

Guide to Inventorying and Documenting Collections

This guide explains how to inventory physical collections and record information in the project spreadsheet. The tasks of working with materials and entering info in the spreadsheet are connected and support each other.

Not every step or field applies to every item, and that is expected. The goal of this work is to create a baseline inventory that helps you to understand what is present, where it is located, and how it can be identified. Recording a few accurate, clearly observed details is always better than guessing or trying to be exhaustive.

Physical Inventory

This section focuses on how to move through a physical collection safely and systematically. It covers assigning item numbers, labeling materials, taking measurements when appropriate, light surface cleaning, and photographing items.

This inventory focuses only on materials identified as part of the Rowing History Project. It does not attempt to document every object, piece of furniture, or furnishing in a space. In general, historic fixtures or features that are directly related to the club's history, such as a table, fireplace, or stained glass, may be appropriate to include, while modern boats and currently used equipment are not. Prioritize items that document the club's history, activities, and membership—materials that help tell the organization's story. If you are unsure whether something should be included, make a note and check with the RHP project team.

Most inventory work can be completed using familiar tools:

- Pencil
- Paper slips or tags
- Measuring tape or ruler
- Phone or camera for photographs

Gloves are not required. Clean, dry hands are usually sufficient and often safer, since gloves can reduce dexterity.

The exception is unframed photographs or negatives. Use gloves when handling these materials to prevent damage from skin oils.

Working Through a Physical Space

Before beginning inventory work, assess the condition of materials. Do not handle items that are wet, moldy, insect-infested, or severely damaged. Set these aside and consult the RHP team before proceeding. Do not attempt repairs.

When inventorying materials in display cases or hanging on walls, begin at a clear point in the room and work your way around the space in a consistent direction.

- Choose a starting point, such as a doorway or corner.
- Move in one direction and complete one case, wall, or section at a time.
- This approach helps ensure that items are not missed or accidentally recorded more than once.

For collections arranged on walls or in cases, you may find it helpful to take a photograph of the full wall or case at the beginning. This provides a visual reference for the original arrangement and can be useful later when confirming that all items were accounted for.

Some materials, such as photograph albums, scrapbooks, or bound volumes, are complex objects that contain many individual parts. In these cases, it is appropriate to inventory the item initially at a high level (for example, as a single album). Additional detail can be added later during review or follow-up work.

Items may be inventoried individually or as clearly defined groups, depending on how the materials are stored, displayed, and used.

As you work through a room, try to inventory items where they are found rather than moving them around. Moving or rearranging objects can make it harder to track what has already been recorded, potentially leading to items being missed or duplicated. If something needs to be moved temporarily in order to see or photograph it, return it to its original place before moving on.

If you notice materials stored in areas with moisture, heat, or direct sunlight, note this in the Internal Notes field. Avoid moving items unless necessary, but flag any concerning conditions for follow-up.

Assigning Item Numbers

Each item should be assigned a unique identifying number using the project format:

XXX_####

The XXX collection prefix will be provided for your collection by the RHP team.

- Assign one number per item or clearly defined group (such as an envelope containing a roll of developed film).
- Do not reuse numbers, even if an item is moved or disposed of later.
- Once an Item ID is assigned, it should not be changed unless directed by the project team.

The Item ID serves as the key link between the physical object, its photographs, and its spreadsheet record.

Some items consist of multiple physically connected or closely related components (for example, a trophy with a lid and base). In these cases, component suffixes such as .A and .B may be added to the Item ID (e.g., RHP_0123.A and RHP_0123.B). Most items will not require component suffixes.

Related Records

This optional field is used to link items that are clearly related but not physically connected. Enter the related Item IDs in the “Related Records” field, separated by semicolons.

Example: a trophy and a photograph of the team holding it.

Use this field sparingly and only for direct, meaningful relationships.

Physical Labeling of Items

After assigning an Item ID, label the item so it can be clearly identified during photography and spreadsheet entry. Labels should always be temporary, reversible, and non-damaging.

Acceptable labeling methods include:

- Collection tags made of cardstock attached with cotton string
- Paper slips or bookmarks placed inside books or folders
- Light pencil marks on the back of photographs or inside book covers (only when appropriate)

Do not use ink, adhesive labels, tape, or sticky notes directly on collection materials.

Measurements may be recorded during physical inventory if they are easy to take and do not require moving or handling the item in a risky way. Approximate measurements are acceptable, and measuring is not required for every item.

Basic Cleaning Before Photography

If items are dusty or have light surface dirt, gentle surface cleaning may be performed before photography to remove dust and oils. If an item appears fragile, flaking, or damaged, do not attempt cleaning beyond removing loose dust.

For metal trophies and plaques:

- Avoid harsh chemicals and abrasive materials such as steel wool.
- Use a soft microfiber cloth lightly dampened with warm water and a small amount of mild dish soap.
- Dry immediately with a clean, lint-free cloth to prevent spotting.

For paper, photographs, and textiles, do not attempt cleaning beyond removing loose dust with a soft brush; instead, record condition concerns in the Internal Notes field.

More intensive cleaning, polishing, or tarnish removal should be handled by a professional. If you are unsure whether an item can be safely cleaned, do not clean it. Instead, note the condition or concern in the Internal Notes field.

Photographing Items

Photographs should be taken during or after recording inventory details, not before. This helps ensure that the identifying number and other basic information are already established.

- Write the Item ID on a collection tag or paper slip and place it at the bottom of the item when photographing.
- This identifying number will be used to rename the image file and link it to the correct spreadsheet record.

If you do not want the ID tag or slip to appear in the final image for the Omeka site, you may:

- Take two photographs (one with the tag and one without), or
- Crop the image after renaming the file.

Try to keep framing and distance consistent across items to make images easier to compare and use.

Some objects require more than one photograph to capture key details. For example, trophies may need front and back views. In these cases, use sequential file names:

XXX_####_1 (front)

XXX_####_2 (back)

If an item requires more than 10 images, it is best to use a leading zero to allow for sorting, XXX_####_01.

Photography Set-Up

Use a neutral background (white, gray, or black) and consistent lighting where possible, avoiding strong shadows or glare. A tripod is recommended to keep images stable and consistent, especially when photographing multiple items.

Make sure the entire object is visible in the frame, with a small amount of space around the edges. Keep the camera parallel to the object whenever possible to avoid distortion.

Lighting Tips

Reflective items such as framed photographs, plaques, and trophies often photograph best with diffuse lighting, which softens reflections and reduces glare.

Diffuse lighting can be created by placing a lampshade, softbox, or other light-diffusing material between the light source and the object.

For objects with worn or difficult-to-read text, take additional close-up photographs or photograph at a slight angle to improve legibility. Record only what you can clearly read, and note any uncertainty in the Internal Notes field.

Photographing Reflective Surfaces

Reflective surfaces (such as glass or polished metal) can show glare or reflections of the surrounding space. If adjusting lighting and camera angle does not reduce glare, consider using a matte black board or other non-reflective surface.

Most items can be photographed successfully without this technique. Consider it when glare obscures important details or prevents a clear photograph. In some collections, medals, plaques, framed photographs, or other objects may be displayed on walls or in cases where some reflections are unavoidable. These items do not need to be removed from display for photography unless that is your preference.

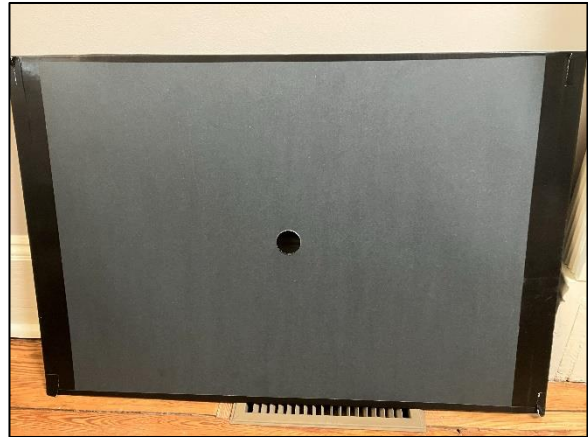
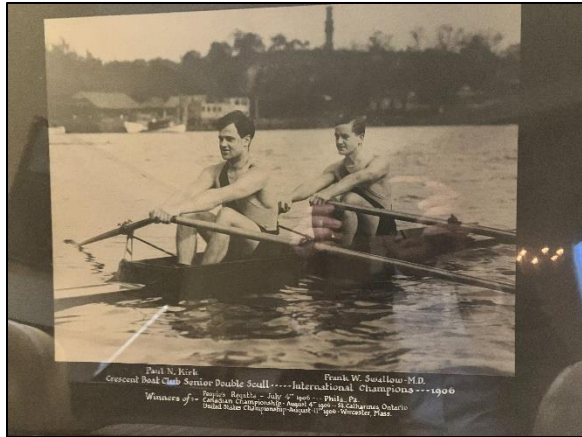
Position a black foam board in front of the camera, with a small opening for the lens, so the object reflects the dark surface instead of the room.

To reduce reflections:

- Place a black board in front of the lens, leaving only the lens exposed
- Use non-reflective materials to limit light bouncing onto the object
- Position black boards or cloth to block bright light sources
- If glare appears, hold a black card opposite the light source
- Use a tripod to keep framing consistent while adjusting



Photography setup used to document reflective silver objects. Courtesy of the Museum of the City of New York, <https://blog.mcny.org/2015/12/08/conserving-and-photographing-the-silver-collection/>.



Using a black board with a small opening for the camera lens can reduce reflections when photographing framed items under glass. Top left: original photograph with glare. Top right: the black board with pinhole. Bottom left: photograph after glare reduction. Courtesy of Henry Hauptfuhrer.

Photograph Editing

Limit photo editing by using consistent lighting, framing, and setup during photography. Images should reflect the original item as accurately as possible.

Basic editing such as cropping or minor color correction is acceptable. When cropping, leave a small amount of background so the object is not cut off at the edges.

If colors appear inaccurate, adjust them carefully using photo editing software. Avoid heavy editing or altering the appearance of the object.

Spreadsheet Entry

Each club will receive its own version of the RHP Google Spreadsheet to describe its collection, including books, photographs, trophies, and other items related to rowing history. There is an accompanying training video hosted on Vimeo at

<https://vimeo.com/1184096935?share=copy&fl=sv&fe=ci>.

There are three sheets, based on the item type: Published, Archival, or Objects & Artifacts. Each row represents one item or object. The top two rows are cataloging examples with fictional items.

Try to fill in as much information as possible, but don't worry if something is missing. It's better to record a few accurate details than to guess.

When entering Subjects, choose 1–5 key topics that describe the item. Separate them with semicolons (;) so they can be read correctly later.

Example: Rowing; Boathouses; Pennsylvania—Schuylkill River

If you are unsure of how to format a Subject, you can refer to the Vocab Data lists on Tab 4 of the Spreadsheet or browse the FAST Subject Headings website at

<https://fast.oclc.org/assignfast/>.

Consistency is more important than perfection — all the data will be reviewed and standardized later!

Collection and Donor

The donor or source field records who provided the item. The collection records the broader grouping of materials the item belongs to. These may be the same, but often differ.

Digital File Links and AV Access Links

Digital File Links and AV Access Links are used to record how images and media for each item are stored and accessed.

Digital File Link 1 should be used for the primary image file saved in Google Drive. This is the main image that represents the item. Additional images may be recorded in Digital File Link 2–10 when needed.

AV Access Links are used for externally hosted audiovisual content, such as videos on platforms like YouTube or Vimeo. These links provide access to streaming content and are not a replacement for image files stored in Google Drive.

Not all items will require additional files or AV links. If only one image is available, only Digital File Link 1 needs to be filled in.

General Reminders

- Use semicolons (;) to separate multiple Subjects and Related Records.
- Include up to five Subjects per item.
- Keep spelling and capitalization consistent.
- Leave fields blank or put “Unknown” if the information is uncertain.
- Required = must be filled in for every record.
- Recommended = add if the information is easy to find, or return later with more detail.
- Internal = for your recordkeeping only; will not be exported to the Omeka site.
- A checkbox field is used to indicate items that should remain private and not be published. Check this box only when an item should be excluded from public access.
- Dates will be standardized by the project team using the Extended Date/Time Format (EDTF), a Library of Congress standard: <https://www.loc.gov/standards/datetime/>. You do not need to use this format when entering dates.

1. Published Materials

Field	Category	What to Enter	Example
QA Check	Required	Nothing, this field is for the RHP management team	—
Item ID	Required	Unique ID with club prefix and leading zeros	RHP_0001
Do Not Publish on Site	Optional	If the box is checked, the item on that row will not be made public on the Omeka site.	—
Old ID (if any)	Optional	Any legacy ID previously used for this item	SN-1984-12
Digital File Link 1	Required	Link to where the primary image file is saved on Google Drive	RHP_0001_1.jpg [this example is the file name, not a link]
Title	Required	Full title as it appears on the title page	<i>Rowing on the Schuylkill: A Century of Boathouse Row</i>
Author / Creator	Required	Author's name in "Last, First" format; use "et al." or "(ed.)" as needed	Carver, Elizabeth M.
Publisher	Recommended	Publisher's name, as printed on the title or copyright page	Philadelphia Heritage Press
ISBN / ISSN	Optional	If available; 10- or 13-digit ISBN, or 8-digit ISSN	1234567890
Date	Required	Year or range (1933 or 1973–1980); use "c." for approximate (c. 1900); use "1930s" for decades; note uncertainty in Internal Notes	2004
Physical Description (Pages, Size, etc.)	Recommended	Page count, illustrations, and size	212 p. : ill. ; 28 cm

Description / Summary	Recommended	Brief summary of the content or purpose	History of rowing on the Schuylkill River, focusing on Boathouse Row and its clubs, 19th–20th centuries.
Subjects / Topics	Required	1–5 subjects or topics; separate each one with a semicolon or use a dropdown menu	Boathouses; Pennsylvania—Schuylkill River; Rowing
Individuals / Entities Referenced	Optional	Names or organizations that are referenced but are not the subject; separate each one with a semicolon or use a dropdown menu	Vesper Boat Club (Philadelphia, Pa.); Philadelphia Girls' Rowing Club (Philadelphia, Pa.)
Item Type	Required	Type of publication (Book, Periodical, Yearbook, etc.)	Book
Usage Rights	Required	Rights statement from the item or repository	In copyright
Source or Donor	Recommended	Donor name or collection title	Schuylkill Navy Historical Committee, 2022
Collection	Recommended	Name of the collection or grouping the item belongs to; use a consistent, standardized collection name; may differ from the donor	Schuylkill Navy Library Collection
Place	Recommended	City and state or country of publication	Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
Time Period	Recommended	Broad historical period or date range	World War II
Condition	Optional	Current physical condition of the item	Good
Internal Notes	Optional	Notes for project use only; not exported	Signed by the author
Physical Location	Recommended	Where the physical item is stored	Library
Entered By	Required	Initials of the person entering the data	KEP
Date Entered	Required	Date record was created (YYYY-MM-DD)	2025-10-08

Related Records	Optional	Item IDs of other records in the spreadsheet that are directly related to this item but are not physically part of the same object. Separate multiple IDs with semicolons.	RHP_0020; RHP_0021
AV Access Link [External]	Required (if relevant)	Link to externally hosted audiovisual content (e.g., YouTube or Vimeo); use for streaming access copies, not files stored in Google Drive; separate multiple links with semicolons	https://vimeo.com/123456789
Digital File Link 2-10	Required (if relevant)	Links to where the remaining image files are saved on Google Drive.	RHP_0001_2.jpg [this example is the file name, not a link]

2. Archival Materials

Field	Category	What to Enter	Example
QA Check	Required	Nothing, this field is for the RHP management team	—
Item ID	Required	Unique ID with club prefix and leading zeros	RHP_0003
Do Not Publish on Site	Optional	If the box is checked, the item on that row will not be made public on the Omeka site.	—
Old ID (if any)	Optional	Any legacy ID previously used	SN-74-2
Digital File Link 1	Required	Link to where the primary image file is saved on Google Drive	RHP_0003_1.jpg [this example is the file name, not a link]
Title (if none, a short description)	Required	Concise title or brief description	Minutes of the Women's Rowing Committee
Author / Creator	Required	Name of author, creator, or organization	Philadelphia Rowing Association
Date	Required	Year or range (1933 or 1973–1980); use “c.” for approximate (c. 1900); use “1930s” for decades; note uncertainty in Internal Notes	1973–1980
Physical Description (Pages, Folders, etc.)	Recommended	Number of pages, folders, or volumes	1 bound volume (200 p.)
Description / Summary	Recommended	Brief summary of the content or purpose	Meeting minutes documenting the activities and decisions of the Women's Rowing Committee, including race

			planning and membership updates, 1973–1980.
Subjects / Topics	Required	1–5 subjects or topics; separate each one with a semicolon or use a dropdown menu	Rowing clubs; Associations, institutions, etc.— Membership
Individuals / Entities Referenced	Optional	Names or organizations that are referenced but are not the subject; separate each one with a semicolon or use a dropdown menu	Schuylkill Navy (Philadelphia, Pa.); Women’s Rowing Committee (Schuylkill Navy of Philadelphia); Philadelphia Girls’ Rowing Club (Philadelphia, Pa.)
Item Type	Required	Form or genre (Minutes, Letters, Programs, etc.)	Minute books
Usage Rights	Required	Rights statement from repository	In copyright
Source or Donor	Recommended	Donor name or source collection	Gift of James J. McKenna Family, 1999
Collection	Recommended	Name of the collection or grouping the item belongs to; use a consistent, standardized collection name; may differ from the donor	Schuylkill Navy Archives
Place	Recommended	City or region associated with the item	Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
Time Period	Recommended	Broad historical period or date range	World War II
Condition	Optional	Current physical condition of the item	Good
Internal Notes	Optional	Notes for internal tracking	—
Physical Location	Recommended	Where the original is stored	Library
Entered By	Required	Initials of the cataloger	KEP
Date Entered	Required	Date entered (YYYY-MM-DD)	2025-10-08

Related Records	Optional	Item IDs of other records in the spreadsheet that are directly related to this item but are not physically part of the same object. Separate multiple IDs with semicolons.	RHP_0020; RHP_0021
AV Access Link [External]	Required (if relevant)	Link to externally hosted audiovisual content (e.g., YouTube or Vimeo); use for streaming access copies, not files stored in Google Drive; separate multiple links with semicolons	https://vimeo.com/123456789
Digital File Link 2-10	Required (if relevant)	Links to where the remaining image files are saved on Google Drive.	RHP_0003_2.jpg [this example is the file name, not a link]

3. Objects & Artifacts

Field	Category	What to Enter	Example
QA Check	Required	Nothing, this field is for the RHP management team	—
Item ID	Required	Unique ID with club prefix and leading zeros	RHP_0005
Do Not Publish on Site	Optional	If the box is checked, the item on that row will not be made public on the Omeka site.	—
Old ID (if any)	Optional	Any legacy identifier used in the past	—
Digital File Link 1	Required	Link to where the primary image file is saved on Google Drive	RHP_0005_1.jpg [this example is the file name, not a link]
Object Name or Title	Required	Concise name describing the object	Commemorative Oar Blade, Henley Victory
Creator / Manufacturer	Recommended	Maker or manufacturer name (if known)	Unknown
Date	Required	Year or range (1933 or 1973–1980); use “c.” for approximate (c. 1900); use “1930s” for decades; note uncertainty in Internal Notes	1933
Materials	Recommended	Primary materials used	Wood; Paint
Size / Measurements	Recommended	Dimensions (height, width, depth, or length)	380 cm (l)
Inscription / Markings	Recommended	Text or markings appearing on the object	Blade painted with “Henley 1933” in gold on one side
Description / Summary	Recommended	Brief summary of the content or purpose	Commemorative oar blade marking a 1933 Henley Regatta victory.

Subjects / Topics	Required	1–5 relevant topics or organizations	Rowing; Regattas; Awards; Boathouses; Pennsylvania—Schuylkill River
Individuals / Entities Referenced	Optional	Names or organizations that are referenced but are not the subject; separate each one with a semicolon or use a dropdown menu	Schuylkill Navy (Philadelphia, Pa.); Vesper Boat Club (Philadelphia, Pa.)
Item Type	Required	Object category or form (Trophy, Oar, Medal, etc.)	Oars; Commemorative oar blades; Trophies
Usage Rights	Required	Rights statement	Public domain
Source or Donor	Recommended	Donor name or source	Gift of Schuylkill Navy, 1985
Collection	Recommended	Name of the collection or grouping the item belongs to; use a consistent, standardized collection name; may differ from the donor	Schuylkill Navy Collection
Place	Recommended	City or region of origin or use	Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
Time Period	Recommended	Broad historical period or date range	World War II
Condition	Optional	Current physical condition of the item	Good
Internal Notes	Optional	Notes for project tracking	—
Physical Location	Recommended	Where the object is stored or displayed	On wall near entrance
Entered By	Required	Initials of the person entering data	KEP
Date Entered	Required	Date entered (YYYY-MM-DD)	2025-10-08
Related Records	Optional	Item IDs of other records in the spreadsheet that are directly related to this item but are not physically part of the same object. Separate multiple IDs with semicolons.	RHP_0020; RHP_0021

AV Access Link [External]	Required (if relevant)	Link to externally hosted audiovisual content (e.g., YouTube or Vimeo); use for streaming access copies, not files stored in Google Drive; separate multiple links with semicolons	https://vimeo.com/123456789
Digital File Link 2-10	Required (if relevant)	Links to where the remaining image files are saved on Google Drive.	RHP_0005_2.jpg [this example is the file name, not a link]

Resources

Downing, Maggie. 2020. *Digitization 101*. Conservation Center for Art & Historic Artifacts.
<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLUwal4tAEZjSaTQjTE1JvofToG6pnN7XH>

Houseman, Chloe, and Kaitlyn Pettengill. 2025. *Handling for Digitization*. Conservation Center for Art & Historic Artifacts.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=emqyrxk7MBM>

Lowe, Katie. 2024. *Inventorying Collections for Museums*. Conservation Center for Art & Historic Artifacts. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tyE7QABo6qo>

Museum of the City of New York. *Conserving and Photographing the Silver Collection*.
<https://blog.mcny.org/2015/12/08/conserving-and-photographing-the-silver-collection/>

Northeast Document Conservation Center. *Preservation Leaflets*.
<https://www.nedcc.org/free-resources/preservation-leaflets/overview>