits of reappraisal encompass all of these gains. The threshold for
adequate payback for the AHC, with holdings of 85,000 cubic feet, will probably be larger
than for a repository with holdings of 5,000 feet.

Regardless of repository size or other factors, as a general rule reappraisal and de-
accessioning should not begin at the level of individual collections. Implementing
reappraisal piecemeal, one random collection after another, is highly inefficient if not
downright dangerous. It is inefficient because the internal processes necessary to ac-
complish deaccession can be “batched”—groups of accession files can be checked for
any ownership or other problems that would prevent deaccession, similar series of re-
cords in several collections can be reappraised and removed, etc. It is dangerous because
piecemeal deaccession greatly increases the risk that dramatically different decisions
will be made from one collection or series to another. This not only undermines the goal
of a rational collecting policy but also may damage donor relations if one must explain
grossly inconsistent decisions. While absolute consistency is impossible, a measure of
consistency is necessary.
To this end, reappraisal should generally be implemented broadly—if not to a repository’s entire holdings, then to significant defined subsets. At MHS we attacked two large subsets of the manuscripts holdings—twentieth-century congressional collections and twentieth-century business records (reducing the bulk of the former by 60 percent). At the AHC we are evaluating the entirety of our holdings over the course of five years. For all intents and purposes we are dealing with a dozen major topical categories as discreet projects. Once candidates for reappraisal and deaccessioning are identified, they are roughly ranked and prioritized, taking into account such issues as size, legal status, and ease in identifying a repository that might want the collection. At MHS we used volunteers, two interns, and two professionals to do some of the research and preliminary paperwork. At AHC we have few volunteers and instead divide the workload among the archivists on our acquisition committee, with support from our few administrative assistants. Deaccessioning thirty collections, or two thousand cubic feet, has been sustainable annually, though at such a rate it will take us, probably, a decade to accomplish all the deaccessioning we need to do.

Strategy and patience can make practical what might otherwise seem impractical, by spreading work over a reasonable number of years. So can planning. So can focusing on the benefits, which, while they will not fully accrue for many years, took almost no time to be visible to our resource allocators. Within the first year of formal collection analysis and reappraisal, the AHC was able to reverse five years of hinting to the provost that we would soon run out of space and begin assuring him that space would not be a problem for the foreseeable future. Though not definitive, it does not seem to be coincidence that immediately after we stopped asking for more space we suddenly got something else we had needed for a decade—university resources to improve the space we already occupied (upgraded security systems, roof repairs, improved handicapped access). We improved our standing with our donors and with our peers. We could resume active collection building in the well-defined areas that emerged from the collection analysis, and prioritize processing for retained collections. In fact, we could put energy toward changing our processing practices to work hand-in-glove with our reappraisal and deaccessioning to drastically shrink our backlog.

Still, if we didn’t just wind up asking everyone on our staff to do more or work more hours, what did we give up in order to accomplish collection analysis, reappraisal, deaccessioning, etc.? We did not do a formal time-motion study at the AHC, so the answer can only be impressionistic. Some time savings came from cutting back on outreach activities. Some of the time came from revamping our accessioning and processing work, so that we could catalog more collections more quickly using less time. Some of the savings came from changing our acquisition and appraisal approaches. Having a clearer, more tightly focused collecting policy, we were able to say no to collections sight unseen and to turn down certain types of materials within collections. This clarity allowed for global rulings, rather than case-by-case decisions. It also improved staff efficiency by giving everyone a clear sense of purpose, direction and coherence in all the work we were doing.

But it is not easy. It takes professional confidence and knowledge, time, and intellectual energy. One must be willing to make tough choices about priorities, accepting and managing risks, project management, and planning. Who needs those headaches? We all do. These headaches, when applied to appraisal and reappraisal, are why archivists matter to society and to their institutions. They are necessary to permit us to fully do our
other tasks of arrangement, description, and preservation. Our backlogs are bloated with stuff we should not keep; our preservation problems are magnified by brittle or moldy stuff we should never have taken. This is the dirty job we have said our profession would do. Let us do it.

Appendix A

From the Director

This past year has been full of achievement at the AHC. Traditionally we would provide a summary of the past year’s accomplishments in our annual report. However, on the advice of our Board of Advisors, the AHC has decided to change publication of its annual report from a calendar year cycle to a fiscal year cycle. This year, therefore, our annual report will be produced in July for distribution in August. This will bring our annual report into line with most of the other units at the university, and make it easier, we hope, to align fiscal reporting with other yearly statistics.

But for internal reporting purposes our department heads continue to provide me with some calendar year statistics, and at least in this transition period I thought it might be helpful to report some of them to you here. Specifically, I would like to highlight four significant accomplishments during the past calendar year, all of which represent down payments on priority goals identified in our 2004-09 academic plan.

First, as I have been discussing in this column, the AHC has pledged to highly refine its collecting policies—to be much more selective about what we acquire. Before accepting collections our archivists look for material that is unlikely to be of use to researchers or students (from utility bills to commonly available publications—for more information about “Types of Material Collected” by the AHC, see www.uwyo.edu/ahc/about/publications.htm). In 2003 the total collection material acquired was 669.80 cubic feet—still sizable by archival standards but significantly less than the previous year.

Second, for decades, up through the 1980s, the AHC—like many U.S. archival repositories—acquired collections without sufficient resources for arranging, describing, and cataloging (what archivists call “processing”) those collections for use by researchers. In the early 1990s this changed significantly for the better, though using traditional archival methods progress was slow.

In 2002 we adopted cutting edge methods and brought in a national expert to conduct a workshop for our faculty and staff. In 2003 these changes resulted in our processing, double the amount ever processed in a previous year—2,115 cubic feet (close to half a mile of paper). Department head D.C. Thompson and her department’s faculty and staff have done an absolutely terrific job in implementing this important change and accomplishing such impressive results.

Third, all of this work—acquiring collections, more closely evaluating collections, and processing collections—is a means to an end, the end being to make excellent historical collections.
Appendix A — continued

From the Director (continued from Page 2)

available to researchers. This year we served 7,615 researchers from 42 states and 15 nations (including India, Israel, Japan, and Nigeria). More than 2000 of those researchers were UW undergraduates, from departments as varied as Anthropology, English, History, Pharmacy, Religion, and Secondary Education. These statistics are exciting because they place us ahead of repositories at much larger and better-financed universities. For example, the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill rare books and manuscripts unit served "about 5,540" researchers this past year; Ohio State's several special collections units served researchers from fewer nations, and worked with fewer university classes.

Department heads Carol Bowers and Anne Marie Lane and their excellent reference faculty also worked with classes and students from Laramie High School and History Day busloads (junior high and high school) from Wheatland, Riverton, and Elk Mountain, among other places. We are very proud both of our success in making primary source research welcoming and accessible to students, and of our international reputation as a research center.

Finally, a word about our public programs. Not everyone interested in history has the time or inclination to do formal research, and as part of a land grant college the AHC has a responsibility to extend the reach of its materials beyond its reading rooms and into the community. We support public lectures and an annual symposium, send our faculty and staff across the state to give presentations to civic and fraternal groups, and make increasing content available on our Web site. But perhaps our most successful outreach tool has been our traveling exhibits (www.uwyo.edu/ahc/edu_outreach/traveling.htm).

During 2003 our traveling exhibits went to Casper, Thermopolis (two different exhibits), Story, Evanston, Wright, Gillette, Kemmerer, and Worland in Wyoming—plus Boise, Idaho, and Moorhead, Minnesota. These exhibits were viewed by (figures provided by the host institution) 36,600 people. The exhibits were created over the years by several AHC faculty and staff members; Bill Hopkins and his staff are responsible for booking and shipping the exhibits, which are free to recipients except for the charge of return shipping.

These are only some of the significant accomplishments of our faculty and staff during the past year, for we continue to be involved in important digitization projects, professional leadership, and academic scholarship, to name just a few other areas. You can learn about some of these other achievements by visiting our newly redesigned Web site, www.uwyo.edu/ahc.

Mark Greene

New Members of the AHC’s Board of Advisors

This year, the AHC is proud to announce the induction of two new members to its Board of Advisors: Mrs. Sally Biegert of Laramie, WY, and Dr. Pete Simpson of Cody, WY.

Originally from Nebraska, Mrs. Biegert has devoted much of her life to making a difference in her community and abroad. She moved to Laramie in 1993, and has already left a great mark on the community. She has offered her talents and leadership to several important nonprofit boards and notable service organizations. She will be one of the distinguished judges for this year's Wyoming History Day state contest.

Dr. Simpson has enjoyed a distinguished career in academia and politics. He is the former Vice-President of Advancement at the University of Wyoming (UW). He also served two terms in the Wyoming House of Representatives and was Republican nominee for governor in 1986.

Today, Pete is the Milward L. Simpson Distinguished Professor in Political Science at the University of Wyoming.

Joseph Hunter
Appendix B


Deaccessioning

Cultural institutions’ missions and collecting areas change with time, making it necessary to have in place a mechanism which allows for re-evaluating earlier appraisal decisions. Such periodic reappraisal of collections is a legitimate and necessary part of development in archives and manuscript repositories, and allows the identification of materials that would not be accepted today or are no longer appropriate to the institution’s mission. An important part of a collections management policy is deaccessioning.18

The American Heritage Center may under certain circumstances and under carefully controlled conditions deaccession collections from its holdings. By adhering to the principles below, the Center will more efficiently fulfill its mission to preserve and make available its resources to UW students and faculty, visiting scholars, and the general public who wish to use the Center’s collections.

Deaccessioning is considered only for material that meets one or more of the following conditions:

1) it is no longer relevant and useful to the mission of the AHC
2) it cannot be properly stored, preserved, or used
3) it no longer retains its physical integrity, identity, or authenticity
4) it is unnecessarily duplicated in the collections
5) it is part of a larger collection other portions of which are owned by another repository that makes its holdings accessible to the public

In addition, deaccessioning can occur only when the item is clearly owned by the AHC. This includes ownership by provision of Wyoming Statute 34-23-101 as it relates to undocumented material.

The AHC always considers the donor’s intent in the deaccessioning process. Express or specific restrictions relating to AHC custody accompanying the original donation are followed unless adherence to such restrictions is no longer possible or would be detrimental to the collections or the repository. When the acquisition includes a restrictive statement regarding custody, the AHC will consult the donor or donor’s heirs before proceeding to deaccession. If necessary, however, the AHC may seek relief from such restrictions through legal action.

Deaccessioning Procedures

When the conditions for deaccessioning have been met, any AHC faculty or staff may recommend deaccessioning to the Acquisitions Committee. The Acquisitions Committee will make a recommendation regarding deaccessioning to the director. In some special cases the director will ask the Board of Faculty Advisors for their advice, but the final decision will be made by the director.
Appendix B – continued

The basis upon which the Acquisition Committee makes its recommendation will be recorded in the committee minutes, a copy of which will be placed in the relevant accession and donor files. A formal document, indicating that all necessary record-keeping has been accomplished, and signed by the director, will further document the decision and process. Documentation of the disposition of deaccessioned materials is also maintained as part of the AHC’s permanent records.

Disposition of Deaccessioned Material

The decision about method of disposition is separate from the decision to deaccession. That is, material will not be deaccessioned for the purpose of a specific disposition.

As a first principle, the AHC endeavors to ensure continued scholarly and public access to the deaccessioned material, though this is only true regarding original material in sound condition. In practice, material to be deaccessioned may be transferred to other repositories, returned to the donor, offered for public sale, or destroyed. Destruction is entirely appropriate for deaccessioned collections that are duplicated in another repository, physically unstable, illegible, or simply too fragmentary or insignificant to be of use to another repository. Appropriate staff and the director will determine the method of disposition jointly. Disposition of material with substantial research value will be governed by the following considerations:

a. Material will be offered to other University of Wyoming units, particularly the UW Libraries, if the material falls within the content and material types collected by that unit.

b. Material will be returned to the donor (or heirs) only if the deed of gift requires this.

c. With the possible exception of instances where the deaccessioned material has significant monetary value, a good faith attempt will be made by AHC faculty/staff to identify a repository to which the material can be donated. The repository must be accessible to scholars and the public, with an interest in the material and the resources necessary to catalog, store, and make the material accessible.

d. In instances where deaccessioned material has (or likely has) significant monetary value, good faith consideration will be given to offering it for sale at a discount to an appropriate repository, so that the material may remain accessible to researchers.

e. Unless offered at a discount to a repository, sales of deaccessioned material will be by public auction or through a process of sealed bids.

f. All proceeds from the sale of deaccessioned material will be used solely for the acquisition or direct care of the AHC’s collections.

g. Materials will not be given or sold to UW employees or trustees, or their immediate families.
Appendix C

Informal Notes about Disposition of Deaccessioned Material

A written policy will specify what forms of disposition are acceptable once a collection has been deaccessioned. My advice is that material should be returned to the donor only if the deed of gift says it needs to be. Destruction is entirely appropriate for deaccessioned collections that are duplicated in another repository, physically unstable, illegible, or simply too fragmentary or insignificant to be of use to another repository. Transferring deaccessioned collections to another repository can be time consuming but reflects, I think, the best character of the archival enterprise. Transferring collections will minimize wasteful competition among repositories and the fragmentation of material related to a particular topic or place, and is more likely to result in integrated and inter-related holdings of maximum value to students, scholars, and other researchers. We as a profession generally pride ourselves on preserving material so that it can be made accessible to the widest possible audience. Selling items, on the other hand, usually consigns them to private hands and relative inaccessibility.

Still, it is hard for a resource-poor repository to give away a small set of Lincoln letters, for example, when the 100s of thousands of dollars they might bring at auction would increase the repository’s acquisition budget by a factor of ten (or more). *NB, the museum community has established as a baseline for ethical sale of deaccessioned holdings that proceeds be used only for the direct acquisition or care of other collection material, and not for general operating expenses. There are some possibilities for “middle ground” when it comes to monetarily valuable but historically important collections once they’ve been deaccessioned. One is to have the material appraised and then try to negotiate a direct sale to an appropriate repository, even if for less than the items might fetch at open auction. Some repositories, unlike mine and most of yours, have substantial acquisition budgets or “angels” who will assist with important purchases. A similar approach is to have an auction house handle the sale, but establish specific provisions to tilt the playing field in the direction of repositories as buyers rather than individuals. One state historical society did this when it permitted other in-state repositories to preempt any final auction bid within 14 days, at a 3–10% discount, plus the ability to pay in installments (posting to the Archives and Archivists listserv, Fri, 2 Dec 1994 09:28:49: Subject: New-York Historical Society Sale of Deaccessioned Collections).*

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Mark Greene has been the director of the American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming, since August of 2002. This Center serves as UW’s archives, manuscript repository, and rare book library. Greene began his career as archivist of Carleton College, followed by 11 years as the curator of manuscripts at the Minnesota Historical Society, and a subsequent tenure as head of research center programs for The Henry Ford Museum in Dearborn, Michigan. He has published more than a dozen articles on archival matters in the United States, Canada, Sweden, Spain, and the United Kingdom. He is a national workshop instructor in the archival field and has served as editor of *Archival Issues*. He is a leader in the Society of American Archivists, where he has served on the governing council and chaired the manuscripts
repositories section, the congressional papers roundtable, and the committee on archival education and professional development. In 2002 he was named an SAA Fellow, and he is serving a one-year term as SAA president during 2007–08.

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY OF ARCHIVAL REAPPRAISAL


NOTES

1. A version of this bibliography can be found in Frank Boles, Selecting and Appraising Archives and Manuscripts (Society of American Archivists: Chicago, 2005): 159–183.
3. Beginning in fiscal year 2006–2007, we were assisted in our deaccessioning efforts by a grant from the National Historic Publications and Records Commission. This article, however, reports efforts prior to that year.


