

From beer to bones: Warehouse to hold Cincinnati Museum Center collections | Going Up

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A look inside the Cincinnati Museum Center's collections and its new home facility
The Cincinnati Museum Center's Geier Center collection and its future home, the Vontz Family Research, Education and Collections Center.

- The Cincinnati Museum Center is remodeling the former Heidelberg Distributing facility into a collections center.
- The \$45 million project will consolidate six million museum items currently stored across three off-site locations.
- Construction is slated to begin in summer 2026, with completion and move-in expected by late 2027.

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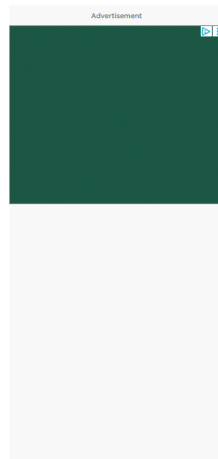
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The basics of Cincinnati Museum Center's new collections facility

- **Name of the facility:** The Vontz Family Education, Research and Collections Center, formerly the [Heidelberg Distributing](#) facility near Union Terminal.
- **Address:** 1518 Dalton Ave., next to the [Cincinnati Museum Center](#) in the West End.
- **Building type:** The museum's new Heidelberg campus is just north of its main building at Union Terminal in Cincinnati's industrial neighborhood of Queensgate. The building will consolidate the 6 million items currently part of the Cincinnati Museum Center's multiple collections, including vertebrate and invertebrate paleontology, zoology, mineralogy, archaeology, history objects, fine art, manuscripts, moving images and photographs.
- **Designer/architect:** [SmithGroup / SHoP](#)
- **Size:** Site encompasses 12 acres and 200,000 square feet of space.

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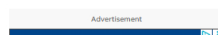


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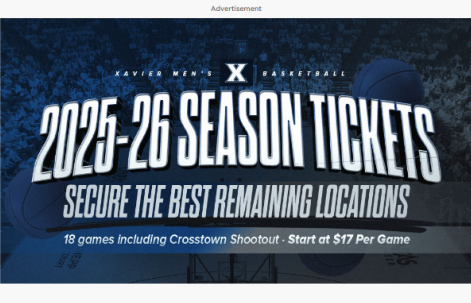
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What you need to know about The Vontz Family Education, Research and Collections Center

The Cincinnati Museum Center made an [unprecedented real estate purchase](#) in July 2024 when it bought what was formerly the Heidelberg Distributing facility next door at 1518 Dalton Ave. for \$15 million.

The move is part of a long-term plan of consolidating collections for the museum center, which [completed a \\$228 million repair and restoration](#) of Union Terminal in 2018.



The 207-year-old organization made the purchase in an effort to combine its massive collections of 6 million items currently housed across three off-site properties, two leased and one owned, at the Geier Collections and Research Center on 760 W. Fifth St. The center aims to drop the two leases, sell the Fifth Street facility and use the funds to pay for the \$45 million remodeling project at the Dalton Avenue site.

City of Cincinnati officials have said they would like to buy the West Fifth Street property to turn it into a daytime center for people experiencing homelessness. The city envisions spending \$5.5 million to buy and convert the space, with hopes of bringing on a partner to operate the center.

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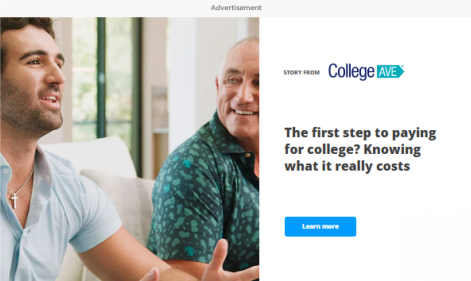
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The Geier Center, which was used to store museum collections since the early 2000s, has "served us very well," Elizabeth Pierce, president and CEO of the museum center, told The Enquirer. "But now it's full because the community continues to share their treasures with us."



The Cincinnati Museum Center's Geier Center is the current home to many of the museum's collections for storage and research. *Phil Didion/The Enquirer*

The museum continuously accepts items from a variety of entities like universities and colleges and even private donors and historical societies. Some items from its collections are moved into the museum center for exhibits, but the majority are preserved for research purposes or to loan to other museums, Cody Hefner, vice president of marketing and communications, said.



As of May 2025, the Cincinnati Museum Center has raised \$15 million toward the Dalton Avenue project, Hefner stated in a press release.

The museum announced in early May that the new collections facility will be named The Vontz Family Education, Research and Collections Center due to the financial support offered by the family of Albert Vontz Sr., a


German brewer who [launched Heidelberg Distributing in 1938](#), which built the Dalton Avenue distribution center in 1967.

"My father long believed that it was extremely important to give back to the community," Al Vontz III, a former member of the Cincinnati Museum Center's Board of Trustees, said in a press release. "He would often say that you could have 100% share of the beer and wine markets, but if Cincinnati failed to thrive along with the Company, it would mean nothing."

What will the new museum facility look like?

Renderings of the new collections facility's interior have yet to be finalized, but Pierce said the [SmithGroup](#) will prioritize preserving the fossils, photos and other items that make up the museum collections in designing the space.

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The architecture firm was selected for this project given its "ability to maximize the volume of our space for these collections' care," Pierce said, adding that temperature control, humidity levels and fire suppression systems are all design features that will be tailored to the best interest of each collection.

For example, the museum has a range of photos, some of which are nitrate film collections and have chemicals that need to be temperature controlled, Pierce said. Whereas, other collections that include million-year-old fossils will require different storage features.




The Cincinnati Museum Center's Geier Center is the current home to many of the museum's collections for storage and research. *Phil Didion/The Enquirer*

Given this, Pierce predicts the design of the facility might mimic "a box within a box," meaning a plain exterior with high-level technology featured in the interior design. Dotting the plain exterior are mammoth statues previously located at the Geier Center, which were brought to the new facility and installed at its front entrance this April, Hefner said.



Regarding the building's interior, Pierce explained that the SmithGroup is "uniquely qualified" to play the "game of Tetris" required for storing all the museum items in the space in a way that maximizes the height and volume afforded at the Dalton Avenue facility.

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Every single item the museum owns will be transferred to the new space through a meticulous process of logging each item in each collection and determining where it will be stored in the new facility.

"We've got spreadsheets upon spreadsheets of details around how many specimens are in each drawer (and) how many drawers are in each box. It's a granular, scientific process that we have to go through to create an understanding of all the items in the collection and then what that gets translated to for future shelving possibilities and how high you're going to stack the material," Pierce said.

Will the museum collections facility be open to the public?

The Dalton Avenue museum facility will be open to the public on a programmatic basis, with an emphasis on supporting the over 1,000 research visits and 8,000 online collections portal searches the museum receives each year.



The Museum Center recently bought an old Heidelberg distributing facility that will become The Vontz Family Research, Education and Collections Center, a new home for the collections. Phil Didion/The Enquirer

Access to the facility will not be included in general admission tickets for the museum center but, rather, will be offered on a case-by-case basis. For example, Pierce said, the facility could be open for Boy Scout troops or for weekend events where curators can share their knowledge with the public.

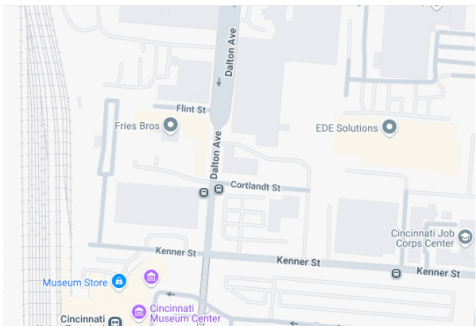
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Ultimately, the space's key purpose is to "manage and welcome researchers," Pierce said.

Inquires from "kids working on their science fair project to postdoc science researchers" will be better supported through the new collections facility, she added.

Here's where the project stands and what's ahead



As of May 2025, the SmithGroup was continuing to finalize designs, with construction expected to begin in summer 2026. The Cincinnati Museum Center is looking to late 2027 to complete the move to The Vontz Family Education, Research and Collections Center.

Regarding noise pollution to residents in the West End, Pierce is not anticipating any significant issues as the facility will be constructed within the existing Heidelberg Distributing space.

"We're adapting the space as it stands. We're not doing significant reconstruction that I know of in this moment," she said.



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