

Experiments in Deaccessioning: Archives and On-line Auctions

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Abstract

All archives accumulate duplicate or out-of-scope materials. Archivists have several options for removing such materials from their holdings: they may return them to the donor, transfer them to a more appropriate repository, destroy, or sell them. Although selling is the least practiced of these options, it has advantages. Furthermore, the proliferation and popularity of on-line auction venues make it possible for archives to sell items more quickly and at a greater profit than before. This article discusses the legal and ethical issues raised for archivists by the use of on-line auction venues in deaccessioning unwanted materials.

In the course of their daily operations, all archives accumulate material without significant informational value, but having some financial value. This material is accumulated routinely from the careful weeding of accessioned collections during processing, and from the reprocessing and reappraisal of current holdings. Such material may include vintage photographs and postcards, autographed documents, ornate corporate letterheads, or copies of popular magazines. Recognizing the financial value of this material to collectors, archivists are often reluctant to destroy it. But they also hesitate to retain it indefinitely and wince at the costs associated with inventorying, storing, and safeguarding it. If the profit to be gained from selling is potentially great, an archives may hire a dealer to auction such unwanted material on its behalf. However, on-line auction sites now provide a flexible, expedient, and cost-effective means by which archives can sell this material themselves.

This essay explores the legal, ethical, and practical issues raised for archivists interested in using on-line auction sites to deaccession unwanted

The author wishes to thank Ken Wirth and Tim Ericson for their careful readings of this essay and their many helpful suggestions. Versions of this paper were presented at a special program of the North East Wisconsin Intertype Libraries, Inc. held in De Pere, Wisconsin on September 13, 2001 (with Tim Ericson), and at the Wisconsin Association of Academic Libraries conference held in La Crosse, Wisconsin on April 20, 2001. The author thanks all the attendees for their participation and comments.

material.¹ It begins with a review of the history and status of deaccessioning in the archival literature, giving particular attention to its acceptance as a legitimate collection management activity in the early 1980s. Since that time, archivists have recognized selling as one deaccessioning option among many, but have had no efficient, cost-effective means of pursuing that option until the appearance of on-line auction sites in the mid-1990s. This discussion of on-line auctions is based on the author's experience in supervising an experimental selling program conducted by the Division of Archives and Special Collections at the University of Wisconsin—Milwaukee. Throughout the experiment, the author was impressed by the ability of on-line auctions to transform the unwanted into the truly useful. On-line auctions can function as an innovative collection development tool, but their use raises complex issues that archivists must address.

The Vicissitudes of Deaccessioning

When the archivist was considered merely a keeper of records, there was no talk of “archival deaccessioning,” only the disposal, by administrators, of records before they came under the archivist's care. In most cases, disposal was a euphemism for destruction. Hilary Jenkinson's arguments against archival participation in appraisal decisions are well known among archivists. In *A Manual of Archive Administration*, Jenkinson complained that the administrator of his day “piles up documents with a carelessness of the future,” and he clearly recognized the need for “the formulation of Rules and the provision of machinery for destruction” of some records.² However, he concluded that the task of records destruction should not be left to the archivist. For the archivist “to destroy a document because he thinks it useless is to import into the collection under his charge what we have been throughout most anxious to keep out of it, an element of his personal judgement.”³ According to Jenkinson, only the administrative body that produces the records is justified in selecting materials for destruction.

Like Jenkinson, T. R. Schellenberg was appalled by the enormous bulk of modern records and understood that disposal of some was necessary. He also appreciated the dangers of records destruction and described the “final and irrevocable” consequences of such action: “Once records have been destroyed,

¹ *A Glossary for Archivists, Manuscript Curators, and Records Managers* defines “deaccessioning” as the “process by which an archives or manuscript repository formally removes material from its custody.” Compiled by Lewis J. Bellardo and Lynn Lady Bellardo (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1992), 10. I would add that “material” in this definition should include all items accessioned by an archives, whether processed or not.

² Hilary Jenkinson, *A Manual of Archive Administration*, 2nd rev. ed. (London: Percy Lund, Humphries & Co., 1965), 137.

³ Jenkinson, *A Manual of Archive Administration* p. 149.

they cannot be recalled; for often they exist in unique copy only.”⁴ Schellenberg formulated specific appraisal criteria and happily included archivists in the selection process. Archivists “should have final responsibility for judging the secondary values of records,” he wrote, “whether these are preserved as evidence of an agency’s organizational or functional development, or for their social, economic, or other information.”⁵ He assigned to archivists a decisive role in determining the disposal of records, whether such activity resulted in destruction, migration to a more stable format, temporary storage in a records center, or permanent retention in an archives.⁶

Until the 1980s, the archival literature addressed only the “final disposal” of records before accession by an archival repository, not the deaccessioning of archives. Neither Jenkinson nor Schellenberg made any provision for removing records already placed among a repository’s holdings. This was because each writer defined archives as worthy of *permanent* preservation.⁷ Schellenberg gave archivists responsibility for selecting items for disposal, but like Jenkinson, he did not address the reappraisal and deaccessioning of records already in archival custody. That move was made by Leonard Rapport in his important and, at the time, controversial article, “No Grandfather Clause: Reappraising Accessioned Records.”⁸ “Every repository of public records has on its shelves records which, if offered today, we would not accept,” Rapport observes. “For such records,” he argues, “there should be no grandfather clause.”⁹ Rapport urged us to consider archives not as permanently valuable, but as *worthy of continued preservation*—a conceptual shift that justifies the reappraisal of current holdings and revision of the standards by which archivists appraised those records in the first place. Rapport hoped that the establishment of more rigorous appraisal criteria would help archivists avoid accessioning records of dubious value. For such records already on the shelves, he suggested that reappraisal according to equally rigorous criteria would result in “internal disposal”—and lots of it.

Since the 1980s, many archivists have retreated from any definition of “archives” resting on notions of permanent value, and have started to discuss questions relating to appraisal and preservation in more relative terms.¹⁰ For

⁴ T. R. Schellenberg, *Modern Archives: Principles and Techniques* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956), 21.

⁵ Schellenberg, *Modern Archives*, 30.

⁶ Schellenberg, *Modern Archives*, 104–10.

⁷ Jenkinson, *A Manual of Archive Administration*, 152; Schellenberg, *Modern Archives*, 16.

⁸ Leonard Rapport, “No Grandfather Clause: Reappraising Accessioned Records,” *American Archivist* 44 (Spring 1981): 143–150. For a response to Rapport’s position, see Karen Benedict, “Invitation to a Bonfire: Reappraisal and Deaccessioning of Records as Collection Management Tools in an Archives—A Reply to Leonard Rapport,” *American Archivist* 47 (Winter 1984): 43–49.

⁹ Leonard Rapport, 143.

¹⁰ On archivist’s changing understanding of the idea of permanence, see James M. O’Toole, “On the Idea of Permanence,” *American Archivist* 52 (Winter 1989): 10–25.

these archivists, reappraisal and deaccessioning are the other side of an effective collection development policy. F. Gerald Ham, writing a few years after Rapport's essay, described deaccessioning as a "creative and sophisticated act of reappraisal that will permit holdings to be refined and strengthened. It allows archivists to replace records of lesser value with collections of more significance, and it prevents the imposition of imperfect and incomplete decisions of the past on the future."¹¹ Ham argued that deaccessioning is "essential for good collection management," and Lawrence Dowler agreed: it is "a legitimate function of appraisal and an essential and integral part of collection development."¹² These archivists defended deaccessioning because it helps repositories to refine their collections and open shelf space for collections more appropriate to their missions.

Archivists who want to deaccession material have several options that should be considered in the following order: The archives should first consult deeds of gift to determine if any restrictions prevent disposal of the material. No deaccessioning should occur if such activity is contrary to an agreement between the donor and the institution. For items with research value falling outside the scope of the institution's collecting guidelines, transfer to a more suitable repository is the ethical priority. Cooperation between institutions "to ensure the preservation of materials in repositories where they will be adequately processed and effectively utilized" falls within the collecting policy guidelines of the Society of American Archivists' code of ethics.¹³ Such cooperation benefits all concerned. The transferring institution gains more space, the receiving institution gets the collection, and the public has the satisfaction of knowing that the records are still accessible. If the material lacks both significant research and financial value, discarding it is often the best course of action.

An option that the SAA code of ethics does not address is selling items that lack substantial research value, but have financial value. This omission is unfortunate and leaves archivists to look elsewhere for guidance regarding this challenging alternative. The Association of College and Research Libraries' "Standards for Ethical Conduct for Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Librarians" devotes an entire section to deaccessioning, but it does not single out selling for special consideration as a disposal option.¹⁴

¹¹ F. Gerald Ham, "Archival Choices: Managing the Historical Record in an Age of Abundance," *American Archivist* 47 (Winter 1984): 17.

¹² Ham, "Archival Choices," 16; and Lawrence Dowler, "Deaccessioning Collections: A New Perspective on a Continuing Controversy," in *Archival Choices: Managing the Historical Record in an Age of Abundance*, ed. Nancy E. Peace (Lexington, Mass. and Toronto: D. C. Heath, 1984), 117.

¹³ Society of American Archivists, "A Code of Ethics for Archivists with Commentary," available online at, <http://www.archivists.org/governance/handbook/app_ethics.html>.

¹⁴ Association of College and Research Libraries, "Standards for Ethical Conduct for Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Librarians," available online at, <<http://www.ala.org/acrl/guides/rarethic.html>>.

Selling is for the “risk-takers” among archivists, and it has important benefits.¹⁵ Selling allows archives not only to refocus their holdings and increase shelf space, but also potentially allows them to escape from the “cycle of poverty” in which most institutions find themselves. The assessment of public records programs made almost two decades ago in *Documenting America: Assessing the Condition of Historical Records in the States*, still has the ring of truth: inadequate resources “prevent state archives from mounting effective programs, while the lack of effective programs renders the archives vulnerable to disregard by departmental administrators and state budget officials.”¹⁶ By generating their own financial resources, all archives have the chance to develop more effective programs and rise in the estimation of administrators. Selling is one way an archives may transform unwanted items into revenue for the purchase of new acquisitions or the support of operations generally.

Archival institutions wishing to sell unwanted items usually rely on dealers. Mattox Coins and Stamps, one such dealer, advertises its services on the Archives and Archivists listserv. The company specializes in helping archives, museums, and other institutions sell “collectibles (coins, envelopes, stamps, currency, autographs) that do not fit into their collections.”¹⁷ After an institution sets aside the items it wants to sell, the company sorts them into appropriate lots, catalogs and researches them, and places them in international auctions. According to Samuel Streit, turning items over to a dealer or other specialist “can be advantageous from several standpoints.”¹⁸ In the first place, because dealers work on a commission basis, “it is to their benefit to sell the material at the highest possible price. The material will therefore probably receive exhaustive cataloging and description and will be brought to the attention of a broad range of prospective buyers.”¹⁹ Selling at auction has additional benefits. It not only allows the institution “to exploit whatever market competition obtains at the moment,” but also “provides a public record of the sale, thereby lending an air of probity” to the actions of the institution.²⁰ Indeed, in a personal message to the author, Doug Mattox writes that “no institution has received any bad press” in the twenty years he has provided his service.²¹ However, a dealer’s fees may cut substantially into profits. For instance, Mattox

¹⁵ Ham, “Archival Choices,” 17.

¹⁶ *Documenting America: Assessing the Condition of Historical Records in the States: Consultant Reports Presented at the Conference of the National Historical Publications and Records Commission Assessment and Reporting Grantees, Atlanta, Georgia, June 24–25, 1983*, ed. Lisa B. Weber (n.p., 1984), 8.

¹⁷ Doug Mattox, “\$\$\$Raising Money\$\$\$,” 22 March 2000, on-line posting, archives@listerv.muohio.edu.

¹⁸ Samuel Streit, “Research Library Deaccessioning: Practical Considerations,” *Wilson Library Bulletin* 56 (May 1982): 661.

¹⁹ Samuel Streit, “Research Library Deaccessioning,” 661–62.

²⁰ Samuel Streit, “Research Library Deaccessioning,” 662.

²¹ Doug Mattox, e-mail to the author, 4 April 2000.

estimates that he usually takes anywhere from 10–20 percent. Additionally, auctions may take years to complete. One auction expert, speaking about book auctions, explains that in many cases items are auctioned gradually, “a process that in many instances can take as long as four years.”²² Finally, the seller also relinquishes control and usually has no way to judge the dealer’s effectiveness or honesty.

On-line auction sites provide archives with an innovative, expedient, and cost-effective means of selling unwanted items. Public libraries already use on-line auction sites in this way. In July 2000 the Milwaukee Public Library began auctioning its 16,000-volume set of British patents on eBay. The information contained in these volumes is available online, and the library wants to use the mile of shelf space occupied by the collection for other materials. The library began by posting auctions for five volumes from the period 1878–1907 at opening bids of \$5 each. Final bids exceeded the library’s expectations. On average, each volume sold for \$74, but one volume went for over \$100. Interestingly, the library received much positive coverage from the local press for “using a digital solution to get rid of an archival albatross.”²³ In 1999 the Friends of the Albany County Public Library in Laramie Wyoming began selling discards on eBay. Announcing the program in the *U*N*A*B*A*S*H*E*D Librarian*, Penny Schenker reports, “This has proved to be a good money maker . . . the fees [charged by eBay] are low and the number of people bidding on items is tremendous.”²⁴ Finally, the title of a recent *Library Journal* article promises that “Your Discards May Be Somebody’s Treasure,” and provides an upbeat account of the experiences of the Anoka County Library in Blaine Minnesota with selling discards on eBay. Unhappy with the pittance that used-book dealers offered for their discards, and without a friends group to support used-book sales, the library opted to use eBay. Though their program is still new, they have “already taken in several hundred dollars.” Given this, one better understands the rhetorical question punctuating the end of the article: “Why resist an idea that could make libraries money?”²⁵

The recurring mention of eBay in the above examples should come as no surprise. eBay is the largest and most popular online auction venue. It began in 1995 as the personal web page of Pierre Omidyar, who called his creation “AuctionWeb,” and is now “the dominant player in the online auction world” with 29.7 million registered users bidding on millions of items in thousands of

²² Quoted in Peter Model, “Books at Auction: The Art of Deaccessioning,” *Wilson Library Bulletin* 56 (September 1981): 38.

²³ Avrum D. Lank, “Library Using eBay to Bid Cheerio to British Patents,” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, 1 July 2000. The story received further coverage in the same newspaper by Scott Williams, “Strong Demand for Old Books of Patents Surprises Library,” 9 July 2000, and by Avrum D. Lank, “Americans Make Book on Value,” 9 July 2000.

²⁴ Peggy Schenker, “Book Sale Adds Internet Auction,” *U*N*A*B*A*S*H*E*D Librarian*, no. 110 (1999): 24.

²⁵ Kathleen Baxter, “Your Discards May Be Somebody’s Treasure,” *Library Journal* 125 (April 1, 2000): 62–63.

categories.²⁶ Auctions on eBay have included such diverse items as a *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* shot glass set, a boxing glove autographed by Sugar Ray Leonard, a leather-bound copy of the first edition in the original parts of Charles Dickens's *Bleak House*, a set of 12-point letterpress lead type, a mounted Malaysian butterfly (species: *prioneris philnoma*), and a Tonka Toy™ cement mixer from the 1960s. If eBay doesn't satisfy one's existing shopping needs, it can easily create new ones.

"eBay—and the online auction phenomenon it has spawned—is redrawing American's business landscape," claims *Time* magazine.²⁷ Steve Westley, vice president of marketing and business development, is quoted as saying: "Every week someone will come up to you and say this [eBay] has changed my business entirely, and you can fill in the blank for what business." Libraries and archives are not businesses, but eBay has the potential to transform how they manage collections. They can use it to acquire wanted materials for their fair-market value, and to deaccession unwanted materials for the highest price someone is willing to pay.²⁸

"Let the Bidding Begin—Your Item Is Listed!"

The Division of Archives and Special Collections at the University of Wisconsin—Milwaukee's Golda Meir Library recently concluded its own experimental use of eBay. The experiment developed out of the Archives' frustration with the amount of unwanted material it had accumulated over the years. Generally, this material consists of "weeds" from processed collections, duplicates resulting from reformatted or newly available online resources, or items falling outside the scope of redefined collection development priorities and limits. Specifically, it includes artwork (paintings in oil and watercolors, lithographic prints, and original sketches in pencil and ink); photographs (thousands of studio prints, *cartes de visite* of Civil War soldiers, and duplicate prints of famous sports figures such as Hank Aaron, Ty Cobb, and Joe DiMaggio); badges and buttons (everything from "Happy Birthday Virginia Woolf and James Joyce, 1882–1982" to "Milwaukee Registered Bartenders Union Local #64"); coins and currency (foreign and domestic, including a set of Roosevelt dimes, 1946–1970, and a \$20 Confederate bill); periodicals (from *Life* to *Bowling*); stamps; postal

²⁶ Adam Cohen, "The Attic of e," *Time*, 27 December 1999, 79. The number of registered users is current as of the time of this writing. See eBay's "Company Overview" web page at <<http://pages.ebay.com/community/aboutebay/overview/index.html>>.

²⁷ Cohen, "The Attic of e" 80.

²⁸ The author posted a message to the Archives listserv concerning the use of on-line auctions by archives to acquire or deaccession items. Thirteen of the respondents admitted to buying on eBay, stating that it provides opportunities to purchase at a fair price items otherwise unavailable or difficult to locate. Only two said they sold unwanted items on eBay. The author thanks all of these respondents for sharing their experiences.

covers; postcards; guide books; brochures; and much, much more. Although this inventory is hardly a treasure trove for researchers, the material is in good condition and some has value for collectors. However, until the appearance of on-line auction sites in the late 1990s, the Archives had no cost-effective means of targeting those collectors.

Before the experiment could begin, the Archives secured the support of its parent institution. Streit, discussing the deaccessioning of library materials, points out that “it is the library administrator who must bear the burden of interpreting the long-term implications of deaccessioning as they pertain to the intellectual well-being” of the institution.²⁹

The Archives then addressed any legal restrictions to the proposed selling program. Discussions with the campus Office of Legal Affairs determined that the Archives was barred from selling items purchased with state funds, but that it could rightfully sell donated items. Legal Affairs also determined that, in utilizing the services of an on-line auction venue, the Archives could not consent to any user agreement providing for arbitration of legal disputes outside of Wisconsin. This policy, established by the State Attorney General, arises from practical considerations, such as the high cost of conducting out-of-state litigation, and the desirability of arbitrating legal disputes according to the laws with which one is most familiar. Likewise, the Archives could not agree to indemnify an on-line auction venue against legal action by the University of Wisconsin.³⁰ The Archives also established clear title to the items it wanted to sell, and consulted deeds of gift for any restrictions that might prevent sale. Streit’s advice to libraries concerning legal title and deaccessioning applies to archival institutions, as well: “Whenever the library is uncertain of possessing clear title, deaccessioning should be deferred until the status of the material in question is clarified. Any other course invites legal complications.”³¹ Publicly funded institutions are likely to encounter more restrictions in disposing of property than private corporations. While private corporations own their property outright, publicly funded institutions manage materials that are the property of the state. Laws will vary from state to state, but an institution must have a clear understanding of them before beginning its deaccessioning program.

Next, the Archives considered the impact of selling on donor relations. The library literature is full of cautionary remarks. Streit considers library/donor relations to be “one of the most sensitive aspects of such a program,” and David

²⁹ Streit, “Research Library Deaccessioning,” 658.

³⁰ Unfortunately, Legal Affairs did not alert the Archives to the “choice of law provision” and the indemnification restraints until the experimental selling program was winding down. This situation demonstrates the novel complications posed by selling online for publicly funded institutions and underscores the importance of including lawyers in the process of establishing a deaccessioning program. Until these restrictions can be negotiated, the Archives’ on-line selling program is onhold.

³¹ Streit, “Research Library Deaccessioning,” 661.

Stam calls it a “difficult question, fraught with imponderables.”³² In the archival literature, Ham identifies the problem concisely: “There is the fear that one incensed donor, proclaiming that valuable records have been destroyed, will put in jeopardy the whole collecting program, for both papers and money.”³³ Dowler acknowledges that there “is no denying that the publicity surrounding the sale or disposal of collections may prompt some donors to withhold future gifts or withdraw current deposits.”³⁴ He proposes that the “most obvious response to this problem is for an institution to honestly acknowledge the vicissitudes of life and the possibility of an altered mission or changed financial climate.”³⁵ Statements that acknowledge these possibilities and allow for deaccessioning should be included in the deed of gift. As Ham notes, “donor agreements cannot become the dead hand of the past; they must contain some option for reappraisal and deaccessioning.”³⁶

Consideration was also given to the appropriate use of proceeds from the sales. While some believe that proceeds should only be used to purchase new acquisitions, others counter that “the financing of operating expenses, that is, paying staff to maintain, service, preserve, and make collections accessible, is a legitimate use of funds obtained from the sale of unwanted materials.”³⁷ Administrators at the University of Wisconsin—Milwaukee decided that proceeds would be placed in a revolving fund for the purchase of new materials by the Archives.

The Archives culled sale items from the above-mentioned inventory of unwanted items. However, not every item from this inventory was a candidate for selling online. Only materials whose sale would not have a negative impact on the mission of the institution were considered for sale. In practical terms, this meant that the items selected had to be free of all legal impediments, ethical issues, and political controversy. With every selection, the Archives considered the reputation of the institution, the feelings of donors (including future donors), and the concerns of library board members. Items were also selected according to their appeal to collectors (based on physical condition and unique features) and their likely selling price. Only items with an estimated value of \$1,000 or less were selected for inclusion in this experiment. With these criteria in mind, a professional staff person selected items in consultation with the Head of the Archives and Special Collections Division.

³² Streit, “Research Library Deaccessioning,” 659; and David H. Stam, “‘Prove All Things: Hold Fast That Which Is Good’: Deaccessioning and Research Libraries,” *Deaccession in Research Libraries: Papers Read at a Symposium Held at Brown University, June 11, 12, 1981* (n.p., [1981?]): 9.

³³ Ham, “Archival Choices,” 17.

³⁴ Dowler, “Deaccessioning Collections,” 124.

³⁵ Dowler, “Deaccessioning Collections,” 124.

³⁶ Ham, “Archival Choices,” 17.

³⁷ Dowler, “Deaccessioning Collections,” 123–24.

Professional staff then familiarized themselves with eBay auction types, categories, fees, and procedures. Currently, eBay provides five different auction listings: regular, reserve price, private, Dutch, and restricted access auctions. In a reserve price auction, the seller sets a minimum selling price that is not disclosed to bidders, but that the winning bidder must meet or exceed. Private auctions protect the identities of bidders; when the auction ends, only the seller and high bidder are notified of the results. Dutch auctions are often used to sell multiple, identical items. All winning bidders pay the same price per item, which is the lowest successful bid. Restricted-access auctions are used to sell adult-only materials. Because of the nature of the materials it was selling and because it wanted to target as many bidders as possible, the Archives decided to post all items as regular listings.

Staff also identified the categories in which items would be best placed for sale. eBay has twenty-one main categories, each of which is divided into numerous subcategories. For instance, the collectibles category, where most of the Archives' auctions were placed, is divided into sixteen subcategories, including autographs, paper, and writing; historical memorabilia; and militaria. Each of these subcategories is further divided: the paper subcategory of autographs, paper, and writing includes separate categories for brochures, documents, ephemera, newspapers, postcards, and scrapbooks.

eBay charges users to list (or "insert") auctions, and takes a percentage of the final selling price. Insertion fees vary by the type of auction listing. In the case of regular listings, it is based on the minimum bid. eBay charges the lowest insertion fee, currently 30¢, on all auctions listed with an opening bid of \$9.99 or less. The Archives decided to start the bidding at that amount on all of its auctions for two reasons: it wanted to encourage bidders to participate in the auctions, and it wanted to retain as much of the profit as possible. The final selling price determines eBay's percentage of the sale. Currently, eBay charges a "final value fee" of 5 percent for items selling for under \$25. The Archives also established a policy of shipping items only within the United States and Canada. (However, it made an exception for the individual who made the high bid on two postcards featuring a Milwaukee taxidermist shop from the early-1900s. The individual collected *only* postcards featuring taxidermy, and the Archives was won over by his enthusiasm for the subject!)

In preparing to place an auction on eBay, Archives staff wrote a brief description of each item to be sold, calling attention to its physical condition and features that are likely to interest collectors: signatures, graphics, and the item's age or historical importance. For instance, checks weeded from the records of a local brewing company were sometimes signed by significant individuals such as the company president or secretary. Beer bottle labels from this same brewing company also have noteworthy features. Workers in the bottling plant used these labels as we use *Post-It*™ notes today. They wrote messages on the backsides about business, accounting, or product information. In fact, most

labels have minor creases from the paper clips or small holes from the pins by which workers attached them to other papers. Archives staff took care to draw the attention of bidders to features such as these. Next, they scanned each item and posted the digital image on the Web. The item description and the URL of the digital image were entered into the on-line form provided by eBay, as were the category and title of the auction, the required opening bid, length of the auction, method of payment, and other information. Because eBay's default search command matches users' search terms against auction titles, the staff was careful to include relevant search terms in each auction title. Professional staff monitored the progress of auctions, responded to inquiries, and notified high bidders. After receiving payment, items were packaged and shipped, and comments about the transaction were left on eBay's Feedback Forum.

eBay maintains the Feedback Forum in order to decrease the risks associated with buying and selling online. The possibility always exists that a buyer might fail to submit payment, or that a seller might unintentionally or deliberately misrepresent the item being auctioned or that s/he will fail to send the item upon receipt of payment.³⁸ Comments left on the Feedback Forum may be positive, negative, or neutral. eBay assigns to each comment a numerical value: positive comments receive a +1; neutral comments a 0; and negative comments a -1. The total of these figures make up a user's Feedback Rating, and the comments themselves become the user's Feedback Profile. The more positive a user's Feedback Profile, the more likely others are to do business with her/him in the future.

From late-March to late-September 2000, the Archives completed 101 transactions online and generated \$2,300 for the purchase of new acquisitions. This figure includes 92 auctions conducted via eBay and 9 sales conducted directly with buyers. Of the 92 eBay auctions, 86 were one-time auctions (meaning that the item was sold successfully the first time the auction was posted), and 6 were repeat auctions. A high bidder failed to submit payment in only one instance; after making several attempts to contact him, the Archives simply reposted the auction. Overall the Archives was more than satisfied with the on-line transactions and the success of the selling experiment. One of the lessons learned was the importance of selecting items and tailoring auctions to attract collectors with special interests. The Archives did a brisk business with collectors of breweriana, selling checks signed by notable figures in the history of brewing, beer bottle labels, and examples of corporate letterhead, and had moderate success selling photographs of famous sports figures. Items that had surprisingly low response from bidders included postcards and vintage photographs of assorted subjects. It is likely that most of these items were not sufficiently unique to entice bidders.

³⁸ According to the National Consumers League's Internet Fraud Watch, consumers lost over \$3.3 million to internet fraud in 2000; 78% of all these complaints involved on-line auctions. Information available at <http://www.fraud.org/internet/lt00totstats.htm>.

In assessing the success of any deaccessioning program, the institution must balance the costs of deaccessioning against the benefits. In general terms, costs will depend on the number of staff involved in the project and the type of deaccessioning (*e.g.*, selling to a dealer, participating in a traditional auction, or posting an on-line auction). Benefits are not only financial, but also include the esteem of administrators, an increase of shelf space, and a decrease in the time spent on (and materials used for) preservation. In the case of the Archives' deaccessioning experiment, the costs of staff time proved to be minimal compared to the financial returns. A professional archivist managed the program on a part-time basis and worked closely with the Division Head in formulating procedures and responding to unanticipated situations. Once the staff person established a routine for posting auctions and corresponding with bidders, the total amount of time devoted to each auction was approximately fifteen to thirty minutes. Because of the small amount of time needed to complete each transaction, he was able to conduct multiple auctions simultaneously, approximately twelve per week. While graduate student interns helped to research and scan materials, the staff person selected the items for sale, posted the auctions, monitored their progress, replied to inquiries, and completed the transactions.

Initial concerns about negative public response to the sales lessened over the course of the experimental program. Only a few bidders inquired about the provenance of the material, and those who did were interested in making additional purchases. The Archives responded to these inquiries individually, identifying itself to the bidders and explaining why these items were being sold. The Archives received no negative responses to its selling program from the general public. However, the general acceptance of on-line selling by institutions such as university archives may have unfortunate consequences for those institutions' acquisition programs. On-line auction sites increase the possibility that individuals may prefer to profit from the sale of their records and manuscripts rather than donate them to an archival repository.

Postings to the Archives listserv occasionally call attention to the sale of items with research value on eBay. One such message alerted list members to an auction of the records of a furniture-making company by an unidentified individual or organization.³⁹ The collection consisted of 15,000 blueprints and 75 cartons of records dating from the 1930s. As far as the author has been able to determine, the seller was unable to find a buyer to meet the opening bid of \$400,000. In another case, the *Local History & Genealogy Librarian News* reported the sale of original Gilmanton, New Hampshire vital records on eBay.⁴⁰ One of these auctions consisted of a single, two-sided page from an 1857 death registry.

³⁹ Dean DeBolt, "Blueprint Collection on eBay," 21 April 2000, on-line posting, archives@listserv.muohio.edu.

⁴⁰ "Alert: Original New Hampshire Vital Records for Sale on E-Bay [*sic*]," *Local History & Genealogy Librarian News*, 22 Feb. 2001, on-line posting, http://www.heritagequest.com/html/lhgl_010222.html.

The individual who placed the auction described the record as “a very historical piece of history for the town of Gilmanton” and expressed the hope that it “will end up back in the town.” The Gilmanton town clerk was equally anxious to have the record returned because the town’s set of death registry records date back only as far as 1859. Apparently, the idea of making a donation to Gilmanton never occurred to the record’s owner. The item sold for \$100.

These reports demonstrate that on-line auctions can offer real competition to archives in their quest for items with research value, but it is probably too soon to gauge the extent of that competition. For the moment, archivists should prepare a response to individuals considering selling records or manuscripts online or through more traditional venues. If the items have research value, archivists should underscore the benefits of donation to an institution where they will be preserved and utilized. For many donors, these long-term benefits will override monetary considerations.

The deaccessioning of material lacking research value as defined by current collecting policy guidelines is a legitimate collection management activity. Selling, whether by traditional means such as dealers or by more innovative means such as on-line auctions, is an appropriate deaccessioning option in some cases. The appropriateness of this option depends on several factors, among them: the ethics of the sale, including the impact that selling will have on public access to the material or the information it conveys; the legal probity of the sale according to donor agreements, and state and federal laws; the political consequences of the sale for the archives and its parent institution; and the financial cost of the sale versus its benefits. Selling online is an option that more archives may consider as they work to develop their collections, open shelf space, become more self-supporting, and fulfill their missions of preserving unique records with continuing value.