

Internship Report: Chester County Historical Society

The Chester County Historical Society is a non-profit organization that specializes in donations of primarily manuscripts, photographs, and volumes, as well as a vast number of artifacts from the Chester County area in southeastern Pennsylvania. As the Museum intern, I was able to gain valuable information about the proper handling and management of collections from a wide variety of objects and mediums, from fine arts paintings to farm equipment. Through this internship I was offered different opportunities around the Historical Society in the Library as well as the Development Office, which allowed me to experience different aspects of the Historical Society. While on a visit to Historic Sugartown (a historic site also in Chester County) to clean the collection of wagons and carriages on loan from the Historical Society, I was offered the chance to process their archives, which is a unique and rare opportunity. I completed many projects during my time at the Historical Society, most notably an inventory of the ceramics collection, scanning the Family Bible collection (during our initial conversation my supervisor told me there were 60, but there turned out to be 60 *linear feet*; over 200 Bibles). I learned many new skills including digital photography, conservation techniques, how to handle and clean many kinds of objects and documents, as well as Past Perfect, the museum software that contains digital records of the almost 80,000 objects kept in the museum. I did primary research on families from the Chester County area in order to fully understand the handwritten records in the Bibles, some of them spanning over 100 years. For the Development Office, I uploaded over 50 finding aids to the Society's website to ensure that researchers have an easier time finding the incredible documents and manuscripts to help their research.

In the three months I spent at the Historical Society, I was able to be exposed to many areas of the museum world; from cataloguing new acquisitions, helping plan the new permanent gallery that the Historical Society just received a substantial grant for, to working with a conservator in offsite storage locations to assess the quality of the objects and document their conditions.

The project that took up the most of my time was by far the Bible Collection. The sixty linear feet were comprised of about 50 boxes each containing 4 large and heavy Bibles, wrapped in sturdy paper. Each of the Bibles were kept in the collection because they contained family record information which is valuable to both researchers and genealogists. It was my responsibility to go through each Bible and mark any pages of interest with strips of acid free paper. I found handwritten letters, articles and poems cut from newspapers, as well as 'The Jones Family Hair Collection', which had braided wisps of all the family members' hair. My partner would then take the Bible and scan the items of interest into the computer. Our main focus was on the family record section which included the births, deaths, and marriages of members of each family. Some of the records spanned over 100 years, with inserts added later as the individuals ran out of room in the pages. There were also pressed flowers, report cards, and invitations to weddings and memorial services. Although sometimes the project became rather monotonous, each Bible contained something different and exciting, and it was rewarding to feel that I was the next person in who-knows-how-long to open the Bible and leaf through the pages, finding the treasures left there by the owner. One of the low points of the project was when I reached the end, and proudly showed the Librarian the whole row of completed boxes. She gave me a sad look, and rolled the entire shelf along the track to open the aisle between the next two shelves;

showing me the entire other side of the row I had just completed, which was just as full of boxes as the side I had just completed. My pride vanished instantly, as I contemplated the extra month's work I had not anticipated. However, that row proved to have the most fascinating things that were to be found; home remedies for ailments, long letters from relatives, and handwritten poems.

My main project in the museum was working with the ceramic collection. This project included organizing and inventorying the vast collection of sets and pieces, ranging from beautiful china patterns to handmade flower pots. I was in charge of making sure that all the ceramics were in their correct locations and housed in the most efficient manner from both a conservation standpoint as well as an organized standpoint. From this project I learned that I am more capable than I think: being given the responsibility of completing the project in my own manner without much questioning or supervision forced me to work harder and smarter because I knew I was the only one being held accountable for the completion of the project. I will take this back to Sewanee in the fall and apply it to all my 'projects,' whether they be papers for my classes or initiatives within my sorority.

This internship was incredibly valuable from a career standpoint because I was able to be exposed to not only museums, but to libraries and archives as well, allowing me to explore my interests in each area. My interest in going to graduate school for Library Science has grown exponentially: my initial processing of the archives at Historic Sugartown has fueled my desire to understand how archivists organize and make their collections helpful to the public. The experience of spending my summer at the Chester County Historical Society has encouraged me to continue as a volunteer, as well as explore exciting career paths in the museum world.