Introduction to Museum Research

Why is Museum research different than Google or Wikipedia?

While Google and Wikipedia can be useful research tools if you are looking up who won the game last night or song lyrics, they are not great tools for academic research.

In the day and age of electronic technology, all someone needs is an internet connection to publish work to a world-wide audience. There is no fact checking involved with most things put on the internet.

Further, museums and libraries offer a context that the internet cannot do by itself. Working in primary sources, or the actual historic documents, provides an individual with the opportunity to analyze the material for themselves. This means the researcher will be able to provide their own opinion on the topic rather than reciting, or quoting/paraphrasing, the opinion of the online author.

What is a "Collection?"

Museums are always actively "collecting" artifacts; however, "collection" means something entirely different in a museum.

In the museum view, a collection may consist of the entire holdings of a particular museum. Or, a collection may be a discrete part of a museum's collection; it may be centred on some type of similarity between the items in the collection. For example, a museum collection may consist of the works of a particular artist (e.g., the Monet collection) or group of artists, a particular medium or technique (the print collection), or a certain discipline (the ethnology collection). Museums also define collections in administrative terms: for example, the collection of a particular donor (the Barnes collection), or suited for a particular purpose (the education collection).

The concept of "collection" is different again in the context of a collaborative digital resource built from the content of many museums. In a collaborative digital resource, the concept of "collection" becomes very fluid; it can extend beyond the physical walls of individual museums and allow users to combine and re-combine objects at will. For example, a user of on-line resources might wish to bring together all the works of art created by one artist, regardless of where they are physically housed. A "virtual exhibit" can also be considered a collection, bringing together individual objects housed in many physical locations.

-Heather Dunn, "Collection Level Description, the Museum Perspective." Vol 6, No.9. <u>D-Lib Magazine</u>, September 2000.

The "collection" will provide context, or place the event/item into its proper place in art, history, science, or any other academic topic. The researcher will be able to understand more about an artifact if they have the other materials that explain, or support, the original document.

Ah-Tah-Thi-Ki Collections

Permanent Artifact Collection

The Permanent Artifact collection is intended to be a representative sample of the material culture of the Seminole Tribe of Florida. For this reason, it is comprised of a wide range of objects that are divided into eleven categories: Baskets, Beaded Objects, Dolls, Fine Art, Glass & Ceramic Objects, Metal Objects, Militaria, Natural History Objects, Southeastern Archaeological Objects, Textile & Leather Objects, and Wooden Objects.

Library Collection

The Library collection consists of approximately 5,000 books and periodicals. The materials cover a few subject areas, such as Southeastern and Seminole archaeology, culture, and history; Florida environment and history; and museum studies.

Archival Collection

The Archival collection consists of over 10,000 paper, photographic, and audiovisual materials. The scope of the collection ranges from historic records of ancestral Seminole groups, and the earliest recorded evidence of the Seminole Tribe, to modern oral history, memorabilia, journalism, and photography.

Oral History Collection

The Oral History collection is a distinct collection housed by the Museum and managed by the Oral History Coordinator. Currently the collection consists of roughly 200 interviews recorded with Tribal members and those non-Tribal members who have direct dealings with the Tribe. There are also field notes, transcripts, and other ancillary materials produced from the interviews which are kept with this collection.

Numbers of items in the collections:

Permanent Artifact Collection - c. 2500 objects
Permanent Archival Collection - over 130,000 objects (only about 10,000 are accessible at this point in time)
Library Collection - c. 5000 objects
Oral History Collection- c. 500 interviews

Rules about collections and usage

The Ah-Tah-Thi-Ki Collections are open for research to Tribal Members. Tribal Members may access any part of the collections with assistance from Museum staff.
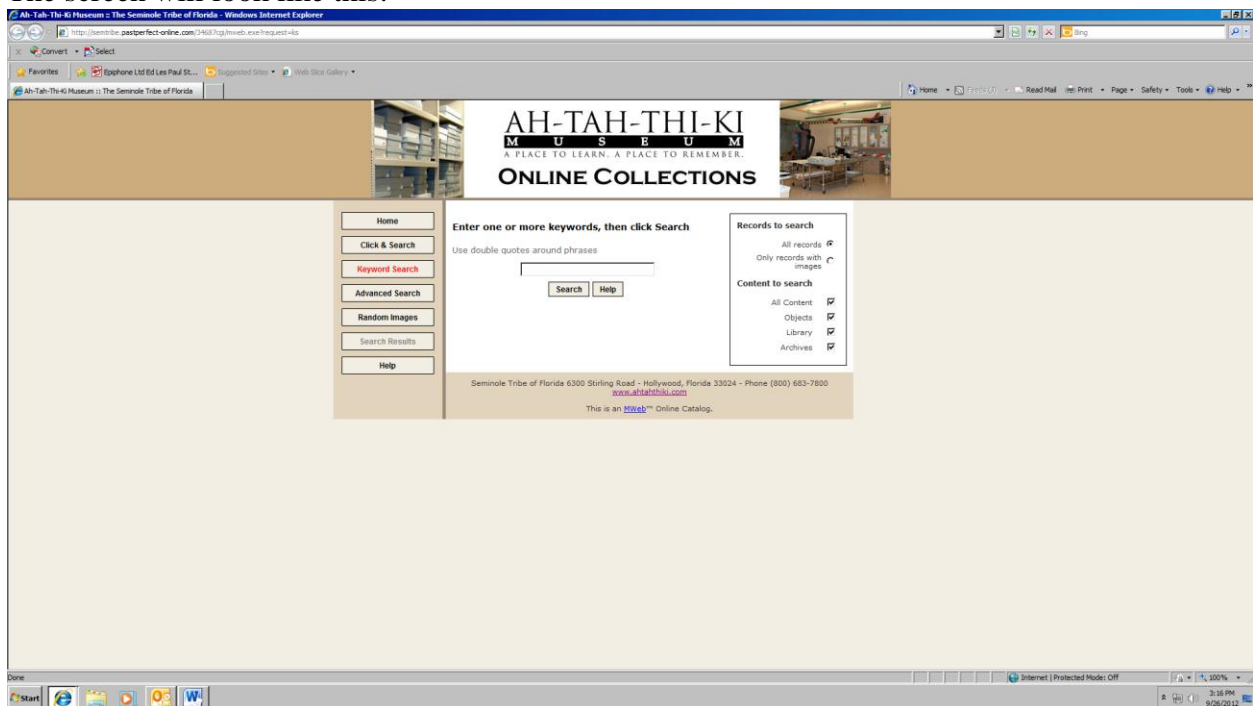
There are restrictions on researchers who are not tribal. There are some parts of the collections restricted to Tribal Member only usage. Almost the entire Oral History Collection is restricted with very few exceptions.

To conduct any kind of research, a researcher should make an appointment with Tara Backhouse at 863-902-1113 to ensure the researcher will have access to the library and proper assistance.
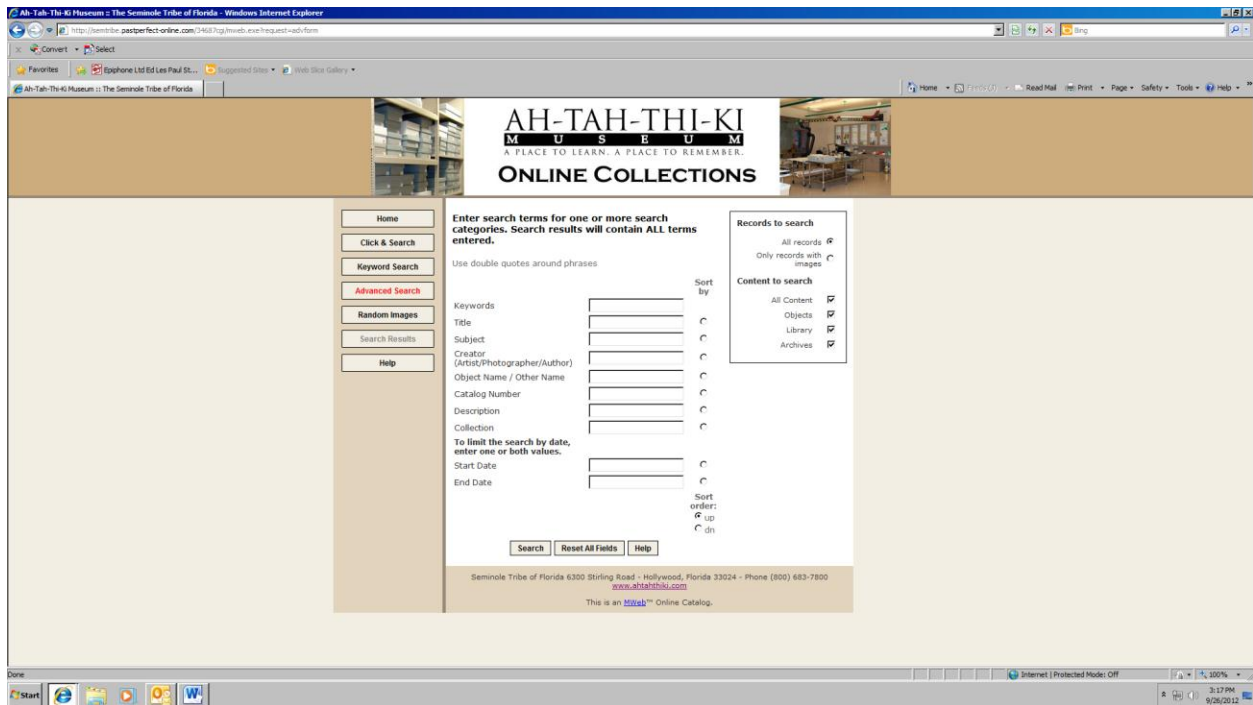
Using PastPerfect for research

Some parts of PastPerfect can be utilized on the Museum's website at: http://semtribe.pastperfect-online.com/34687cgi/mweb.exe?request=ks.

The screen will look like this:

From here, a researcher can initiate a keyword search, pull up random images, or conduct an advanced search. The advanced search will allow a person to research in several different ways. When the advanced search is accessed, it will look like this:
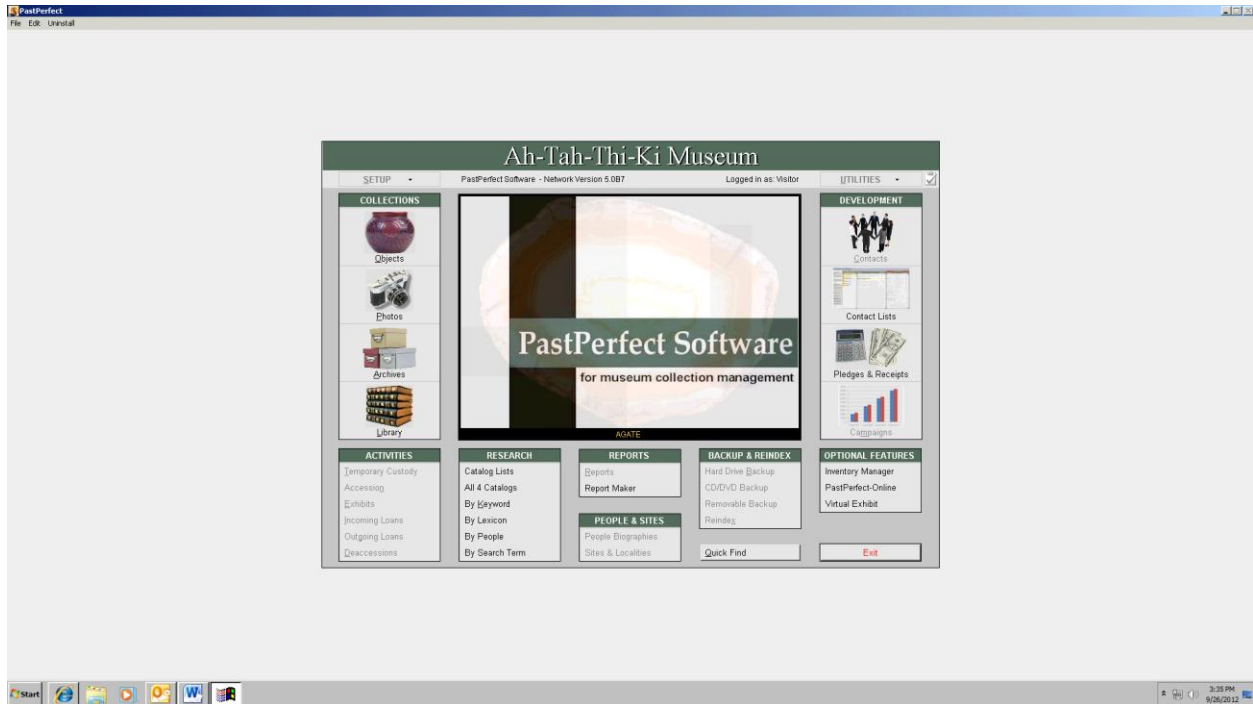
From here, you can research by keyword, author, creator, date range, catalog number, and more.

*There is only limited records available through PastPerfect Online. For access to the entire available collection, as stipulated by restrictions, a researcher must make an appointment to use the Research Library. Limiting access to online records protects culturally sensitive materials, individuals, and restrictions.

Using PastPerfect in the Museum

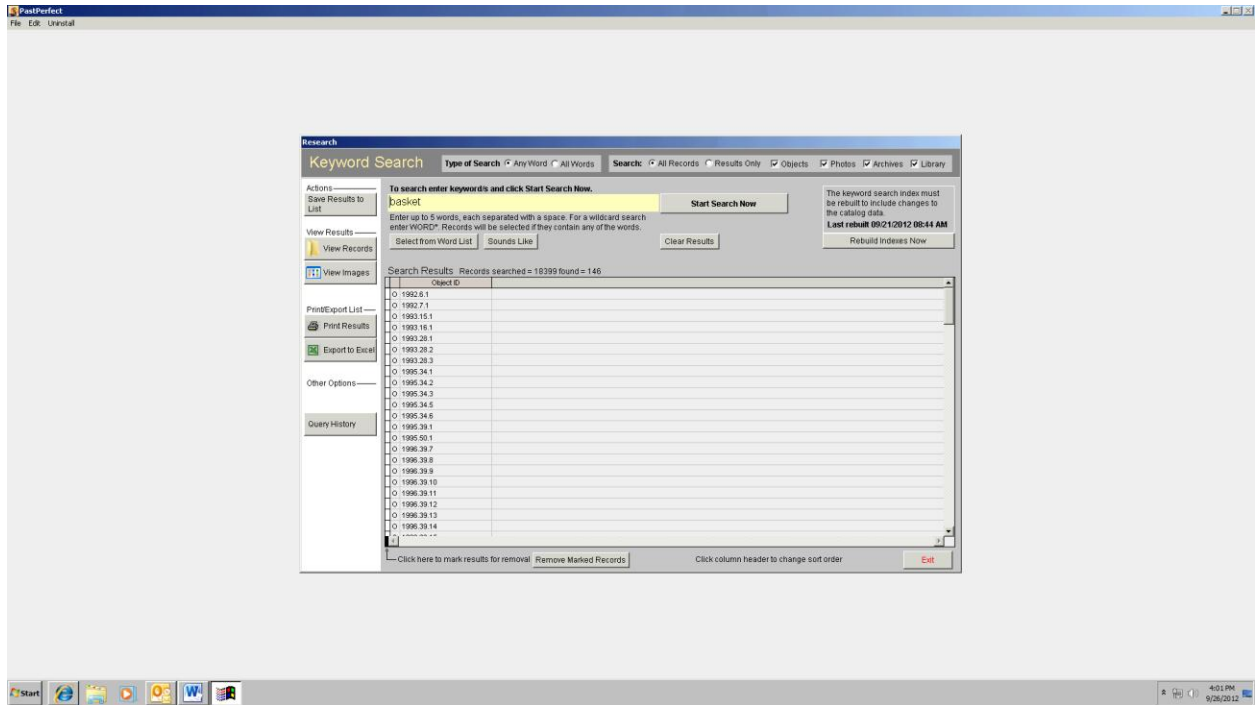When a researcher logs onto PastPerfect, this is what they will see:

On the left, the buttons "objects," "photos," "archives," and "library" can be clicked for browsing by catalog number.

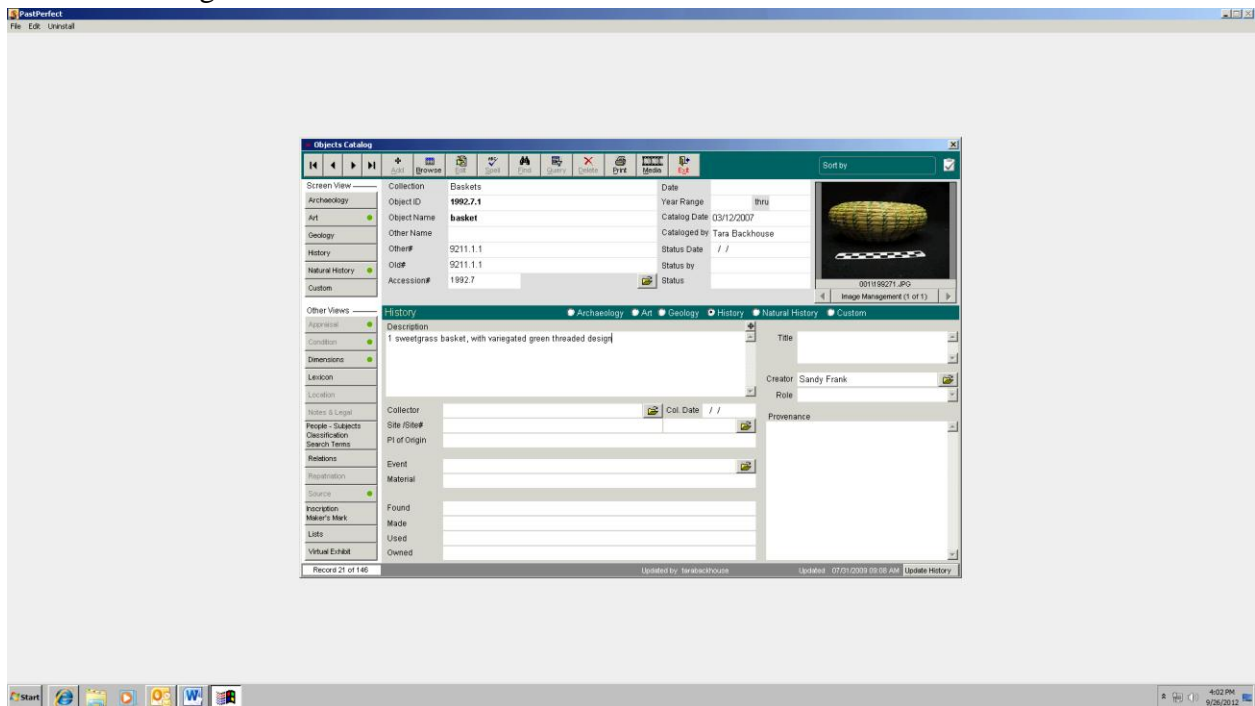The box on the bottom left hand corner labeled "Research" is the best place to start.

The links will allow you to research by catalog, keyword, lexicon, people, or search terms. Although it is not available to the general researcher, tribal members can access the "people biography" section that will provide some biographical information and links to items in the collection associated with that person.

In this keyword search, the word "basket" was entered.

To access a record, put the cursor over the catalog number and double click it. When the forward button is clicked, it will only browse the records returned by the original query.
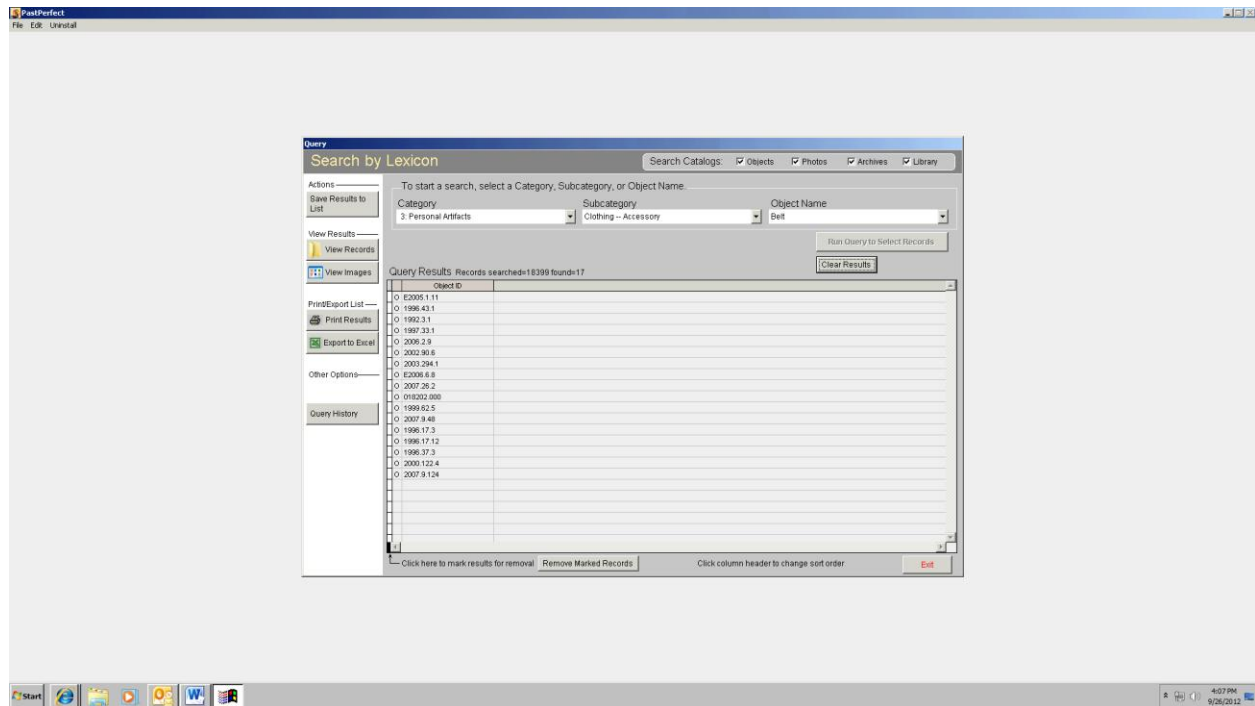
This is a catalog record:

From here, the researcher can look at the archival photograph of the item, the provenance, or history of the item, and much more.

Most importantly, the catalog record provides an exact location of the item. Once the item's location is pulled up, museum staff can pull the item from the collection for the researcher to look at it.

In some instances, digital or photocopies can be made for the researcher.

The "lexicon" is various levels of description, or classification, that identify what type of an item is in the collection. If a researcher is looking for a specific type of item, this may be a good approach for them.

This query had "Category: Personal Artifacts, Subcategory: Clothing-Accessory, and Belt."

The other queries, people and search term, will pull up words already in the database and the researcher can click on those words to return all catalog records with that particular word in it.