

An Interview with Alexander Betts, Curator at the Ohio History Connection

by Jason Baird Jackson on July 15, 2016

Alex Betts is a Curator at the [Ohio History Connection](#) based at the OHC's [headquarters](#) in Columbus, Ohio. He earned a MA with distinction in [Museum and Artefact Studies](#) at the University of Durham in the United Kingdom. As an undergraduate he earned a BA at Indiana University, where he double majored in [anthropology](#) and [history](#), graduated Summa Cum Laude, and was inducted into Phi Beta Kappa. While an undergraduate he worked for three semesters as a practicum student at the [Mathers Museum of World Cultures](#) participating in a wide range of curatorial and collections documentation projects. He also interned at the [Indiana State Museum and Historic Sites](#) and at the [Tyne and Wear Archives and Museums](#) in Newcastle upon Tyne.

Jason Jackson (JJ): Thanks Alex for talking with me. I am eager to catch up with you. For an emerging professional in our field, you have already experienced quite a few adventures as a curator-in-training and curator. We'll come back to some of these, but I hope that we can begin with your current role as a Curator at the Ohio History Connection. You began there as an Assistant Curator in March 2015, less than a year after this 131 year old institution [changed its name](#) from the Ohio Historical Society to the Ohio History Connection. You've recently been promoted to the position of Curator. What is your work at the OHC about and how does your role fit within the mission of the organization?

Alexander Betts (AB): Thank you for having me! Yes, I am a Curator in the Collections Management department of the recently re-branded Ohio History Connection. We are a team of five that works to make sure that OHC's collection of nearly two million objects can be effectively used by staff, researchers, and visitors. As a Curator, I contribute to this goal through collections inventory, cataloging, photography, location tracking, storage, and being a collections point-person on exhibit teams. Another large part of my job is to maintain an active deaccessioning regimen, from initial identification to final disposal. My work focuses on the history and art collections, but also involves the archaeology, ethnography, and natural history collections. We are based at the headquarters in Columbus, the Ohio History Center, but also work with our over 50 historic sites around the state. As you can probably guess, our team is never lacking in things to do!

At the Ohio History Connection, our mission is: "Spark discovery of Ohio's stories. Embrace the present, share the past and transform the future." Along with the rest of the Collections Management team, I incorporate the spirit of this mission into my work everyday. Whether we are creating new records and photos for the online catalog, hosting visiting researchers, or assisting with the latest exhibit, our work increases accessibility and helps all Ohioans to share in the mission with us. I am also a big believer of the role that active and responsible deaccessioning plays in collections stewardship, especially at a 131-year-old institution. This is one reason that I was hired for the job.



Alex sits with a pair of metal teeth (H 64030) from the Miller Ohio Penitentiary Collection at the Ohio History Connection. This and other Ohio Pen objects are on display in the OHC's newly-opened Gallery 3.

JJ: You and I know that the range of positions in the museum field is quite large, from information technology to retail; from market research to health and safety. But when most students think about a museum job, I suspect that many of them think specifically about just the work that you are doing—working everyday with a collection (of collections) of objects. How did you travel from being a freshman in college to being a curator working with two million objects?

AB: As a freshman I already knew that I wanted a career in the curatorial/collections realm—it has been a dream of mine since I was 12. I entered IU as a history major but also quickly found anthropology. IU has such a strong anthropology department, and this is where my undergraduate interests blossomed. Starting my first [practicum](#) at the Mathers Museum of World Cultures was what cemented my desire for a museum career. It began to feel like a concrete goal. I will always look to Chief Curator Ellen Sieber as the one who jump-started the beginnings of my career. Through her guidance over three semesters, I gained invaluable experience and skills that I still use today.

After IU, I spent a summer interning with the registrar at the Indiana State Museum in Indianapolis. This was another fantastic internship that introduced me to a completely different area of collections work. I can say I truly enjoyed that summer!

As summer came to a close, I moved to the North East of England for the Museum and Artefact Studies program(me) at Durham University. From my first view over the medieval city and its cathedral (est. AD 1093) in the distance, I knew this was the right next step. During several months of my time there, I commuted to the nearby city of Newcastle to intern at Tyne and Wear Archives and Museums, the region's museum network. I split my time between database management in the Documentation Office and rehousing projects with the conservators. The TWAM staff were so willing to shape the internship to my learning needs and interests, which is one of the most supportive things a museum can do for its interns.

After returning home to Indiana, I began the job hunt. Despite my expectations for a competitive field, I received two job offers only four months later. One was from OHC. What do I credit for this incredible luck? My internship experiences. Part of this was intentionally strategic, as I sought collections internships that had variety and branched into registration, conservation, and databases. But the real value was in their quality. I am fortunate to have had supportive, attentive supervisors to guide me and help me learn. Without them, these internships would have been mere exercises rather than the sources of growth that propelled me to where I am now.

JJ: Wow. Yours is a very encouraging story. Given the role that internships and practicum played in you own career development, are you working now with students at the OHC or, like some institutions of its type, does it instead draw in community volunteers rather than students?

AB: OHC does have a large number of both interns and community volunteers that assist our efforts in several departments. So far I have not had the chance to take on interns of my own, but I absolutely look forward to “paying it forward” during my time here. It looks like I may have a chance to train some catalogers later this year, and I am excited to experience the perspective of the teacher.

JJ: In closing, what advice might you share with an IU undergraduate who—like you did—wants to curatorial career? What observations would you like to share with the department chairs in your home IU departments—history and anthropology? I ask both of these questions, because we are busy working to strengthen the support that the museum provides to students with public humanities/applied social science career interests. Much of this work is, of course, done in cooperation with departments across campus.

To my fellow Hoosiers and other students: In my experience, there is nothing more valuable for pursuing a curatorial career than finding good internships. I believe this to have been my key to success. Always seek out variety in those work experiences, not only for an attractive resume, but to try on various hats and see what fits you best. For the same reasons, test out different institutions. Some people strongly prefer working in small community museums, while others prefer large state museums. You may even be like me and love elements of both. It's all about

finding what feels right, in addition to gathering the experience necessary to move forward. And throughout all of it, remember to enjoy yourself!

To the department chairs: Never stop working to promote a flexible learning environment. The best classes I took were those that allowed students to create their own paths within the curriculum by being conscious of differing learning styles and allowing expression through a variety of media. In one class we were asked to present our research in any style we felt appropriate. In another, we were taken on “campus field trips” that tied into our lecture themes, such as analyzing the murals inside the IU Auditorium. These are the kinds of experiences that stick with a student. With that in mind, please continue to offer and expand opportunities at IU and around Bloomington that provide practical experience. My time at the MMWC is a good model. Classroom learning is incredibly important, but the single most useful component of my IU education was this practical experience. It not only provided me with the skills needed to progress toward a career, but also confirmed what I feel passionate about in life.*

JJ: Thank you Alex for sharing your experiences. Good luck!

AB: Thank you for the interview, Jason. If your readers and students have questions or I can help in any way, please feel free to contact me at: abetts (at) ohiohistory (dot) org.