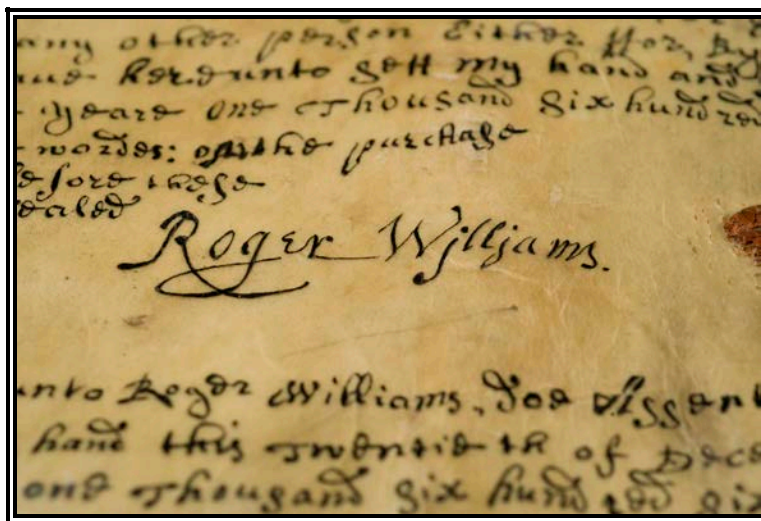




Providence City Archives Annual Report (FY 2012-2013)



The operations of the City Archives during the past twelve months was characterized by accelerating momentum in continuing to carry out the recommendations of the 2010 Council Commission on Archives and in developing new initiatives designed to preserve the materials entrusted to us and develop finding aids to make our collections available to a wide universe of users. Established in 1978, the Division of Archives basic mission is to acquire, preserve, and make available to the public archived municipal records and to supervise the city's records management program for non-permanent records. The division is currently staffed with an Archivist, Deputy Archivist and an Archival Assistant. The activities of the City Archives for the year are summarized below.

Physical Setting

Work carried out by the Department of Public Properties on the roof of City Hall seems to have eliminated the major leaks of water into the archives and its storage areas during periodic storms. Prior leaks caused water damage to photo collections stored in the mezzanine area as well as a number of reference books shelved along the archives' north wall. Despite this improvement, walls along the north, east and south sides of the mezzanine areas (just below the public research area) show evidence of major water

penetration over the years with large areas of peeling paint and plaster loss along these walls. The Archivist began working with Public Property on the feasibility of installing a temperature and humidity control system in both the research and vault rooms, however, a new development may make this effort unnecessary.

In May 2012 Mayor Taveras informed the Archivist and City Clerk that a local businessman had expressed great interest in providing the financial resources necessary to relocate the archives to a more suitable location. This major development could resolve the long standing issue of the unsuitability of the archives' 5th floor location for the storage of the city's irreplaceable documents. Archives staff members are currently working with the mayor and his staff in developing specific plans for this relocation. Concern over the safety and security of the city's historical records—its collective memory—has been a concern of local governmental officials and concerned citizens since the settlement of this city. The relocation of the archives to an environmentally stable, spacious, and secure facility would represent a historic fulfillment of that community desire to preserve this important part of its cultural heritage.

Finding the space necessary to store large volumes of current municipal records is an ongoing challenge. The archives staff continues its survey of stored records and we have been aggressive in destroying records that have exceeded their required retention. During the past three years this effort has resulted in the elimination of approximately 1,600 boxes of records from storage areas at City Hall or at our storage facility in West Warwick. In addition to saving money by reducing the volume of records stored, the archives was able to successfully renegotiate the storage contract with Cornerstone Records Management that reduces storage fees by more than 16% and fixes the per box storage fee for five years.

Other improvements at the archives included the installation of new shelving along the mezzanine storage area, reorganizing important vital record collections and placing them on the new shelving. New map flat storage cases were purchased for the better storage of blueprints, maps, and large drawings. We are also working closely with members of the Police Department to arrange non-permanent departmental records currently stored at the Chad Brown facility. We have also established a close working relationship with two dedicated police historians (retirees) and are assisting them in organizing the police archives. The current plan is to move much of this archived material to the City Archives.



A Before and After of the Upper Mezzanine above the Archive Reading Room

Despite this progress challenges remain. Some time ago archives staff visited the City Engineer's Office on Ernest Street to inventory records there and discovered a basement storage area with large volumes of early plans, correspondence and other material. Nearby, in the Traffic Engineer's Office, a second floor area is filled with an estimated 3,000 sets of early plans and elevations for municipal buildings.

Records Management & Cataloging

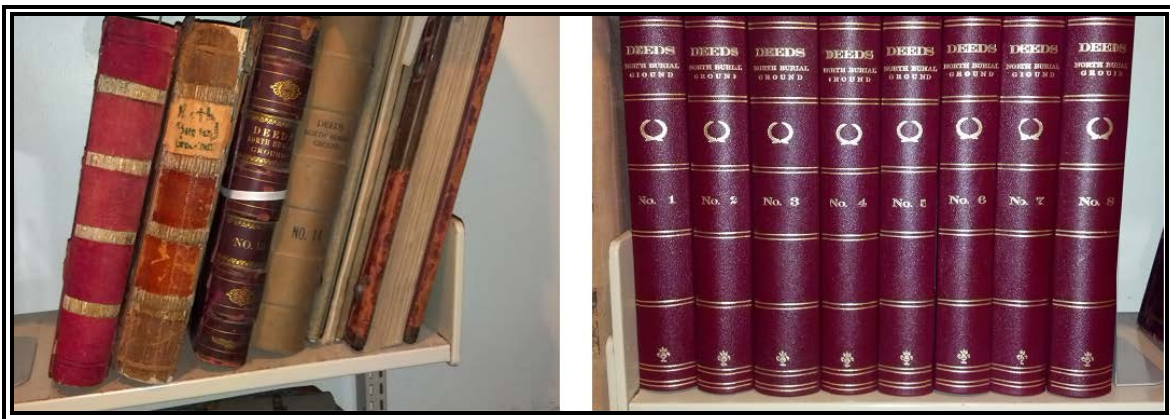
The City Archives supervises the records management program for the city and, as such, works with individual city departments in maintaining a sustained records management effort. It is estimated that 85% of records generated by municipalities are not permanent. Records Retention Schedules developed by the State of Rhode Island provide specific guidelines on when city records have exceeded their retention and consequently are eligible for destruction. Carrying out an effective records management program usually results in savings in storage and administrative costs. Currently, more than 6,000 boxes of city records are being stored at a facility in West Warwick, and the archives staff are currently reviewing all records stored there in an effort to eliminate records there that have exceeded their retention.

This spring we began working with the Providence School Department on conducting a complete review of the considerable volume of records stored in their warehouse and carried out a workshop with staff to educate them on proper procedures to reduce record volume there. We also trained Police Department personnel and continue to work closely with the Office of Building Inspection on a thorough review of their records. In carrying out these and other records management initiatives we have to date halted the growth of records storage volume in our off site records center.

Cataloging and the creation of finding aids is an essential function of archival administration. While we have been fortunate to have received a great deal of assistance from volunteers in processing collections (some stored in boxes for nearly two centuries), the sheer volume of the task requires an elevated effort. As a result, the archives staff in May submitted a \$190,000 grant application to the National Historic Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC) that will, if funded, make great strides in organizing, preserving, and allowing these historically valuable primary source materials to be available for research. Other grant opportunities are also being explored. This spring the City Archives joined the Rhode Island Archival and Manuscripts Collections Online (RIAMCO) consortium and will soon upload catalogued material onto a shared open source “ArchivesSpace” software platform.

Preservation

The accelerated effort to preserve archived records, some dating back to the 17th century, continues. Last year, three book binders, all based in Rhode Island, did a considerable amount of work repairing or rebinding a variety of books including vital records, 18th century town meeting record books, atlases, plat books and maps. Some of the city’s earliest records, including the 1637 civil compact are now being conserved at the Northeast Documents Conservation Center. A volume of early 19th century plat maps, which were in extremely fragile condition, were deacidified, old tape repairs removed and each plate placed in a mylar protective envelope. Ongoing minor repairs to individual documents were carried out by archives staff and volunteers. Sixteen volumes of early North Burial Ground deed books were rebound. This project was carried out in conjunction with an effort by Rhode Island Professor Francis Leazes who, with student volunteers, is developing internet based walking tours to the North Burial Ground. Our preservation initiative has been greatly supported by the Rhode Island Genealogical Society who has provided grant funding for restoration of the archives’ 18th century Town Council Meeting books.



A look at the North Burial Ground Deed Books, before and after being rebound

Digitization is another form of preservation in that it reduces handling of original materials and has the additional benefit of making records available to a wide audience of users. In June the archives launched its first large-scale digitization project in conjunction with the city’s Information Technology Department. At this time 45,000 Assessor’s “Field Cards” created in the 1960s are being scanned and shortly they will be

loaded onto the city's new Socrata software platform. Two other sets of cards (late 1940s and 1980) are scheduled to be scanned within the next year. Three other scanning projects are in the developmental stage. They are; 1) a collection of 1,500 photos taken of villages demolished in 1915-16 to make way for the Scituate Reservoir; 2) a collection of 6,000 urban renewal photographs from the 1960s; 3) a collection of 7,000 slides of Providence taken primarily in the 1970s.

The archives has been the recipient of several gifts of records during the past year that included Central High School Year books and the donation of 184 issues of a Providence newspaper dating from 1828-1830 by Dr. Patrick T. Conley. The archives also acquired 3 plat books depicting city-owned property hand drawn by draftsmen in the City Engineer's Office. These unique books date from period just after the Civil War.



Art Conservator, Alice Miles hard at work on the portrait restoration of Mayor Patrick J. McCarthy

Portrait Restoration Project

I am very pleased to announce that all mayoral portraits at City Hall have been conserved. This major achievement was made possible through the generosity of a number of individual donors, two grants, the corporate community and the leadership of Mayor Angel Taveras and Councilman Terrence Hassett who agreed to co-host a fundraising event that was held at GTECH Headquarters last September. The fundraiser, also attended by former mayors Vincent A. Cianci, Jr. and Joseph Paolino, Jr. raised more than \$10,000 to support the effort. More than \$25,000 was raised for the project. I would also like to acknowledge our volunteers—GTECH and Mayor's Office staff as well as a group of archives volunteers—that helped to ensure the event's success. A special effort launched by the Irish community and led by Dr. Donald Deignan made possible the restoration of the Patrick J. McCarthy and Edwin McGuinness mayoral portraits. Biographies of each mayor are being written and these will be placed adjacent each portrait. A special thanks also goes to arts conservator Alice Miles who worked

near miracles in restoring several badly damaged paintings and for her willingness to set up her studio here at City Hall so that the public could see her at work.



The three stages of Mayor McGuinness: Before, during, and after restoration

Volunteers & Interns

The archives has had great success in attracting a number of volunteers and interns to work on a variety of projects and with their help, we have made substantial progress in processing important collections of records that, in some cases, have been unavailable for research for nearly two centuries. Students at the West Bay Collaborative, LaSalle Academy and the MET School provided valuable assistance. A team of Brown University students created a special Civil War exhibit that was installed on the 2nd floor at City Hall. Eighteen students studying Public History at Providence College worked at the archives this spring, providing valuable service in processing 19th century city papers, inventorying the City Clerk's vault, research, and exhibit planning and design for an upcoming exhibit. Caleb Horton, a URI Graduate Library School senior, performed a 135-hour internship here, and we have begun a close collaboration with Rhode Island College. Ed O'Donnell, a retired teacher, continues to volunteer and is now reorganizing the archives' photo collections.



The City Archives has a full house as PC students put in volunteer hours late on a Wednesday evening

Outreach

The archives staff engaged in a number of activities designed to make the city's important collection of historical materials available to researchers. Our web site serves as a valuable platform for disseminating content such as new finding aids, news about archives activities, as well as posting historical essays on the city's history. This past year we began to upload historical photos from our collections and to date more than 500 photos from our collections can be found on the web site's Flickr page. The development of the web page has resulted in a dramatic rise in reference inquiries from around the world, however, the archives continues to maintain its reputation for timely response.

In November 2012, the archives launched its Facebook page as another element of our campaign to educate, make archival material available to users and create another vehicle whereby nearly anyone can contact the archives to seek help with a simple question or assist them with their research. Several months ago we launched a "Mystery Monday" feature on Facebook, and this has become a very popular feature on the page. The development of this social media site was developed by staff member Nathan Lavigne.

More than 1,200 patrons visited the archives last year with March 2012 being the busiest month. The mix of visitors included genealogists, house researchers, historians, architects, real estate developers, lawyers, title searchers, students and homeowners seeking tax and zoning information. Researchers came from a number of states and several foreign countries including Ireland and England. The archives staff also process city departmental requests on a daily basis. We also answered a number of requests via mail, telephone calls, and the web.

In 2012 the archives completed the construction of an exhibit area just outside the entrance of the archives and installed "Rhode Island in the Civil War," an exhibit

marking the 150th anniversary of the conflict between the North and South. In November, the archives hosted an exhibit of highlights from our collections that was carried out in conjunction with the New England City Clerks Convention held in Providence. Documents from the City Archives also appeared in a special exhibit on the Providence African-American community that was installed in a first floor exhibit area at URI's Downtown campus facility.



New Archives exhibit Area

The archivist conducted a number of tours of City Hall and gave talks at the John Hay Library, the Providence Arts Club and at the Annual meeting of the RI Genealogical Society. News articles on the City Archives appeared in the *Providence Journal*, *Rhode Island Monthly*, *East Side Monthly*, *the Providence Phoenix*, and the *RI Genealogical Society Newsletter*. The archivist also appeared on the WJAR TV and the Buddy Cianci radio show. Several new finding aids were also created and an illustrated *Guide to House Research at City Hall* was produced and is now available on our web site.

<http://www.providenceri.com/archives/finding-aids/researching-your-house-history>

This progress would not have been possible without the steady support of Anna Stetson, City Clerk, whose enthusiasm for the archives program and commitment to its mission is an important element of our success. Councilman Terrence Hassett's leadership in acting as a passionate guardian of the city's cultural assets deserves applause as does the recognition by Mayor Angel Taveras that City Hall, its unique mayoral portraits, and its valuable collection of the city's documentary history deserve to be preserved and shared. Our legion of volunteers, too many to name, provide the human and intellectual resources that propel us forward. Finally, Deputy Archivist Claire Bestwick and Archives Assistant

Nathan Lavigne are due a great deal of credit for maintaining a very high standard of service to our patrons whether they visit us here at the archives or contact us with inquiries from locations throughout the U.S. and around the world. With a great deal of confidence in the staff and the ongoing commitment of our governmental officials, I have no doubt that we can continue to build on the progress made here during the past year.

Paul R. Campbell
Archivist, City of Providence
July 19, 2013