

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS . . .

About the temporary relocation of collections and archives of Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument

- **Where are you taking the collection and archives? Why?**

The National Park Service (NPS) will temporarily transfer Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument's collection and archives to the Western Archeological and Conservation Center – WACC for short. This state-of-the-art repository and conservation laboratory in Tucson, AZ, is the premier facility of its kind in the NPS.

Monument staff and the Intermountain Regional Office of the NPS decided to move the collections for their protection and conservation while the park works with Little Bighorn's partners to create a new, permanent museum storage facility at the battlefield. Work will begin on a long-term preservation program while the collection is off-site. The monument does not have adequate storage space or conditions to keep the collection safe and preserve it properly. There is potential for irreversible deterioration of items or catastrophic loss by fire or flood in its present location – the cramped basement of the park's small and outdated visitor center, where most of the 149,000 items in the collection and archives are kept.

- **But the collection has been stored in the same place for decades. Why move it now?**

The NPS has tried to implement long-term plans to build a new museum collections storage facility and visitor center at Little Bighorn Battlefield for more than 25 years, as called for in the monument's 1986 General Management Plan. But financial, political and legal setbacks have delayed that proposal.

Meanwhile, despite the NPS's best efforts, on-site storage conditions have continued to degrade. The present space lacks museum-standard humidity controls, and it lacks a fire suppression system. Its exposed water and sewer pipes in the basement ceiling pose a flood risk.

Several evaluations and reports have documented concerns with existing storage and concluded that the risk to the collection is unacceptable. These include the National Parks Conservation Association's 2003 "State of the Parks" report on Little Bighorn, the Intermountain Region Museum Collections Facilities Strategy, a cultural resource program review by the region, and the region's designation of the Little Bighorn collection as the most "at risk" in the region's eight-state, 91-park jurisdiction. The park's recent "public engagement" process in 2010 indicated that the Little Bighorn collection is highly important and needs to be protected. As a duty to the American people and the tribes, and by NPS policy, we must ensure it is properly safeguarded.

- **Why can't you move only the items that most need special attention or preservation, and leave the rest of the collection and archives alone?**

The security and condition of the entire collection are threatened. The move will protect the collection as a whole while also allowing conservation work on items that need attention. Keeping the collection together is important for effective management and accountability and will be more convenient for researchers.

WACC has ample room to store the entire collection properly, as well as laboratories and other facilities where it can perform preservation work on items in need of special care. Other projects also can continue, including improvements in museum documentation and digitizing of the archives for on-line access and use. These can be completed for less cost and greater efficiency if the collection remains together. Additional efforts to help the public use the collection, including digital photographs of museum objects, also are planned.

- **Won't that make it impossible for historians, scholars, Indian tribes and the public to look at the collection and use the archives?**

The White Swan Library, which should be the researcher's first stop, will continue to be open at the park. Search-and-find aids for the cataloged archives, and microfilm copies of 16 of the most important Little Bighorn collections, will continue to be available for research use at the library. Continuing efforts to transfer more archives to digital form will enable the park to improve public availability.

WACC is a modern repository with professional facilities to accommodate historical research and consultation with tribes. Access will be available at WACC once the collections have been unpacked and properly stored. In addition, the collection will be accessible at WACC to individuals with physical disabilities, unlike in its present basement storage area at the monument.

- **Why can't these materials stay in Montana, at a regional or local museum? Can't you move them to another national park in the state, like Yellowstone or Glacier?**

The Park Service did study the possibility of relocating the collection temporarily to Yellowstone National Park in nearby northwest Wyoming or to Grant-Kohrs Ranch National Historic Site, west of Helena, MT. Both have facilities that meet museum standards, but neither has the space nor the staff to properly care for the collection or provide access for researchers.

The Park Service and the monument also considered temporary relocation to a non-NPS facility closer to the park. But numerous issues involving storage standards, security, staffing, researcher access, database management and cataloging, and the collections' need for active, efficient evaluation and conservation work rendered other options less preferable than a move to WACC.

Park Service policy requires that collections be stored in facilities that meet rigorous standards for environmental controls, security, fire protection, staffing and operations. Besides safe storage, the Little Bighorn collection also needs active evaluation, stabilization and conservation work. Essential elements include a facility managed by a full-time professional curator, with archivists and conservators on-site and conservation labs available locally.

In addition, the NPS must address and correct significant database management issues for the collection and do additional cataloging before it could consider storage at a non-NPS facility. Extensive work is under way to convert parts of the collection to digital images for on-line availability. This work can continue more efficiently if the collection is in an NPS facility. A final factor is the park's desire to keep Little Bighorn's collections open to researchers, which would require a significant investment of staff time and expertise at another host facility.

- **What will it cost to move the museum collection and archives?**

The monument and WACC estimate the collections' temporary relocation to the center will cost approximately \$220,000. This figure includes salaries for NPS staff and partner institutions, moving supplies, transportation expenses and facility preparations at WACC for the collection. It also includes the purchase of new storage cabinets and other "furniture" to house the collection, items that will return with the collection to Little Bighorn when relocation ends. About \$180,000 of the funding will come from national park fee receipts that are collected and shared among Intermountain Region parks. The rest is from the Intermountain Region office, funds requested specifically for this use.

- **Why can't the Park Service use the money it would pay to move and care for the collections to build new storage or improve existing storage instead?**

The relocation funds are specifically earmarked for the move and are not part of the monument's budget or resources for any other purpose. The NPS has determined that renovating the existing facility would not meet all the collection's needs. Construction of a new visitor center is the desired goal. Little Bighorn actively uses its collections in visitor center exhibits, so storing the collections in the same building as the exhibits is important. The library and archives also belong together because they are so strongly interconnected. Investing once, in a single new facility in a more appropriate location, is the best solution.

- **When will these collections be moved?**

The park and the conservation center plan to transfer the collections and archives to Tucson this year. They expect to complete this temporary move by the end of summer. Separately, about 30,000 Little Bighorn archives already have been at WACC, a few of them for as long as 15 years, to undergo necessary conservation work, cataloging and conversion to digital record format for easier public access and storage.

- **I heard that some donors, including the widow of Lt. Col. George A. Custer, gave their collections to Little Bighorn monument on condition that the items would stay at the battlefield forever. Is that true? If so, why are you moving them?**

To ensure that donor wishes for collection materials are properly followed, the monument sought advice from the Solicitor General's office of the Department of the Interior, which counsels the NPS on legal matters. The will of Elizabeth Bacon Custer, who died in 1933, directed donation of her collection to "the Public Museum or memorial which may be erected on the battlefield . . ." Although the will did not require that her donation remain forever at Little Bighorn, the NPS is committed to return the entire collection to the battlefield, its permanent home. The NPS believes it is in the best interest of the collections that all objects and records remain together and receive the same level of care. Research access will continue to be provided while the collection is in temporary storage in Arizona.

- **But how do we know these collection and archives will ever come back? When will you return them home to Little Bighorn Battlefield?**

The monument and the NPS are committed to bringing the collection back to its permanent home at Little Bighorn Battlefield as soon as possible. The museum collection and archives will return when the collection is stabilized, critical conservation work is completed, and proper museum collection storage can be built at the battlefield. Given political and budgeting constraints, this process could take, at minimum, a number of years. The monument's 1986 General Management Plan, the park's operational blueprint, calls for museum collection storage to be built in conjunction with a new visitor center on battlefield land not within the present 765 acres of the monument. NPS will undertake a concerted effort to negotiate with the Crow Tribe, the Custer Battlefield Preservation Committee, and other monument partners to do so. If negotiations do not show progress, the Park Service would begin work on a new comprehensive plan to evaluate other strategies to house the museum collection at the battlefield or in the local area.

- **What kinds of objects and records are in the museum collection and archives?**

The Little Bighorn Battlefield collections are some of the most valuable and significant in any national park. The park's archives include 30 unique collections, with more than 123,000 documents, photographs, maps, and other items. These include the U.S. 7th Cavalry records, extensive 19th-century photographs of western Americana and eminent figures, several assembled research collections, and materials assembled by Elizabeth Bacon Custer, Lt. Col. Custer's widow. There are more than 25,000 objects and specimens, including original silk battle flags, uniforms, medals, and other equipment from combatants on both sides of the battle.

The 30,000 archives already at WACC for conservation work include 7th Cavalry documents, the park's collection of historic newspapers, and administrative records. They, too, will return to the monument when it has adequate, secure space to store them again.

- **How do we know that important items won't get lost or stolen during the move?**

The move plan developed by the park, the Intermountain Region of NPS, and the conservation center includes a law enforcement presence at all stages of the temporary relocation. The packing team will include curators, archivists and conservators from the NPS's Intermountain Region Museum Services Program and other professional partner institutions. A 100 percent inventory will be completed as the items are packed.

- **What makes WACC a good place to put the collection and archives?**

The center is a state-of-the-art facility operated by the NPS's Intermountain Region, an eight-state, 91-park administrative division that includes Little Bighorn Battlefield and the state of Montana. About 10 million archives and objects from 71 western parks are stored there. The staff includes curators, conservators, and archivists skilled at documenting and preserving park collections. This climate-controlled facility meets or exceeds standards established by the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA). For the past 15 years, the center has cataloged, conserved and digitally recorded some of the Little Bighorn Battlefield collections. Some of the monument's archives, including the 7th Cavalry collection, also are stored there temporarily. Moving the collection and archives to WACC can ensure that they will return to the park in better condition than when they arrived.

- **How will moving the collection affect tourism in the region around Little Bighorn? Won't taking away these priceless objects and documents hurt the local economy?**

The temporary relocation will not affect the number or kind of items on display in the visitor center museum exhibits. Although the collection and archives are important and invaluable elements of the monument, their temporary absence from the battlefield is unlikely to have any noticeable effect on Montana regional tourism or the economy. Although researchers use the collections heavily, only a small number of them actually do so on-site at the monument. In addition, an extensive effort already is under way to make digital images of portions of the collection available on-line for historians and for the general public.

- **What about the monument's library? Will it move, too?**

The White Swan Memorial Library will remain at Little Bighorn Battlefield, open to researchers by appointment. It is the largest publicly available collection of literature on the battle, Lt. Col. George A. Custer, the Indian Wars and the Northern Plains tribes, and it is always the first stop for researchers. More than 5,100 volumes, plus historic

newspapers and audio-visual materials will stay in the library's present location, the historic "Stone House." Late this summer, the library's card catalog will be available to the public for the first time, at www.library.nps.gov. The library receives numerous research queries every year, although only a handful of researchers choose to follow up by visiting for in-person study.

- **Does moving the collection mean that the display cases in the battlefield visitor center will be empty?**

Park museum displays will not be affected by the move, and the amount of material on exhibit will remain the same. During the collection's time away from Little Bighorn, provisions will be made to display additional objects, documents and museum materials whenever museum needs arise.

- **Are there objects in the collection that the tribes who fought at Little Bighorn consider sacred or in need of special treatment? Aren't there federal laws and regulations that affect these items?**

Staffers at the monument are consulting with the tribes about any items that may be subject to the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA). This consultation will continue regardless of where the collection is located. Monument staff also will consult with tribes about any unique storage and visitation requirements that certain objects may need.

- **Won't the collections and archives be off-limits once they are moved to this conservation center? If they are open, how can they truly be accessible to park visitors, historians and scholars if they are three states away?**

The park and WACC are committed to making the collection available to the public during its time away from its battlefield home. Once the collection is unpacked and properly housed at WACC, it will be available to researchers, historians, scholars and others. The center anticipates the collection will be available again in summer 2012.

- **How can I gain access to the collections once they move to Tucson? What limitations will apply to access and use?**

Researchers should first contact the White Swan Memorial Library at the park to see if the information sought is available there. Library staff will refer to WACC any requests that cannot be filled at the library.

WACC is open for research 9 a.m.-3 p.m. Monday through Friday except federal holidays and the weeks from mid-December until Jan. 1. Researchers are required to complete an access request form. Once access is approved, an appointment will be scheduled.

- **Where can I find updates about the status of the collections, plans for their return, and efforts to build a new home for them at the monument?**

For further information about the monument and its collections, please continue to visit the Little Bighorn Battlefield website at www.nps.gov/libi .