



*Figure 1.* Courtesy of the Thomas Edison Center. Painting of the Thomas Edison Memorial Tower.

Preservation of Library and Archival Materials  
Preservation Assessment Project:  
*Thomas Edison Center in Edison, NJ*

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## Executive summary

The Thomas Edison Center is a “hidden gem” located on the site of Thomas Edison’s Menlo Park “Invention Factory,” where he famously perfected the phonograph and incandescent light bulb. Operated by Edison Township, the State National Park Service, and the Edison Memorial Tower Corporation, the small museum boasts an interesting collection of invention patents, letters, newspapers, telegraph machines, and phonographs for visitors to interact with. Due to limited space and resources, only 1/16th of the museum’s total collection is on display. The rest is stored in three separate archival storage units.

Plans to enlarge the museum and “bring important artifacts back into the light” are currently underway. This preservation survey was conducted to provide planning recommendations that align with this future vision of creating an interactive technology facility.

In the short-term, care should be taken to formally document a collection and preservation policy based on the museum’s current standards. Once this policy is documented, it will be easy to evolve the principles and criteria throughout the expansion project. Gaps in preservation knowledge and skills among the current staff should also be identified. This gap analysis will help form the basis of a future staffing plan for the new museum. Long-term, a preservation plan for the museum’s future vision should be established to include guidelines for collection storage, visitor access, and processing artifacts for exhibition.

## Introduction and institution overview

When Thomas Alva Edison returned to Menlo Park in 1925 for the unveiling of a bronze plaque in his honor from the State of New Jersey, the site of his “Invention Factory” was already “largely reclaimed by nature.” Edison had moved on to a larger factory as notoriety of his inventions grew, leaving behind the place where he and his “Edison Pioneers” first recorded sound and perfected the incandescent light bulb. While headquartered at Menlo Park, Edison applied for 400 patents on his inventions, earning him the title of “The Wizard of Menlo Park.”



*Figure 2.* Courtesy of the Thomas Edison Center. Painting shows what Edison’s “Invention Factory” would have looked like in 1875.

The 34-acre laboratory and factory in Edison, New Jersey, was active from 1875 until the early 1880s. The property was left to deteriorate until Edison’s family donated it to the State to be converted into a state park (now Edison State Park) in 1933. In 1938, the art deco-style Thomas Edison Memorial Tower was erected to commemorate the work completed by this man of science. Today, a small museum has been added to the property to exhibit original artifacts related to Edison’s work at the Menlo Park factory, including a phonograph more than 120 years old.

The museum and memorial are operated by the Edison Memorial Tower Corporation, a 501(c)3 nonprofit that has been working with Edison Township since 1999 to rejuvenate the property

and keep the memory of Thomas Edison alive. The organization relies on memberships and funding to maintain its collections, most of which are kept in offsite storage units due to lack of space in the current exhibit.

## Preservation and planning management

### Staff size and responsibilities

The Thomas Edison Center runs on a very small staff: Museum Director Kathleen Carlucci, who also sits on the Board of Trustees; two part-time Museum Curators and Educators; and a part-time Office Administrator. While the Museum Director doesn't have a background in archives and preservation, they hold a degree in history and have assisted with several restoration projects, which include planning the museum's future expansion. The director also organizes many community outreach programs and events that are important for spreading the word about the museum and its mission.

Marissa McFetridge is one of the part-time curators and is pursuing a Master's in Museum Studies. Most of her work involves researching existing collections and coordinating incoming donations. McFetridge also manages volunteers and interns, who are crucial to the small staff's operations. Volunteers typically serve as docents who lead visitors on tours through the two-room exhibition space, but they also receive training to assist with curatorial tasks.

In the summer months, the museum receives help from high school students who have the opportunity to receive college scholarships for their volunteer efforts. The museum also offers archival, educational, and social media internships for college students looking to gain experience working with nonprofits or museums.

### Preservation and collection policies

The Edison Memorial Tower Corporation accepts collection donations that align with their mission to "celebrate the innovative mind of Thomas Edison" and present artifacts in a way that "spark[s] the imagination of people to continue to create a technologically advanced world and brighter future." The nonprofit works closely with the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection's Division of Parks & Forestry to coordinate the acquisition of artifacts donated from private and community collections from around the world.

No formal preservation or collection policy is documented, but Marissa says that an artifact's size, preservation quality, and relevance to Menlo Park determine what they collect and prioritize for exhibition. Their main consideration is size, since most of their collection is stored offsite in three separate storage units. "Only 1/16th of our total collection is on display in the museum," Marissa says. Due to budget and resource constraints, items collected must be in good condition, and priority is given to artifacts that are unique to Edison's time in Menlo Park.

## “It’s a hidden gem”

Bharath is one of the four volunteer docents at the Thomas Edison Center. She only recently discovered the museum despite living in the area for over 10 years. “It’s a hidden gem,” she says. “A gem hidden in plain sight.”

Awareness is important for any museum, but it’s imperative for the Thomas Edison Center that relies on support from donations, memberships, and partnerships. Like Bharath, people seem to happen upon the museum, but it’s not the most consistent strategy for encouraging people to sign up for memberships. The center has different membership levels people can join to make annual contributions and receive perks like discounts.

## Museum access

The museum and memorial tower are open for tours every Thursday-Saturday from 10am-4pm. Tours are scheduled online or by phone, and visitors can only enter the museum at their appointed tour time. The front door is always locked, and visitors must knock to request entry. Educators can make special arrangements for school trips and learning activities in advance.

## Future expansion

Director Kathleen Carlucci partnered with SSP architects to create an expansion plan for the museum. The vision is to enlarge the space into an interactive technology facility that allows visitors to imagine themselves as innovators like Thomas Edison. According to the website, “this future will bring important artifacts back into the light, freeing them from three different archival storage units and showcasing the collection for the education and enjoyment of all.”



Figure 3. Courtesy of the Thomas Edison Center and SSP Architects. Floor plan and visualization of the future museum site.

## Building and environment

### Weather proofing

The museum building has a flat roof with no skylights or areas for rainwater to pool and cause leaks. Gutters appear to be cleaned regularly, as there was no visible buildup of leaves or other foliage.



*Figure 4.* Image of the left side of the Thomas Edison museum building, which shows the flat roof, emergency exit door, and four windows with open blinds.

Behind the building is a small shed and residential rain garden that prevents rainwater from flooding the park land that surrounds the museum building and memorial tower. The plants are brown and dead because it is winter, but the soil appears to be fresh. The garden is placed in the vicinity of the building's downspouts in accordance with rain garden best practices, but it isn't located 10 feet away from the foundation like the guide also suggests. It isn't clear if the museum is responsible for maintaining the rain garden.



Figure 5. Image of the residential rain garden located behind the museum building and shed.

## Pest control

There are no areas around the roof for birds to make a nest, though window sills should be closely monitored as possible locations for nests. A bird house has been placed near the park trail several feet behind the building, possibly to keep birds away from the museum. Several lidded garbage bins are located around the building and park to discourage littering.

Landscaping around the building appears well-cared for, though there was a swarm of small gnats flying around the museum entrance.

## Security

The museum building is protected by Scott's Security Systems, as the signs placed around the property indicate. Doors to the museum building and memorial tower are always locked and can only be opened by a staff member or volunteer. Visitors to the museum are escorted by a docent to ensure the safety and protection of artifacts. Smoke detectors are located in both rooms, and there's a fire extinguisher mounted on the wall by the front door.

## Climate and temperature

The digital reader for the building's central heat and air conditioner indicated that the interior temperature was 71 degrees fahrenheit, which felt cool yet comfortable on a gray winter afternoon. While Ritzenthaler (2010) states the maximum temperature for archival materials should be 65 degrees fahrenheit, it's important to consider that the environment should feel comfortable to visitors.

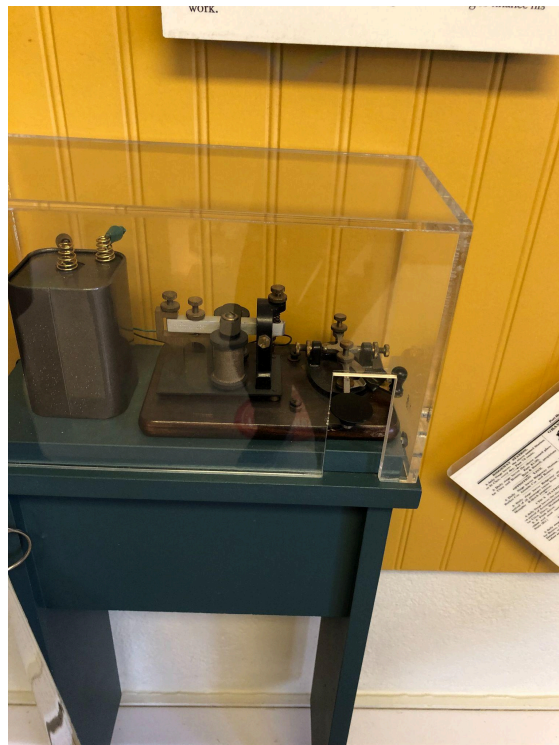
## Housekeeping

Food and drink are not allowed in the museum, and staff must take care not to consume any food near the collections. A regular cleaning schedule is maintained to keep the exhibit cases and windows free from dust, and the floors free from dirt and other pollutants carried in by visitors.

## Collection composition

### Exhibit cases

A variety of exhibit cases are used to properly display the different artifacts housed in the museum. A telegraph machine, for example, sits in a case with a small opening at the front, allowing visitors to try tapping out Morse code for themselves.



*Figure 6.* Image of a telegraph housed in an exhibit case that allows for visitor interaction.



Exhibit cases in the room at the back of the building were marked with signs requesting visitors not to lean on them. This part of the building contained examples of Edison's phonograph, including one model that is over 120 years old.



*Figure 7.* Image of a sign that thanks visitors for not leaning on the display cases.

Aligned with exhibition best practices, cases are not lit from the inside. The museum doesn't have the tools to monitor the climate and humidity levels of these microenvironments.

## Reformatting and replicas

Most original artifacts are placed behind glass or inside exhibit cases, except for the different phonograph models that are handled by docents and staff during tours for visitors to enjoy listening to the old records. Many of the machines and books—like the telegraph or the books that sparked Edison's interest in science—are examples of what Edison would have used. Photographs, paintings, magazine covers, and newspaper articles were copied and reformatted as museum placards to withstand exposure to light.

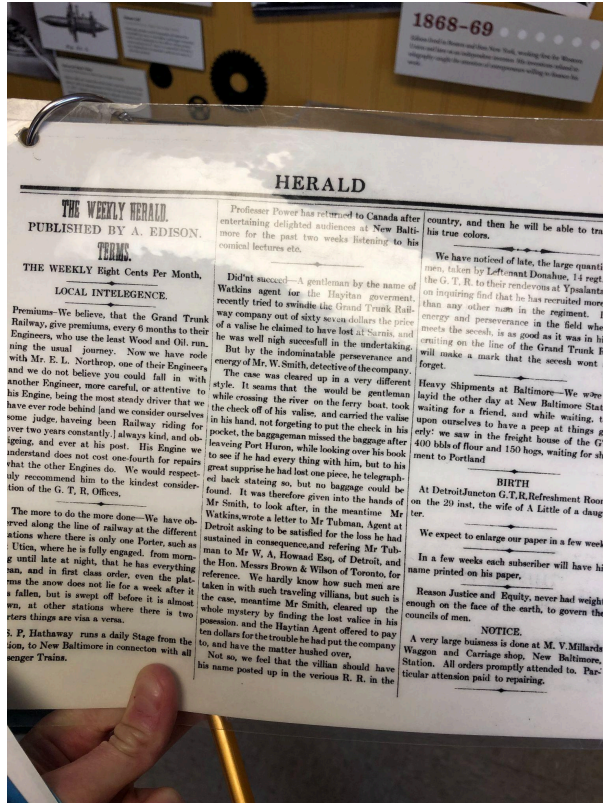


Figure 8. Image of Thomas Edison's self-published newspaper reformatted into a laminated card for museum visitors to hold and read.

Since interaction is important to the museum, items like Edison's self-published newspaper and invention patents have been laminated into cards that visitors can pick up and read.

## Lighting

Both rooms are well-lit by four fluorescent ceiling lights. The front space also receives natural light from six medium-sized windows that are fitted with blinds. The blinds are open during museum hours and closed the rest of the time. Because the museum is only open three days a week, the artifacts have minimal exposure to both ultraviolet and natural light.

## Length of display

Lack of space inhibits the museum from rotating items in the collection or staging special exhibitions. All items on display are part of the *regular exhibit*. Care has been taken by the staff to preserve artifacts for future visitors.



*Figure 9.* Image of a 100-year-old model of the main laboratory at Menlo Park.

The green color of the grass fading to brown in the above model of Edison’s main laboratory at Menlo Park is the only known damage. The model is now more than 100 years old, and it spent too much time directly exposed to light before curators decided to place it in a glass exhibit case.

## Recommendations

### Short-term recommendations

The Thomas Edison Center plans to expand its facility to put more of its holdings on public display. Limitations in space, staff, and funding pose challenges to the maintenance and growth of the nonprofit’s existing collection, but there are activities the museum can start doing in preparation for this future vision.

**Document a collection & preservation policy.** The museum already sets standards for what they’ll acquire and display based on size, preservation quality, and relevance to Edison’s time in Menlo Park. Formally documenting these principles will help the organization evolve their policy as they expand their space and increase their staff. How might these priorities shift when they have the space to display more artifacts?

**Identify gaps in knowledge.** Current staff members don't have backgrounds in archives and preservation. For future staffing considerations, a gap analysis in knowledge and skills should be conducted to ensure that the museum is hiring for those qualifications when they're ready to expand. In the short-term, the organization can establish relationships with university Library Science and Archives & Preservation programs to spread awareness about its internships.

**Continue monitoring storage facilities.** While the majority of the museum's holdings remain in offsite storage units, the facilities should be regularly assessed. Climate and humidity levels should be logged according to an environmental plan. Records and three-dimensional objects should be properly packed to protect them from deterioration and abrasions, and no new items should be acquired unless there is ample space.

## Long-term recommendations

**Preservation planning for the future vision.** The goal of expanding the museum facility is to bring the organization's collection of artifacts out of storage and put them on display. But the vision also calls for a space where visitors can interact with Edison's inventions and truly understand how innovative they were. This hands-on education can be at odds with goals of preservation and conservation. A comprehensive management plan should be established and include guidelines for the following:

- Will visitors only be able to visit the museum on a docent-led tour? If not, how will you ensure artifacts that can be touched are handled properly?
- Will there be space in the new facility to store collections not on display?
- What will the process for moving items out of storage entail?
- How long will items be on display? What actions will be taken to ensure the preservation of these artifacts?

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