

Up-and-Comers

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Meet Lisa Geiger, Exhibitions Registration Assistant, the Field Museum

I began my career traveling around the country as a contract archaeologist, doing research and excavation work in support of National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) compliance. Over eight years, I worked on sites ranging from Mississippian indigenous villages around Cahokia, Illinois, to burgeoning colonial commercial districts in the New York borough of Manhattan.



Archaeological research, excavation, and collection management meant participating in the life cycle of an object as it became an “artifact”: discovery, identification, cataloging, and deposition into a repository—hopefully to be consulted in the future. Envisioning history through the material culture record helped me to understand what qualities make artifacts objects of enduring value, and being part of the process brought me an awareness of the human element in redefining everyday items as cultural property worth saving.

Archaeological work also placed me on teams alongside talented and dedicated professionals from diverse disciplines, including material culture specialists, construction engineers, conservators, geologists, project managers,

surveyors, and many others. The need to speak these people’s languages and understand their perspectives is a key reason I count “cultural-heritage worker” as part of the information science field.

While archaeological work was exciting and challenging, it sometimes felt like the systematically gathered and synthesized data we generated weren’t contributing to future study. Our project site reports and artifact assemblages, meant to serve as official, federally mandated NHPA public records, were often transferred to state or local repositories that did not make their holdings digitally discoverable and imposed barriers to physical access. The difficulty of finding and accessing public archaeological data became more obvious and frustrating during my 2015 graduate work at CUNY’s Hunter College, as I gathered comparative site collection data for a survey of changes in early American reproductive health care.

Archival studies offered me a key to understanding how unique types of information, like site reports and artifact data sets, can be effectively organized and made publicly discoverable. A position in Chicago with DePaul University Library’s Special Collections and Archives (SPCA) introduced me to archival concepts and content management software with wide applicability to both paper records and artifacts. Through cataloging and reference service, DePaul’s SPCA helped me conceptualize content organization geared to the researcher’s perspective. The supportive staff encouraged me to pursue an MLIS degree from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign’s iSchool to grow a foundation in archival theory while continuing to gain job site experience.

While pursuing this degree, I’ve found a home at Chicago’s Field Museum as part of the Exhibitions Registration team. The registrars act as caretakers for the museum’s collections—over 140 million artifacts and specimens—as they move between in-house research divisions and public exhibit spaces. Cataloging and content management software skills are critical in creating and storing digital records of moves, loans, mounting specifications, and case environmental needs, as well as in querying existing collections catalogs for details about exhibit

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items. Experience with artifact handling also helps in transporting objects through exhibit spaces safely and planning display parameters.

Like many information science workers, registrars at the Field often act as translators between disparate parties. Safely moving, storing, and displaying objects ranging from anthropological artifacts to dinosaur fossils requires coordinating with exhibit developers, mount makers, collections staff, conservators, and protection services. My archaeological and archival reference service experiences have been immensely helpful in understanding and sharing different stakeholder needs across the museum's departments. This kind of teamwork was critical in closing the recent *Specimens* temporary exhibit. It will also be key as a team member for the upcoming redevelopment of the museum's prominent dinosaur exhibits, as Sue the *T. rex* moves to a new hall to make way for *Patagotitan mayorum*, the world's largest dinosaur, this spring.

One of the biggest challenges in meshing the needs of multiple departments is standardizing database content. Archival study has familiarized me with a variety of metadata standards and prepared me for challenges like creating interoperability between schemas developed for internal use and popular frameworks like Dublin and

Darwin Core. As a link between exhibit production staff and more research-focused collection managers, the registration team is helping to develop our content management software in a way that will enable it to better mesh collections catalogs, multimedia digital assets, and production workflows.

Working at the Field has been a terrific way to meld my archaeological experience with my archives education. I get to work with diverse material culture and natural history specimens to support the Field's science-based mission, helping to disseminate new discoveries and research to the public. I hope to use this experience in tandem with my iSchool focus on database infrastructure and metadata development to help make existing archaeological assemblages and data sets more discoverable and open to public use.

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