

Cleaning Out the Attic:  
Evaluating and Refining the Heritage Textile Collection at Historic Waco Foundation

by  
Rebekah Childers

A Project  
Approved by the Department of Museum Studies

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Kenneth Hafertepe Ph. D., Chairperson

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Julie Holcomb, Ph. D., Chairperson

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **Cleaning Out the Attic: Evaluating and Refining the Heritage Textile Collection at Historic Waco Foundation**

*An MST Professional Project by Rebekah Childers*

Chairperson: Julie Holcomb, Ph. D.

This graduate project was completed at Historic Waco Foundation in Waco, TX. The project consisted of the examination and evaluation of the women's textiles in HWF's Heritage Collection on an item-level basis. Objects were evaluated based on criteria in HWF's Collections Management Policy. This evaluation primarily considered whether each object fit within HWF's collecting scope and whether or not it was exhibitable. Recommendations for each item were given to the Collections Manager for presentation to the Collections Management Committee.

# **Cleaning Out the Attic: Evaluating and Refining the Heritage Textile Collection at Historic Waco Foundation**

## **I. Introduction**

Deaccessioning can be a touchy subject in the museum field. One doesn't have to look far to see the dilemmas and controversy that dealing with museum collections can cause. Due to several recent cases that made national news, the public is also very aware of deaccessioning and museum staff are alert to the hazards of even considering deaccession. Despite the stigma often attached to deaccessioning, museums find that they must remove objects from their collection for a variety of reasons. Sometimes a museum cannot adequately care for its collections, and must therefore downsize. In other cases, a museum must make more space due to the overcrowding of collections storage space. Additionally, museums sometimes collect objects that are not actually within their collecting scope, or their scope and mission changes. In these instances, a museum may need to remove material from their collection in order to align with the museum's mission. These are rarely easy decisions, and are sometimes fraught with controversy. Nevertheless, deaccessioning is a necessary part of museum operations.

My graduate project came to me by way of Holly Browning, the Curator of Collections and Interpretation at Historic Waco Foundation. Holly recognized that that the textile collection at her institution had grown beyond the bounds of the storage space and needed to be evaluated and refined, which would require the deaccession of some of the institution's objects.

## **II. Historic Waco Foundation**

Historic Waco Foundation, or HWF, is a historical society in Waco, Texas. In 1967, several local historical foundations merged to form Historic Waco Foundation. Today HWF owns five Waco homes, four of which function as house museums, and is accredited by the American Alliance of Museums. The mission of HWF is to “collect, maintain, preserve, publish and interpret the heritage and history of Waco, McLennan County, and Texas.”

I worked with HWF’s textile collection, which is also known as the Heritage Collection. The Collections Management Policy defines the textile collection, stating, “The Heritage Collection belonging to the Foundation shall consist of textile items that will be held in the trust of the public and used whenever possible to augment the interpretation and history of Waco and McLennan County, Texas from 1795-1945.”

Years ago Lavonia Jenkins Barnes, a Waco historian, started the collection with textiles related to Waco and its inhabitants. Today the Heritage Collection consists of over 3,500 textiles from across the United States that span a time period of over two hundred years.

## **III. Project Development**

The Heritage Collection is housed in the attic of the Hoffman House, where HWF’s offices are also located. Basically, the attic was a mess. The Heritage Collection has grown almost exponentially over the years. Lots of textiles were donated and purchased, and it seems that not many were turned away. Because of this, the collection includes numerous pieces that are unexhibitable or outside of the collecting scope.

Additionally, HWF is in desperate need of more space. The house is small, the attic is small and it is hard to move around. Furthermore, it is hard to pull collections and

difficult to deal with them. The storage space also serves as the textile processing space, but because of overcrowding there is very little room to work. Finally, there was talk of the possibility of moving office space up into attic. As it stands, there is no room for a staff member to work permanently in the attic. In order for this to happen, we would need to create more space.

With these issues in mind, we developed the project. The goal of the project was to evaluate Historic Waco Foundation's textile collection on an item-level basis. I decided to examine each object and evaluate it based on criteria in HWF's Collection Management Policy, primarily considering whether each object fit within HWF's collecting scope and whether or not it was exhibitable. I developed the following questions based on the criteria contained in the accessioning policy.

a) How does the piece support the mission of the Foundation? In other words, can the item be used to interpret the heritage and history of Waco, McLennan County, and Texas? One important function of the Heritage Collection is the augmentation of interpretation within HWF's houses and even now, all of HWF's houses have objects from the textile collection on exhibit. The records for some textiles did not have a location listed, and many just included the name of the donor. In these cases, I researched the donors in order to determine their backgrounds. The majority of these individuals were Wacoans.

b) Does the object fit within the scope of the Collection? Similar to the previous question, here I considered whether each object has a Texas, McLennan County or Waco provenance. I took special note of objects that are connected to Waco in particular.

Additionally, I asked if each item was created, or gained its significance, from 1795 to 1945.

c) Is the object in good, exhibitable condition? As already mentioned, the collection is meant to support HWF's interpretation plan. While unexhibitable objects can be held by a museum with preservation in mind, these objects do not aid in interpretation or education, as they cannot be exhibited. Due to space limitations, exhibitable objects are given preference. With a collection this large, many unexhibitable items would not need to be kept.

d) Does this object have duplicates in the collection? If so, how many and which are in the best condition? When space is limited, an institution may not have the luxury of collecting and keeping multiple, duplicate objects. Often, particularly with smaller textiles, HWF collected several unnecessary duplicates of many objects. As it turns out, HWF only needs so many white, cotton handkerchiefs and some of these would be deaccessioned.

e) Was the object owned or related directly to a specific important person or one of the original house families? Objects connected to a prominent Waco individual or one of the individuals who lived in HWF's houses are of greater significance. HWF's interpretation plan involves telling the story of Waco through certain eras, and through the lenses of the families that lived in HWF's houses. A textile may not meet most of the other criteria, but this would be reason enough to keep it. This would principally apply if an object were in poor condition.

Ultimately, my goal was to make a recommendation for each object based on how well it fit within these criteria. If an object did not adhere to these criteria, I would make a recommendation for the item's deaccession. These recommendations would be presented to the Collections Management Committee for review.

#### **IV. Beginning the Project**

I hit my first roadblock on the first day. Before I could even begin the project that I had outlined, I had to spend a couple of days cleaning. The worktable was piled high with collection material. Boxes of textiles were sitting out around the attic and on the desk. Until I put objects away, I did not have an open workspace.

The majority of these objects did not have home locations listed in PastPerfect, which is the collections computer database used by HWF. The only inventory was handwritten and organized by box number, rather than by object number. It was therefore difficult and time consuming to determine where I needed to return each textile. As I laboriously put these objects away, I developed a strategy for completing my project.

My first decision was where to begin and how to proceed. As I contemplated the task before me, I discussed the project with Dr. Holcomb and Holly. At this point, we decided to slightly alter the project to include only the women's textiles, and any other textiles only as time allowed. While I was confident in my ability to evaluate the entire collection, Dr. Holcomb and Holly thought that was overly ambitious. They recognized the daunting task before me, and wanted to ensure that the scope of the project was not too extensive. The women's textiles comprise the bulk of the collection, and I agreed to revise the project to begin with this. As box A is the first box of the women's collection, this is where I began.

My process was fairly simple. I pulled one box at a time, took it to the processing table and pulled all of the textiles out of the box. I then examined each object as I placed it back into box. I experimented with other workflows, but found this to be the most efficient. When I began the project, I tried examining each textile as I removed it from the box. However, this took more time, as I had to carefully arrange each object as I placed it back into the box, ensuring pleating and fabric creases were properly set. In addition, this meant I was extensively handling each textile twice, when I examined it and again when I resituated it in the box. Therefore, I switched to the aforementioned method, examining each textile as I placed it back in the box. At this juncture I was primarily considering the condition of each object.

With an old collection, it is to be expected that many objects will not be in pristine condition. Textiles are often submitted to a lot of wear and tear, as many were worn frequently. Also, textiles damage fairly easily over the years. Therefore, the collection includes a lot of pieces that are very stained, yellowed, or have light damage. Furthermore, many textiles have minor holes, tearing or fraying. While I noted these faults in my spreadsheet, I did not mark these objects as unexhibitable. Rather, I applied this designation primarily to textiles that are now very fragile because of deterioration. In my estimation, these textiles would not stand up to extensive handling or extended exhibition.

One of the most common unexhibitable textiles is shattered silk. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, silk was often weighted. This involved chemically bonding metal salts to the fabric. Weighting made the fabric heavier, made the material rustle and created an illusion of greater quality. Over time, these metal salts attack the fabric until it



shatters and disintegrates. Little can be done, as this is an inherent fault. While not inherent to the silk itself, it is inherent to the textile as an object, as the chemical treatment was completed when the object was created. It is virtually impossible to handle shattered silk without causing further damage. The lightest touch results in a shower of silk flakes, and pieces of the textile cling to cotton gloves. Within the Heritage Collection, I found a number of objects, especially dresses, which appeared to suffer from silk shatter.

I chose to record information as I examined the objects and considered condition. To this end, I produced several forms to assist me. One form was a box list, which contained every box in the collection. I color-coded the list by type of material in the box. Women's textiles were pink, men's were blue, children's were green and boxes with mixed textiles were yellow. As I completed a box, I marked it on the list as complete. In this way, I could easily see what I had completed and what I still needed to complete. In addition, I made another spreadsheet in which I recorded all of the relevant information for each textile. The columns on this spreadsheet corresponded with the criteria that I chose to use. I filled in condition as I examined the object, listing whether or not the object was exhibitable, and why. I filled in other information, such as date and origin, based on the information contained in PastPerfect. I decided to come back and make deaccession decisions later based on the information recorded in this sheet. I realized that with duplicates in particular, this made the most sense. Until I had looked at the entire collection, I would not know which objects were duplicates or which duplicates were in the best condition. It also allowed me to conduct any necessary research, such as the

identity of the donor, at a later time when the textiles were not out and exposed to the elements.

## **V. Challenges**

Inevitably, I faced several challenges throughout the course of this project. One of the most frustrating challenges involved the textile housing. Objects were all housed differently, and I therefore encountered a variety of issues as I worked. Dresses and other large clothing items were usually laid flat in long dress boxes. Sometimes acid-free, archival quality tissue was stuffed inside the sleeves in order to help the sleeves maintain their shape. Sometimes, no such consideration was taken. Typically, one sheet of tissue that ran the length of the box was placed in between each dress. However, sometimes there was no tissue in between the textiles. When there was inadequate tissue in a box, I added a sheet of tissue between each textile in order to further protect the objects.

In other instances, boxes contained an excess of tissue. This was the case with most all of the smaller textiles. Years ago, a well-meaning volunteer packed away the majority of the textile collection. Each textile was carefully and methodically wrapped and many objects were wrapped several times over. Many of the boxes also had additional layers of tissue placed between the securely wrapped textiles in order to further separate them. While the boxes are very nice and neat, this is both a waste of resources and a waste of space, which is at a premium. I removed several stacks of extraneous tissues from these boxes.

The layers of tissue are secured by small, white oval stickers. It is unclear whether or not these stickers are acid-free. Over time, the stickers either have fallen off or they are firmly stuck to the paper. The stickers that have lost adhesiveness are now loose in the

box, floating in between dress pleats and pant legs. The shower of stickers that sometimes results is an aggravation and creates a mess. As a result I threw away quite a few stickers. Unfortunately, sometimes the stickers have not completely lost their adhesiveness, and have stuck to other unprotected textiles in the box. This is a preservation concern that has arisen because of the methods employed to house the textiles years ago.

The stickers that are still stuck to the tissue are not easily removed. To access the textile within, these stickers must first be torn from the paper. This action often shreds the paper, which leaves holes in the wrapping. Only once the stickers are removed can the textiles be removed from the package of paper. This package has been painstakingly folded, first one way and then another, in a sort of museum storage origami. When I finished with an item, it was difficult to refold the paper exactly as it had been. Sometimes I left the paper in this way, but in other cases I chose to rewrap the object. Because the paper has sat folded for years, the creases are very set and, when not properly refolded, the objects take up more space than they did before.

Another challenge involved size and space considerations. The attic space is small, and it is difficult to maneuver. The space in between the walls is tight, and many of the boxes are large. The dress boxes are long enough to lay a dress flat, and were often overly full. To complicate matters further, I am a fairly small person. The top shelves of each unit are above my head, which made it hard for me to pull these boxes. Therefore it was a constant challenge to ensure that I pulled and moved boxes in a way that kept the textiles safe and prevented injury to myself.

The lack of locations listed in PastPerfect posed yet another challenge. As I began looking at objects in PastPerfect, I noticed that many did not have locations listed within

the database. I was instructed to update any locations that were incorrect or incomplete. Of the objects that I examined, over ninety-five percent of them did not have locations listed in PastPerfect. Entering the box numbers did not considerably increase the time I spent with each individual object. However, as I had to update locations for the vast majority of the textiles that I examined, this added a lot of unexpected time.

Another somewhat unsurprising challenge involved the consideration of object condition versus the scope of the collection. It often seemed that the textiles in the best condition were the textiles that were furthest outside of HWF's collecting scope. Similarly, the objects that most closely aligned with the collecting scope were the objects in the poorest condition.

One final interesting challenge involved the environmental conditions in the attic. I completed much of my work over the winter months, and the winter in Waco this year was particularly cold. Hoffman House is an old, two-story home and, like many old homes, has heating complications. While the downstairs was often fairly cool, the attic was not. Due to an efficient vent in the attic and the well-known fact that heat rises, the temperature in the attic was often in excess of ninety degrees. This is not ideal for the collection, as textiles are ideally kept around 65 to 75 degrees Fahrenheit. Excessively warm temperatures can damage the textiles and lead to embrittlement. In addition, the attic saw a great deal of temperature fluctuation between colder and warmer days. Ideally, collections storage space is kept at a stable temperature, with as little variation as possible. Significant fluctuations such as the ones in the Hoffman attic cause the textiles to degrade more quickly. Finally, these hot temperatures are not ideal for anyone who may be working in these conditions.

## **VI. Project Successes**

Despite the challenges that I faced, I accomplished a great deal. I examined and evaluated a total of 1,118 textile objects. This included a wide range of textiles, from wedding dresses to Red Cross uniforms, from fans to handkerchiefs. For each of these objects, I also recorded information, updated locations in PastPerfect and made recommendations. In addition, many times, one accession number was tied to multiple pieces. These related objects are designated with letters after the accession number. For example one, wedding dress, which is considered one object, consisted of nine individual pieces that included the dress, veil, gloves, shoes and other accessories.

I accomplished my project goal, and evaluated the entirety of the women's collection. As I worked, I became somewhat discouraged as I realized that I would not evaluate the entire collection. Although my project description indicated that I would evaluate only the women's collection, I had assumed that I would blow everyone away with my ability to complete the entire collection. In retrospect, I should have listened to the advice and predictions of those individuals with more experience and insight than myself. Nevertheless, I did complete what I set out to do.

Due to my decision to record information for each textile, I completed an inventory for half of the collection. The Collections Management Policy dictates that an inventory of the Heritage Collection shall be completed every three years. The most recent inventory was completed in 1998, so this is long overdue. Inventories are time consuming and not easy to undertake with a limited staff, which makes this inventory a great help to HWF. While there is still work to do in order to complete an inventory of

the entire collection, this process is well on its way. In addition, HWF now has a typed document that indicates the permanent location of each textile.

Ultimately, I recommended 183 objects for deaccession. As discussed, these are textiles that are not exhibitable, are not connected to Texas, or are dated outside of the interpretive period. I recommended an additional 126 objects for further review. Some of these objects are late in the interpretive period, or otherwise barely within the collecting scope. Others are in okay condition. These items are not unexhibitable, but the damage is significant enough that the objects would need to be carefully considered before they were exhibited. Additionally, this list includes textiles donated by still-active and very involved volunteers. Because creating more space was a significant aspect of this project, deaccessioning these objects will help accomplish this goal. However, many of the objects that I recommended for deaccession are smaller. While their removal is important for the refinement of the collection, it will not significantly create space.

Finally, I identified sixty “problem” textiles. These objects had a variety of issues. Some were not in the box, or were unnumbered. Others were not listed in PastPerfect. In some instances, the PastPerfect record did not match the object with the corresponding number. This list also included ten recommendations for possible conservation. In particular, this includes several beautiful dresses that were owned by prominent Waco individuals. However, the textiles are in incredibly poor condition and would need conservation work before exhibition could be considered. In the course of the project, Holly and I took two chairs with textile cushions to a textile conservator in Allen, Texas. I conversed with the conservator and received advice on the proper care and storage of textiles. While many of her suggestions cannot be implemented at this time due to space

limitations, this underscored the importance of this project and the need to house and store textiles carefully.

## **VII. Conclusion**

My recommendations will eventually be presented to the Collections Management Committee for review. While it remains to be seen what actions the committee will take based on these recommendations, I feel that, regardless, my project was successful. HWF is now more aware of the contents of the Heritage Collection and of the problematic textiles contained within the collection. Furthermore, my personal professional growth cannot be discounted. When I began this project, I had virtually no experience handling textiles. This project greatly developed my knowledge of textiles within museums, and the proper care and handling of such collections. Furthermore, it provided me with a better understanding of the challenges associated with collections management within in a small institution. HWF has limited funds and resources, and decisions must be made accordingly. For example, while the idea of conducting a regular inventory is a good one, supported by museum best practices, it is unfortunately not always practical. Many small museums simply do not have the time to conduct inventories every three years. Sometimes the practical must take precedence over the ideal.

Despite budget and staffing constraints, HWF is fortunate to have a large group of dedicated volunteers. These volunteers are passionate about HWF and the work done by the institution, and many have donated textiles in the Heritage Collection. Consequently, complications can arise when these volunteers become very attached to the collection, as one volunteer has with the Heritage Collection. This makes it difficult to implement

changes, and I learned to approach these matters carefully. I more fully understand the need to proceed cautiously when making deaccession recommendations to a committee, which may include individuals who have donated some of these objects. Due to the challenges faced in this project, both in the implementation of the textile evaluation and the interaction with budget limitations and volunteers, I can confidently face similar situations in the future.