

Focusing on a series of reforms instituted at the Sacred Harp Museum in Carrollton, GA in 2018 and '19, this paper offers a case study in creating a new set of technical and practical guidelines for a small special library. Like many libraries of this type, the Sacred Harp Museum exists outside the framework of academic or public librarianship and receives minimal, almost entirely volunteer staff support. Some of the idiosyncrasies of this collection stem from practical limitations—especially the physical capacities of the building, available ILS software, and a part-time staff. Of equal importance to practicalia is the nature of the audience attracted by this narrow collection. The Museum's foremost public is the Sacred Harp community broadly writ—primarily practitioners who are deeply engaged with shape-note singing. Therefore, management of the collection needed to accommodate the interests and habits of such persons while also maintaining a realistic attitude toward the institution's capacities.

While the solutions posed are necessarily peculiar to the Museum, the process itself provides a model for the management of other small libraries that must still meet the needs of a specialized audience. It should be of interest to technicians or administrators who work with small special libraries. After providing an overview of the Museum's institutional history, the presentation will explain solutions arrived at for a variety of problems that faced the collection at the time these major changes began in late 2018. I summarize three areas of activity: the physical arrangement of material, the call number system, and subject analysis. In each case, the paper explains how the new guidelines attempt to meet the wants of Museum patrons within the capacities of the staff.

Sacred Harp is a participatory tradition of sacred music-making, sustained by annual day- or weekend-long events in which people gather to sing from one of several books known as the *Sacred Harp*. First published in west-central Georgia in 1844, the book's enduring popularity

across much of the South resulted in a fracture when its initial copyright expired at the turn of the twentieth century, with a variety of competing “successor editions” gaining popularity in different regions. Rather than representing the Sacred Harp tradition as a whole, the Sacred Harp Museum is closely tied to one revision, known as the “Denson Book.” This revision is issued by the “Sacred Harp Publishing Company,” which has been a nonprofit since 1977. Historically most popular in northern Alabama and west Georgia, the Denson Book is now the most recognizable revision of the *Sacred Harp*, particularly among singers outside of the South.

The Museum was begun in 1986 as the personal project of three Sacred Harp singers: Charlene Wallace, Hugh McGraw, and Richard DeLong. At the time, the Publishing Company was relocating from Cullman, AL, to Carrollton, GA, which entailed building the company’s first dedicated office and storage space. All three founders were native West Georgians from traditional “singing families,” who held positions of responsibility in the Publishing Company, and whose compositions appear in the current edition of the Denson Book. These singers requested that space be set aside in the new headquarters to house Sacred Harp-related publications. Early holdings consisted of Wallace, McGraw, and DeLong’s own personal libraries and gifts they received from singing friends. Therefore, the collection is deeply rooted in West Georgia material, followed by other locations where the founders regularly traveled to sing (primarily Alabama and Texas). Meanwhile, the headquarters building also stored yet-to-be-sold copies of the Denson Book, served as a meeting place for shareholders, and not infrequently a boarding house for visitors attending singings in the Carrollton area.

Wallace, McGraw, and DeLong were all instrumental in the popularization of Sacred Harp outside of the South, a trend that radically changed the holdings and audience of the Museum. Since the turn of the century, numerous new singings have been established, beginning with the

eastern U.S. and now encompassing another dozen countries. Networks of mutual travel encourage “new” out-of-region singers to visit “traditional” singings, an activity which—given the prominence of the Denson Book—centers in West Georgia. Shape-note enthusiasts from around the world have become acquainted with the Museum while visiting all-day singings in Carroll County. This has resulted in longterm relationships between the Museum and enthusiasts who regularly donate material related to their home regions—such as Ginny Ely, an early Northern enthusiast of Sacred Harp who started photographing New England singings in the 1990s; or Werner Ullah, who has collected ephemera from nearly every European all-day singing held since 2012. The collection has also grown beyond the Denson Book, and now features particularly strong holdings related to Cooper Book Sacred Harp singings in South Georgia and the seven-shape tunebook *New Harp of Columbia*.

Simultaneous with this rapid growth, the Museum experienced a transfer of custodial effort. Charlene Wallace remained honorary director until her death, but declining health forced her to take a less direct role. Since 2016, volunteer curator Nathan Rees—an art history professor at the nearby University of West Georgia, who has some background in museum studies—has essentially served as a one-man band, devoting one or two hours of work per week to cataloging, conservation, and digitization. The same year, the Publishing Company funded an annual, month-long internship. Initially meant to support cataloging the extensive backlog, the internship program has since supported more specific projects, including Andy Ditzler’s development of a preservation strategy for born-digital materials, and my own revision of Museum procedures.

At that time, the Museum was facing a longterm shortage of storage space, exacerbated since the building also had to house 3,000 boxes of newly manufactured Sacred Harps, intended to be the final printing of the 1991 edition prior to the completion of a new revision. None of the

Museum material circulates, and no data on pulled items was available. Therefore, in conversation with Museum volunteers and visitors, we informally gathered information regarding which monographs patrons most frequently access and why. Responses suggested that most patrons' needs could be met by access to one reference copy. We therefore removed most duplicates from the shelf and placed them in storage boxes, resulting in an immediate and dramatic relief of shelf overcrowding. The Museum's ILS does not easily permit changes of holding location—more on that later—so a spreadsheet system was created to track which box was used to store each duplicate item, in case a specific copy was demanded.

This solution was eminently *unpractical* for the various Denson revisions of the *Sacred Harp*. Even though most visitors are intimately familiar with this title, the Museum owns several hundred copies. This extremely high number of copies of one book resulted in a large portion of the tunebook collection having been cataloged under a single call number and taking up numerous shelf-feet. Patrons hoping to look at a *Sacred Harp* do not typically browse through such books but instead request to see a copy once sung from by a friend, ancestor, or prominent singer. Therefore, these books were separated and placed in a devoted shelving unit, where they were organized by edition, state, and accession number. Particularly robust information on provenance is included in the catalog record, permitting easy identification of a copy associated with a particular person or location. Pulling all the Denson Books at once also facilitated gathering information about variant states within editions for the first time. Non-Denson versions of the *Sacred Harp*, being fewer and less frequently requested, remain part of the main tunebook collection.

Information on donation patterns also aided prioritization of available space. For instance, both the book and VHS shelving units have long been targeted for replacement. Each was

homemade in 1986 and is no longer physically sound. By 2018, only one person was known to still regularly record Sacred Harp singings on videocassette: Bill Windom of Ider, AL. Windom regularly donated VHSs, and was expected to eventually will his remaining recordings to the Museum—as indeed happened earlier this year. Therefore, projected growth in the VHS collection could be inferred reasonably accurately and was not expected to exceed the capacity of the current shelving unit. Therefore, budgetary priority was accorded to replacing the *book* unit. Until that could be done, steps were taken to relieve some pressure on the main book shelving unit, including by separating duplicates (as described earlier) and shifting pamphlets to vertical storage.

During the early days of the Museum, when books and audiovisual recordings dominated the collection, Wallace and others simply relied on personal recollection to keep track of items. While compiling a checklist that served as the Museum’s first catalog in 2002, Charles Woods instituted a shelfmark system for books and periodicals. Later, the Publishing Company licensed an early version of ResourceMate—a lightweight ILS marketed toward volunteer-led libraries—though no efforts were made to create a computerized catalog until Sasha Hsuczyk’s tenure as intern in 2016. Hsuczyk initially attempted to use Library of Congress call numbers but was foiled by ResourceMate’s stringent character limits. She and Rees therefore “homebrewed” a call number system that could function within ResourceMate. This system employed an initial code indicating the format of an item, followed by the year of publication and a title incipit.

These two-letter codes directly linked format, holding location, and resource type, a system that was unsustainable for several reasons. Firstly, ResourceMate does not facilitate batch-changing the holding location associated with a given record or call number, so any physical rearrangement within the Museum necessitated significant recataloging. The software’s resource

types are also minimally customizable, making it difficult to account for less-common types (such as floppy disks or reel-to-reel tapes) whose physical format necessitated separate shelving. Finally, items stored separately from other items of the same format could not be accurately cataloged, such as books whose fragility necessitated storage in document boxes rather than on the shelf. To alleviate these problems, a new conceptual model was created that less directly mapped these qualities to one another. This necessitated divorcing resource types from call numbers and no longer equating holding locations with format (the latter of which, via the two-letter codes, continues to form the most basic division within the call number system). A complete shelving map of the facility was created. While most items of similar format continue to be stored together, the physical location of a given call number range can now easily be located on the shelving map without patrons needing to be acquainted with ResourceMate's somewhat esoteric resource types. Shifting items requires amending the map and/or shelf signage, rather than altering the call number for each item in the catalog. A separate, controlled-vocabulary field within ResourceMate is now used to indicate items that are stored apart from similar call numbers, using indicators like "Duplicate Box" or "On Display"; such items can be located by their call number on separate spreadsheets maintained for each such category.

Upon first creating the call number system, Rees established several conceptual divisions within the book collection, separating out tunebooks and minute books. Since the late nineteenth century, many all-day singings have published minutes detailing any business transacted, as well as the leaders present and, frequently, which songs were sung. Minutes continue to be issued by individual singings and in annual compilations. Such publications provide a crucial historical record of Sacred Harp singing and have been the focus of significant recent research on geographical and chronological aspects of the repertoire. Apart from their documentary utility,

minute books have a vital and beloved place in Sacred Harp culture. Secretaries commonly forward minutes to homebound singers, so that—by reading the minutes—they can in some degree experience an event that they missed. Rees’s decision to treat minute books as a special category of publication was a valuable first step in organizing the Museum’s physical and conceptual space in ways that reflect how *singers* think about singing.

Revamping the call number system allowed us to extend such organizational thought to other types of publications. Rather than all call numbers consisting of a format code, date, and title incipit, we have taken a more nuanced approach that is meant to reflect how patrons most often use a given type of material. Chronological organization had been effective for the minute books, since most patrons seeking minutes have a particular instance of a singing in mind. The vital records collection, by contrast, is now organized as an open file with items ordered by subjects’ surnames, making it quick to browse through birth, anniversary, and death records for an individual or family. Similarly, ephemera are organized geographically, newsletters by title, and sheet and manuscript music by composer.

Robust subject analysis is particularly vital for the Sacred Harp Museum. Since the call number system is not based on subject, patrons discover material overwhelmingly through catalog searches rather than by browsing shelves. Geographical and personal names are vital access points. Yet existing thesauri did not offer sufficient depth or specificity to meaningfully describe other aspects of items within the collection, the vast majority of which would conventionally fall under a mere handful of Library of Congress subject headings. Therefore, we began developing and implementing a self-constructed group of subject headings intended to reflect the language that singers conventionally use. For instance, material related to tunebooks other than the Denson revision of the Sacred Harp receive subject headings based on the name

popularly used to refer to the book, rather than its exact title (which frequently varies by edition). Like the Sacred Harp, the popular seven-shape tunebook *Christian Harmony* fractured into regional traditions following the lapse of its original copyright. Therefore, items related to Christian Harmony singing receive the general subject heading “Christian Harmony,” as well as (if appropriate) the more specific “Christian Harmony (Alabama Book)” and “Christian Harmony (Carolina Book).” Wherever possible, these local-use subject headings have been supplemented by rich descriptions in natural language, particularly in the case of archival items whose assigned titles may not adequately convey their points of interest.

Again, Museum volunteers and frequent visitors were consulted to determine which research questions ought to be encompassed. These included topics that scholars have long considered significant to the culture of Sacred Harp singing, such as the communal “dinner on the ground” potluck, but also others that surprised Museum staff—convention bylaws, recipes, travel directions to defunct singings, and advertisements for singing schools. Individual annual singings, a common topic of enquiry for patrons, have proven particularly thorny to encompass. While some singings are organized by an incorporated body—such as WMSHC, Inc., which oversees the Western Massachusetts Convention—many are informally organized. Most have no official name, but are referred to simply by their hosting venue, even when, as in the case of “State Line Church,” multiple singings occur at multiple venues of identical name. Singings frequently change venue or date, are dissolved and reinstated, or calve off from or combine with another singing. For currently active singings, we based subject headings on the names submitted by secretaries to the 2018 edition of the two most comprehensive collections of singing minutes. It would be highly desirable to create an authority file for names of singings, but this would require more detailed research into defunct singings than currently exists,



particularly for Mississippi, Florida, and Texas. Conducting such research has been suggested as a focus for a future internship.

The 2018 internship culminated in the creation of a handbook outlining practices for accessioning new items and processing backlog, intended primarily as a guide for future interns. Creating this handbook required taking serious stock of the aims and characteristics of the institution it is meant to serve. The numerous changes to Museum practices made during 2018 and '19 emerged through discussion between myself, curator Nathan Rees, Publishing Company officers Karen Rollins and Jesse Karlsberg, and a large number of shape-note scholars, prior Museum volunteers, and local Sacred Harp singers who were willing to offer their input.

My most recent job prior to working at the Sacred Harp Museum had been cataloging at the special collections unit of an R1 university. My first responses to the new surroundings tended towards frustration. Ultimately, it proved more productive to accept that, so to speak, the Sacred Harp Museum's "best practices" would be different from the best practices of other repositories. Acknowledging this fact allowed us to make level-headed prioritizations that fit the needs and capacities of our specific situation, rather than more abstract ideals. For example, we determined that it was best to venture a guess at the date or geographical origin of an item instead of leaving it in an "unidentified" folder, and to privilege density of description over a greater volume of original cataloging.

Secondly, even within the limitations of a small non-profit, a leaky building, and an outdated ILS, it was still possible to foreground the needs of patrons. The knowledge we could safely presume from most visitors is that of practitioners deeply engaged in shape-note singing; they come to the Museum wanting to learn more about *their* practice. Thus, the Museum will have failed in its aims if singers do not find the experience of exploring its holdings practicable,

attractive, and fulfilling. Even though conducted on a highly informal basis, surveying both first-time and repeated visitors provided insights about the usability of the collection that Museum volunteers had never arrived at on their own. Such insights were particularly influential as we developed the subject heading thesaurus and have resulted in a future commitment to keeping more comprehensive records of patrons' research questions.

Finally, directing the amount of time, attention, and labor toward the Museum's collection that was necessary to complete this guide allowed me the opportunity to observe the strata of influence left by prior custodians. Thanks is owed here: many hands had cared for the collection and for the individual items in it. Of the three people who devoted the most hours to Museum, one was dead and two were dying by the time I began work there. The Museum's position in Carrollton allows access to a large community of Sacred Harp singers who can and have assisted in identifying the faces, handwriting, and voices of singers represented in the collection. Though this communal knowledge remains strong, a vast amount of institutional knowledge has been lost. The Museum is still held together with spit and a shoestring; now, at least, we have the advantage of writing down how we did it.