

Collections Stewardship and Collecting Plans

Leo Landis, State Historical Society of Iowa, State Curator

Among the core documents recommended by the American Alliance of Museums is a Collections Policy. A good collections policy should include a collecting plan that directly connects to an organization's mission. A collecting plan is a key to responsible collections stewardship, including acquisitions and review of existing collections.

The State Historical Society of Iowa approves an annual collecting plan for each of its bureaus including the State Historical Libraries in Des Moines and Iowa City, Special Collections in both locations, the State Archives, and the State Historical Museum. The four bureaus have their own plan but all four collections are framed by a set of collecting parameters.

As an example, the below list represents the current State Historical Society of Iowa Collecting parameters:

Relevance and Provenance

- Donor is able to convey clear title, and transfer all copyright when applicable.
- Donation must have a documented or discernible Iowa relationship and be representative of, or having an association with, an Iowan or an Iowa event or activity.

Condition and Status

- Is free of inherent vice and is not a threat to existing collections, or issues can be mitigated prior to acquisition.
- In fair condition or better.
- The State Historical Society of Iowa can adequately store and care for the material.
- Is not duplicative of existing collections.
- Materials are related to a person or organization for which another institution in the state has not already established a substantial collection.
- Materials are without excessive or administratively burdensome restrictions.

Current Institutional Emphasis

- Materials dating later than 1970 should be solicited.
- Materials related to rural Iowans.
- Materials related to recent immigrants.
- Materials related to the Meskwaki people and other Native American groups.
- Materials connected to stories of special significance including rural life, the Iowa Caucus, and refugee resettlement.
- Materials related to Iowa manufacturers, workers, or innovations.
- Materials that represent the activities of state agencies.
- Items with a specific and immediate research, exhibit or program need.

Materials that do not fit these parameters are declined or are candidates to be considered for deaccession. To effectively manage labor, space and other collections activities, it is essential to develop and follow a collecting plan.

Further Information

The following websites provide useful introductions to collections stewardship.

- American Alliance of Museum—Collections Stewardship
www.aam-us.org/programs/ethics-standards-and-professional-practices/collections-stewardship-standards/
- Active Collections
www.activecollections.org/