

# Skeletons in Your Closet: Heavy Small Collections



Jennifer Bolmarcich

@jbolmarcich

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**I'd like to begin this talk by acknowledging that we stand in Massachusetts land. I'd also like to acknowledge our neighboring Indigenous nations: the Nipmuc to the West, the Wampanoag and Narragansett to the South, and the Wabanaki Nations to our North.**

**This talk will discuss state and institutional violence towards Indigenous nations and related land and resource dispossession.**

It's hard to say no to your boss, especially when it's your first job as a professional archivist. Reprocessing this small collection took far more of my time and labor than either my boss or I expected. Negotiating this collection, its ethical demands, and the subsidiary conflict that developed was both personally and professionally challenging. Looking back now, nearly a year later, I find that I can better trust my own ethical judgements and see more vividly the violence inherent in "neutral" or "objective" descriptive practices.

## Out with the (genocidal) old guy...and in with the new



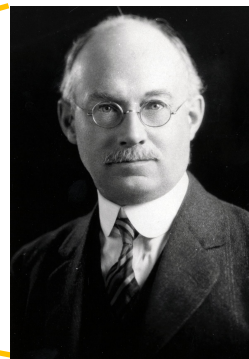
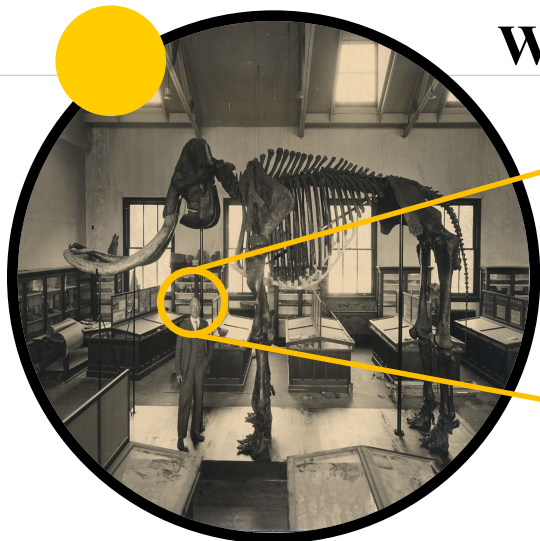
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Replacing an imperialist, genocidal mascot (one Lord Jeffrey Amherst, who proposed gifting Native communities with smallpox-infested blankets) with a huge purple mammoth? This 20-ft tall inflatable version greeted our new first year students this fall.

Excellent idea. Why a mammoth? If you've got it, flaunt it!

## Why do we *have* a mammoth?



Frederic B. Loomis,  
1873-1937

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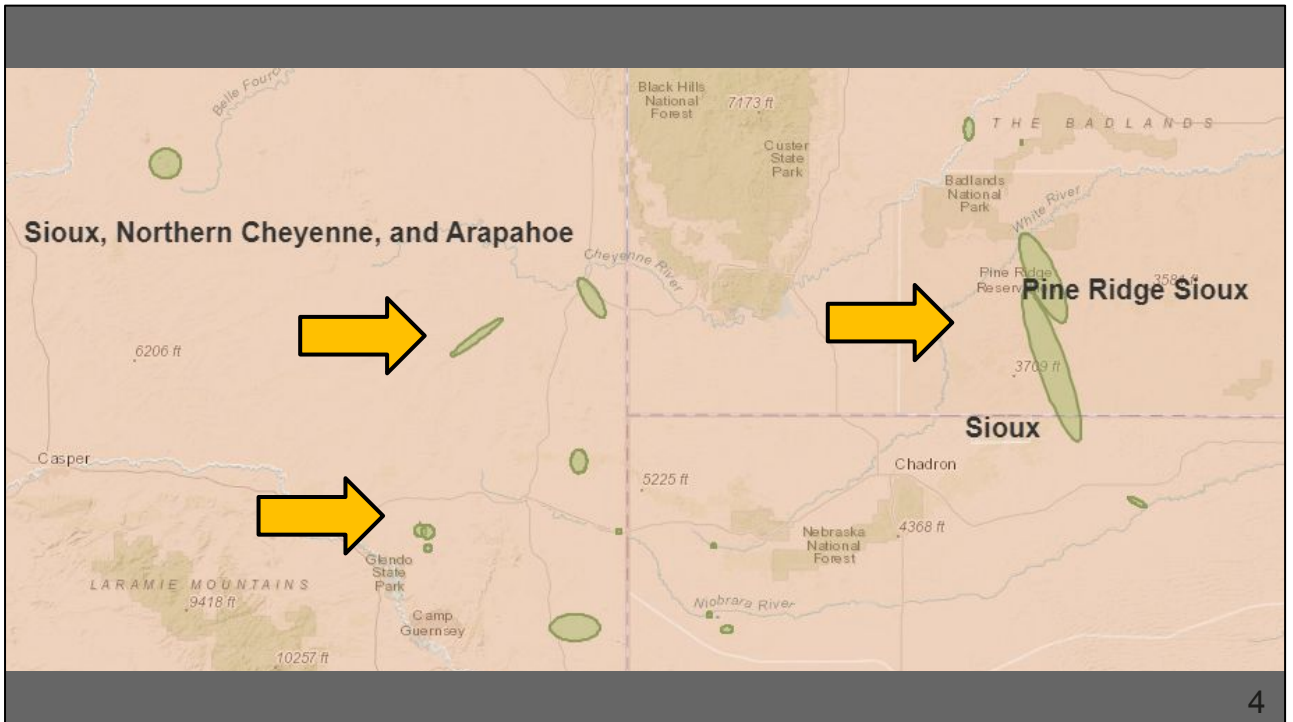
Why do we have a mammoth? This guy, Frederic Brewster Loomis. His friends called him “Mud Puppy.” He’s standing in the workroom next to the Columbian mammoth fossil skeleton he recovered in 1923 and 1925. His portrait on the right shows him about 10 years later, in the mid-1930s.

The new mascot meant that this paleontologist’s two boxes of papers were now a priority to reprocess, with an eye towards eventual digitization. This seemed to be an easy job for the new archivist (me). But when I began reading Loomis’s accounts about the 1923 and 1925 digs in Melbourne, Florida, I realized that in addition to mammoth fossils, Loomis recovered human remains and artifacts.

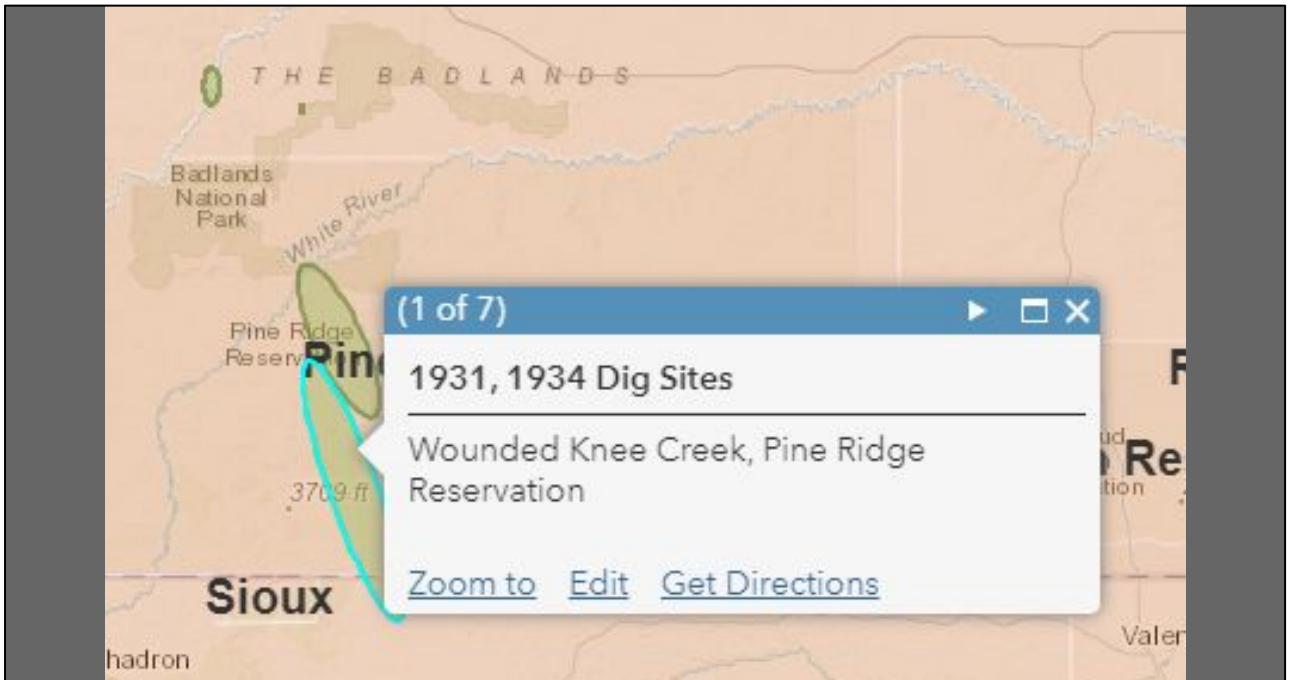
Suddenly, this collection was not quite so easy and light. As I continued processing, I began noting the locations of Loomis’s worksites, which could be vague, noted only by a creek or town name. I also began looking for more context in museum and anthropology literature, focusing on NAGPRA, the 1990 North American Graves Repatriation and Protection Act, and the ethical responsibilities of institutions holding Indigenous bodies and artifacts.

NAGPRA reviews and inventories had in fact been conducted for the holdings of the Beneski Museum of Natural History, Amherst’s science museum. Loomis’s work had focused on museum collection growth, and his shipments of fossils became a large

percentage of the holdings. I initially assumed that the non-human fossils were not an ethical concern, until I remembered that SUE, the T-rex at the Field Museum in Chicago, had been purchased at auction for \$8 million. The non-human fossils were valuable resources, and their removal to Amherst College was not harmless. For more analysis, see Lawrence Bradley's book *Dinosaurs and Indians* in my references.



Using ARCGIS I mapped Loomis's digs with varied precision, depending upon his location descriptions in publications and correspondence. Overlaying maps of Indigenous nations' homelands and treaties allowed me to identify the peoples Loomis and fellow paleontologists before and since had exploited. Much of Loomis's work took place on land currently claimed by the United States that had been wrested from Native nations' control. This map shows where South Dakota, Nebraska and Wyoming meet, with green circles around the locations where Loomis recorded digs. The names of Indigenous nations indicate the recorded names of the nations as different treaties were signed.



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But even that land had only been taken barely a generation before: Loomis was digging at Wounded Knee 40 years after the Wounded Knee Massacre of Lakota men, women and children in 1890. This map zooms in onto the Lakota Pine Ridge Reservation. Wounded Knee Creek was the only identifier Loomis noted for these excavations, so the entire length of the creek is highlighted.

I wanted to provide researchers with this context and to create description that acknowledged the harmful nature of this creator's work and how exploration and exploitation entwine in fieldwork and research across fields, and to recognize the Indigenous communities affected by his excavations, without ignoring Loomis's dedicated work as a faculty member and teacher. Here's what I wanted to write:

**THIS DEAD WHITE GUY STOLE  
LOTS OF STUFF FOR "SCIENCE"**

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But that's not exactly useful for a researcher. I ended up with this:



## Providing necessary context

Throughout his career, he collected both fossils and Native artifacts for Amherst College collections from the homelands and reservations of Native nations.

*Biographical note, Frederic Brewster Loomis (AC 1896) Papers, 1896-1938*

<https://asteria.fivecolleges.edu/findaids/amherst/ma18.html>

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One paragraph of the biographical note explicitly situates paleontology's development within the settler colonial wars against Indigenous peoples of the late 19th century, and its contribution to other forms of resource extraction like mining and oil (and other fossil fuel) extraction.

That paragraph took a lot of back and forth between my boss and I: was I editorializing? Overinterpreting?

My own judgment was that *omitting* this background would in fact be contributing to the white supremacist and settler mythos of science and individual careers as worth more than human lives and wellbeing. Honest description, to borrow Jennifer Douglas's phrase, requires knowing where things come from. Acknowledging the true costs of scientific fieldwork, refusing to continue the myth-making of empty wastelands and White discovery: I persisted.

The other descriptive tactic I used involved the mapping I mentioned earlier.



 June-September 1931

Accompanied by Louis H. Walz (AC 1931) and John W. Harlow.

South Dakota: Porcupine and Wounded Knee Creeks, **Pine Ridge Reservation. In Oglala Lakota Nation.**

Wyoming: Van Tassell. **On Lakota and Arapaho homelands taken by the Act of February 28, 1877.**

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In creating a chronology of his fieldwork, I named the nations where Loomis worked. The repetition over his 20+ documented digs helps underline and reinforce Indigenous presence and sovereignty. This example corresponds to the highlighted site on slide 7 — Loomis worked on the Lakota Pine Ridge Reservation, as well as on land taken by Congress from the Lakota and Arapaho nations, also called Van Tassel, Wyoming.

# Archival description expresses professional ethics and values.

—Principle 1, from the Revised Statement of Principles for Describing Archives: A Content Standard (DACS)



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Writers like Gracy Brilmyer, Michelle Caswell, Marika Cifor, Jarrett Drake, Anna Robinson-Sweet, Tonia Sutherland, Stacy Wood, and so many others have written about confronting the inherent white supremacy, patriarchy, racism, and ableism within our institutions, our collections, and our practice, whether in appraisal, outreach, or description.

The new revised principles for DACS begin with the fundamentals. Description is ethical work. Undoing the white supremacist, racist, settler colonial, and ableist structure embedded in our society, our archives, and ourselves is more than fixing subject headings. How we describe records' creators, subjects, and content is and should be a place where we stop enabling Whiteness and its associated myths — academic disciplines require sources for fuel like any other fire, and for too long, communities, peoples, and lands constructed as “other” have been those sources.



## References

1. Bradley, Lawrence W. *Dinosaurs and Indians: Paleontology Resource Dispossession from Sioux Lands*. Denver: Outskirts Press, Inc. 2014.
2. Dussias, Allison M. "Science, Sovereignty, and the Sacred Text: Paleontological Resources and Native American Rights." *Maryland Law Review* 55, no. 1 (1996): 84–159.
3. Redman, Samuel J. *Bone Rooms*. Harvard University Press, 2016.
4. Caswell, Michelle. "Teaching to Dismantle White Supremacy in Archives." *The Library Quarterly* 87, no. 3 (2017): 222–35.
5. Society of American Archivists Technical Subcommittee on Describing Archives: A Content Standard (TS-DACS). "Revised Preface and Statement of Principles for Describing Archives: A Content Standard." *under consideration*, posted Aug 6 2018. <https://github.com/saa-ts-dacs/dacs/pull/20>.



## Credits

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