

PAPER TO PLASTIC: 5 ORGANIZATIONAL STEPS BEHIND REHOUSING AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL COLLECTION

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The Cabin Run Mitigation collection comes from Warren County, Virginia, from a project dating to the early 1980s. The artifacts range across material culture, including decorated ceramics, stone tools, bones that show evidence of use both for food and as tools, and much more. The artifacts arrived at the Virginia Museum of Natural History in brown paper bags, contained within about 50 cardboard boxes, without any sort of inventory or catalog. It has been my task over the past few years (!) to work with these materials and get them ready for permanent storage in the museum's collections.

1. Bags on bags



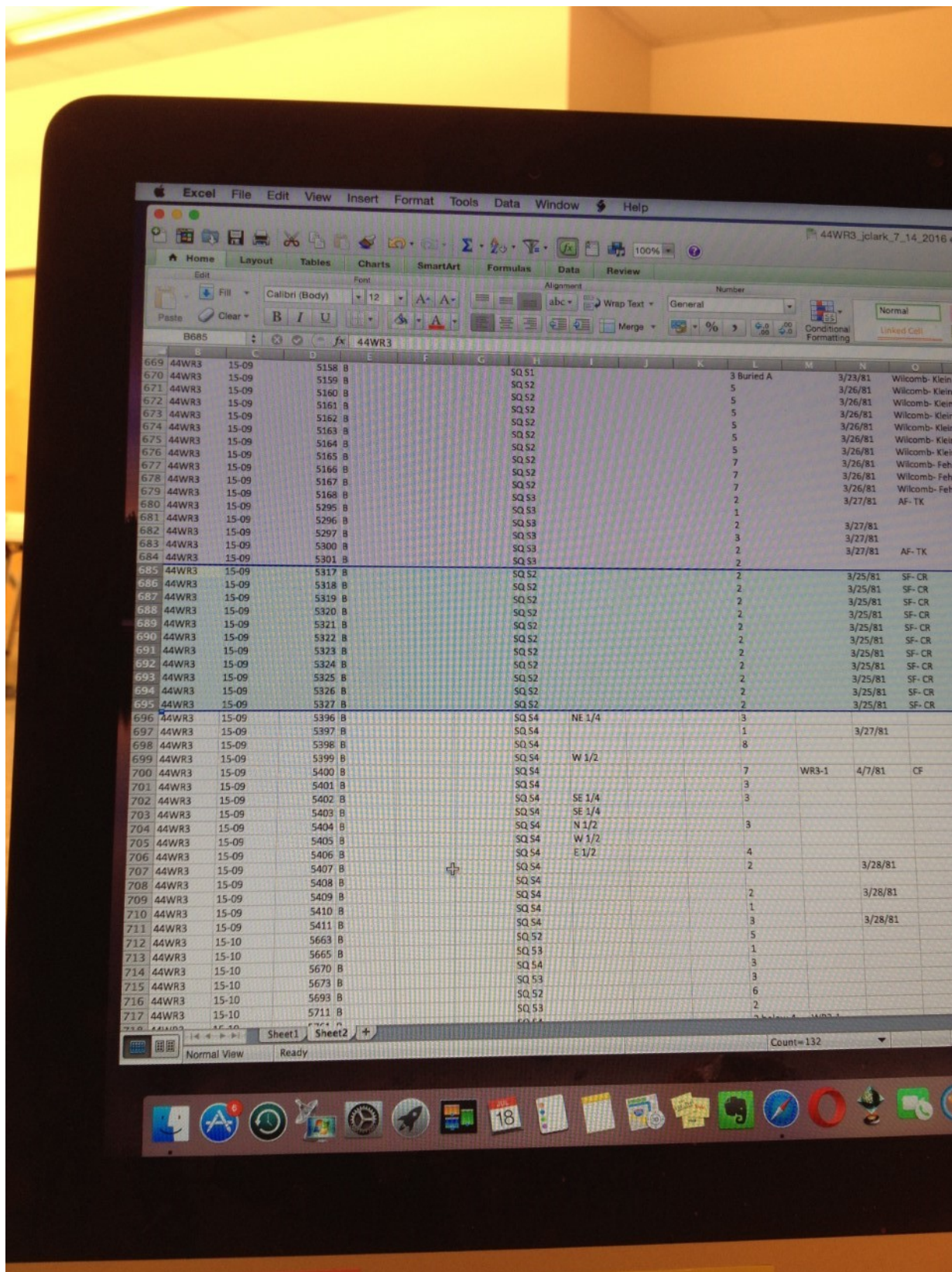
The first step in this large project was to physically rehouse the artifacts from paper and cardboard into new, archival quality plastic bags. This process involved cutting out and keeping any notations that had been made on the paper bags, and transferring the artifacts into new bags. This was a bit of an adventure, because there was something new in every box—artifacts were stored in everything from cigar boxes to film canisters to 30 year-old plastic wrap.

2. Take stock



Next, an inventory was created, listing all the materials that we had acquired so that there would be a record of the artifacts. This involved interpreting handwritten proveniences, counting all the objects, and recording their description and material type. Some bags of lithic flakes, for example, had counts numbering in the thousands, so this process took a considerable amount of time to complete. The catalog reached a final count of over 8000 entries representing 85,281 artifacts or soil/flotation samples.

3. Manage the data



With a catalog of this size, data management became a critical next step. This collection was received and rehoused in no particular order, so the data had to be reorganized into an archaeologically relevant order based on provenience. To accomplish this, each artifact was given a temporary number (between 1

and 8000); simply rechecking the catalog and labeling each bag took an additional 2 weeks to complete. The data was then reorganized in the spreadsheet, placing artifacts with others of the same provenience (Feature A with Feature A, Test Pit B with Test Pit B, etc.). Artifacts could then be physically sorted into the new arrangement using temporary numbers as identifiers (each a discrete number) rather than using the entire provenience (which may not be entirely unique).

4. Coordinate with volunteers



Sorting 8000+ bags of artifacts is no small task and could not have been accomplished without the help of some very willing and able volunteers. Through the combined efforts of museum volunteers and staff members, we were able to rearrange and store all the artifacts in less than 4 work days, moving approximately 4,000 bags of artifacts in one day alone.

5. Store material for future research

Now that all the artifacts have been sorted and put into Delta museum cabinets, their archaeological information and current physical location are now in a searchable document and much more accessible for people interested on conducting research using these materials. While data editing and some final curation processes remain to be done, this collection is now much more useful and available than it had previously been.

You might say it takes a village to successfully manage an archaeological collection of this size. From the first crinkle of brown paper to the resounding ring of the final drawer sliding into its storage cabinet, careful organization and teamwork were the hallmarks of rehousing the artifacts from the Cabin Run Mitigation project.