

In 1836, Henry Spalding and his wife Eliza joined Marcus and Narcissa Whitman on a mission to bring Christianity to the Indians of the Oregon Country. In 1846, Spalding acquired Nez Perce clothing, artifacts, and horse gear which he shipped to his friend and supporter, Dr. Dudley Allen, in Ohio. In exchange for these Native American goods, Dr. Allen, a benefactor to the Presbyterian mission sent needed commodities to Spalding. After Allen's death, his son, Dudley, donated the Spalding-Allen Collection to Oberlin College in 1893. Oberlin College in turn loaned most, but not all, of the collection to the Ohio Historical Society (OHS) for safe keeping where it languished for decades.

In 1976, curators at Nez Perce National Historic Park (NEPE) rediscovered the collection. After negotiations, OHS loaned most of the Spalding-Allen artifacts to the National Park Service in 1980 on renewable one-year loans. However, in 1993 OHS abruptly demanded the return of the collection. In negotiations with OHS, the National Park Service learned that OHS would sell the collection, but only at its full appraised value of \$608,100 with a six-month deadline to provide the money. The Nez Perce Tribe raised the money within six months with help from thousands of donors and purchased the collection where it is now on loan to NPS.

This project explores the attempted dispossession of Nez Perce cultural heritage. In his barter of Nez Perce goods, Spalding sought to end traditional Nez Perce culture, by advocating that the Nez Perce adopt western dress, agriculture, and a stern version of Christianity. Ironically, at the same time Spalding worked to “civilize” the Nez Perce, he also created an archive of their earliest documented material culture. The ethics of acquiring, bartering, owning, and selling Native cultural history will be explored. This research is important for it demonstrates that collections are never impartial or neutral, instead archives reflect the interests of their creators resulting in a complex, and often problematic, historical record. The origins of collections—their provenance—is critical for the future ethical curation of indigenous collections held in museums and archives.