

Attention: AAM Accreditation Commission
Besser Museum for Northeast Michigan: Progress Report
March 2024: Space and Collections Management Improvements Made

On November 3, 2017, the American Alliance of Museums' Accreditation Commission voted to table its decision on accreditation for the Besser Museum for Northeast Michigan. Their decision was based on the **“long-standing, severe deficiencies in collections care and stewardship”** noted in the 2017 Site Visit Report.

During the tabling period, Besser Museum took immediate steps to address the issues. Networking with museum professionals, we devised a plan of action to address the “long-standing, severe deficiencies in collections care and stewardship” noted in the 2017 Site Visit Report.

On December 12, 2018, Besser Museum submitted a final report to the Accreditation Commission which included an action plan and the steps the Museum had already taken to address several of the issues cited. February 2019, the Accreditation Commission recognized the positive results of the proactive efforts and awarded Besser Museum reaccreditation. Besser Museum was asked to submit an update report by March 1, 2024, to the Accreditation Program staff concerning the space and collections management improvements.

The Besser Museum for Northeast Michigan Board of Trustees, staff, and volunteers have worked diligently over the past four years to address the deficiencies noted in the AAM 2017 Site Visit Report. This report will outline the action steps the Besser Museum for Northeast Michigan has taken since submitting the December 2018 report to gain physical and intellectual control of the collections.

Physical Control: Space Improvements

Step 1: Creating more storage space:

One concern voiced by the visiting AAM Site Team was that Besser Museum allocated more space for exhibitions than to collection storage; museums normally allocate more space for collection storage than exhibitions. Part of Besser Museum's action plan was set in motion in April of 2018 when requesting a proposal from R. S. Scott Associates to conduct a space study of the interior and exterior of the building to remove conditions threatening the collections.

In September 2018, the Besser Foundation awarded Besser Museum a \$30,000 grant for this study. The goal of the space study was to provide an outline of work that needed to be performed to enhance the function of the museum and better preserve and protect the collections along with repairs that go along with an aging structure. R. S. Scott's

architect Susans Edwards started the space utilization and building improvement study in May 2018. R. S. Scott invited Apollo Engineering to assess the HVAC system as part of the study. The completed space study was submitted to the Board of Trustees in December 2019. The report was reviewed by the Board at the January 2020 meeting.

Step 2: Create an artifact intake and processing room.

The visiting AAM Site Team also commented on the condition of an area being used to receive, process, and store both temporary custody objects and some found in collection objects. The area had a large window exposing the objects to sunlight and temperature fluctuations. The large window wells also attracted vegetation and insects. This space did not have adequate shelving, as some were wooden. Their concerns were noted.

In April 2019, the Besser Museum initiated steps to convert a 1,275-square-foot exhibit gallery into a receiving and processing room for artifacts. This gallery housed a large, educational exhibit of exotic animals which fell outside Besser Museum's mission. With permission from the donor, Cranbrook Institute of Science, Besser Museum transferred the collection of exotic animals to a local business owner who built an exhibit space with environmental controls to protect the mounts. Besser Museum provided educational content for the animal displays. Area teachers and school students are invited to visit this popular animal display free of charge.

The former exotic animal exhibit space was then outfitted with metal shelving to store temporary custody and found in collections artifacts. Besser Museum Facility Manager and museum volunteers relocated these artifacts following a procedure that separated temporary custody and found in collections objects. Procedures to properly process the objects continued through weekly meetings of the collections committee with oversight of museum professional Laura Quackenbush. Computers with PastPerfect software, scanners, and a lightbox for photographing objects were added to this room.

Step 3: Implementing the plan: a domino effect that spans four years:

R. S. Scott's space study identified exterior and interior concerns that guided the Board of Trustees' continued efforts to create safe storage spaces for the museum's permanent collection. Achieving this goal required removing the lower-level windows and filling the deep window wells. Metal shelving needed to be purchased and installed. Upgrading the environmental controls to monitor temperature and humidity in the storage area was essential. Because addressing these concerns hinged on financial resources, the R. S. Scott study suggested approaching the improvements in phases. Exterior improvements directly impacted the desired interior improvements.

Step 3a : The HVAC

July 2020, while the Board of Trustees discussed an approach to address the exterior renovations, the HVAC system's chiller unit demanded immediate attention. The local plumbing company that services the HVAC system was contacted. The HVAC equipment, although repaired, needed replacement. Since the HVAC system was part of the museum's larger facility renovation plans, R. S. Scott was contacted. R. S. Scott and Apollo Engineering, already familiar with the HVAC system and the goal of monitoring and controlling environmental conditions, were hired. The contract included a \$12,000 fee for R. S. Scott to have their mechanical engineer determine specifically what was needed, to let bids, and manage the work on the upgrades/repairs to the HVAC system's chiller and humidity unit. A new HVAC control system also had to be installed. The Board allocated \$145,000 remaining from the 2016, 50th Anniversary Capital Campaign for this project. A \$195,000 contract was awarded to Johnson and Woods in June of 2021. The project faced delays due to shortages in both materials and labor shortages caused by Covid-19. The installation was completed in December 2021. The new HVAC system could not be tested until the summer of 2022 when the chiller and humidification system would operate. The museum's average humidity is between 30% and 40%. In February 2024, interior sensor monitors will be replaced in four exhibit spaces and in the permanent storage areas.

Step 3b: The Log Cabin

June 2020, Besser Museum hired architect Rick Neuman to conduct a condition report on the 1898 log cabin. Many of the logs showed severe deterioration causing the structure to be unstable and at risk of collapsing. August 2020, R. G. Kenel Log Builders, well known for restoring historic log cabins, submitted a proposal of \$85,000. December 2020, the Board of Trustees approved moving forward with the restoration of the log cabin using funds received through various grants and Giving Tuesday donations. Kenel started working on the log cabin in February 2020 and completed the project on November 8, 2021.

Step 3c: The Exterior Repairs

August 2021, Besser Museum requested a proposal from Meridian Construction for three of the exterior projects listed in the 2019 R. S. Scott space study report. September 2021, Meridian submitted a bid of \$164,000.

1. Remove the lower-level windows, build a block wall in the opening to match the foundation and interior wall and fill in the window-wells.
2. Fix the cracks in exterior concrete columns and repair/rebuild the concrete block flowerboxes to prevent water leaking into the building.
3. Replace the front concrete sidewalk and steps. The deterioration is a trip hazard.

November 2021, a \$164,000 Improvement Grant was requested from the Besser Foundation. The following month, Besser Foundation approved \$164,000 for the capital improvements.

June 2022, Besser Museum signed a contract with Meridian for \$174,097 to complete the three projects. They commenced construction in July and completed the three exterior projects in November 2022.

After the exterior windows were removed and the walls rebuilt, Besser Museum staff installed metal shelving in three new storage areas. These areas will be used for the permanent collections. The first collection to be reallocated was the large furniture collection. During this transition the permanent collection was separated by the found in collection objects. Following the notice procedure under The Michigan Museum Disposition of Property Act of 1992, 399.611, the Besser Museum posted a notice in the Alpena News and on the museum's website of the found in collection objects. Other collections are being prepared to be transferred.

Step 3d: The Great Lakes Fisheries Heritage Exhibit.

In 2012 a concerted effort by museum staff and a handful of dedicated volunteers began the ongoing process of restoring and preserving the 1928 *Katherin V*, a wooden commercial fishing vessel. The volunteers restored the boat, built a mock fishing village surrounding the boat underneath its pole barn shelter, and captured several oral histories to help with interpreting the exhibit. Their work is ongoing and has been expanded into what is now being called the *Great Lakes Fisheries Heritage Exhibit*.

In 2016, the Michigan Department of Natural Resources (DNR) donated the retired *Chinook* research vessel to the Besser Museum. The *Chinook* sat in front of the museum from 2016 until 2019, waiting for its permanent display location to be built. The moving of the *Chinook* cost \$27,581. The funds came from the Great Lakes Fisheries Trust Grant, the Besser Foundation, and designated funds for the *Great Lakes Fisheries Heritage Exhibit*.

- August 2019, site excavation was completed with an area prepared for a large concrete slab that would hold the steel cradles that the *Chinook* would rest in.
- September 2019, an R. S. Scott engineer designed the cradles. Unfortunately, Besser Museum could not find a company to fabricate the cradles until June of 2020.
- June 2020, Moran Iron Works, and Industrial Arts Institute, both in Onaway, MI, agreed to take on the project of building the cradles for the *Chinook* for a student engagement project. The museum donated \$5,000 to the Industrial Arts Institute for the design, building, and delivery of the cradles.
- August 2020, Moran Iron Works delivered the big steel cradles and placed them on the concrete pad with a special crane.

- September 2020, a low-boy trailer was rented from Moran Iron Works to carry the *Chinook* vessel from the front of the museum to the backyard where it will be placed on display. A crane operator was hired to lift the 26-ton *Chinook* and place it on the cradles. A dock was built connecting the *Katherine V* fish tug exhibit and the *Chinook* research vessel.
- April 2022, Besser Museum was awarded a \$386,500 Michigan Invasive Species Grant to construct a shelter over the *Chinook Research Vessel* and construct an exhibit.
- October 2022, Besser Museum contracted with Huron Engineering to develop engineering drawings for the structure.
- March 2023, Huron Engineering had the specification drawings completed and ready for bidding.
- August 2023, Meridian Construction was awarded the bid. The *Chinook* shelter will cost approximately \$200,000.
- September 2023, construction of the shelter commenced and should be completed sometime in 2024.
- December 2023, Besser Museum contacted Good Design about the exhibit designs they had provided in 2018. Revisions to the original design plans will be made and the project will move forward.

Step 3e: Discover Northeast Michigan History Exhibit

In 2014, the Besser Museum started casting a vision to renovate the *Peoples of Lakes and Forest* exhibit. This outdated 1971 exhibit desperately lacked information about the heritage of the Anishinaabe of Northeast Michigan. In 2014, Eric Hemenway, a tribal repatriation specialist from the Cultural Preservation Department for the Little Traverse Bay Bands of Odawa Indians in Northern Michigan was invited to the Besser Museum to discuss goals and objectives for a new exhibit. That initial conversation began a long journey of building relationships, gathering stories, conducting research, and securing funding.

In 2016, the Besser Museum participated in the Northeast Michigan Council of Governments (NEMCOG) Discover Heritage Route 23 event. Collaborating with other local cultural entities, a Michigan Arts and Culture Council grant was secured to produce short videos featuring Anishinaabe heritage in Northeast Michigan. These videos are housed and available for viewing on the Besser Museum website. (<https://www.bessermuseum.org/anishinaabe-way>)

In 2016, a private donor wanted to honor his long-time neighbor Edith Bondie. Edith, a member of the Saginaw Chippewa Indiana Tribe of Michigan, wove black ash baskets and often demonstrated her weaving skills at the Besser Museum. The donor contributed \$25,000 to conduct genealogical research on Northeast Michigan's Indigenous families. The funds were also used to contract with Indigenous consultants who helped with the development of the exhibit design. For over ten years, the Besser Museum has been working with several Indigenous consultants to develop an exhibit to honor their heritage. The consultants include Eric

Hemenway, Cultural Preservation Department, Little Traverse Band of Odawa Indians, Frank Ettawageshik, Executive Director, United Tribes of Michigan, Little Traverse Band of Odawa Indians; William Johnson, Ziibiwing Center of Anishinaabe Culture and Lifeways, Saginaw Chippewa Indian Tribe, Jonnie J. Sam, Tribal Historic Preservation, Little River Band of Ottawa Indians, Charlee Brissett, Sault Tribe of Chippewa Indians, Colleen Medicine, Cultural Repatriation Specialist, Sault Tribe of Chippewa Indians, David Joseph, Saginaw Chippewa Indian Tribe of Michigan, Albert LaBlance, Sault Tribe of Chippewa Indians, Michael McCreery, Saginaw Chippewa Indian Tribe of Michigan, and Genevieve Morgan, Sault Tribe of Chippewa Indians.

In 2020, the Besser Museum received notification that it was the beneficiary of \$1,020,000 designated endowment fund given to the Community Foundation of Northeast Michigan. The fund is to be used for the establishing and improving permanent indoor exhibits which are held within the main museum building depicting local history. With the newly endowed fund, the Board of Trustees expanded its vision to transform 3000 square feet of outdated exhibit space into a modern, interactive, and immersive regional history experience. The new design will create a family-friendly environment chronicling eleven time periods celebrating Northeast Michigan's heritage from the big bang to big industry.

March 2022, the Besser Museum began working with Cornerstone Architects to develop a schematic exhibit design based on the exhibit concepts and Indigenous consultants' input. This schematic design was used to launch the capital campaign.

February 2023, the Besser Museum contracted with Split Rock Studios, a professional exhibit design and fabrication company located in Minneapolis, Minnesota. With their expertise, the schematic exhibit design evolved into what the Besser Museum Exhibit Committee and Board of Trustees envisioned. The estimated cost of the project is \$1.8 million dollars with a completion date of December 2024. To date, the Besser Museum has secured a little over \$1.3 million, with only \$430,000 left to be raised. The new *Discover Northeast Michigan History* exhibit will present the interconnected stories of Northeast Michigan's natural resources and cultural heritage conveyed through modern technology, hands-on components, and immersive displays. Besser Museum is working closely with Split Rock Studios' team of designers and historians on the design development phase.

February 2023, under the supervision of Besser Museum Collections Manager, the *Peoples of Lakes and Forest* exhibit was dismantled. Artifacts were inventoried and properly stored awaiting the new exhibit. Work has been ongoing to identify the artifacts that will be on display in each of the eleven thematic exhibit areas.

July 2023, the Besser Museum contracted with Meridian Construction to "white box" 3000 square feet of exhibit space in preparation for the new exhibit components. Contractors started working with Split Rock Studios in November 2023 for the installation of the new exhibit. The exhibit design is mindful of museum best practices for display cases and exhibit labels to protect

and interpret the artifacts on display. Information about the new exhibit can be found on the Besser Museum website (bessermuseum.org).

Intellectual Control: Collections Management Improvements

The 2017 AAM report cited several concerns affecting intellectual control. Besser Museum has been addressing these concerns including the staffing shortage, incomplete paperwork, record keeping, and lack of funding among other things. Since the 2017, AAM site report, Besser Museum hired two staff, one part-time and one full-time, to assist the Collections Manager. A core group of three museum volunteers assist staff on a weekly basis with general tasks in the collection. Tasks include basic inventory, organization, and filing. In 2023, the Besser Museum became the beneficiary of an endowed gift through the Community Foundation of Northeast Michigan. Besser Museum will receive an additional \$30,000 to the annual budget to be used for artifact preservation per donor's wishes.

The 2017 AAM report cited one particular concern stating although the museum had PastPerfect for managing collections, objects are inventoried and managed through an Excel Spreadsheet. The following are the steps the Besser Museum took to gain intellectual control of the collections utilizing PastPerfect.

Step One: In 2018, the Besser Museum purchased an updated version of PastPerfect.

Step Two: The handwritten artifact accession logs, dating back to 1966, were digitized.

Step Three: The Besser Museum worked with representatives from PastPerfect to create an Excel spreadsheet template to capture all the data on handwritten accession logs. The data in these formatted Excel spreadsheets could then be imported directly into PastPerfect.

Step Four: Copies of the scanned accession logs, along with instructions on how to complete the Excel spreadsheet, were then given to volunteers. With copies of the scanned accession logs, volunteers worked at home to complete the Excel spreadsheets.

Step Five: Once volunteers completed capturing over 50 years of data into the Excel spreadsheets, PastPerfect representatives assisted with ensuring the information was properly imported into the PastPerfect software.

Using this approach, Besser Museum artifact records are now accessible and tracked using PastPerfect. In 2024, Besser Museum upgraded to the PastPerfect web edition with public access. Our future goal is to make the digital collections available online.

In 2019, temporary custody and found in collection items were transferred to the new artifact storage and processing room. Museum staff and volunteers devised a procedure to organize and identify these items. Meeting on a weekly basis, museum staff and volunteers worked to match temporary custody forms to their correct item. Temporary custody items were processed either by returning the item to the owner, or removing the item with owner's permission, or by obtaining signatures from the owners to put the item into the permanent or education collection. Since beginning this process, the following has been achieved:

Temporary Custody Items

- 42 donors received declined items returned to them and/or gave permission to the Besser Museum to dispose of them. See attached declined letter used to address incomplete temporary custody receipt forms.
- 141 accessioned donations.

Found in Collection Items:

- Found in collection items pulled out during the reorganization in 2019/2020 are now documented.
- Museum staff relocated its furniture collection to a new storage space. Accessioned furniture pieces were inventoried and photographed for the database. Over 30 un-numbered items were found among the collection. These items were documented as “found in collection” and presented to the Collections Committee for a decision. The “found in collection” items declined by the Collections Committee were published in the local newspaper in accordance with the Michigan Abandoned Property Laws.

Collection Storage

Volunteers contributed greatly to the success of transforming three collection storage rooms into progressive workspaces.

- 1. Exhibit prep room 2019-2020: Accomplished clearing the space and removing collection items.
- 2. Temporary processing room 2019-2020: Accomplished creating an organized space to help tackle the backlog of temporary custody items and incoming donations. Serves as a meeting space for the monthly Collections Committee.
 - Temporary Custody Project:
 1. Volunteers sorted the backlog of items into three categories. The categories included temporary custody items waiting for committee/board approval, approved items still waiting to be accessioned, and found in collection items with no numbers.
 2. Volunteers also uncovered many Deeds of Gift forms separated from their items. Many of the Deeds of Gift forms were able to be successfully matched to the items based on descriptions. The forms that did not immediately match with an item were organized into a binder by categories. These binders have proven useful many times in helping reconcile found in collection items.
- 3. Library/ Archives
 - Library Project 2019: Discarded outdated circulatory books to make space for accessioned books in the collection.
 - Newspaper project 2020: Inventoried and relocated the newspaper collection into safe storage boxes with acid free tissue paper. See photos.

- Map project 2021: Inventoried and relocated the map collection into safer storage. Spent six months flattening all rolled maps. Purchased clear archival polyester for encapsulation. Purchased a flat, metal 10-drawer filing cabinet for storing maps and other large documents. See photos.
- Filing project 2022-2023: Museum's records organized and consolidated into the archives.

Seven volunteers sit on the Collections Committee and meet monthly to offer guidance on incoming donations, collection issues (found in collection items), and deaccessions. A single volunteer with a background in cataloging gained while working at the University of Michigan's Bentley Historical Library volunteers weekly to catalog photos in our collection. Within a year, she helped catalog a single collection of 600 photographs into our database.

In 2020, the original accession records were mass imported into PastPerfect using Excel. These records were "skeleton records" to provide a starting point. Since 2021, a total of 10,383 records have been added or modified to include more in-depth information such as a description, key words, subjects. Reference photos. And an updated location.

Major collections:

Linke photograph collection (~600 photos) is 95% inventoried, digitized, and cataloged in PastPerfect.

Fred Trelfa collection (~5,000 negatives) is 20% inventoried, digitized, and cataloged in PastPerfect.

Haltiner archaeology collection (~9,000 objects) 10% inventoried, digitized, and cataloged in PastPerfect.

The Besser Museum's strategic partners are the Alpena County George N. Fletcher Library and NOAA/Thunder Bay National Marine Sanctuary. The Besser Museum has deaccessioned or transferred items to both institutions.

On December 9, 2022, the Besser Museum worked with Wayne Lusardi, the state maritime archaeologist to return a long-term loan from the Michigan Department of Natural Resources. In 1972, the Michigan Department of Natural Resources loaned the Besser Museum the anchor from the 1865 shipwreck *Pewabic*. For years, the anchor sat outdoors in front of the museum exposed to the elements. The museum did not have the resources to provide necessary conservation of the anchor. In 2022, the museum returned the loan to the State of Michigan with Wayne Lusardi, state archaeologist, acting as the liaison. Wayne Lusardi agreed to transfer the anchor to Alpena's NOAA Great Lakes Maritime Center where he could oversee conservation of the item.

The Besser Museum is submitting for the review of the AAM Accreditation Committee Besser Museum's Five-Year Strategic Plan.