

Collections Plan
Newton History Museum at The Jackson Homestead
January 2006

[Revisions made through Collections Committee Meeting 6/6/06]

Introduction

The Collections Plan for the Newton History Museum at The Jackson Homestead is an internal document used by the Museum's staff and board to guide the development and refinement of the Object and Document Collections, in order to further the mission of the Museum. The Collections Plan serves to focus the Museum's collecting activities, to guide decision making, to increase intellectual control over the collections, and to ensure adequate resources for collections care.

The Collections Plan is part of the Newton History Museum's Collections Management Manual. The Collections Plan provides guidelines for the development of the collections and is used in conjunction with the Museum's Collections Policy, also part of the Manual. The Collections Plan is implemented within the context of the Museum's Mission (see below), Vision for the Future, and Strategic Plan.

The Intellectual Framework for the Collections Plan was developed by the Museum's Collections Committee during FY 2005. The Committee used *Information Center Fact Sheets* from the American Association of Museums to help develop the Plan. The Collections Committee intends that the Plan should guide the Museum for the next twenty years, but recognizes that it will need periodic updates.

Newton History Museum Mission

The mission of the Newton History Museum is to encourage the inquiry and exploration of Newton within the broad context of American history. To accomplish this mission the Museum maintains a collection and an historic property that interprets Newton's past and present. The Museum collects, preserves and exhibits historical artifacts of local significance and presents public programs that involve the diverse population of Newton and the region.

Intellectual Framework: Vision for the Collections

The **collecting goals** of the Newton History Museum at The Jackson Homestead are to acquire, document, study, interpret, make accessible, exhibit and care for the object and document collections that further the Museum's mission and meet the needs of the Museum's audiences. The Museum's collections reflect the people and history of Newton, emphasizing Newton as an evolving community. The object and document collections complement and support each other in illustrating the stories of Newton's past and present.

Specifically, the collections are significant for preserving the history of Newton as one of the country's earliest railroad suburbs. The Museum, as an Underground Railroad site, also collects and interprets local anti-slavery history, with the goal of becoming a well-known regional resource. Both the object and document collections are used actively, in exhibitions and programs, to connect the history of Newton to larger, more complex issues of American history, such as suburban development and the **A**bolition **M**ovement.

All collecting activities are focused on meeting the needs of the Museum's **audiences** through exhibitions, programs, and research. The Museum's targeted audiences are:

Adults, children and families in Newton and surrounding communities

Educators, teachers, and coordinators of formal and informal learning groups in Newton and surrounding communities, and their group participants

Student researchers and others interested in the interpretive themes outlined below

The Museum's collecting activities support mission-based, **interpretive themes** that allow the staff to show that history happened and happens at the local level through the actions of ordinary citizens, and how local Newton history is tied to the broad context of American history. Those themes include but are not limited to the following:

Open Space: farms, orchards, parks, and recreation areas

The Charles River: river-based industry and water-related recreation

The Railroad: development of villages and businesses, suburban development

Education: formal schools and informal organizations for both children and adults

Communities: civic life and social life; villages, organizations, ethnic groups, houses of worship et al.

Commerce: businesses, the workforce, and consumerism

Innovation: social and technological advances

Architecture: style, materials, construction techniques, and design

Suburban development and suburban living: proximity to Boston, transportation, the family and home, and domestic help

Social change: civil rights, women's rights, war demonstrations, gay rights

The Abolition Movement: slavery, abolitionists, antislavery organizations, and the Underground Railroad

The following guidelines further help to define the Museum's collecting:

Due to the lack of appropriate storage, the Museum does not collect large industrial machinery or transportation vehicles; firearms; or clothing and accessories made of animal fur

The Museum does not collect antiquarian books unrelated to its interpretive themes

The Museum does not collect military uniforms, which can be borrowed from another institution if one is needed for exhibition purposes; however, the Museum may collect the military insignia of Newton residents

The Museum is cautious about collecting modern objects, unless they are commemorative items available only for a short time, and tries to ensure that the items have historical value before acquiring them; however, modern documents may be added to the collection at a more proactive level

The Museum attempts to limit the number of a specific type of item in the collections, but may collect similar items that illustrate different time periods, ethnic groups, or styles to improve the interpretive value of its collections

The Newton History Museum acquires and preserves items that meet the collecting criteria outlined in Section 4 of the Collections Policy, and that fit with the Museum's mission, collecting goals, target audiences, and interpretive themes. The Museum collects representative items that enhance the staff's ability to interpret, through exhibitions and programs, the themes of Newton history outlined above. In the process of developing the collections, the Museum may need to deaccession one item if a more representative item becomes available.

Collecting History and Existing Collections

The collections at the Newton History Museum at The Jackson Homestead were begun in 1950 when the building was opened to the public as a historic house. At the time it was given to the City of Newton, the building was empty. Thus, objects thought to be interesting and complementary to the historic status of the house were sought after for display. Since there was no collections policy or collections plan to define collecting goals, some objects were acquired that had no connection to Newton, were duplicative, and/or were not of museum quality. In addition, antiques thought consistent with the early nineteenth century (the period in which the house was built) were purchased to furnish rooms.

Early collecting of documents included a variety of items such as prints, photographs, maps, personal papers, scrapbooks, books about Newton, and antiquarian books. With the exception of the antiquarian books, these materials form the basis of the local history collection that we have today. Although there was no collections policy or collections plan to define collecting goals, large portions of these materials fall well within the current policy. Antiquarian books with no Newton connection have been deaccessioned.

In the 1980s, self-scrutiny through AAM's Museum Assessment Programs (I and II) led to the realization that as a house museum, The Jackson Homestead could not successfully compete with other excellent examples of Federal house museums in the Boston area. Accordingly, the Trustees and the Directors voted to change the mission from that of a historic house to a community history museum.

The change in mission called for assessing and deaccessioning those items in the collections that no longer supported the mission. MAP II clearly urged the Museum "to identify and deaccession the large quantities of material which did not originate in Newton, were not used here at some point in the past, and are unlikely to be needed for future exhibits." Several rounds of deaccessioning, including significant quantities of furniture and costumes, have already taken place.

Today, the **object collection** contains approximately 12,000 items, including a wide variety of such artifacts as tools and equipment; clothing and accessories; textiles and domestic furnishings; art objects; toys, games and sports equipment; and many other objects relating to the Museum's interpretive themes.

Currently, due to lack of storage space, donations to the object collection are accepted in very limited numbers, and only if the items meet the mission, goals, and collecting criteria of the Museum. The only items actively sought for addition to the collection are those needed for specific exhibitions and programming.

The **document collection** is comprised of the following: the Newton Reference Collection and the General Reference Collection; Manuscripts and Photograph Collections, and the Historic Properties and Burying Grounds Surveys. The Newton Reference Collection currently contains approximately 300 books, including Town and City Reports, Newton Directories, books on Newton history, high school yearbooks, and City Atlases. The General Reference Collection contains approximately 1,000 books on museum and collection management, topics related to exhibition development such as abolition; suburban development; transportation; national, state, and local history; and genealogy. The General Reference Collection has been catalogued and is added to based upon research needs. Cataloguing of the Newton Reference Collection will be completed in 2006.

The Manuscript and Photograph Collections contain approximately 300 linear feet of unique manuscript and photographic materials, including a wide range of paper-based documents from Newton families, businesses, and organizations. The manuscripts have not been inventoried or catalogued, but there is a variety of finding aids to provide access to the material. There are an estimated 20,000 photographs, including several hundred examples of daguerreotypes, ambrotypes, and tintypes; 8,000 negatives; 800 lantern slides; and 10,000 35mm slides. Scanned and digital images are also being acquired.

The Historic Properties Surveys contain information on more than 6,000 properties in Newton. When available, historic photographs have been added to these files, making this resource one of the most heavily used in the collection. The Burying Grounds Surveys, which document the stones in all three historic burying grounds (East Parish, West Parish, and South) document the most fragile historic sites in the City and provide an important resource for genealogists.

Due to lack of storage space, donations to the document collection are accepted in very limited numbers, and only if the items meet the mission, goals, and collecting criteria of the Museum. The only items actively sought for addition to the collection are those needed for specific exhibitions and programming.

Analysis of Existing Collections

The Newton History Museum has a large **object collection** including toys and recreational artifacts, Newton business and organization-related items, family and home items, and a variety of other items relating to its interpretive themes, such as suburban history and the history of abolition. Many of these artifacts have a well-documented local provenance and fit in well with the Museum's current collecting themes.

The Museum's current collections, however, are far too large for its resources and are still primarily those of a historic house: domestic furnishings, textiles, and clothing. Significant portions of the collections do not relate to Newton, do not relate to any of the Museum's interpretive themes, and therefore do not support the Museum's mission. Moreover, many items are in poor condition and would require extensive conservation treatment prior to exhibiting them.

The Museum needs to expand its collections in the thematic areas that are under-represented, and reduce the number of items left over from its historic house phase. Collections must be carefully reviewed, and items that do not relate to any of the interpretive themes listed above, have no Newton provenance, and/or are in poor condition should be deaccessioned.

The Museum's **document collection** is substantive, providing an important complement to the collections in the Newton City Archives and the Newton Free Library. Strengths in the collection include manuscripts and photographs, maps, plans, City Directories, City Reports, Newton Historic Property Surveys and Burying Grounds Surveys. Unique manuscripts and early photographic materials such as daguerreotypes are significant components of the collection that do not exist anywhere else in the City. Creating the appropriate archival storage environment and pursuing essential preservation initiatives must be an ongoing priority if these rare and valuable materials are to survive.

Weakness in the document collection lies not in the materials, but in the lack of comprehensive intellectual access and control. Collections, particularly manuscripts and photographs listed and described on the Museum's website, draw long-distance researchers, further demonstrating the need for a full-scale cataloguing project and the value of outreach. Improving intellectual access and expanding storage space are essential for the use and future growth of the document collection.

Implementation and Evaluation

The Newton History Museum needs to transform its existing collections to better meet the needs of its audiences and to better interpret its identified Newton history themes. The Museum needs more space; staff, volunteer, and consultant time; and funds in order to realize its collections vision.

In March of 2005, the Museum completed a Preliminary Space Program Study with Solomon + Bauer Architects Inc. The study re-emphasized that the Museum's current collections storage space – 985 square ft. for objects and 414 square ft. for documents – is inadequate. The study recommended 2,400 square ft. for objects and 720 square ft. for documents. The needed space will be realized through a combination of deaccessioning to better store what the Museum already has and acquiring additional, museum-quality storage space to allow future collecting. The staff and board are currently studying storage options.

For the **object collection**, the costs of installing a high density/ compact shelving system in the Storage Garage will be investigated. This space is climate-controlled, and unlike the main house, has the cement flooring strong enough to bear the weight of such a shelving system. Moving more of the collection into such a space will alleviate some of the congestion in the main house storage areas, and improve access to the collection overall. The whole process of reviewing, refining, and deaccessioning will be greatly facilitated by enlarging the space in which to lay out and examine the objects. Currently, the space for such activity consists of one 8 ft. x 3 ft. table.

Over the past several years, inventory and cataloguing work has been completed for most of the collection, resulting in two computerized databases. The “Inventory” database is a listing by storage location, with very short descriptions (sometimes only an object name), and an accession number. There are currently 10,962 entries in this database (representing approximately 12,000 total objects). The objects catalogue (“ObjCat”) database lists the collection with more detailed descriptions, storage locations, accession numbers, as well as, condition reports, exhibition history, provenance, and classification headings. Total number of entries in “ObjCat” is 5,191 (representing 7,360 total objects). The latter figure includes 1,084 archaeological pieces excavated from TJH backyard all entered in one record (under one accession number).

Over the next few years, a careful review of the collection will be conducted to determine how well each object fits into our collections plan. Questions, such as, does the object have a Newton provenance and how well documented is it?; is it in good, exhibitable condition?; does it duplicate another object in the collection?; and/or does it relate to any of our interpretive themes? will need to be asked and answered for each object. Information recorded over the last several years in the inventory and cataloguing phase of the project will be an invaluable resource in making our determinations. Objects or sub-collections which may require outside expertise to document or assess will need to be identified. Costs of consultants, additional staff or volunteers will be investigated.

Once items are chosen for consideration for deaccessioning, the stringent guidelines of the Museum’s deaccession policy, as outlined in the Collections Policy, will be followed. Deaccession Worksheets will be completed on each object or group of objects. The Collections Committee and Joint Board will vote on whether or not the pieces should be removed from the collections and on the method of deaccession. The Museum hopes to be able to transfer many appropriate pieces to other educational institutions, such as museums and historical societies, which could better use them. A few pieces may be transferred to the Museum’s Education Collection, if appropriate, for use in programming. Other pieces may be sold at public auction.

To accurately assess the strengths and weaknesses of the object collection and make informed decisions about what to deaccession, it is important to complete the detailed cataloguing project begun in July of 2002. At that time, a full time Cataloguer was hired for a 3-year project. Much was accomplished during that time in gaining the intellectual control over the collection necessary to carry out the plans and achieve the goals outlined above. Funding for the full-time Cataloguer ran out in June of 2005, and several thousand items still need to be catalogued. The remaining cataloguing must now be completed by the Curator, currently working 15 hours a week, along with many other curatorial duties. The Curator’s hours need to be extended to full-time (or 25 hours a week, at least) in order to complete the cataloguing and achieve the goals outlined herein. Some tasks might be successfully delegated to a board member or trusted volunteer, but ultimately all will require curatorial supervision, oversight and follow-up. The Museum also may need to hire material culture specialists to assist in analyzing sub-collections for deaccessioning.

The needs of the **document collection** are similar to those of the object collection: safe and adequate storage and research space; additional staff time; and funds. The overriding issue is the need for intellectual access and control. Currently, a variety of systems provide access to the collection, but there is no comprehensive guide. Policies regarding scanned images in the document collection, intellectual access and copyright need to be established.

The Museum is promoting an initiative to create a searchable database that will combine the historical resources of the Museum's object and document collections, the City Archives, and the Newtoniana collection of the Newton Free Library. The City Archives portion of this project has been funded by the National Historic Publications and Records Committee (NHPRC); implementation will take place under the leadership of the new City Clerk in 2006. The Museum's document collection is a key element in this initiative; finding funding to catalogue the collection must be given the highest priority. In order to promote this initiative, a short description of each of the three collections will be developed, describing their strengths and showing how they complement each other. This will help potential supporters understand the value of the Museum's collections and their essential role in preserving the City's history.

The Curator of Manuscripts and Photographs is currently a 24-hour a week position and all curatorial, research, and reference work is done by that person in a single, all-purpose space. Volunteers can and do provide assistance, but accommodating additional people in the limited workspace is difficult. Additional staff time, preferably a full-time contract cataloguer, will be needed to undertake the essential cataloguing project. Private funding will be needed, as public agencies will not fund cataloguing projects for private collections.

Plans have been developed to convert the Jackson Room to a public reading room. This plan would provide the opportunity to ease some storage concerns for the document collection while providing a new opportunity for public access to the reference collections as well as space for an archives assistant or volunteer to work. Elements of this plan include:

- upgrading the file units and shelving on the north wall of the document storage area
- building book shelves in the Jackson Room, furnishing it with moveable/multi-purpose furniture and microfilm/fiche reader, and replacing carpet and wall-finish
- removing book collections from the kitchen area to new shelves in the Jackson Room, eliminating shelves on the south wall of the kitchen, and moving the refrigerator to the north wall in order to create a usable staff lunch area

This initiative could be undertaken with CIP funds or with private funds if they can be raised. (\$25,000 is budgeted in the CIP for archive renovation, but monies are dependent on the end-of-year surplus in the City budget for any given year).

While the Museum is in the process of refining its object collection, gaining intellectual control over its document collection, and obtaining collections space, acquisitions will need to be kept to a minimum. Priority will be given to those items that meet foreseeable programming and exhibition needs. Future collecting should concentrate on items needed to interpret the themes outlined above. The Collections Committee will meet yearly to identify collection items needed for upcoming programming and exhibitions, and to strategize on how to obtain them.

Progress reports on implementation of the Collections Plan will be reviewed by the Collections Committee at each meeting. The committee will meet every other month except during the summer (5 meetings per year). Additional updates may be circulated via e-mail when necessary. A more formal review of the plan will be undertaken annually to evaluate the plan's success, and make any necessary changes to the scheduling and staff assignments. The Collections Committee's review of the Collections Plan will be presented annually to the Museum's Joint Board.

Schedule of Revisions

Mission statement (Revised 2004)

Drafts I and II written by Sheila Sibley and Susan Abele (2005)

Revisions through 6/7/05 by Sheila Sibley and Susan Abele

Revisions through 12/31/06 by Eleanor Mish

Draft III written by Sheila Sibley (through 6/7/05), Susan Abele, and Eleanor Mish (January-February 2006)

Revisions through 6/6/06 by Eleanor Mish and Susan Abele