

# **Keys to Keeping Track of Material History:**

**A Basic Guidebook for Cataloguing and Photographing  
Artifacts in The United Church of Canada  
(2017)**



**(Key to Marysville Methodist Church in New Brunswick  
now held by the Maritime Conference Archives)**

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## Introduction

Canadian suffragist and United Church member, Nellie McClung, once noted: “People must know the past to understand the present and face the future.”<sup>1</sup> The United Church of Canada and the denominations that came before it have had a rich history. That history can help we, The United Church of Canada, understand where we have been and where we are. Understanding the more problematic aspects of our history can help us redress some of those historic grievances. In addition, the faith of our forebears can inspire us as we move forward into the future.

The history of the United Church of Canada, however, is not confined solely to historical records and documents. There is a rich material history in the United Church. **In other words, church history can also be told by the vast collection of historical objects – artifacts – that reside within the church and sometimes outside of it.**

The study of church artifacts often provides people with glimpses of the past that are different from or augment the story told by the narrative which is recorded in historical documents. The study of material history is often a way to include the history of groups who are traditionally under-represented in the written historical record.

**Artifacts can be items as grand as stained-glass windows and as simple as a hymn book. A small box of tiny Canadian Girls in Training (CGIT) camp souvenirs can impart part of the story of the United Church of Canada just as can a giant hand that once sat atop a church steeple.**

Several years ago – recognizing the importance of material history -- an Ad Hoc Sub-Committee of The United Church of Canada’s Archives and History Committee (hereafter AHC) was appointed to study matters about artifacts. This guide stems from that work.

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted on “Why is Women’s History Month Important?”, Status of Women, Government of Canada, accessed 29 May 2017, <http://www.swc-cfc.gc.ca/commemoration/whm-mhf/why-pourquoi-en.html>.

What follows is a basic guidebook for cataloguing and photographing artifacts in the United Church of Canada. It is designed so that a person does not need to have experience working in museums or archives to undertake a cataloguing and photographing project. Section One covers reasons why cataloguing and photographing artifacts is important. Section Two provides details about how to catalogue artifacts. Section Three provides tips for photographing artifacts. Section Four covers some basic storage and care suggestions for artifacts. Section Five provides some ideas on how to creatively share information about your material history. Appendix A contains a template cataloguing form. Appendix B provides some further resources for more in-depth information about cataloguing and photographing and artifact care and storage.

Not every artifact in the church will remain in its original or current church home. Cataloguing and photographing artifacts is an opportunity to preserve the historical record of these objects.

This is not a booklet that details what to do with church artifacts that have lost their church home. Church records **SHOULD** be sent to the various United Church archives. Photographs and cataloguing records of artifacts **SHOULD** be sent to the various United Church Archives. Artifacts **SHOULD NOT** be sent to United Church Archives. The various archival facilities of The United Church do not have either the room or the proper facilities to hold artifacts. Artifacts which are leaving the United Church are a matter that must be dealt with by those who have the responsibility to oversee property and finance matters at the various levels of the United Church.

Thanks must be extended to Nichole Vonk, General Council Archivist, Sarah Wallace, Maritime Conference Archivist, volunteers at Kirk-McColl United Church in St. Stephen, New Brunswick who worked on a trial cataloguing project, all those who filled out the Artifact Survey of 2016, past members of the AHC's Ad Hoc Sub-Committee on Artifacts, and many others for their work and input in bringing this project to fruition.

Blessings,

Julielynn Anderson,  
Chair,  
Maritime Conference Archives Committee,  
Representative from Maritime Conference  
to the Archives and History Committee of  
the United Church of Canada

# Section One: Reasons to Catalogue

## 1. Preserving History:

Cataloguing and photographing artifacts preserves the historical information that can be shared through the study of artifacts/material history. This is important because sometimes the history imparted by the study of historical objects provides unique or different information about people and events not found in old church documents.

## 2. Artifact Check-Up

Cataloguing and photographing artifacts provides an opportunity to inspect artifacts and identify any areas of concern. For example: Are there issues with moisture, dryness or insect infestations? Hopefully, this allows people to address concerns before historic items are beyond repair.

## 3. Respectful and Legal Ownership

Cataloguing and photographing artifacts helps ensure that congregations and other church bodies legally and respectfully own the historic objects they currently possess. Some objects in the past were removed from the culture that created them (i.e. historical objects made by indigenous peoples) without their consent or blessing. It behooves us as a church to be certain that any historical object we have was freely given or purchased. If we have artifacts that were taken without consent from historically marginalized groups of people, discussions should be had amongst involved parties about where the most ethical and respectful home for such historical objects should be.

## 4. Is It Owned or Is It a Loan?

Cataloguing and photographing artifacts helps ensure the church does not have objects on loan that they think they own. It is probably wise to ensure a congregation or other church body knows the legal status of items – even historical ones – it has in its keeping lest it become a surprise legal matter.

## 5. Respecting the Faith of Our Forebears

Many church artifacts were given or made for the church as a symbol of a person's faith. Many artifacts were also donated in memory of someone. We, as a church, may very well not be able to keep every artifact currently in our possession. Some may already be beyond saving. Some artifacts have historically been damaged by fire and natural disasters. Others may suffer such fates in future. Cataloguing and photographing the

church's historical objects allows us to honour the faith of those who came before us and respect the importance of their donations and work even if we cannot maintain all the artifacts themselves.

## 6. Intergenerational Fellowship

It is often the elders of our church who know the information about historic items in the church. It is the young of our church who are more likely to have the capacity to move objects, crawl under tables to look for maker's marks and generally do the more physical aspects of cataloguing. Thus, cataloguing and photographing artifacts provides a unique opportunity for generations to work together. This sort of intergenerational fellowship would allow for the transmission of the history of the church from one generation to the next and maybe foster greater understanding between generations.

## 7. Share our story with the world

Cataloguing and photographing artifacts allows us to share our history. There may be others outside the church who are interested in studying artifacts possessed by various levels of the United Church of Canada. If we, the church, do not know what material history we possess, how can anyone else? If we do not remember our history and foster connections with others interested in the preservation of the past, we effectively write ourselves out of history.



(Plaque commemorating The Methodist Churches of Bermuda in Union with The United Church of Canada at The Maritime Conference Archives)

## **Section Two: The Cataloguing Process**

### **Supplies Needed for Cataloguing:**

- Cataloguing form (see Appendix A)
- White cloth gloves or nitril or vinyl gloves (no powder on the inside)
- Pencils
- Pencil sharpener
- Erasers
- Computer or tablet if you prefer to fill out the cataloguing form electronically (Use modern table to support computer.)
- Clipboard
- Measuring tapes (flexible ones used for sewing work well) and rulers
- Camera
- Non-artifact chairs to sit on
- Dust Masks (Especially if you have allergies and/or items have been stored for a long time.)

### **Tips for Cataloguing:**

- Use white cotton gloves. For slippery items such as ceramics use nitril or vinyl gloves with no powder on the inside. Hands have oils on them that over time can damage historical items – especially items made of cloth and metal. If you do not have gloves, wash and dry hands very well, but be advised historic paints and dyes often have chemicals in them that you may not want in contact with your skin.
- Avoid using pen around artifacts. Use pencils or computers to record the information. Avoid writing or placing computers on artifact surfaces.
- Avoid drinking or eating while cataloguing.
- Catalogue in shorter blocks of time – a few hours on any given day at most.
- Work in pairs. It makes cataloguing easier when one person examines the artifact and another person records the information.

- Try to get several teams of two working together. It creates a more convivial atmosphere, makes the work move along faster and provides a greater opportunity for fellowship.
- Get younger people involved. Cataloguing sometimes involves getting down on the floor, climbing to examine something affixed to a wall or crawling under tables to look for inscriptions. If you do not have younger people available in your church consider reaching out to universities/colleges with programs in history or museum studies which might have students who are interested in volunteering and getting some experience or reaching out to high schools where students need community service hours.
- Pick up objects by their strongest area. For example: When picking up a chair pick it up by its seat and not its back. Another example: When holding a vase support the base and hold the neck securely.
- Avoid moving heavy objects on your own. Think carefully before removing items from walls. Better to examine an object less than to create conditions where someone might easily get injured.
- If you have a written church history, consult it for information on artifacts.
- Do not worry if you cannot fill in every blank on the cataloguing form. Some information is better than none.

#### **Notes on the Cataloguing Form (Appendix A):**

- **Object name** would be something such as “book” or “quilt”. **Title** would be something such as “*Our Children in Old Scotland and Nova Scotia* by E. M. Stirling” or “CGIT Quilt.”
- When giving a description of the artifact include as much information as possible about what the object is and what it is made from. Include information such as material (wood, metal, cloth, paper etc.), colour, and distinguishing features.
- **Key words** are themes that the object has connection to (i.e. key words for a UCW quilt might include words such as: textile, women, quilts, United Church Women).



- **Inscriptions and Markings** include anything written, engraved, painted, etched or stamped on an object (i.e. an inscription that reads “This chalice was presented in...”).
- Artifacts often have markings which give some information about where, when and by whom they were made. Remember to look closely at objects if you can.
- Church histories and plaques affixed or inscriptions engraved to historical objects can often provide information about where an object came from, when and how it arrived in the church and who brought/bought/ or donated it.
- There will be items that you have no idea how the church received them. You may also find items that technically were “loaned” to the church.
- When commenting on **Condition** note any damage or deterioration.
- When noting a **Location** be specific about where in a church or other United Church facility that object is.
- The **Notes** section is for any other information you consider relevant. Are there stories that go with this artifact? Are there references in a church history to it? Are there other artifacts that go with it? Do you know if it comes from a particular culture, artistic movement or trend?
- Include the town or city and province of the church you are cataloguing artifacts at when you note the name of the congregation or other church locale at which you are working. There are a lot of churches with similar names.
- Try to include as much information as possible. Try to be as specific as possible. Avoid guessing, however.



(CGIT Midi Blouse, Kirk-McColl, St. Stephen, NB)

## Section Three: Photographing Artifacts

### Tips for Photographing:

- Use a camera you are comfortable with.
- Take pictures of the artifact from different angles. This is especially important for objects that have markings, writing or different images on different sides.
- Try to take “close-up” pictures of the artifact. If the artifact is too large to see everything in a “close-up” take a picture of the whole artifact from a distance and then take several “close-up” pictures of different areas of the object.
- Try to take pictures of artifacts on neutral backgrounds that contrast from and that do not distract from the object.
- Try to avoid reflective surfaces when taking pictures.
- Take pictures of large artifacts where they are. This helps avoid potential injury. If you cannot take a picture of the back of a large object because it is affixed to a wall or something similar, do not worry about taking a picture of the back of that object.
- If you still have a film camera then use a film camera. If you have a digital camera then use a digital camera. Digital pictures do not need to be printed. They could be sent to the archives in a digital format (i.e. on a memory stick).
- Send old pictures of the artifact (if you have them) to the appropriate United Church archives along with the modern pictures of the artifact.



(Different angles of a Woman's Missionary Society collection box, Kirk-McColl, St. Stephen, NB)

## Section Four: Basic Storage Tips

- Try to avoid storing artifacts in area where temperatures fluctuate (i.e. damp basements and hot attics). This is especially important for artifacts made from materials such as cloth, paper and metal
- Avoid eating around artifacts (exceptions include communion tables and old dishes meant for eating on). Crumbs attract insects and other pests which may also begin to eat away at artifacts.
- Keep artifacts out of direct sunlight when possible. Direct sunlight is strong and can cause fading on textile, paper, painted and other items. If artifacts are stored in an area with a lot of windows consider curtains or UV film.
- When textile items are not in use try to store them by laying them flat. If items are too large to lay flat, roll them on archival quality rolls. If items are designed to be hung (gowns etc.) and are still in good enough shape to do so, then they can be stored in a hanging position. Folding textiles creates creases which can eventually lead to tears.
- Keep historic books and other paper items (hymn books, bibles, historic Sunday School libraries, church histories etc.) out of damp basements. Books can get moldy and mildewed.
- Check artifacts occasionally for signs of mold, mildew, insect infestation or other forms of deterioration. Hopefully, this will allow for stopping any deterioration before an object becomes too expensive to fix or simply beyond repair.



(Blue glass “jug” that was used in parsonages in Newfoundland in 1889, now at the Maritime Conference Archives by way of Mount Allison University)

## **Section Five: Sharing History**

This section includes some creative ways to share your history with the people in your church and even your community. If you've catalogued your artifacts, you should have some pictures and information to share.

### **1. Night (or Day) at the Museum Event:**

Display some of your artifacts in a large room with pictures and brief information about them. Take donations. (It can be fundraising for building repair, stained-glass window restoration, Mission & Service, Outreach etc.). You can share your history, have fellowship and raise funds for church work all at the same time.

### **2. Theme Event**

Pick an artifact to have a theme event around. Do you have an old magic lantern, slides or slide projector? Have a movie night and display older projection artifacts for people to see. Do you have quilts or banners? Have a quilting workshop or other crafting event and display the old quilts and banners. Do you have a wide range of hymn books? Have a "Old fashion" hymn sing service but use hymns from a variety of hymn books to appeal to an intergenerational audience. Again, this provides an opportunity to explore church history, engage in fellowship and maybe fundraising.

### **3. Digital Exhibit**

Get younger people involved. Have them put together a digital exhibit – pictures and information – for a church website or a Facebook page, etc. This is an excellent way to share church history with a wide audience.

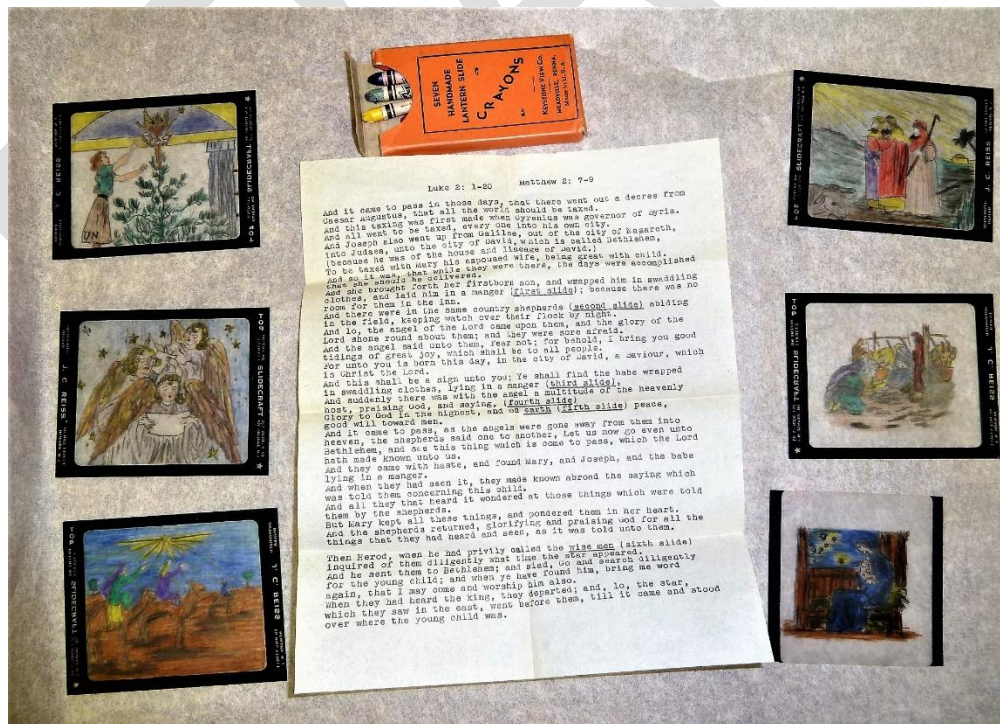
### **4. Engage Young People**

Do you have items related to Sunday School or Youth in the past? Work such objects into a Youth, Sunday School or VBS event, (i.e. comparing then and now). Do you have items that reflect the less technological past? Use them as a teaching tool to talk about what life was once like in Canada and how life might still be similar for people in other parts of the world, (i.e. artifacts related to water before indoor plumbing and working on a project to raise money for wells in Africa or elsewhere). Do a workshop on a historic toy such as a Jacob's Ladder and compare it with a

toy from another part of the world. Raise funds for a Mission and Service project involving children and youth. It is today's young people who will have to preserve the history of the church and these sorts of ideas engage youth, and provide an opportunity for both intergenerational fellowship and mission and service engagement.

## 5. Do Not Hide, Hoard or Dismiss Your History

History is meant to be shared and this is particularly true of material history. If artifacts are hidden away, what is the point of keeping them? Do not be afraid to share your history with your church community and a wider community. Yes, care needs to be taken to protect artifacts, but do not be so overprotective that there's no sharing at all. If your congregation has no use for an artifact consider that another congregation might. (Consult the appropriate people who oversee property and finance). If you are leaving a historic building, consider creative ways you can incorporate church artifacts or pieces of the old building/furniture into the new space (as was done at the Christian Resource Centre at 40 Oak Street in Toronto). Church artifacts should be preserved to honour the faith of our forefathers and foremothers and be used to the glory of God, not hidden, hoarded or dismissed.



(Hand coloured slides, lantern slide crayons and advent Sunday School lesson to go with them at Kirk-McColl, St. Stephen, NB)

**Appendix A:**  
**Artifact Cataloguing Form**

**Object name:**

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**Title:**

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**Description:**

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**Key Words:**

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**Inscriptions or Markings:**

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**Size:**

**Height:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Width:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Length:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Who made it?** \_\_\_\_\_

**Where was it made?** \_\_\_\_\_

**When was it made?**

**Exact date or Estimated date** (Please circle one) \_\_\_\_\_

**Where was it used?** \_\_\_\_\_

**When was it used?** \_\_\_\_\_

**Who acquired this object for the church?**

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**When did it come to the church?** \_\_\_\_\_

**Terms of Ownership:** (please circle one) **Gift Purchase Loan Other Unknown**

**If "Other", please explain:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Condition:** (please circle one) **Poor Fair Good Very Good Excellent**

**Condition Comments:**

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Location:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Modern Photographs:** (please circle one) **Digital** **Printed**

**Are there old records/photographs?** (please circle one) **Yes** **No** **Unknown**

**If "Yes", where are the old records/photographs?**

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**Notes/Comments:**

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**Date of Inventory:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Completed By:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Congregation/Pastoral Charge/Other:**

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## Appendix B:

### Further Resources

#### Some Artifact Management Resources

##### Some Canadian Resources:

**Website of the Canadian Museums Association:** <http://www.museums.ca>

- Under the “Publications” section there are two sub-sections of interest. These are: “Reports and Guidelines” and “Museum Ethics.” The “Reports and Guidelines” section contains links to articles and documents about museum practices. The “Museum Ethics” section has questions about a variety of dilemmas which are linked to answers. This includes issues related to permanent loans.

**List of guideline and procedure documents from The Association of Nova Scotia Museums:** <http://ansm.ns.ca/collections-and-access.html>

- Of particular interest, a brief document about photographing artefacts.

**List of resources about conservation from the Ontario Museum Association:** <https://members.museumsontario.ca/sites/default/files/members/ConservationResourceListMarch2013.pdf>.

- This list of resources was particularly designed for the aid of people who were not professional curators.

**Website of the BC Museums Association:** <http://museumsassn.bc.ca/>

- Under the “Professional Development” section, the “Museum Standards and Best Practices” and “Care and Handling of Your Collections” sub-sections have links to resources which may be relevant.

**Link to a Government of Canada webpage about “Caring for Sacred and Culturally Sensitive Objects”:** <http://canada.pch.gc.ca/eng/1448995219999>

## International Resources:

***Running a Museum: A Practical Handbook*** published by The International Council of Museums: [http://icom.museum/uploads/tx\\_hpoindexbdd/practical\\_handbook.pdf](http://icom.museum/uploads/tx_hpoindexbdd/practical_handbook.pdf)

- This is a fairly scholarly guide covering many issues related to museums. This includes articles on subjects such as care of artefacts and the cataloguing of them. Accessible also through the Canadian Museums Association site.

***The Small Museums Cataloguing Manual*** – an Australian resource designed to help staff and volunteers at small museums catalogue artefacts. It can be accessed at:

[http://mavic.asn.au/assets/Small\\_Museums\\_Cataloguing\\_Manual\\_4th.pdf](http://mavic.asn.au/assets/Small_Museums_Cataloguing_Manual_4th.pdf)

- This guide is excellent because it is informative but remains accessible to the lay person.

**A link to a guide on textile care put out by the National Park Service in the United States:** <https://www.nps.gov/museum/publications/MHI/Appendix%20K.pdf>

- Historic textiles can be particularly challenging to work with and often require a lot of special care and considerations.