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1. Costs of Curating Archeological Collections: A study of repository fees in 2002 and 1997/98

by S. Terry Childs and Karolyn Kinsey, 2003

Introduction

Over two decades ago, it was argued that "...there is a critical need for the acceptance of responsibility, the development of guidelines, and the realistic assessment of costs for adequate curation of archaeological collections in the United States." (Marquardt et al. 1982:409). A curation crisis was developing at that time due to a sharp increase in federal- and state-mandated archeological projects. The collections and associated documentation which resulted often received inadequate care, storage, documentation, and accessibility for a variety of reasons (see also Ford 1977; Lindsay et al. 1979, 1980; Marquardt 1977). Notably, however, archeological collections and records are included within the legal definition of "archeological resources" in the United States and have been a matter of public interest and concern since the mid-19th century (McManamon 1996).

The question now becomes in 2003: have constructive steps been taken to tackle this "curation crisis" or has it continued to grow? Evidence shows that some steps are being taken to improve the care of archeological collections and associated documentation for the long-term, while the constant influx of new collections continues (Childs 1996; Sullivan and Childs 2003). Although there still are some education issues related to broad acceptance of responsibility by archeologists, the promulgation in 1990 of the federal regulations entitled "Curation of Federally-Owned and Administered Archeological Collections" ([36 CFR Part 79](#)) has helped considerably. These regulations provide important standards, procedures, and guidelines for the effective curation of collections generated by public projects. Many states have adopted similar standards and guidelines for collections resulting from state-mandated projects.

Another significant step has been the adoption of fee structures at many repositories across the U.S. in order to fund high-quality care and management of incoming archeological collections that meet professional and federal standards. In fact, the significant increase in the standards of professional museum practice, as well as those in 36 CFR 79, may be a contributing factor to the introduction and need for curation fees in recent years.

For years, many repositories provided various free services, including storage and cataloging, to government and state agencies. These services were often offered in an informal exchange for access to and use of the collections for museum and university exhibit, research, and public education programs. Government agencies, on the other hand, own and are responsible for archeological collections recovered from federal lands, yet often do not have repositories and/or staff to provide for their long-term care. Sometimes, these agencies approach a repository to curate collections that do not fit within its scope of collections and, therefore, would not contribute to its research and interpretation programs. In other cases, a collection may be offered that fits an institution's mission statement and scope of collection, but requires a prohibitive monetary investment to process, catalog, and care for it over the long term. Many university museums, state museums, historical societies, and local museums are finding that they can no longer afford to provide the most basic curatorial services for free, yet struggle with how to develop an appropriate fee structure for collections they do not own.

Another factor in the curation crisis relates to the fact that archeologists and project managers often have not adequately budgeted for two key stages in the long-term care of the collections they create ([Childs and Corcoran 2000](#)). First, they have not adequately budgeted for archival quality bags, boxes, and labels to be used once a collection is analyzed and cataloged. Second, they have not budgeted for long-term care by a repository designated in the scope of work, project statement, permit, and/or grant proposal. Some remedies, fortunately, have been put in place to tackle this problem. Many repositories now have a collections acceptance policy, which identifies the supplies needed to properly package a submitted collection, both the artifacts and associated documents. With this information, it is much easier for the project manager to budget for the first phase of collections care. We hope that this study on curation fees also provides archeologists and project managers with both a greater appreciation of the costs involved in long-term curation and comparative information from which a budget can be derived.

This report provides data and trends from two informal, yet systematic surveys on the adoption and use of curation fees across the United States. The first was conducted in 1997 and partially updated in 1998. The second occurred in the fall of 2002. The original goal was to better understand the introduction of curation fees nationwide, the variations in fee structure, and the criteria used to generate a fee structure. This goal did not change in 2002, but a second goal was added—to gather data, usually from the same repositories that responded in 1997/98, that would elucidate trends in the costs of curation across the United States. Certainly this study is not exhaustive, but it does examine the most comprehensive sample of data compiled to date on this topic.

Study Participants

The repositories contacted to participate in the 1997/98 study were selected from several sources. One was the list of respondents to the 1994 Survey of Federally-Associated Collections Housed in Non-Federal Institutions conducted by the Department of the Interior [Museum Property Program](#) in cooperation with the Interagency Federal Collections Working Group (now called the [Interagency Federal Collections Alliance](#)). Of particular interest were those institutions that reported holding significant archeological collections. Another source was the list of participants

at the 1996 conference entitled "Partnership Opportunities for Federally-Associated Collections" held in Berkeley, CA. The issue of curation costs was discussed loudly at that conference without the benefit of any background data. The 1996-97 American Anthropological Association Guide to Departments of Anthropology also was consulted for educational institutions with archeological collections housed in university or college museums. The 2002 informal survey solicited input from many of the 1997/98 respondents, while word-of-mouth was used to identify other possible participants across all fifty states and the District of Columbia.

The 2002 survey was conducted from August through November 2002. Phone calls and emails were used to contact 120 institutions and over 93% graciously responded. The response rate was considerably more than expected and considerably more than 1997/98. Many participants expressed interest in our results and several reflected on how they used the 1997/98 results. Each responding repository also granted permission to use their data in this and other reports. No institutions were hesitant to provide dollar figures on their fee structures, although some are in the process of changing their fees.

Some repositories, although quite willing to respond, were not used in the final compilation and analysis of data in 1997/98. These included respondents that: 1) did not have facilities to curate archeological collections; 2) were not accepting collections at the time; and 3) did not curate archeological collections. In 2002, although there were no repositories that met criteria #1 and #3, there were three that met #2. The latter are included in the report since they present unique circumstances and were accepting collections in 1997/98.

Many of the respondents who are included are university or university-associated repositories, some of which (6 [9%]) curate only collections created by their own staff. These latter institutions are included in order to examine the full range of variation of repositories that curate archeological collections and make them accessible for research, heritage activities, and interpretation. As discussed below, a significant number of university-related institutions charge fees. Several state institutions, as well, curate only collections from that state and may or may not charge fees. Private or city-owned institutions are also included and may or may not charge fees.

Curatorial Fee Structures for Artifact Collections in 2002

Whether or not a repository charges a fee to house and care for an archeological collection, they usually have standards or requirements for accepting a collection. These may include specifications for labeling, boxing, and storage, as well as for associated documentation and cataloging. If an agency or organization requesting curation does not meet the requirements, they may have to pay a processing fee or be denied acceptance. An institution also most often accepts a collection in accordance with its mission, scope of collections, and acquisition policies. Finally, unlike standard practices of past decades, acceptance now almost always involves a written agreement that specifies collection ownership and the responsibilities of all parties involved.

The responses from 112 repositories are used in this report. [Figure 1](#) is a lengthy chart that provides comparative fee data for artifacts and documents in 1997/98 and 2002. Forty-two (38%) of the repositories do not charge fees, although one accepts monetary donations. Importantly, five (12%) of the 42 are considering charging curation fees in the near future, including two of 13 (15%) that were considering doing so in 1997/98. The other 70 (63%) respondents charge fees, primarily to federal and state agencies, private firms who have contracted a legal obligation to provide collections storage and care, usually "in perpetuity", and some non-profit organizations. The repositories rarely own the collections for which they assess fees, which is the primary reason why they must charge for curatorial services. How can they afford to spend scarce resources on collections they do not own?

A significant sub-group of respondents are public university or university-related repositories; these constitute 64 or 58% of the total sample. Twenty (31%) of these do not assess fees, but 2 (1%) are considering doing so. This is a notable drop from 1997/98 when 7 or 30% of the university-related repositories without fees were considering establishing a fee structure. One repository accepts monetary donations. Six (9%) curate only their own collections and do not accept collections from others. One slightly decreased their 1997/98 fees, but will probably increase fees at some point due to lack of space. Two stopped charging fees and accepting new collections in 2001 and 2002 because of lack of space and lack of support from the university administration. One institution has no standard fee schedule and will not accept new materials for which it cannot gain title or ownership.

The unit of fee assessment most commonly used is the cubic foot. However, a number of repositories use "a box", "a standard box", a specific number of artifacts, or "a drawer" as their unit of assessment. The respondents usually provided additional information about the size of the unit that they use. Most often, "a box" measures 12x15x10", although other "standard" box sizes mentioned are 21x16x3" and 15x1.5x9.5". The need to standardize the storage unit used to calculate fees in order to facilitate accurate comparisons of repository fees and services by potential clients has been voiced in recent years. Our data indicates that no significant change in the use of the cubic foot for the artifact storage unit has occurred over the last five years.

The fee structures implemented across the country vary considerably in terms of function or type of fee, unit of assessment (i.e., box or cubic foot), and fee amount. The primary types of fees charged are:

- one-time — usually collected when the materials arrive at a repository and are most often considered to be "in perpetuity", although fixed increments of time, such as 10 years, may be set;
- processing — charged when new collections must be cleaned, packaged, and/or cataloged according to the repository's collection management and acceptance policies;
- annual — for yearly maintenance of the collection and usually assessed based on a given unit, such as a cubic foot (cf);
- and, combinations of the above.

Many repositories have both a one-time fee and a processing fee and several currently charge a one-time fee, but are considering an annual fee as well. The latter ensures that the client meets its

agreed-upon responsibilities upon delivery of a collection and valuable repository resources are not used without compensation. One repository had a processing fee, plus an annual fee that could be prepaid for up to fifty years in order to "lock in" current rates, in 1997/98, but stopped charging fees in 2001 because of an administrative order. This repository is in the process of working with a federal agency to return its collections. In 1997/98, only a few repositories charged both a one-time and annual fee, probably because they tried to cover all their long-term costs in one fee. The 2002 data suggests that there is an increasing need by repositories to charge both a one-time fee (more or less an acceptance fee) and a minimal annual fee to cover yearly responsibilities, such as inspection, inventory, and conservation.

The fees vary from a high of \$1500/cf to a low of \$68/standard box, although one repository charges "\$30.55 per eight artifacts." Some repositories have a sliding scale such that the fee decreases as the number of units to be curated increase. Some have different fees depending upon who owns a collection (i.e., federal agency, state agency, or private landowner.) In 2002, we asked if federal agencies paid the same fee as other entities, such as cultural resource management firms, whether or not there was a curation agreement with a federal agency. We also asked if the contractors paid the fees for the federal agencies. We found that federal agencies usually pay the same fees (43 [62%]), although 10 (14%) repositories have reduced the fees or not charged fees to some agencies. In the majority of cases (30 [43%]), the contractors pay the fees for the federal agencies. In some instances, these fees are built into their contracts with federal agencies; in others, it was not known. Twelve (17%) responded that federal agencies either pay the fees themselves, pay for certain fees and/or projects, or help support an institution in some special way such as paying for an archeology exhibit and support for a graduate student.

Clearly, there is considerable variation in the fees charged across the country. [Map 1](#) shows the distribution of the highest fee charged by our respondents in each state in 1997/98 and reveals some regional patterns. The New England area and the northern states of the mid-west had the lowest recorded rates, while the western states tended to have the highest rates. Our analysis cannot fully explain this pattern, but it may have to do with the high proportion of public lands in the west, as well as large numbers of government-funded archeological projects that yield large collections. [Map 2](#) shows the distribution of the highest fee charged by our respondents in each state in 2002. Although over 30% of the respondents in the 1997/98 study increased their fees over the last five years and there are repositories charging fees in more states now, the relational distribution remains similar. Finally, [Map 3](#) shows the low-high range of fees charged by our respondents in each state with the background colors from Map 2.

Curatorial Fee Structures for Associated Records in 2002

The utility of a collection of archeological artifacts for research, interpretive or heritage purposes is greatly limited if its associated records do not accompany it. The latter should record the context from which the artifacts were removed, provide information about their attributes, and chronicle their history of care in the repository context. Records include field notes, maps, photos, catalogs, preliminary reports, laboratory notes, and electronic records in an electronic

database or other format. Although archeological curators understand the importance of associated records, they may handle them quite differently than objects. It is important that such documentation is curated close to the associated objects for research purposes, although this does not always happen.

One of our study questions asked if fees for records differ from those charged for the artifact collections, and if this part of a collection is managed differently. While most of our study participants consider a collection incomplete without its associated documentation, a few respondents noted that they had not considered the associated documentation when they determined their fee structure. As with the artifact collections, the records are assessed in a variety of ways across the country. Different units of assessment are used, although the cubic foot and linear inch are the most common units. Some of the ways that fees for associated records are handled include:

- No fees are assessed for records, photos, maps, etc, or small project reports and catalogs in addition to those assessed for the collection of objects.
- Only the processing fee is charged for associated documents.
- The same fee structure charged for units of objects is applied to units of documentation.
- Records are charged differently than objects. Some examples are: \$15/linear inch with a \$20 minimum; \$20/linear inch long-term; \$120/linear foot (one-time); \$45/letter-size file with a \$10 minimum; \$50/5 linear inches: \$5/linear foot; \$483/drawer in a 5-drawer file cabinet; a range from \$135.7 per 1/8 drawer to \$1086 per full drawer.
- A documentation fee is based on the time (hourly rate) it takes staff to process the collection.
- Some records, such as oversized maps or photography, are assessed an additional fee above that of the other documentation.

The associated documentation question also produced several variations of the response that associated documents are "included in the artifacts fee." This may be interpreted in several ways. One interpretation is that one fee covers both documents and artifacts per unit; another is that documents are charged a separate fee, which is the same amount as for artifacts. Some of the responses that were confusing are:

- "There is no separate fee for associated documents; it is included in the overall curation fee."
- "Associated documents are considered part of the artifact collection and included in that fee."
- "The charge for associated documents is included with the charge for materials at a certain price per cubic foot."
- "There is no separate fee for documents; the fee for artifacts is intended to cover the associated documents as well."

Since we cannot clearly interpret some of the responses, the phrase "included in the artifacts fee" is used in [Figure 1](#) to denote the ambiguity. A dollar amount is provided in parentheses to show the amount per unit that we think is charged by the repository.

The data from our 2002 study suggests an interesting trend. In 1997/98, a sizable number of repositories either charged nothing for the documents or a smaller fee than for the artifacts. By 2002, many more repositories now charge the same fee as for the artifacts. Based on some remarks we received, this may be because repository staff now understand the significant effort and resources required to provide long-term care of the associated records. Others noted an increase in the number of documents-only collections since there is policy and practice in place mandating that artifacts that are not to be collected during Phase I projects and only a collection of records that should be created.

Curation Fee History

When curation fees were first instituted around the country is also of interest. The earliest reported fee structure in the survey was set sometime in the "late 1970s," over thirty years ago. This makes sense given the timing of the [Archeological and Historic Preservation Act of 1960](#) and the [National Historic Preservation Act of 1966](#). Both laws mandated preservation of and compliance on archeological sites on federal lands, as well as the appropriate care of the resulting collections. One repository began assessing fees as recently as 2002; another in 2001 and two in 2000. The breakdown by decade is:

- 1970s: Nine institutions (8% of all) (13% w/fees)
- 1980s: Twenty-eight institutions (25% of all) (41% w/fees)
- 1990s: Twenty-seven institutions (24% of all) (39% w/fees)
- 2000-2002: Four institutions (4% of all) (6% w/fees)
- Four respondents, although not presently charging fees, began assessing in the 1980s.

Purposes of Curation Fees and the Criteria Used to Assess Them

One of the questions asked in the informal survey focused on the intended purpose(s) of the curation fees once collected. While many institutions cited more than one purpose or use, the primary ones can be distilled into the following:

- To cover the personnel costs to process collections upon deposit at the repository.
- To cover the cost of appropriate curatorial materials, such as shelving, boxes, and packing materials.
- To cover the pro-rated percentage of repository overhead.
- To meet the standards of storage, including environmental controls, and collections care as required by the federal regulations, 36 CFR Part 79, and by professional museum standards.
- To optimize accessibility to the collections and associated documentation for researchers.

The intended purposes to which collected fees are put differ from the criteria used to develop a fee structure, although they can overlap significantly. The actual costs of curation are covered

only if the original fee assessment was adequately determined. In 1997/98, some repositories principally derived their fee structure by comparing those charged by nearby repositories. Such intent seems, in part, to have been competitive. Unfortunately, absent a discussion of criteria, institutions may not have considered enough data to realistically assess their curation costs.

Our findings in both 1997/98 and 2002 reveal that institutions vary considerably in the methods and level of detail they used to assess fees, although the criteria cited often overlap in scope and function. These criteria are listed here in order of frequency.

- To ensure compliance with the conditions set forth in a curation agreement.
- To meet the fees charged by other, similar institutions in the region based on a survey performed by a staff member. In two cases in 1997/98, institutions chose the low-end of the fees collected at nearby institutions reasoning that they seemed adequate and fair.
- To meet actual costs associated with processing incoming collections, ensuring their "shelf-ready" status, and long-term care. This includes: overhead costs (i.e., rent, electricity, climate-controlled physical plant set-up and maintenance); valuation of the space occupied by the collections versus the costs of improving existing facilities and new construction; supplies; salaries of professional staff, students (often at minimum wage), or supplemental staff; computer hardware and software; for collections documentation; and, storage furniture.
- To allow for inflation over the duration of a long-term contract.
- To properly accommodate a collection based on the research interests of the staff, the availability of funding, and the size and quality of the collection and its associated documentation.
- To enable the waiving of fees for collections derived from grant-funded research, or for special collections that have significance to the mission of the institution.
- To accommodate the type of fieldwork performed and the number of person-days in the field that yielded the collection.
- To reasonably support a curation program, yet not allow the fee to be a deciding factor that causes an agency or organization to send their collections elsewhere.
- To meet requirements of an institution's accounting department.
- To meet curation costs based on a minimum dollar amount per unit of assessment rather than the value of the collection.
- To meet curation costs from the anticipated return of an endowment account into which the assessed fees are put for a particular collection.

General Trends Based on the Two Data Sets

Given the results collected to date, we noted some trends, including:

- The variation in curation fees continues to be unpredictable across the United States. However, more repositories in the west charge fees at higher rates. Key to understanding the 1997/98 and 2002 data is recognition that there are many difference between states, as well as between the archeological and museum communities in each state who are responsible for long-term collection management and care. State legislatures have passed

various laws, regulations, tax rates, and annual budgets that affect field collection, repository management, staffing, the ability of some repositories to charge fees, etc. States and regions also differ significantly in the cost of land, real estate, and utilities, which affect the costs of curation and the assessment of curation fees.

- More realistic criteria are being used to determine fees.
- There does not seem to be any nationwide attempt to standardize the storage unit (e.g., cubic foot, linear inch) upon which all repository fee structures are based.
- There has been a slight increase in the use of annual and term fees to cover continuing real costs.
- In 1997/98, several repositories had embarked on the use of interest-bearing trust accounts for fee income. In 2002, we did not find a significant increase in this practice.
- There is some evidence that fee structures are being changed to offer potential clients with options, such as a sizeable one-time fee or a smaller, one-time fee and an annual fee.
- Some repositories want to begin to accept federal- or state-owned collections under a fee structure, but have no space to start, cannot due to the need for state legislation, or cannot because of restrictions by university administration.
- Several repositories are returning existing collections because they have little space left, the collection owner has not agreed to pay a fee for long-term care, or under orders by the administration.
- Complaints are still being voiced that federal agencies are not acknowledging ownership of collections and their responsibility to pay for curation.

Based on both the fee data and the general trends noted, there is a need for nationwide guidelines to standardize fee structures by storage unit and services provided in order to facilitate comparability between repositories. This could be done nationally by the Department of Interior or by professional societies, such as the American Association of Museums or the Society for American Archaeology. Better guidance is needed for archeologists and project managers on preparing curation agreements with a repository and how to budget for curation. This could be provided at either the federal level or by professional societies, such as the Society for American Archaeology or the Society for Historic Archaeology. Finally, federal leadership needs to be informed on the continuing curation crisis and make recommendations on funding and organizational leadership.

Conclusions

This report provides some results of our two phases of inquiry on the range and variation of fees applied to the curation of archeological collections across the United States. A more extensive discussion and presentation of the information received from 112 respondents will be prepared in the near future.

Given the lack of adequate funding, professional staff, and space to curate archeological collections over the long term, one can only conclude that both the repository and the agency/organization who owns a collection benefits when a sufficient fee is charged for these services. Federal agencies, however, must provide leadership in acknowledging ownership of

collections recovered from public lands and their responsibility to provide adequate funds for curation. The curation crisis still remains a challenge, which must not go unmet.

If you would like to provide comments on this report or contribute new data, please contact Terry Childs: terry_childs@nps.gov.

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