21st-Century Tech Tracks Georgia's Centuries-Old Treasures: The Governor's Mansion RFID Project

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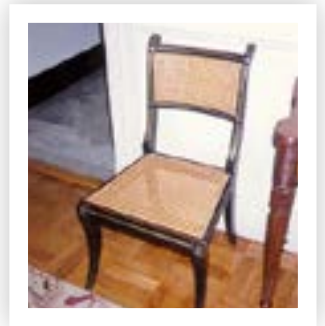sharon.burrow@gba.ga.gov

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Project End Date: December 31, 2019

In the Peach State, the Governor's Mansion is truly Georgia's Mansion. Georgians visit the home year-round, for everything from an Easter egg hunt on the grounds to pet adoption days hosted by the first family. The Mansion's staff pride themselves on finding new ways to make tours and events memorable and educational. With each visit, guests enjoy a taste of the Mansion's $13 million art collection. The collection rotates constantly. Come back next month, and you are likely to see something different. While that is a boon for visitors, the revolving collection can be a burden for those keeping inventory.

That challenge falls to the Georgia Building Authority (GBA). This state agency manages the Mansion and its holdings, including a detailed inventory of the art collection and its many historical treasures.

GBA needed a reliable way to maintain accurate record of the Mansion's valuable holdings – everything from chandeliers to serving sets, fine china, furniture, paintings, rugs, and more. Cherished historical items like Federalist-era upholstered armchairs are never warehoused, but in use and on the move within the Governor's Mansion. To protect the treasures, GBA needed a means of providing real-time inventory and performing regularly scheduled asset audits. Further, they needed to do it all in a way that did not disrupt the Mansion's operation as both a museum and a home.

GBA catapulted its inventorying capability into twenty-first-century mode in 2019 when it adopted WiseTrack®, an asset tracking software and equipment system. It meant installing radio-frequency identification (RFID) chips on every collection piece in the Mansion – painstakingly, without scratching a surface or tearing a fabric (RFID is the industry standard in museums for managing artifact inventory). Did it make the Mansion's staff a bit anxious? It did. But by year's end, asset tags for every item in the collection were logged into WiseTrack's database, and RFID antennae were discreetly positioned throughout the Mansion.

With the implementation of WiseTrack, inventory tracking capability went through the roof. What had previously been manual audits every four or five years was now real-time inventory information, available any time to Mansion and GBA staff. Gone were the days of manually matching up items against old grainy photos of Mansion holdings and printed spreadsheets. With the WiseTrack implementation, inventorying and conducting appraisals were streamlined and made easier.

CONCEPT

Initially, the concept behind using an inventory-tracking software like WiseTrack® seemed straightforward. The system is flexible and easy to use. It's used on premises with web-based software and comes with unlimited support. The Georgia Building Authority (GBA) knew this was the system they would need to properly manage the many Mansion assets. All that was left to do was to implement the program, right? Well, not exactly. Because Georgia's Governor's Mansion is more than a museum or gallery, it was first important to take into consideration the many functions of the Mansion and its large collection of fine pieces.

GBA quickly learned that full implementation of the program would require a time-consuming and comprehensive look at the complete Mansion infrastructure. There was a new challenge around every corner, literally. Each of the Mansion's three floors and 30 Greek-Revival-style rooms had to be evaluated to ensure that guests would not be able to see the physical asset tags placed on the items or the RFID antennae above most entryways.

The Georgia Governor's Mansion is a museum, with a family living in it. Not your average setting for a public art collection.

The dedicated Mansion staff, with help from GBA's IT team, came up with solutions to each of the following considerations:

Appraisals

Because the Mansion serves as a museum, special insurance is needed for the collection and each individual item. Like many other Georgia agencies, GBA is insured through coverage provided by the state's Department of Administrative Services (DOAS). With the financial worth of the Mansion collection changing based on items' condition, age, and market value, appraisals are performed to guide GBA's decisions on insurance type and coverage amount.

WiseTrack met both the appraisal needs and the inventory tracking needs of GBA. Its comprehensive database allows for the addition of financial details and documentation, along with an audit trail. All of these features ensure GBA is prepared, should a damage or loss claim become necessary.

Original Photos

Keeping inventory used to mean matching the Mansion's physical items with original photos of the same. Even after digitizing the photos and creating an electronic database, GBA kept bulging ring binders with printed sheets showing item name, inventory number, one-inch picture, and manual checkmarks. Typically between gubernatorial election cycles, GBA's appraiser of record would walk through each of the 30 rooms and verify by hand which items were currently on display and in onsite storage. Needless to say, this process was tedious and inefficient.

The new system provides a variety of customizable options, and the asset tags do all the work. Mansion staff can use the RFID technology to manually scan an item and either confirm its existing location or update it when moved. Pieces can also be scanned automatically when they pass through multiple zones within the building.

CONCEPT *(continued)*

WiseTrack's real time updates allow Mansion staff to conduct quick inventory checks, and periodic appraisals will always represent the current status. This feature greatly reduces the impact on Mansion operations and the First Family's schedule.

Inventory Numbers

The Georgia Executive Fine Arts Committee, originally created by executive order in the mid-1960s, was responsible for the care and safekeeping of one of the finest Federal period collections in the nation. Under oversight of the committee, each piece of this collection at the Georgia Governor's Mansion was carefully marked with a hand-painted inventory number by curators. The number is less than half an inch in size and placed discreetly and out of view. They served their purpose for many years, but over time, some have worn away partially or even entirely. While historic and interesting, they were upgraded in 2019 with twenty-first-century RFID-readable tags.
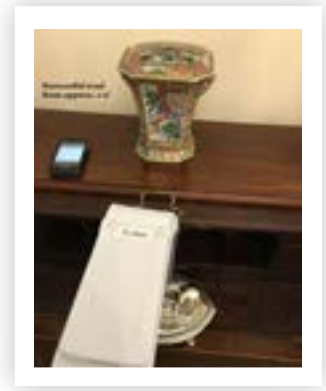
RFID Reader Range

RFID readers installed throughout the Mansion can pick up movement of collection items between zones of the building. Some items move around frequently and to varied rooms. To monitor their location, GBA staff use a handheld scanner as they walk around the Mansion and electronically identify where the RFID tagged asset is. It is as easy as entering a room, moving the handheld scanner throughout the space, and reading the screen to find or log the location of the items.

What sort of items are these? A 1907 Gorham-Crankshaw sterling silver presentation urn from the USS *Georgia* battleship, for one. It was presented by Miss Stella Tate, sister of former U.S. Congressman Carter Tate who christened the ship. The urn is used a few times a year and moved from the Butler's Pantry to various locations and back multiple times.

Tag Types

Placing RFID tags to minimize the visual and physical impact to the artifact proved a formidable challenge. WiseTrack sent a catalogue of tags, and GBA then sought the expert advice of the Atlanta Art Conservation Center. In addition, the appraiser of record knew where and how to place tags on specialty items like a pair of English regency black lacquer side chairs, circa 1800, to avoid damage.
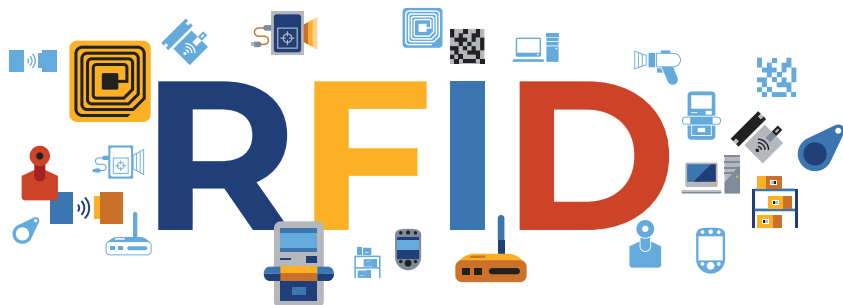
Antenna Location

The RFID reader antennae make automated zone tracking possible. They are also the most visible pieces of the WiseTrack system, and GBA strategically placed them for least distraction to Mansion visitors. They are located above the main entrance and multiple service doors.

In the span of just more than five months, GBA took the RFID Mansion project from just a challenging prospect to a museum-quality reality. After many hours of carefully sewing tags into multiple area rugs, including a nineteenth-century hand-knotted wool Serabend rug, and placing chips on the fixtures of various gilt bronze and crystal chandeliers, GBA could look toward the benefits of the project, many of which are already being realized.

The RFID project has had a positive ripple effect for the Mansion docents, too. These individuals volunteer their time a few days a week to give tours. They are knowledgeable about Mansion and Georgia history, but with the size of the collection and frequent rotation of items, sometimes they cannot answer every visitor's question.

In the future, GBA hopes to create a mobile app for Governor's Mansion docents to use to provide in-depth item details (from the RFID database) and enhance visitors' tour experience.

IMPACT

The goals of the Governor's Mansion RFID project went beyond simple inventory management and included the following targets. In each case, there is promise of significant achievement.

ENHANCING THE TOUR EXPERIENCE FOR GUESTS AND DOCENTS	BETTER TRACKING AND DOCUMENTING SERVICE NEEDS OF COLLECTION ITEMS	ASSURING ANY ITEMS ON LOAN FROM THE MANSION ARE ACCURATELY TRACKED AND RETURNED

Tour Experience

A virtual tour for the Mansion is envisioned in the future as a way to extend the Mansion experience to students' classrooms or homes, as well as to broader audiences. It will walk guests virtually through each interactive room. Designers creating that online program can now be confident of accurately identifying item placement and content.

Service Needs of Items

The RFID project will allow Mansion staff to schedule recommended care and revitalization of items and art pieces. The WiseTrack database can reflect the last time an item was evaluated, helping keep the collection fresh and properly preserved.

Assurance for Safeguarding Loaned Items

The Mansion has enjoyed a trusting relationship with respected museums and fine arts institutions, but a more efficient method of keeping track of its precious items on loan is welcomed. A contract between the recipient and the Mansion will still be maintained stating (among other points) the duration of the loan. The WiseTrack database can supplement this process by including the legal details and documentation related to the transaction. That makes the information even more accessible, further assuring the pieces can be located while away.

Ultimately, the RFID project has allowed GBA to make better business decisions about the Mansion.

A building of such historic value to Georgia should not itself be buried by history or outmoded practices. Capitalizing on current technology like WiseTrack helps ensure the Governor's Mansion remains one of Georgia's treasures.