

Title: Inventory Data as Object Documentation and Interpretation (brief or poster presentation)

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Authors of the forthcoming *Collection Inventory Handbook for Museums and Historical Societies* (Rowman & Littlefield) will examine the role of inventories in documenting and preserving knowledge, and the ways inventory data has been integral to interpreting collections at two New York City museums.

After 9/11, the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey and the National Institute for Standards and Technology (NIST) identified and inventoried World Trade Center steel to study why and how the towers collapsed, and to preserve pieces for use in exhibits and memorials. Recently, steel critical to the NIST investigation went on display at the National September 11 Memorial and Museum. The interpretation of this material is rooted in the original inventory documentation, which included an analysis of the steel's location in the towers.

At Brooklyn Children's Museum, a mineral collection inventory revealed specimens separated from any documentation except locality. Documenting where a

specimen originated is vital to its scientific value. Researching the museum's archives enabled staff to reunite specimens with provenance information, which unexpectedly revealed how the collection inspired a generation of scientists during the Great Depression. Furthermore, the informal learning approach the museum used to engage youth in mineral studies transformed formal science education in New York. The discoveries made by studying locality data helped interpret and restore historic value to the specimens, and ultimately gave rise to a digital exhibit.

These examples demonstrate how inventory data is critical to the preservation and control of knowledge contained in collection records, and is often the first information invoked for research and interpretation.