

Showcasing Our Heritage: Developing and Curating a Civil Air Patrol History Display

Purpose and Plan

The key to a professional history display begins with the purpose of the display. Why are you creating this display? What is the theme or topic for the display? What is your target audience in relation to where the display will be seen? Once you have answered these basic questions, draft a plan of action. You will want to consider every possible variable; it is always best to start with costs and budget, the duration of the display (days, months, years), how much space you will have available to work with, and the conditions of the display area (light, heat, humidity, noise, foot traffic, etc.). You will also want to consider what artifacts you wish to display in relation to these factors.

Research

A thorough, objective research effort will help produce a professional display. Engage with primary documents and published primary and secondary histories. History.cap.gov is a great tool for primary CAP research. Your local library may have access to assorted digital databases of newspapers or federal records. Wing and region historians, as well as the National History Program staff, are available for research advice. Never forget to also work with your fellow CAP members, as many have lived the history you are sharing.

Script and Design

A display of only artifacts without any descriptive information or contextualization undermines the purpose of your display. Cogent and concise textual or graphic display panels will provide the broader context and framing for the display. Approximately 250 words of text or less per textual/graphic display panel is a good working rule of thumb. For label copy, opt for 50 words or less. Aim for the essence of the information on your topic and then revise your text for clarity. Incorporate peer feedback and try reading the text aloud. For label copy, pick a standard format for displaying the information and focus on consistency in presentation, i.e. typeface, font size, color, date format, and so forth.

For your design, consider your five senses (see, hear, taste, smell, feel) and the topic theme. Are you incorporating bright or subdued colors? Will you have particular textures in your display area? Technological interactives, such as video presentations, music, touch-screens, and sound and light effects can all immerse your audience in the topic and complement the artifacts and graphic display panels. As with the script for the exhibit, gather and incorporate feedback into your design.

Proposal

The proposal represents a blueprint to help transform a vision into actual reality. A proposal can be as simple or detailed as you like, but it provides an efficient method to produce a display and avoid mission creep. Most importantly, the proposal provides your fellow members and CAP leadership a tangible document of your display vision. The proposal can walk a person through each case or table, listing what artifacts, display text, and label copy will be featured. Many modern museums do this through computer-assisted design, or even build scale models of the display. For most displays, a good drawing of the layout and design will suffice.

Acquisition

After consideration and selection of what artifacts you wish to use, acquire (purchase, donation, or loan) and prepare these objects for display. Factor in the artifact's condition, the duration of the display, and the display conditions. More importantly, the significance of the object. Do the items support your overall theme or topic? Do they share a greater story? Mounting the artifact on a supporting base needs to be done in a reversible manner that will not alter the artifact's original state.

For documents, always try to use a color copy rather than an original if the display will be exhibited for a long period of time. For uniforms, factor in the cleaning and mounting of the uniform on a mannequin. Do not stretch or manhandle an item to make it fit on a mannequin or mount. Always remember that artifacts are not replaceable.

Documentation (CAPR 210-3 and CAPFs 180-183) will ensure accountability of the artifacts and provide answers to countless questions. For example, do you know who owns the artifacts, if they are originals or reproductions? If a loan, what is the condition of the object when you received it? Does the donor or loaning authority require a credit line?

Printing your textual/graphic display panels and label copy can be done at home, but if your budget permits, go to a professional printer. During your planning, you should have considered how to mount the text, either by framing, printing on foam core or gator board, or evening printing and folding. Standard sizes for posters and photographs will enable use of simple frames available at any arts and crafts store.

If using display cases, check the condition and security of the case. If lockable, ensure key control. If the interior needs painting, ensure that sufficient time (up to a month) has passed to allow off-gassing of any damaging chemicals. Review any interior lights to see that they are functional and not burning too hot or bright as to damage the artifacts.

Installation

When packing artifacts for transport, it is always best to err on the side of protection and pack in an orderly fashion. Clearly labeled boxes with like types (insignia, books, headgear) help when you need to set up a temporary display with limited time. If artifacts will be on display for a long period, stage your installation and only bring out those objects and pieces of label copy or display text when you are ready for them.

If at a conference or public event, you will want more than one person to assist with mounting and physical security of the artifacts. Unfortunately, theft can happen regardless of the organization or institution. Always opt for extra hands and eyes when installing and limit access to the display area until installation is complete.

Minor adjustments, particularly to travelling or temporary displays, are inevitable. Try to give yourself sufficient time during installation to make changes. This is common when installing a more complicated display without prior knowledge of the room or area.

Maintenance

Every history display requires regular care and attention. Be vigilant for changing environmental conditions; climate controls will fail, audio/visual equipment may malfunction, light bulbs will burn out. Visitors will leave trash, handle objects despite signs saying not to, or accidentally damage displays. Do not hesitate to politely ask people to not touch an object, be they a cadet or a general officer. Whether at a conference or in a museum, monitor the display for changes in its condition. Ensure that loaned objects are accounted for and that you are aware of when the loan is scheduled for termination. Handling a loan poorly easily results in this privilege being revoked and you or your unit's reputation sullied.

Interact with your visitors and gather feedback on the display. Answer any questions and be prepared to share your contact information. Business cards and small pamphlets about CAP are great to have on hand. You never know when conversation with a visitor might result in a donation or the recruitment of a new member.

Acknowledge those individuals who have helped bring your display to fruition. It is appropriate to include a small "thank you" graphic display panel or consider their efforts for more formal recognition with a challenge coin or award nomination submission.