
Here Today, Gone ...[Date Unknown]: Databasing a Historic Accession and Deaccession Record

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Understanding the unique history of a fossil specimen can be difficult with historic collections. This is especially true if staff cannot determine when a specimen was received and/or transferred or with whom a specimen is associated. Well-groomed accession and deaccession records can aid in understanding the full holdings of a collection in its historic and current usage; however, tackling decades-to-centuries worth of paper records is a daunting task. In the Vertebrate Paleontology collection at the Museum of Comparative Zoology (MCZ, Harvard University), we have captured this data in a four-stage process, consisting of: 1) identifying transactions from historic documents; 2) inventorying related specimens; 3) databasing accession and deaccession transactions; and 4) digitizing their associated media for ready access. While the primary documents were often repurposed loan forms, other material included correspondence and informal documents from previous staff, donors, and recipients. This meant each document and transaction had to be individually evaluated, increasing the complexity of the project. Other challenges included identifying uncatalogued material and relating incomplete specimen descriptions to cataloged material. Other collection documents (e.g., field journals, yearly reports, and staff notes) and communication with other institutions' collection staff proved key to our success in clarifying specimen record data. Previously, accession records were entered into our database but required cleaning, while deaccession records had not yet been captured. As a result of this project, we verified and digitized 126 accession and 111 deaccession records, updating over 1,500 specimen records in the process. We were also able to identify information and documents relating to historic loans and other MCZ collections (e.g., Invertebrate Paleontology), as well as illuminate the connections between the MCZ, other institutions, and the researchers we support.
