

Mercy Heritage Center Internship
Summer 2014

For the summer of 2014, I worked at Mercy Heritage Center in Belmont, North Carolina. The Heritage Center is a relatively new compilation of every archive of the various Sisters of Mercy communities in the Americas. It houses thousands of archival documents as well as many artifacts. There is a plan for the Heritage Center to open a museum in 2016 that will display many of these items, which range in date from the early 1800s until the present day. The Sisters of Mercy were founded in Dublin, Ireland by Catherine McAuley; a remarkable woman who desired a religious order that stressed the importance of personal freedom as well as service to women, children, and the poor. In 1843, a few years after her death, seven Sisters of Mercy led by Frances Warde brought the organization to the United States. From there, it spread to form the hundreds of religious communities, schools, and hospitals that operate today under the name of Mercy. The Heritage Center serves as a central location for the information and objects that pertain to their history.

As the full-time intern for the archivists at the Heritage Center, my daily job was working with the artifacts in two different ways. I began by completing the inventory of all of the artifacts, a job nearly finished by a previous Sewanee summer intern. The entire inventory, as of the day my internship ended, was comprised of nearly 4,000 items. The inventory is recorded in two steps: first on worksheets, and second digitally in Microsoft Access, a system used by professional museums and archives to record basic information about each item. Once that was completed, I began cataloging each individual item into Past Perfect, a museum-grade software program that will eventually be a record of the whole collection housed by the Heritage Center. The Heritage Center's cataloging process, like its inventory process, includes a handwritten and

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a digital copy. When cataloging an item, every single minute detail has to be recorded. It is necessary to pay attention to any inscriptions or manufacturer's marks, the condition of the item, how and where it is being stored, its dimensions, as well as any provenance that accompanies the object from its previous collection. At the beginning of this endeavor, there were 36 items that had been catalogued by a previous volunteer. At the end of my summer, there were close to 600 objects in Past Perfect. I completed the catalogue for the objects from the Northeast Regional Community, as well as made headway into the St. Louis regional collection. The catalogue is extremely important to the Heritage Center because it will serve as a detailed database of information about potential museum items, as well as provide a starting point for the Heritage Center's massive records to become accessible to the public.

This internship experience challenged me from day one and continued to do so until my ten weeks were over. Before this experience, I did not fully appreciate exactly how much meticulous work goes into every item in a collection. Not only is it time consuming, but it also requires intense focus, visual analysis, patience, and repetition. Frequently, I would examine an object multiple times to ensure I wasn't missing any information. Additionally before my internship began, I was unaware of how diverse the items in archives truly are. I catalogued some artifacts that will most likely not be in the future museum, including a pink flamingo drink stirrer. However, there were many items that would make a fascinating addition to a museum display and deserve further research, such as a medal from the Chicago World's Fair Exhibition in 1893 that was designed by the renowned Augustus Saint-Gaudens. Perhaps the most important skill I learned at this internship is diligence. With so many items in the collection, my progress

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felt minimal at times and the work ahead seemed intimidating and overwhelming. However, it was rewarding to finish a shelf, look at it, and be confident that all of the information about those items was permanently recorded. It was a slow process, but I did make significant progress. To paraphrase my boss and Sewanee sponsor for this internship, Betsy Johnson, “We haven’t won the war yet, but we have gained a lot of ground.”

Beyond working with delicate historical artifacts, I learned how to work in a team with a part-time intern who was there twice a week. We collaborated on examining the objects, and made our archiving styles work together to maintain continuity in the catalogue for future researchers and the museum. One of the more memorable days of my internship experience involved everyone in the office working together to install the freestanding, eight-foot high panels in the museum space for future exhibitions. These walls were the first step in physically creating the museum.

My work at Mercy Heritage Center taught me a great deal about the archiving field and what qualifications I will need if I decide to become an archivist. I cannot say for sure that this is what I want; however I enjoyed the research aspect of the internship the most, and would like to do similar work in the future. Furthermore, the idea of making information available and accessible to the public is one that I want to keep in mind for any potential career path because I find it exciting and worthwhile. All things considered, this internship was an amazing opportunity and I am grateful to have a sense of direction for my post-college aspirations after completing it.