**Survey of Digital Media at the New England Historic Genealogical Society**

by Sally Benny (Assistant Archivist)

May 1, 2014

The R. Stanton Avery Special Collections at the New England Historic Genealogical Society (NEHGS) is responsible for the Society’s manuscript collection, institutional archives, and fine arts collection. Over the years, Special Collections has received digital media and born-digital files from both NEHGS staff and donors of manuscript collections, but no formal policy has ever been created for managing, storing, preserving, or accessing born-digital material. Born-digital files, and the associated digital media, have therefore been handled in various ways, depending on the collection, and the media and file formats involved. In some cases, digital media, like floppy disks and CDs, were stored in a different location from the rest of a collection. In other cases, digital media would remain stored with a manuscript collection. When possible, the Special Collections staff prints copies of the files found on digital media, so researchers usually use the printouts, instead of the digital media.

Since there was no defined procedure for handling digital media and born-digital files, the extent of our digital holdings was unclear. When the Jump In Too/Two survey was announced in November 2013, it sounded like a good opportunity to get better control over the digital media in our collections. With the assistance of other members of the staff, I located as many digital media disks as possible, in both manuscript collections and the institutional archives. I noted the original location of each disk, and rehoused the disks in archival boxes, designed for storing CDs, DVDs, and other optical media. The digital media rapidly filled fourteen boxes, each estimated to hold about 50 to 100 disks. The media found in the NEHGS Archives filled seven boxes, and the digital media from manuscript collections filled the other seven boxes. Since I was doing the survey on my own, I decided to focus on creating an inventory of the media found in the institutional archives. I am also on a committee that is creating a formal records management policy for NEHGS, and surveying the digital media found in the Society’s Archives was a good way to learn more about the records created by NEHGS staff in the past.

Before beginning the survey, I created a spreadsheet to record the details of each digital disk. I also wrote a brief instruction sheet, detailing how to fill out each column of the spreadsheet so that the data would be recorded consistently. I began the survey in December 2013, and completed it April 2014. The survey showed that the NEHGS Archives contains 554 pieces of digital media, including 50 5.25 inch floppy disks, over 170 3.5 inch floppy disks, over 300 CDs, and 1 Zip disk. These numbers include over 30 software installation disks. While many of these disks are likely to be discarded in the future, I am keeping them for the time being in case any of them will later be helpful in opening or converting the files found on the digital media. The disk labels indicate that the digital files were probably created between 1985 and 2012. The labels also indicate that the digital media contain digitized books, quarterly and annual reports to the Board of Trustees, drafts of books and articles, photographs, correspondence, membership records, library catalogs, and financial records. Some disks, however, were unlabeled or labeled very vaguely, so the contents are difficult to guess.

This survey was a helpful activity for the Special Collections staff. Locating and rehousing the digital media in our collection made it easy for the whole staff to see that there were many more disks than the staff expected, and more are likely to be found as collections are processed. The survey also showed that many of the disks found were 5.25 and 3.5 inch floppy disks, which are becoming difficult for modern computers to read. It is important that we create a strategy now for reading these disks and copying the contents to another storage medium. As part of this effort, we are working with the staff of the American Jewish Historical Society—New England Archives (also located in the NEHGS library) to create a digital curation workstation that both institutions can use to accession and preserve born-digital collections stored on obsolete media. The digital curation workstation is still in the planning stages, but the Jump In Too/Two survey was an important first step that showed us the need for this workstation. The NEHGS Special Collections staff will also create procedures for accessioning, storing, and accessing born-digital collections, so that digital media and electronic files are managed consistently in the future.