



Museums Alaska - Collections Management Fund 2022

Anchorage Museum Association

Application

Primary Contact:

Phone:

Email:

## Narrative

**PROJECT DESCRIPTION:** Describe your project, the need, and benefit to your institution and community. Answers should be concise, and include detailed numbers where appropriate (for example, number of collections to be cataloged, or estimated length of time to catalog an item).

Please carefully review the current guidelines.

TIP: Click on the question mark next to each question to see guiding questions.

### **Please provide a short summary of your project.**

*(250 character limit)*

The Supporting Our Communities project will focus on providing conservation assistance to recently exposed and damaged cultural heritage from the Nunalleq site and train community members and staff of the Nunalleq Cultural Center.

### **What is the problem you are solving?**

*(1000 character limit)*

The Nunalleq archaeological site dates from about 1450 to 1650 AD and has until recently been amazingly well preserved by permafrost. But like countless others in the north, it is being destroyed by the combined effects of climate change. Since 2009, the Yup'ik village of Quinhagak has teamed with professional archaeologists and conservators with two primary goals: to rescue as many artifacts as possible and to train local community members in caring for their own history.

Quinhagak Heritage Inc. (QHI), who operates the cultural center, expressed the need for training community members and the desire to locally conserve the collection. The opportunities for training for Nunalleq staff are limited, expensive, and difficult to attend. Virtual training is also not the best, as many offerings are not oriented for remote communities in Alaska. Conservation up to now has been led from Aberdeen, but with Anchorage Museum's collaboration, they hope to have local conservation occur.

### **Describe the steps of your project and who will be involved.**

*(5000 character limit)*



The project will begin in January 2023 and extend through August 2023. The primary focus will be the stabilization and treatment of recently exposed and damaged cultural heritage during two trips. QHI Staff who will support the project include Dr. Rick Knecht, Volunteer Curator and QHI Board member, and Lynn Church, Volunteer Director. Anchorage Museum staff Monica Shah (Chief Conservator, also Deputy Director), Janet Northey (Senior Collections Manager), Stephanie Black (Objects Conservator), and Meghan Abercrombie (Conservation Fellow) will provide the conservation and collections management needs that have been



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requested by QHI for the Nunalleq Culture and Archaeology Center.

In January 2023 we will hold planning meetings via zoom with QHI staff and AM staff. During these meetings, priorities for conservation and collections management work will be determined, and logistics for the two visits will be finalized.

In April/May, AM staff will travel to Quinhagak for two weeks. While there, they will conserve heritage items recovered in September 2022 immediately after Typhoon Merbok landed on the western coast of Alaska, assess storage needs at the Cultural Center, train staff and community members, and evaluate needs for additional conservation treatment. AM staff will also meet with other board, community members, and elders during this visit. These meetings are to further develop relationships and will center on the idea of collaborative collections care, with AM staff engaging community members while also providing advice on care, and continuing discussions on alternate ideas of care and best practices within the context of community-driven preservation efforts.

In June/July, Anchorage Museum staff will make a second trip, to focus on newly excavated heritage items, as well as to implement storage solutions identified on the previous trip. Much of the work during this two-week period will be driven by the emergency recovery efforts of the archaeologists. Additional meetings with elders and community members will occur, along with public events to share work and train any interested community members.



Bios and c.v. for AM staff are attached, and demonstrate their ability and rich experience to fulfill the requests of QHI. Monica Shah will provide project management and oversight for the project. She will also provide training and conservation treatment. Janet Northey will provide training, assessment, and collections management solutions. Stephanie Black will provide conservation treatment/assessment and training. Meghan Abercrombie will assist during the training and provide conservation treatment/assessment.

**What are the goals and benefits of the project?**

*(2000 character limit)*

Since 2009, the Yup'ik village of Quinhagak has teamed with professional archaeologists and conservators to excavate under the control of elders and the village council. The project has succeeded in recovering more than 100,000 rare artifacts, now housed in the village-based Nunalleq museum. Local young people who grew up with the project are now leading preservation efforts in traditional skills, arts, dance and language. In 2021 National Geographic Magazine named the Nunalleq site as one of the 100 "archaeological wonders of the world" and gave it special coverage, alongside Machu Picchu and the Titanic.

Excavation at the site has always been a race against time, with the shoreline retreating more than 40 feet since the project began. Sandbag walls and geotextiles have prevented the worst from happening. But in mid-September 2022 record coastal flooding and storm surge from the remains of Typhoon Merbok caused



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massive damage. Sandbags were scattered, and yards of shoreline retreated, leaving the site exposed again to the winter storms of the Bering Sea. Archaeological recovery at Nunalleq will resume emergency-recovery operations this coming summer. Meanwhile Quinhagak residents are recovering what they can. Artifacts like the remains of skin clothing and wooden tool handles are now in refrigerated storage at the Nunalleq Museum awaiting conservation.

This project will fund the travel, lodging and subsistence expenses of a 4-person team of conservation and museum experts from the Anchorage Museum to travel to Quinhagak to help deal with what will be a massive influx of newly recovered artifacts. Quinhagak residents and museum volunteer staff will be trained in conservation and artifact handling. The Nunalleq Museum will get help in finding storage solutions for a rapidly growing collection. Workshops and presentations will inform the community in how best to care a world-class artistic and cultural heritage that ultimately enriches all of humankind.

#### **How will you evaluate the project?**

*(1500 character limit)*



The project will be evaluated a variety of ways. First, we will be able to provide metrics on the quantity of artifacts conserved and rehoused, as well as the number of people trained during the two trips. In addition, surveys will be sent to QHI staff and community members who participated in any of the meetings, trainings, and presentations. We will have these surveys available at each event, so as not to burden participants later. For those who do not wish to fill out a form, we will be available to take notes on comments. We will also send a post-trip survey to QHI board members and Nunalleq museum staff, to see how we can continue to support their work.

#### **If this is an emergency situation, please explain why.**

*(1500 character limit)*

Soils at the extraordinarily rich Nunalleq site have the consistency of bread flour. After the losses from Merbok, the rate of erosion is expected to accelerate this winter as seasonal storms continue. Archaeological crews are being mobilized for a large-scale recovery effort beginning in late spring, but getting artifacts out of the ground is just the beginning. More than 80% of the artifacts from Nunalleq are made from rarely recovered organic materials such as wood, grass, leather, baleen and even gutskin. Cleaning and conservation takes many more hours of work than recovery and documentation in the field. The quantity and quality of these recovered objects is well beyond what the Nunalleq team has dealt with in the past and help from professional conservators and museum professionals from the Anchorage Museum is badly needed.

The Quinhagak village community have been very active partners in the Nunalleq project and many residents already have a basic working knowledge of archaeology and artifact conservation from their previous volunteer work at the site and museum. However, the scale and immediate need are not something they can deal with alone. This project will help deal with this emergency as well as help train community members in triage that may well be needed in the future as extreme weather events become more frequent.



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**Is there anything else the review committee needs to know about your application?**



*(1500 character limit)*

Normally, this type of project request would come directly from a local museum or culture center, in this case QHI. However, as the community deals with many issues arising from the recent disaster, having to administer a grant and all the associated paperwork is an unnecessary burden. The Anchorage Museum recognizes that there has been a long history of unequal relationship between museums and tribes and is trying to support tribes in an equitable way. The AM, with its larger staff, is able to provide help not only through staff expertise (conservators and collections managers), but also through taking on the expense of administering this grant and managing this project. We hope the committee understands that writing this grant, administering this grant if awarded, and managing the project are all ways in which the Anchorage Museum can support the work of our community partners.

**You must click "Save Work" at the bottom of each page.**