

ARSENAL MUSEUM FINAL REPORT

MAY 2010

This is the final report on the Arsenal Museum Project for the City of Beaufort, South Carolina. The time reference for this is November, 2009 through May of 2010. The artifacts and other historical materials mentioned in this report are those contained in the Arsenal Museum. No items that were or are stored in other locations are under consideration here.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I did not do this by myself. It would be ignorant of me to not express appreciation to those who stepped up and did their part. In December, 2009, a team from the Confederate Relic Room and Military Museum in Columbia, SC spent a few days at the Arsenal and rendered valuable hands-on work and advice. Alan Roberson, Rachel Cockrell and Kristina Johnson composed this team. Dr. Stephen Wise and Dr. Bryan Howard of the Parris Island Museum, Grace Cordial of the Beaufort Library and Mary Lou Brewton of the Beaufort County Historical Society all pitched in and helped with the labor of expertise and/or guidance. Donna Alley, Historic Preservation Planner for the City of Beaufort, provided the overall supervision for this project as well as hands-on work at every level. I'm sure I'm forgetting some people and to them I can only offer the excuse of old age.

OVERVIEW

The Arsenal Museum collection, its parts and methods from 1939 to date can best be described as a compilation of, "The Good, the Bad and the Ugly", from the motion picture of the same name. The Ugly will be described first in order to save the Good for last.

THE UGLY

The ugly describes, in general terms, the state of the collection and its environment. The second floor room at the Arsenal, called here the Collections Room, was the storage room for the collection for a period of perhaps eight years. The Collections Room was devoid of any and all amenities characteristic of a good museum. There were no temperature or humidity controls in place. The shelving was of a quality for a garage. The windows had no curtains or anything else to prohibit the intrusion of light into the room and onto the collection. Vermin control did not exist. There was evidence of silverfish infestation in the clothing and books. Rodent droppings and rotted food were also present.

All of this inattention and care did the collection no good. Leather items were moldy. Paper items were reacting negatively to the presence of acids in and around the paper. Wooden items were dry and splitting. Clothing was dried out, rotten, soiled and eaten by vermin. Ferrous items rusted some to the point where they could not be identified without them crumbling to pieces.

Of all the artifacts in the collection, one type stands out as one unfortunate example of many of what can happen. The City has, in its collection quite a number of women's late-19th century silk mourning clothes. Mourning clothes of this period are scarce, if not exactly rare. There are museums with nice collections of mourning clothing. That the City has so many pieces is a bit of a coup that would make other museums envious.

However, the present condition of these clothing articles, given their long period of neglect, is now beyond hope. The pieces are now classified as, "shattered silks". What this means is that if the garment is touched, no matter how gently or by what manner, the part that is touched disintegrates. No amount of money or care will bring these things back to life. They are dead.

There are other examples of artifacts that have suffered breakage, mold, oxidation and general degrading. The mourning clothing perhaps represents the worst of the ugly parts of the collection.

THE BAD

The collections paperwork is about as bad as bad gets. In the early days of the Museum's existence, beginning in 1939, a simple numeric or alpha-numeric system of cataloging would be adequate for a museum staff of untrained but well-meaning people unfamiliar with standard museum accessions protocols. At some point, this will break down and will have to be replaced with a better system. This one broke down early and has remained broken for 71 years.

There is evidence that someone tried to make things right by emplacing an inventory and accessions system more in line with what a good museum should be doing. This person or persons deserves credit for making the effort but the effort was stopped before completion. Things then went from bad to worse.

There were at least six different methods of numbering artifacts encountered. Some made sense but others resemble a dead language. In multiple cases, numbers were assigned to batch lots of donations. One number might refer to one item or a dozen items or 400 items. One item gets one number; that's how it's done. Four hundred items get four hundred numbers, related but separate and unique. That doesn't apply here.

Several artifacts have numbers that do not correspond to their description. One example is 1993.01.59. According to the paperwork, this accession number refers to a court paper concerning the death of Thomas Williams of Pennsylvania. However, this number is not on that document. This number is on two business cards for George Waterhouse, grocer.

Accession number 1993.01.56 refers to an 1879 pension certificate for Susan Rice, widow of Charles Rice. The actual document, though, bears a different number. The document has the number 1993.1.64. According to the records, that number is the 1857 last will and testament of Burnwell McBride. There are other examples of mismarked artifacts but this raises a question: is the number right but on the wrong document or was the document right and the number wrong?

The state of the collection raises other questions.

THE BAD: HOW MANY ARTIFACTS ARE THERE IN THE COLLECTION?

This should be an easy question to answer but nothing about this collection is easy. Museums are supposed to keep running totals of the number of items in the collection including a list of loaned items. No list was found, nor do I believe exists. One should be able to go through the accessions paperwork and count by hand each item. That does not work here. Consider the following table:

YEAR	GIFTED	LOANED	LOANS RETURNED	UNKNOWN
1939	22	82	38	0
1940	13	29	13	5
1941	32	87	32	22

In 1939, 22 items were given outright to the Arsenal Museum. There were 82 items loaned to the Museum and 38 of these were returned to their owners at some time. This leaves 44 items as being still on loan from 1939.

In 1940, 13 items were gifted and 29 were loaned. Of these 29, 13 were returned, leaving 16, a majority, as still being on loan. There were an additional 5 items whose title is unknown.

In 1941, 32 items were gifted and 87 were loaned. Only 32 were ever returned. This means 55 items are still on loan after all these years. The number of items whose title is unknown jumped to 22.

As far as the paperwork is concerned, for only these three years, 115 items are still being carried as on loan to this day. There are 27 items where title has still not been established.

Just the first three years of such record keeping alone would be enough to make it impossible to answer the question above. However, the more one dwells into the paperwork, the worse it gets.

Accession number 1939.47.1 is described as One Lot Documents. Number 1940.12.1 is described the same. How many documents make up one lot? Number 1941.4.12 in one lot of Indian arrowheads, etc. How many items are in one etc.?

Number 1950.8.1 is a collection of papers about the Confederacy. How many are there in one collection?

Other artifacts are listed twice in the paperwork, under different numbers. Number 1941.35.5 is an ostrich egg engraved with African symbols. This one egg is also listed as 1993.05.93. It's the same artifact with two different numbers. Numbers 1940.17.4 and 1993.05.94 are the same thing, an egg and pedestal. A wooden model of the ship, "Willie" is both 1949.17.1 and 1993.05.87.

For these and other reasons, no one will ever know how many artifacts the collection has.

THE BAD: WHAT'S MISSING?

Again, this is a very difficult question. Again, it is not possible to answer. Given the state of the paperwork, there could be 15,000 items missing and no one would know. The problem with unknown batch lots, unknown titles, and potentially hundreds of loaned items still on loan has already been mentioned. Let's consider just one example.

According to the paperwork, the Arsenal Museum has enough cannon balls, swords, and rifles to start a war all by itself. According to the paperwork, at least 36 cannon balls were gifted to the Museum. Only one of the 36 is described adequately enough to tell it apart from the others. The rest are all listed as, "cannon ball". It really doesn't matter about the descriptions, though. Of the 36 listed, 31 are missing.

In addition to artifacts missing, there are numbers missing as well, in some cases whole blocks of numbers. I first discovered this while trying to track down a World War I German machine gun, presumably a bring-back from a veteran. In reality, the machine gun was made in Austria for the Austro-Hungarian Army. The name plate is in German and this perhaps accounts for the mistake in nationality. The weapon has an accession number of 1993.15.15. The weapon was one of the first artifacts donated to the Museum, in October of 1939. The accession number should start with 1939.

A search of the 1939 paperwork revealed that every number associated with donations for October, 1939 is missing. Deeds, the machine gun, papers, pottery and more are all missing. Is it just the numbers that are missing? What were the actual artifacts and where are they?

Also missing among the numbers are 1939.3 through 1939.27. The numbers 3 through 27 are all batch numbers. Each represents at least one artifact and perhaps a hundred. With the numbers missing, there's no record of what the related artifacts are or how many.

Every number for the years 1990 and 1991 is missing. Every number from 1999 to the present is missing as well. The last item on record as being donated is dated 1998. It is an 1865 letter from Union General Rufus Saxton here in Beaufort. The letter was not found at the Arsenal.

The Arsenal paperwork carries two references to a ship's bell, one an original and one a reproduction. The original is brass from the *USS Beaufort*. It is numbered 1953.14.1. It is also numbered 1993.08.33. One artifact is represented by two numbers. The reproduction bell is numbered 1993.05.65 and is described as being a copy of the *USS Beaufort* bell. The reproduction bell is mounted on a 2' x 2' stand which is 4' tall.

Underneath the eaves of the Arsenal Museum is a brass bell mounted on a 2' x 2' stand that is 4' tall. This bell is described as the original. Either someone removed the reproduction bell from its mount and replaced it with the original bell, or the bell on the mount is misidentified as being original when it's not. Either way, there is a large brass bell missing.

Lastly, on this subject, as each artifact was found in the Collections Room, it was matched where possible with its corresponding reference and description in the accessions paperwork. This was noted on the paperwork along with a notation that the artifact had been photographed. Another notation listed the box it was packed in or it was listed as unboxed where applicable. For the first 50 years of the Arsenal Museums' existence, 1939-1989, I can positively account for less than 100 items.

THE GOOD

Not all the lamps are out. There still remain some artifacts of superior quality worthy of any museum. They exist not because of the care they received, but in spite of it. Beaufort possesses some rare pieces of hair jewelry from the 19th century. Some of the pieces are made in the form of mourning jewelry. Rachel and Kristina of the Confederate Relic Room, who helped with this project, were ecstatic over the quantity and quality of these pieces. They represent a lost art form representative of our nation's popular culture. Beaufort is lucky to have so many in such good condition.

Other items which still remain in good or superior condition are a World War I US officer's doughboy uniform, several pieces of early women's Navy uniforms, Boy Scout items, 19th/early 20th century medical and dental items and some ceramics. The vast numbers of Indian points and nature specimens are worthy of note.

The documentary artifacts are a class unto themselves. Even the ones in bad condition are valuable in what they tell us. Not everything makes it into the history books. In some instances, the sole surviving proof of an event or person is found in the surviving records. If the records do not survive, do we?

RECOMMENDATIONS

This does not come easy. Quite unfortunately, in my opinion, there are not enough good things left to build a museum around. They could represent a foundation for a future museum given sufficient expenditure of material, personnel and monetary resources, all of which are in very short supply these days. The few good items left might fill three display cases. Three cases do not a museum make.

The items that are beyond hope take up time and space and they aren't going to get any better. Hold a sale or auction and get rid of them. Use the money to create a hospitable environment for the remaining items that are worth keeping. If a friendly environment is not feasible, do not get rid of the good things; they will never be replaced.

Take the good things and loan, not sell them, to other museums. The City would establish good will and favorable working relationships with other institutions which would be glad to get these items. Let them bear the cost of storage and display and essentially hold them in good custody until such time as the City feels it can recall them for a new museum. The City would be in good standing by this time with these other museums. Not only would the City get its artifacts back but would be able to use its professional standing to receive artifacts on loan from them.

Historical artifacts of any kind are not cold and dead. They have much to tell to those who listen. They tell us about the lives and times of our ancestral families, how things were in their everyday affairs, their interactions with each other and their surroundings. They tell us of their material culture and their level of social advancement, their hopes and dreams. Our families are gone; only their material legacy remains to tell their story. In telling us about them, they tell us about ourselves.

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