



Little Bighorn's Museum Collections

Protecting the precious legacy of an iconic event in the story of America

Lack of storage space, poor climate control, and other vulnerabilities jeopardize historical resources of the most famous battlefield in the American West

In strictly factual terms, Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument in Montana memorializes the June 25, 1876 clash between the U.S. Army and Northern Plains Indian tribes. Led by Lt. Col. George Armstrong Custer, about 700 soldiers from the 7th Cavalry attacked a Lakota Sioux, Cheyenne and Arapaho village – and several thousand warriors fought back to preserve their way of life. In the end, more than 60 warriors and 260 soldiers died, including Custer in his fabled “Last Stand.”

In the public’s imagination, the monument and the events and artifacts it preserves are icons of the historic conflict between diverse American cultures on the 19th-century western frontier. Although the park remains a living memorial, the historical objects and archives are a threatened legacy today because of cramped space, inappropriate storage conditions and seriously underfunded collection management.

For this reason, the monument and the National Park Service have decided to temporarily relocate the collection and archives until we can provide these historical treasures a proper home for their display and storage, and for research and reflection. By the end of summer of 2011, all museum objects and documents not on exhibit in the park visitor center will be transferred temporarily to the Western Archeological and Conservation Center (WACC), a state-of-the-art preservation and storage facility operated by NPS in Tucson, Ariz.

This brochure explains how we arrived at this decision – the importance of the collections in the story of Little Bighorn Battlefield, how the collections came into jeopardy, the search for an appropriate temporary home, and what we will do to return them to the battlefield as soon as is possible.

One of the most important and invaluable collections in the National Park Service

Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument's collections total 149,000 objects and archives, most of them stored today in the basement of the battlefield's inadequate and outdated visitor center. These essential collections add immeasurable meaning and context to the events of that day, and to the history of the Northern Plains Indians and their clash with those who came west to settle the American frontier.



Museum objects and archive documents are stored today in the basement of the inadequate and outdated visitor center - NPS photo

The museum collection includes an astonishing array of artifacts: Custer's uniforms . . . Sitting Bull's arrows . . . a rusty and battered Springfield rifle . . . Cheyenne warrior Wooden Leg's ledger drawings of the battle . . . stone-headed war clubs . . . a tattered cavalry flag bearing 13 stripes and 35 stars . . .

Archives that include the Elizabeth Bacon Custer and 7th Cavalry collections provide immeasurably important insight into the history of the battle and its participants.

Crowded and substandard storage space for these collections is the immediate threat. For half a century, limited exhibit space and inadequate exhibition conditions have prevented the park from displaying the vast majority of the collections' wonders.

Decades of delay and inattention have come to this moment. It is time to act to preserve these irreplaceable historic treasures of Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument.

A battlefield monument challenged on all flanks: Aging infrastructure . . . limited land . . . overcrowding . . . and a long-term plan never implemented

For decades, officials at Little Bighorn have had to grapple with numerous unaddressed issues. Park facilities and infrastructure have not aged well. Protection of battlefield lands has been limited. Park staff, visitors, important historical and cultural resources and the telling of the battlefield's story all have suffered from overcrowding.

In 1986, the park adopted a General Management Plan (GMP) that called for major changes to relieve Little Bighorn's problems. They included construction of a new visitor and museum collection storage facility outside of the park's current boundaries to better house, display and explain the park's museum collection. Since then, a combination of critical factors – politics, controversy over some of the plan's proposals – has frustrated NPS efforts to make this recommendation a reality. A series of recent reviews by the NPS and



A previous proposal to expand the existing visitor center with new space for museum displays and storage failed - NPS photo

outside consultants recommended that the museum collection immediately be moved to museum storage that would both meet Park Service standards and put the collection in the care of professional conservators, curators, and archivists.

Although issues of battlefield land and space will continue to take time and negotiation, the threats to the

museum collection and archives, and the potential for irreversible degradation, are serious enough that the NPS must safeguard them immediately. Then, while professionals undertake measures to improve their condition, the monument and NPS can work toward building appropriate collection storage and display facilities at the battlefield.

Thousands of objects, records and documents in need of urgent attention . . . and a new home with modern standards of care

Two small rooms in the crowded basement of Little Bighorn Battlefield’s visitor center house the park’s world-class collection of historical objects and archives. These irreplaceable items already are subject to substandard preservation and curation – not because dedicated NPS staffers do not care, but because space, storage conditions and funding are so inadequate. These precious treasures of Little Bighorn heritage are only a fire, an unexpected flood or a burst water pipe away from ruin.

Among the challenges:

- Many artifacts need – and lack – appropriate storage under modern standards for museum and archival collection management
- Appropriate climate control cannot be achieved with present equipment
- Potential water leaks from overhead pipes pose an immediate threat to artifacts and archives
- People with disabilities cannot gain physical access to the basement storage and research area

- Cramped storage space and substandard cabinets are damaging objects
- There is no fire protection system

One expert study of the storage space noted: “Although the museum collection facility is secure and away from public areas, the storage areas do not meet the fundamental standards per National Park Service policies nor best practices as determined by American Association of Museums.”

These problems would have been remedied by now if construction of new museum storage and a new visitor center had proceeded as the 1986 GMP recommended. In the intervening years, a proposal to expand the existing visitor center with new space for museum displays failed. Most recently, a consultant to the

monument and the NPS proposed the action we will now take: Moving the collections from the monument to safer storage at another repository.



Exposed water pipe in ceiling looms above collection storage cabinet in visitor center basement of Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument - NPS photo

The next step:

Immediate protection elsewhere for Little Bighorn's museum collections until a new facility can be built on the battlefield

In a recent and extensive “public engagement process,” the park discussed key management issues for the battlefield – including the museum collections and archives – with park stakeholders, local residents, historians and Indian tribes connected to Little Bighorn. During those meetings, monument staff heard repeatedly the public’s concern that this highly important collection must be protected. Based on this feedback and professional advice, the park asked the Museum Services Program of the Intermountain Region of NPS to determine collection space needs, evaluate options, and estimate costs for temporary storage of the collections elsewhere.

What we heard: The public, stakeholders and tribes overwhelmingly recommended that the NPS take immediate action to safeguard the museum collection, even if doing so requires temporarily storing the collection off-site until proper storage can be built at the park.



Framed items and boxes crowded into a corner of a basement room where the Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument collection and archives are stored - NPS photo

The search for a temporary facility

Regional museum management and Little Bighorn staff examined the possibility of storing the collection close to the park. They studied two other NPS locations in the Montana-Wyoming area: Yellowstone National Park and Grant-Kohrs Ranch National Historic Site, west of Helena. Although both repositories have facilities that meet museum standards, neither park has the space or staff to care for the collection properly or provide access to researchers.

Although dividing the collections into smaller groupings was considered, this would interfere with effective preservation and accountability work. It also would limit public access and make collection management much more complicated. As a result, the

cost of caring for the collection during the relocation period would rise.

The NPS and the monument also considered moving the collection to a non-Park Service facility closer to the park. NPS policy requires that a facility meet rigorous standards for environmental controls, security, fire protection, appropriate staffing, and operational purposes. For accountability reasons, a separate secure space for the Little Bighorn collection also would need to be created within a non-NPS facility.

In addition, the collection and archives require more than just a safe place to sit on shelves. They need active evaluation, stabilization and conservation work.



Crowded basement storage for Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument collection is currently damaging objects - NPS photo

Finding a temporary location managed by a full-time professional curator with archivists, conservators and a conservation laboratory on site was key. The NPS also would need to address and correct significant collection database management issues and cataloging before it could consider storing the collection in a non-Park Service facility. As noted before, the NPS wants to keep the collection open to researchers, a factor that would require significant investment of staff time and expertise by a host facility.

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The best solution:

Western Archeological and Conservation Center, Tucson, AZ

The Western Archeological and Conservation Center (WACC) is operated by the Museum Services Program of the NPS’s Intermountain Region (IMR), an eight-state, 91-park administrative district that includes Little Bighorn Battlefield and the state of Montana. Professional curators, conservators, and archivists at the center have worked extensively with the Little Bighorn collections over the past 15 years. Staff conservators will be able to begin long-term preservation efforts needed for the objects and archives in on-site laboratories. WACC, which permanently stores more than 10 million records and objects from dozens of other national parks in the West, also is a research destination. WACC is a modern repository with professional facilities to accommodate historical research and consultation with tribes. Monument staff is consulting with historically associated tribes about any items that may be subject to the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA). Monument staff will also consult with tribes about any unique storage and visitation requirements that certain objects may need.



A conservator at the Western Archeological and Conservation Center works with Native American museum objects - NPS photo

Moving the Little Bighorn collections

Moving the museum collection and archives to their temporary new home in Tucson will be complete by the end of summer 2011. These objects and documents will be packed by experienced curators, conservators, and archivists from the IMR Museum Services Program, aided by staff from Little Bighorn and nearby parks and University of Arizona staff and students. A complete inventory will be conducted during the packing process. Law enforcement will provide security for the collection at every stage of the move.

After the collection arrives in Tucson, WACC staff will begin to unpack and organize the objects and archives for storage in vastly improved, museum-standard conditions. Initial evaluation of items will help the center develop and implement a long-term treatment program to preserve the collection. Due to this necessary work, the collection temporarily will be unavailable for research until the summer of 2012. The monument will announce on the Little Bighorn Battlefield website (www.nps.gov/libi) when the collection and archives are available again, including details about how to access them.

Two important notes: Exhibits containing objects and documents on display in the park visitor center will continue to showcase the collections. In addition, the White Swan Memorial Library, located in the historic “Stone House,” will stay in the park as well.

The library, with thousands of volumes, microfilm, photographs and other resources, is considered the first stop researchers. It is considered the largest publicly available collection of literature on the battle, Custer, the Indian Wars and the Northern Plains tribes. Late in summer 2011, the library’s card catalog also is scheduled to be available to the public online for the first time, at www.library.nps.gov.



Exhibits will continue to showcase objects and documents on display in the park visitor center - NPS photo

The collections’ future – and their return

Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument’s museum collection and archives are at the heart of telling larger-than-life history on this site. They illuminate and enliven the stories of the battle itself, and of the political and cultural forces that threw warriors and soldiers together in the grasslands above and along the banks of the Little Bighorn River.

We at the monument and the National Park Service know that the collections’ temporary relocation disconnects these important resources from the very place they help explain. But we also know that the collections would suffer unacceptable deterioration and risk of catastrophic loss if we continued to leave them in the same substandard conditions.

While the collection and archives get the professional care they need and deserve, we will focus a relentless and visible effort to secure a new visitor center and storage facility for their safekeeping, study and display. This renewed effort demands fresh discussion and negotiation with our partners and the public, especially two key parties: The Crow Tribe, whose reservation surrounds the monument, and the Custer Battlefield Preservation Committee, which purchased land near the monument for donation to the park.

With their help and yours, we intend to bring the collections home to Montana and Little Bighorn as soon as is humanly possible.