

Alaska State Museums BULLETIN

An Information Source for Alaska's Museum Community

A Paper Conservator's Alaskan Adventure

By Grace White

I recently had the opportunity to work in three different Alaska locations, offering my services as a paper conservator to institutions without conservators on staff. It was my first visit to Alaska, and I loved what I saw. Being from the South, the climate was obviously quite different for me. I came in February, and I loved the snow, the cold, the light, the sky, the stars, the aurora, the ravens, and the moose.

But it felt almost like a holiday – a six-week change from my usual routine – it was definitely a working holiday with a busy schedule. Funding was provided by the Rasmuson Foundation, the Foundation of the American Institute of Conservation (FAIC), and the University of Alaska at Fairbanks (UAF). With great organizational assistance from Scott Carrlee, curator of museum services at the Alaska State Museum, it was arranged that I would work in three locales: Fairbanks, at the UAF Museum of the North; Eagle, at the Eagle Historical Society and Museum; and Barrow, at the Tuzzy Library Consortium and the Iñupiat Heritage and Language Center.

Fairbanks was my first stop, where I was made welcome by staff at the Museum of the North and my hosts, Wanda Chin, Terry Dickey, and Candy Waugaman. I collaborated with Mareca Guthrie, fine arts collections manager, to identify and prioritize objects in the museum that needed treatment. Some of the objects included a watercolor by Henry Wood Elliot, a pencil illustration by William Dale Berry, a group of historic paleontology lithographs, and a corroded tin with a rust-stained paper label.

But the most challenging and rewarding tasks were two hand-lettered vellum diplomas from the 1920s, one of them the first diploma ever issued by what is now UAF. Having been stored and displayed in varying conditions over the years, the documents had contracted and cockled with changes in temperature and humidity. They were also soiled and stained with adhesive residue. They have now been cleaned, flattened, mounted, and sealed in frames to protect them from further deterioration.



Grace White conducts a surface cleaning of a Henry Wood Elliot watercolor. Grace is an associate paper conservator at Etherington Conservation Services in Brown's Summit, North Carolina. Photo by Grace White

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Museum Success Stories

Sutton's Alpine Historical Park

The last few years of developments at the Alpine Historical Park are even more significant when one considers their limited resources: one paid employee (part-time), free visitor admission, and a limited season of May through September. Taking full advantage of the Grant-In-Aid program of the Alaska State Museum, Alpine Historical Park has implemented advancements making the Mat-Su Valley's mining history more accessible and sustainable.



*Several artifacts in the
Alpine Historical Park collection.
Photo by Dave Harvey*

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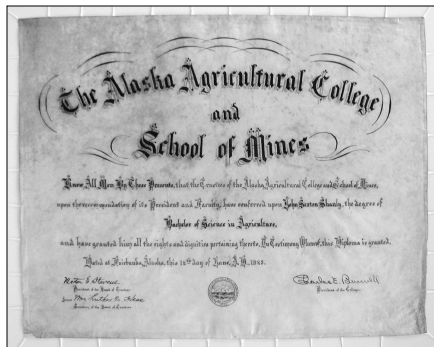
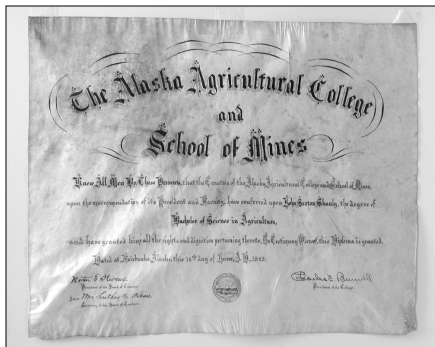
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Their first Grant-In-Aid award of \$2,000, in 2007, was for the purchase of an exhibit case to highlight and secure various fossils, minerals, and coal samples from the area. This benefits school groups visiting Alpine Historical Park in conjunction with history and science lessons.

A 2008 Grant-In-Aid was awarded to fund public programming and accessibility. The \$1,997 covered a laptop, printer/scanner/copier combo, and a projector. This technology has enabled more comprehensive oversight and care of their collections, and has supported programs and community events. Since the award, the Alpine Historical Park has developed a more extensive website, alpinehistoricalpark.org, with event listings, photo gallery, volunteer opportunities, contact information, and further information about their collections and their relationship to the greater Mat-Su Valley.

The Alpine Historical Park's most recent Grant-in-Aid project saw them undertaking their first conservation assessment of their collections, completed in September, 2009, by conservator David Harvey. The assessment includes a survey of their collection's current condition and recommendations for short and long-term preservation. This survey provides the institution with expertise to gain the knowledge and skills needed to preserve their collection. From this assessment, the Park's volunteers and staff have a carefully outlined map of the specific care required by their collection and the proper way to deliver treatment, as well as targeted goals for the future.



Above: Vellum diploma, before and after treatment. Below: Applying tension to flatten the diploma. Photos by Grace White



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My next destination was Eagle, where I examined and treated documents held by the Eagle Historical Society and Museum under the care of Jean Turner. For such a small town, the historical society was highly impressive. Although the office space where I worked was smaller than the usual labs a conservator gets used to—having no sink or running water meant that I had to bring bottled water with me and perform all aqueous treatments in a brownie pan—the external storage building and the Jim Scott Archives and Library were all exceedingly neat and organized.

The archive is an historic log cabin that has been modernized and refurbished inside, with shelves and tidy rows of archival boxes. The building is unheated, and in winter the archive is allowed to go cold. I was interested to see whether this yearly temperature fluctuation would have produced any evident problems with the paper items and photographs stored inside, but the representative selection that I examined appeared to be in stable condition. Any damage that I encountered appeared to be inherent to the material itself (e.g. discolored wood pulp paper) or due to improper handling before acquisition (e.g. tears, local stains). I was pleased to learn that any time objects must be brought from the cold storage into a warm building, there is an initial period of monitored acclimatization to prevent sudden changes. In addition to evaluating conditions and making storage recommendations, I treated a collection of hand-written land transfer documents from 1898.

My final destination was Barrow where I visited the Tuzzy Consortium Library and the Iñupiat Heritage and Language

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Ask ASM: Do most museums take out insurance policies on their collections?

Most museums carry what is called a blanket insurance policy that covers the collection for a specific amount. This is based on risk analysis—how much do you think will be damaged in the event of an incident (whatever that might

be); hoping that not everything will be affected. Museums generally cover any items that they borrow for an exhibition, for the term of that exhibition. One has to have insurance, as well as fire detection and suppression systems,

but most of the materials in a museum are considered irreplaceable—that is you might be able to obtain a similar object to replace one that is lost, but it will not have the connections (the story) that the original had.

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Center (IHLC) in their shared building. At the library I talked with director David Ongley, examined volumes in the rare book collection and made storage recommendations. While at IHLC, I advised on storage and handling in the photography collection and helped with its reorganization, collaborating with director Kathy Agheak, collections manager Diana Martin, and numerous other dedicated museum personnel.

When my journeys in Alaska ended, I was sorry to leave. I had enjoyed my time in all of the locations, and I felt that there was still much more work for me to do. I would love to return and continue such interesting work, but meanwhile it is good to know Alaskan collections are being cared for by such dedicated people in institutions all across the state.



Neat and tidy rows of archival material line the walls of Eagle's archives storage housed in a historical log cabin. Photo by Grace White

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