

March 27, 2003

Harvey Perlman, Chancellor
Office of the Chancellor
Administration 201
University of Nebraska-Lincoln
Lincoln, NE 68588-0419

Dear Dr. Perlman:

I am writing to you as president of the Society for American Archaeology (SAA), an international organization founded in 1934 and dedicated to the research, interpretation, and protection of the archaeological heritage of the Americas. With 6,900 members, the Society represents professional archaeologists in colleges and universities, museums, government agencies, and the private sector. The SAA has members in all 50 states as well as many other nations around the world.

SAA has recently learned that the University of Nebraska plans to eliminate the research programs within the University of Nebraska State Museum. We are very concerned about the museum's ethnographic and archaeological collections which, we understand, are slated to be "transferred responsibly through deaccession, long-term loan, or inter-university transfer."

As I am sure you are aware, the Nebraska State Museum, which was founded in 1871, was one of the first natural history museums established west of the Mississippi River. Its ethnographic collection includes some 14,500 items. The archaeological collections, which contain more than 12,000 specimens, include artifacts from some 800 Nebraska sites, as well as from sites in Wyoming, Texas, South Dakota, North Dakota, Montana, and Kansas. Many of these sites are of considerable significance in North American prehistory.

We understand that Nebraska, like many states, is operating under austere fiscal conditions and that some difficult decisions must be made. SAA's primary concern is with the integrity and well-being of archaeological and anthropological collections. As the University administration considers various courses of action affecting the museum and its collections, we would ask that you keep the following ethical, legal, and financial issues in mind.

First and foremost, many of the collections have resulted from federally funded or state-funded research. In order for the collections to be "transferred responsibly," the federal and state agencies responsible for these collections, especially those who have entered into Cooperative Agreements or Contracts with the University, must be notified as required by federal law (36 CFR Part 79.8(g) and (o)). In addition, complete documentation must be transferred with the collections, and collections from individual sites should be transferred as a unit and not divided among different institutions. There is no provision for deaccession in federal regulation; hence deaccession is not an option for collections from federal lands or those resulting from federally funded projects.

Second, any transfers should be to reputable curation facilities that meet the same federal standards as the

University of Nebraska State Museum.

Third, it might be in the University's best interest to consider long-term loans rather than permanent transfers. In this way, should the University decide in the future to re-establish the Museum, it would not have reason to regret rash action on the part of today's administration.

Fourth, the University should ensure that all responsibilities related to the 1990 Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act have been met. It is unlikely that another institution will accept any material that is not in compliance with the Act.

Fifth, it would be most desirable if collections from the state of Nebraska could remain within that state. Collections from other states should first be offered to reputable curation facilities within the state of origin.

Sixth, since all states are under fiscal pressures, it is unlikely that any curation facility would be able to take collections without adequate funding. The University will have to consider whether it would not actually be more cost-effective to continue to house the collections and documentation at their present location.

Ending the museum's function as a curation facility and transferring the collections elsewhere will have additional effects on both the University as a research institution and the local economy. Ongoing research with collections is an essential part of any museum's and anthropology department's program. Without ongoing research and changing exhibits, visitation will decline and the value of the museum to local schools will rapidly decrease. Without a viable research program, the museum and the faculty in the department of anthropology will not be competitive for grant funds. This could have a sizeable fiscal impact on the University; currently the museum has some \$4 million in pending grants, all of which depend upon access to the extant collections. Finally, access to an accredited curation facility is necessary in order for local cultural resource management firms to compete for contracts linked to compliance with federal and state laws and regulations; without local availability of such a facility, the competitiveness of local businesses might be reduced.

For all these reasons, the Society for American Archaeology would urge you to carefully consider all possible options for maintaining the integrity of the University of Nebraska State Museum collections and maintaining their historical link with the University and the state of Nebraska. We urge you to consider the long-term loss in Nebraska's heritage resources in trying to solve a short-term fiscal crisis.

SAA is prepared to assist the University of Nebraska in this task in any way it can.

Sincerely,

Robert L. Kelly
President

cc:

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