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COLLECTIONS

Advisor



Martin Collection, Indiana Historical Society, cropped from original

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Leveraging a Conservation Assessment Program Grant

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In 1994, our museum received a Conservation Assessment Program grant of \$6,110 from the National Institute for the Conservation of Cultural Property, now called Heritage Preservation. This small grant would eventually form the basis for a \$1 million renovation of our historic building. At the time we made the application, we had reason to be concerned about the state of our collections. Through the grant assessment we learned that our collections problems could not be solved until we had addressed the many concerns with our building.

The museum is located in a historic 1904 Carnegie Library building that was vacated when our library moved into a newly constructed building in 1969. In 1971, with much community support, the Floyd County Museum was established in that building. However, in 1986, after the loss of a major source of support which left the museum facing closure, the board of trustees of the New Albany-Floyd County Public Library voted to make the museum an off-site department. The library would provide operational support, and a separate 501(c)3 organization would raise support for programming and needs the library was unable to fund.

The struggle to survive had taken attention and focus away from the core of our mission to “collect, preserve and interpret the past.”



Electrical system - before

We knew we needed help.

In 1993, we submitted the application for a CAP grant. In our application for the grant, we listed the following goals:

1. Improve collections care overall
2. Improve environmental conditions of the building, with special emphasis on collections storage
3. Increase staff awareness of collections management practices
4. Use the assessment findings as a tool for funding collections care

Because our building was more than 50 years old, the grant provided funding for both a conservator and an architect. We selected a conservator from a list provided by Heritage Preservation. After conversations with preservationists in our community, we selected Ron Stiller, a local architect with a background in historic preservation. Because we had completed and sent the required and lengthy site questionnaire to both professionals, they had a sense of what to expect when they arrived for the two-day consultation. We were also fortunate that since Stiller lived in New Albany, he was able to meet and consult with our conservator while she was here.

After several days of an in-depth exploration of our building and consultations with our staff and members of our board, the assessment phase of the project was completed, and we anxiously awaited the final reports. Stiller's was the first to arrive. The Executive Summary described in detail six areas of concern relating to the building which began with the need for long-term planning and space utilization goals before taking action on the other areas of concern. The other concerns dealt with security, outdated and potentially hazardous mechanical systems, the need for an HVAC system, weatherization and the issues concerning access and egress for non-ambulatory visitors. The 34-page architectural assessment identified both short-term and long-term priorities and a detailed action plan.

The conservator's 19-page conservation assessment was equally detailed. The summary of recommendations identified such high-priority items as applying for a MAP II grant; staff development on all aspects of collections care and management; a separate, climate-controlled collections storage area with appropriate containers and shelving; a pest management program; and proper lighting levels in the galleries and storage areas.

We immediately began work to implement the recommendations addressing the most urgent needs. We applied for an American Alliance of Museums (formerly the American Association of Museums) Museum Assessment Program grant and received a



Electrical system - after

MAP II (now a Collections Stewardship assessment) grant. Then, staff attended the Smithsonian Institution's week-long seminar on collections management. We began implementing the recommendations from all of the assessments and information from the seminar. However, many of the collections issues we were experiencing could not be adequately addressed until the major problems detailed in the architect's report were solved. Additionally, it was clear that the extensive building renovation required a level of funding that far exceeded our ability to produce. We realized that a capital campaign was needed. Armed with the detailed architect's report, we began a preliminary study to determine our readiness to successfully raise the estimated cost of nearly \$1 million.

However, just weeks after refining our plan, we discovered that the library was also finalizing plans for a renovation of their building which would be funded through a bond issue. Because we had a detailed, well-defined renovation plan in place, we were able to move quickly to submit our plan for inclusion with the library's project. Both projects were approved by the state. Approximately 18 months later, we successfully completed a \$1 million renovation that incorporated the major recommendations in the CAP assessments. We closed to the public during the nine-month renovation. During that time, we focused on resolving the issues concerning the collection, which included doing a survey and inventory of our entire collection, resolving ownership issues, deaccessioning objects that did not adhere to our new collections policy and purchasing a collections management software program. When we re-opened to the public in January 1999, we had a new name, the Carnegie Center for Art & History, which better reflected our mission and our relationship to the library.

As the director of a small museum, I understand the frustration of having needs that exceed available resources. However, the invaluable resources available to us through MAP and CAP assessments proved to be a crucial first step. These assessments provided a guidebook which we used as the basis for our collections management policies and procedures and for the renovation of our building. We would not have been successful without them.

Conservation Assessment Program

CAP provides a general conservation assessment of your museum's collection, environmental conditions and site. Conservation priorities are identified by professionals who spend two days on-site and three days writing a report. The report can help your museum develop strategies for improved collections care and provide a tool for long-range planning and fund-raising.

www.heritagepreservation.org/cap

Museum Assessment Program

The Museum Assessment Program helps small and mid-sized

museums strengthen operations, plan for the future and meet national standards through self-study and a site visit from a peer reviewer. IMLS-funded MAP grants are non-competitive and provide \$4,000 of consultative resources and services to participating museums.

aam-us.org/resources/assessment-programs/MAP

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