

Dorothy J. Moon

Bit by Bit Curation in a National Recreation Area

Like the park itself, collection management at Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area (NRA) has grown more complex through the years. Bit by bit, acquisitions have accumulated, placing an increasing burden on both park staff and park facilities. Park staff, focused on enhancing and providing recreational opportunities for visitors — a prime objective of the national recreation area — have been hard pressed to make curation of the collection a top priority. Park storage facilities require renovation, including elaborate utility upgrades, if they are to satisfy museum storage criteria. At Delaware Water Gap NRA, we have found that improvements are more likely to occur when approached in small doses, or “bit by bit.”

Even before it became clear the Tocks Island Dam would never be built, then-park Superintendent Peter DeGelleke wanted to preserve and interpret what was left of the history of the area. The two sites chosen were Slateford farm, a historic farm in Pennsylvania, and the historic village of Millbrook, NJ. As part of this effort, park staff acquired through donation, purchase, and field acquisition thousands of objects that would be used in furnishing the buildings and creating a 19th-century atmosphere for both sites. Household furnishings, farm implements, mill works, carriages, sleighs, books, shoe-making tools, and more were collected and used in fulfilling this mission.

In addition to historic objects collected for the exhibits, “salvage archeology” conducted in conjunction with the proposed dam generated a large collection of both prehistoric and historic objects that have not been completely cataloged. The personal papers, magazines, newspapers, and ephemera of

past residents were also collected. When facilities and staffing levels at the park were planned, such large collections were not anticipated, so care and maintenance have been done bit by bit with stolen staff time. National recreation areas seldom plan for collections; but even if they do not acquire collections from outside sources, every day they generate resource management records that must be retained in the park archives. It has been an on-going struggle to protect and exhibit these collections. Thus far there are 6,385 records relating to historic objects and 64,235 records relating to archeological material. And the number grows daily.

In a national recreation area designated as a Wild and Scenic River, the focus is usually on natural resources. Visitors are primarily attracted to recreational opportunities such as canoeing, kayaking, fishing, hunting, hiking, and swimming. Although there are some people who come to enjoy a tour at Millbrook Village or to seek out the many historic buildings identified in the park’s auto-tour book (see Kopczynski article, p. 44), these cultural sightseers are in the minority. In addition, the park’s staff has often been more attuned to the significance of the natural rather than cultural resources under the stewardship of the National Park Service. At Delaware Water

Bushkill School collection storage facility following installation of new hip roof. Work will begin on the new HVAC system later this summer. NPS photo.



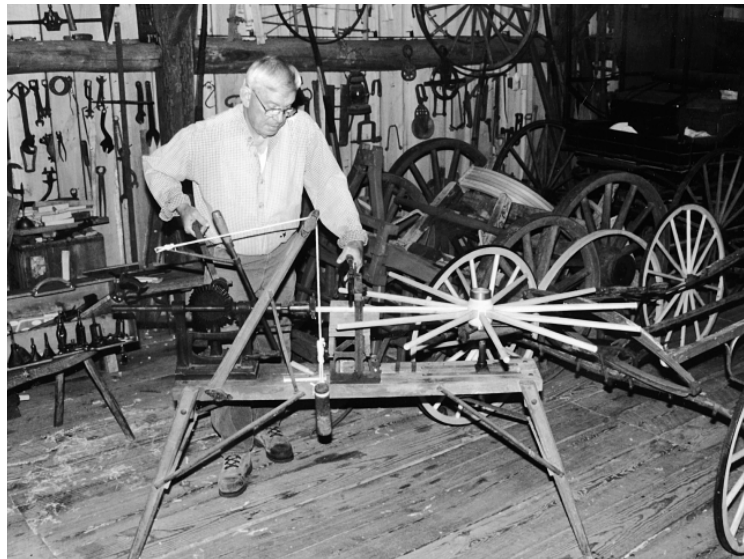
Interior of wagon shop in museum village of Millbrook, N.J. Park interpreter Jim Morris operates a horizontal boring machine patented in 1883. A hollow auger bit is being used to make wheel spoke tenons, "bit by bit." In the background are just a few of Millbrook's vast collections. NPS photo.

Gap NRA we have no famous names or events with which to associate our collections, but this does not make them any less important to preserve once we have accepted that responsibility with their acquisition. Indeed, the lack of knowledge and appreciation of cultural resources puts them in danger.

Many staff members are unsure of the curatorial responsibilities of the park. To account for park collections and to care for them, cataloging and environmental monitoring more often than not take place behind the scenes, out of sight of staff or visitors. This is especially true in some of the remote areas where park collections are located. Getting support and cooperation for accessioning and organizing management records that comprise the park archives is an even more formidable task since many people do not recognize the importance of "their" files to the overall park legacy. When it is recognized, the staff is supportive and understanding.

Along with the difficulties outlined above, the park has never had sufficient funds to undertake major projects to document and provide storage for the collections. To bolster support for funding, in the summer of 1996, a team from the National Park Service Northeast Museum Services Center visited the park and developed a Collection Management Plan to help the park get a better grip on the museum collection. With the plan's recommendations in hand, the park began seeking funding through the Museum Management and Protection Program, the Cultural Resources Preservation Program, and other sources for which curatorial projects qualified. Much time and thought was invested in developing project statements and determining priorities for projects. This was a cooperative effort involving not only the curatorial staff, but also the maintenance and historic preservation staff as well as our colleagues at the Northeast Museum Services Center.

A major accomplishment of this effort was the expansion and improvement of the collection storage facility in the former Bushkill School. Proceeding bit by bit, we undertook a phased,



multi-year approach, focusing on smaller projects and components in order of priority. Phase 1 studied the total needs of the building with a team of architects and engineers. The flat roof of the building leaked, especially under the stress of accumulating snow, so installation of a new sloping roof and structural repairs was Phase 2. In Phase 3, an HVAC system will be installed to provide a museum environment for objects in storage. The three phases of the project were funded over four years. The plans allow for the eventual expansion of the storage facility, including the mechanical system. Although storage conditions for park collections are vastly improved, there is still much more to be done. The next priority is security — including fire detection and suppression and intrusion alarms. To complete the upgrade of the Bushkill School collection storage facility, some smaller projects remain— including blocking and securing windows and doors, interior plastering, painting, and installing storage equipment.

There are many challenges facing curators in the National Park Service; but for those of us who work in sites that are not primarily recognized for a significant person or event, the challenges in fulfilling our mission can be even more monumental. At Delaware Water Gap NRA, getting as many supportive players on the team as possible and getting tasks accomplished bit by bit are pragmatic solutions that have worked.

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