

PROVIDENCE CITY ARCHIVES

ANNUAL REPORT 2023



The mission of the Division of Archives and History is to acquire, preserve, catalog, and make archived municipal records available and supervise the city's records management program.

The Division of Archives and History was established in 1978 by the City of Providence with financial assistance from a grant from the National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC). A professional archivist and staff were hired to begin collecting, cataloging, and arranging an extensive collection of municipal records and developing records retention schedules for non-permanent records. In 1983, a new Home Rule Charter went into effect, and among its provisions was the formalization of the Providence City Archives as a permanent division within the City Clerk's Office.

In addition to serving the records needs of various city departments, the archives are used daily by architects, engineers, lawyers, title examiners, historians, genealogists, and house researchers. Many school children, college, and university students utilize our collections, and we have hosted several tours of the archives and City Hall. The archives also host many historical exhibits in community libraries and City Hall.

In 2009, the Providence City Council created a special commission to examine the archival program and the storage of municipal records. In April 2010, the commission issued its final report, which included seventeen separate recommendations to improve the conditions under which records are stored, enhance security, accelerate the preservation program, and adopt strategies to coordinate the city's records management program better.

Currently, the archival holdings include nearly 20,000 cubic feet of records, blueprints, maps, atlases, and visual images that span the period from the arrival of Roger Williams in 1636 to the present day in various departments and buildings throughout the city. The lack of storage space at City Hall has necessitated the use of off-site storage. Approximately 12,000 cubic feet of records are stored at the public-facing office on the 5th floor of City Hall.

The City Archives employs five professionals: Caleb Horton, City Archivist; Britni Gorman, Deputy Archivist; Richard Izzi, Deputy Assistant to the City Archivist; Antonio Santurri, Reference and Research Administrator; and Adrianna Costa, Reference and Multimedia Administrator.

In addition to maintaining and making the city's permanent records available, the City Archives supervises the records management program. Given the continued proliferation of municipal records and the transition to electronic storage, this presents a significant challenge. Archives staff works closely with Rhode Island State Archives personnel to coordinate record retention strategies and destroy non-permanent records.

Collection Management

A part of the City Archives' mission is to make our city's history available. As such, the staff spends considerable time assessing and working with other city departments to archive their records. A primary goal in 2023 was to preserve and establish a home for archival police records.

The old Chad Brown Police Academy building has stored historical documents for several years. However, as the Police Academy has moved to the old Providence Water Supply Board building on Academy Avenue, the archives have worked with the PPD this year to move records to the new academy in a permanent archives room, with approximately 80 cubic feet and more of documents, ephemera, and items to be processed and cataloged. These historical documents have long since fallen out of usage or relevance to current police work. In their current state and housing, the documents and artifacts risk further deterioration (acidic folders, rusting staples, improper storage – i.e., boxes not meant to be stacked or papers squished into boxes.) Currently, the collection of the Providence Police Department is split between two locations: the City Archives graphics room and the storage above the area at the Academy.

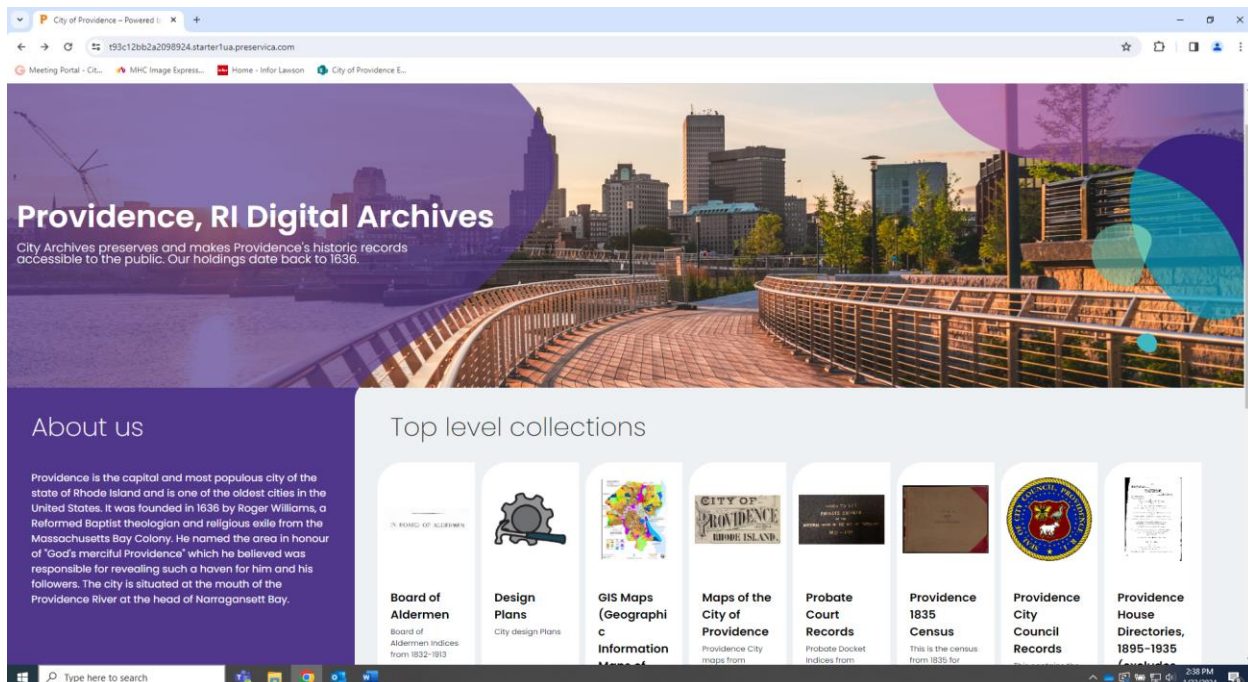
The Providence Police Department and the Newport Police Department are the only municipal Police Departments in Rhode Island to maintain historical documents to an archival standard (Newport PD is housed at the Rhode Island State Archives). With the current trend in historical scholarship toward social history (i.e., history from the bottom up or the history of everyday people) to the history of policing, these files are critical. From the Police archive, a researcher can write a history of the Providence Police Department, a day in the life of an officer from between the 1920s and 1970s. These efforts are partly thanks to the Providence Police Department and official Providence Police Historians (by general order) John Glancy and George Pearson.

The City Archives' goal is to one day establish a permanent police and fire museum and archives. Whether that may be at the home of a new City Archives building or a permanent home for the Providence Police Academy, it is the department's goal to work with the PPD to create a repository that can compare with the New York City Police Museum and can be utilized by the public, police recruits, and veterans alike. It could serve as a headquarters for community policing events and recruitment drives for the police and fire academy.

Digitization Projects

As of fiscal year 2023, through the present. The City Archives' major projects include bringing the department into the 21st century. This includes a significant digitization effort of the repository's collections. The goal is to electronically catalog these records and make digital content available online through the archives' website. This is possible in cooperation with IT and using professional software such as the ArchivesSpace cataloging program and Preservica, which archives digital records and media. The City Archives department obtained these much-needed programs in 2021 and 2022. This software allows the department to maintain and control the archives' collections and gives access to view what is available through an online public access catalog. So far, in the fiscal year 2023/24, with the help of professional interns, the archives have managed to complete the cataloging of most of its significant collections. Additional staffing has and will continue to make this goal achievable. Scanning efforts continue aggressively, including the probate court's collection of wills and administrations spanning nearly four centuries.

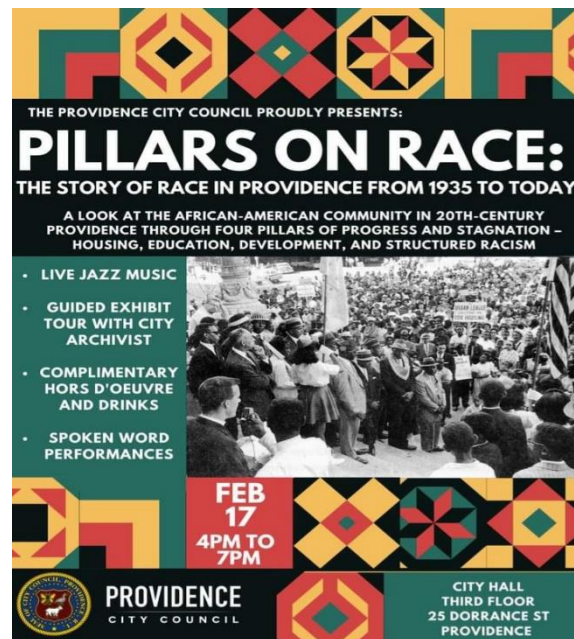
Over the last year, we have uploaded records for the Tax Assessor and added additional records for other departments. The archives were able to digitize the old Record of Deeds Plat Cards. These cards are instrumental in depicting the city before 1900. They are now available online on Preservica and through the Recorder of Deeds Office. The Archives is also pursuing digitizing the remaining City Council Final Papers from 1997-part to 2008. The Archives is also helping the Department of Inspection and Standards pursue a pathway to digitize their permits. from the 1980s-2010s.



The City Archives' digital content page hosted by the Preservica platform.

Exhibits and Public History

The Providence City Council and Archives hosted a total of four historic exhibitions showcased on the 3rd floor of City Hall. In celebration of Black History Month in February, an exhibit titled “Pillars on Race: The Story of Race in Providence from 1935 to Today” included curated exhibits focused on racial history in Providence, looking at the “Four Pillars of Progress and Stagnation,” which include housing, education, development and structural racism; an exhibit on elected Hispanic officials in the state of Rhode Island in celebration of Hispanic Heritage Month (Sept.-Oct.); and an exhibit showcasing veterans in Providence for Veteran’s Day (November 11th).



City Archivist Caleb Horton and Councilwoman Mary Kay Harris conducting an exhibition tour on opening night.



The 2023 Black History Month exhibit reported in the *Brown Daily Herald*



Veteran's Day Volunteers Caleb Horton, Bugler Ken Doyen, and Jason Roomes "present arms" as Ken plays Taps.



A Revolutionary War display on loan from Jason Roomes on the history of the 1st Rhode Island Regiment. This regiment consisted primarily of African American and Narragansett Native American soldiers – many from Providence.

The City Archives hosted its first Pride Month history exhibit in June of 2023 in partnership with Robb Dimmick and Ray Rickman of Stages of Freedom. Created by Robb Dimmick and with contributions from the Equity Action Fund at the Rhode Island Foundation and the Providence City Council. The exhibition, “Black Lavender: Black Gay Men in Rhode Island,” explores the meaning of being Black and gay in the Ocean State. Covering 100 years of history, the exhibit begins with Duke Hawkins, an African American waiter embroiled in the 1919 Newport Sex Scandal and, coming forward, others entangled in the legal system for their sexual preference. The bar scene, pride parades, politics, salons, theatre, and academia provide surprising windows into how Black gay men in Rhode Island have navigated the adversity – featuring artists, authors, and activists such as Joe Wilson, Jr., Rodney Davis, and Derek Livingston, and national heroes such as James Baldwin, Langston Hughes, and Countee Cullen.

This exhibit was a first in the City Archives and Providence City Council’s history and would not have been possible without the support of Council President Rachel Miller. The department is thankful for the council president’s support in allowing the City Archives to have a platform for presenting such an impactful social history. It will continue to do so every Pride Month, showcasing local historical LGBTQ+ topics.

The City Archives Department would also like to thank Councilwoman Mary Kay Harris for her tireless devotion to hosting and supporting our yearly Black History Month exhibits and Council Pro Tempore Juan Pichardo for hosting the city’s first Veteran’s Day exhibit.



Council President Rachel Miller (left) and Councilwoman Althea Graves (right) at the opening ceremony of City Hall's first historical Pride Month exhibit.

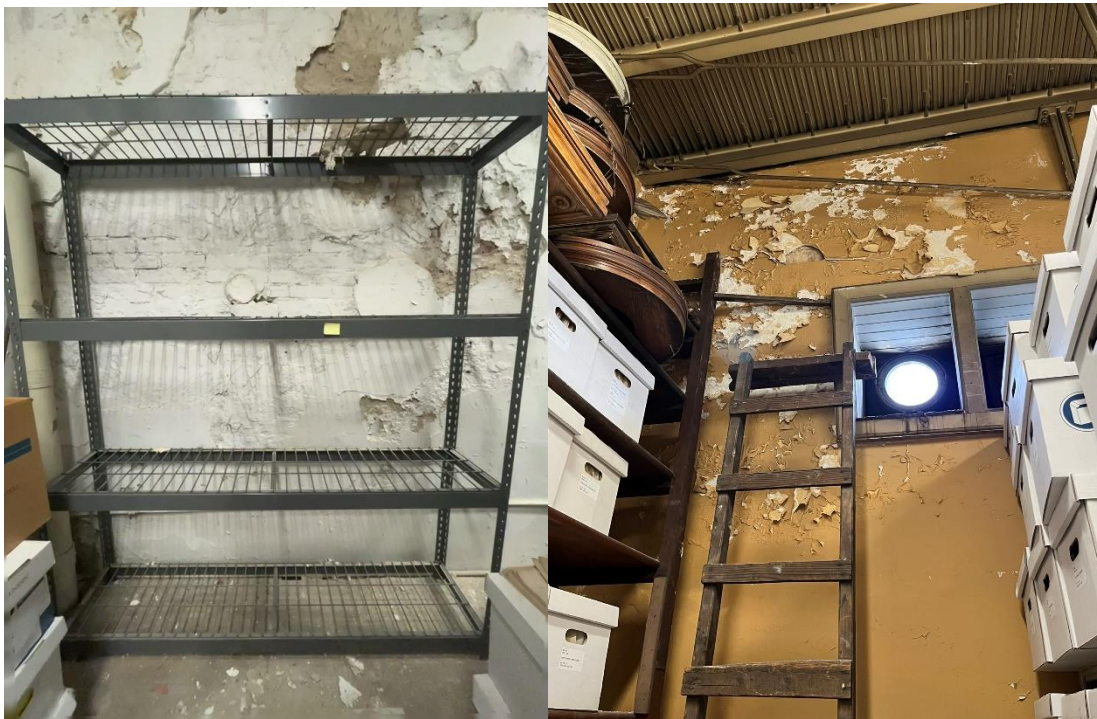


Exhibition designer/contributor Robb Dimmick lectured visitors and answered questions.

Facility Management

Structural conditions in the City Archives continue to deteriorate, including crumbling plaster and water leaks due to an aging roof. This is a great source of grief for the department and its effort to preserve the city's collections. The department's current goal is to continue preservation and access through digitization and reduce the volume of records kept on the 5th floor of City Hall due to the environment.

Attempts at moving the archives were made in the past, including an initiative in 2016 with the Rhode Island Secretary of State to move the department into a shared archival facility and state museum, which would include the Rhode Island State Archives, Rhode Island Judicial Archives, and Rhode Island Historical Society Library. However, this effort has not come to fruition. Efforts by current Secretary of State Gregg Amore are in the works to fund a new state archive and museum. Still, despite communications from the City Archives, City Clerk's Office, City Council, and Mayor's Office, it appears that the Secretary of State's Office is taking a different approach and will not include stakeholders as they had proposed in 2016.



An example of falling plaster in the archives dept.'s mezzanine area (right wall) and paint peeling caused by moisture in the City Clerk's Records Room of the City Archives.



An accumulation of plaster dust on archival documents and shelves from continued deterioration of the City Archives' mezzanine walls.

A significant goal since 2010 by the former and current City Archivist has been to move the archives to an adequate facility for storing and preserving records and an adequate public-facing office and reading room, regardless of a partnership with the state archives. As of this year, the City Archivist, City Clerk, City Council Office, and Mayor's Office are working to find a new location, including an attempt to occupy the old University of Rhode Island Library at the Shepard's Co. Building (80 Washington Street). However, after corresponding with the Rhode Island Department of Administration, the empty library is currently unavailable due to a "reconfiguration" of the building.

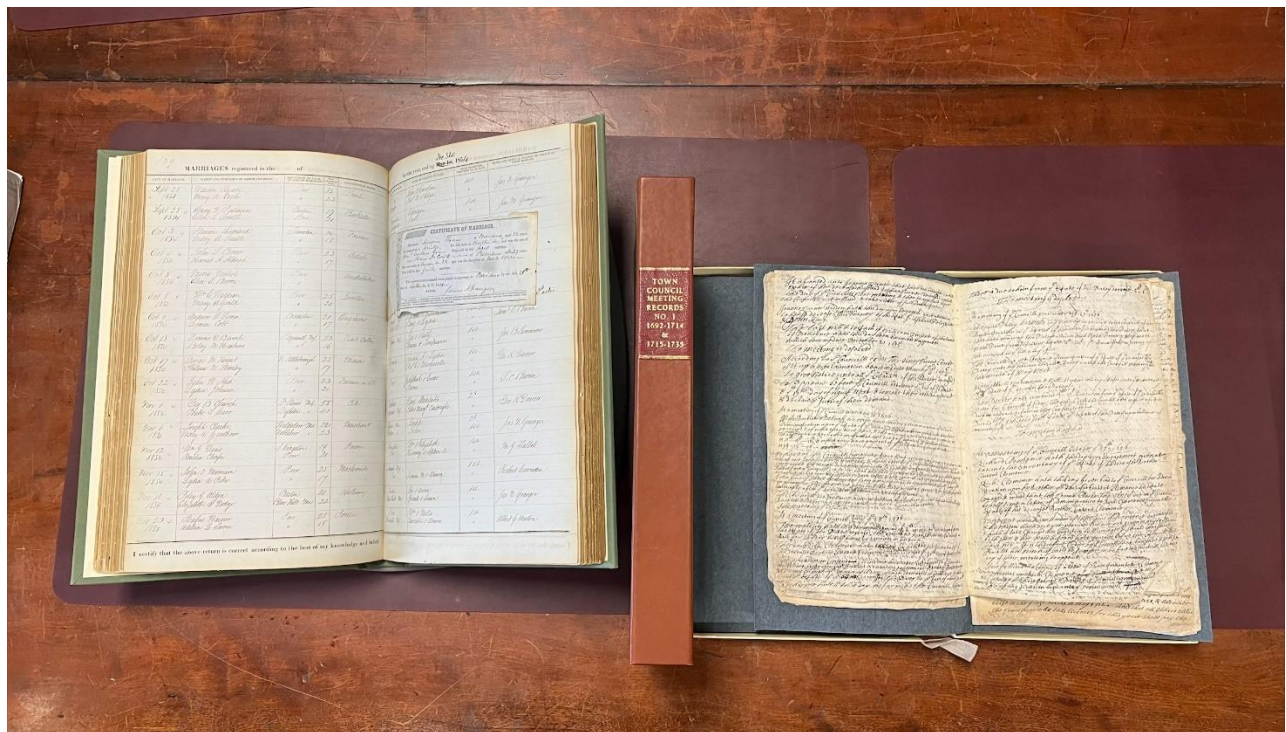
If a move cannot be achieved, significant renovations to the roof of City Hall must be made to repair the exterior walls of the archives' office. Once completed, an appropriate HVAC system for the repository's collections can be considered. Efforts to investigate and create new feasibility studies for the possible move or repair of the City Archives' current location must be a primary goal continuing into 2024, primarily as CIP funding has been allocated for fiscal years 2025 & 2026 for City Hall roof repairs.

Interns/Volunteers/& School Groups

The department's mission is to make the city's history available. The archives conduct tours and workshops for the public, primarily students. The City Archives conducted tours for STAR program students at the Providence Career & Technical Academy, Students transitioning to adult readiness at the Providence School District, and numerous tours for Brown University, University of Rhode Island, Providence College, Rhode Island College, and RISD students. Many of our interns come from these colleges and universities. Students of Library and Archival Science and Public History programs earn school credit by volunteering their services for the betterment of City Archives.

Preservation

This year, the City Archives repaired and conserved 12 vital record books and one Town Council Meeting Records Book from the late 17th century (see below).



The archives department strives to preserve and conserve as many records as possible and to teach other city departments basic preservation techniques for their records, which will someday become part of the city's archival collections.

Records Management Report

Over the last year, the City of Providence's records management program has grown extensively in outreach and consistent compliance with R.I. General Law 38. The last three years have provided time and the necessary training to allow the records management program to evolve to an appropriate level that would help the city's departments understand and maintain compliance. As of today, the City Archives has taken drastic steps to provide a more cohesive program that allows for ease of use and accessibility.

During 2023, the department's records management program increased participation from a dozen departments to over two dozen departments, plus divisions. These departments are actively maintaining and using the available records management resources. This includes:

- Iron Mountain (offsite records storage facility) and Iron Mountain Connect.
- State Retention Schedules will assist with the disposition of records.
- Contacting the Archives for additional information, guidance, and training.

With the increased participation in the records management program, the City Archives is also beginning to assist in transferring paper records to digital and helping maintain digital-born documents.

Records Management Improvements:

1. Active participation has increased, which allows departments to take responsibility and accountability for new and legacy documents.
2. Increased usage of Iron Mountain Connect has enabled departments to access their records continuously.
3. Increased awareness regarding record retention laws and the importance of disposition. This includes having over 200 boxes destroyed in spring 2023 and another 650-700 ready for destruction as of January 2024. This process has helped clear part of the dome and will clear several areas in the basement.
4. The unidentifiable boxes at Iron Mountain decreased by 22%. The remaining unidentifiable boxes will become part of a project to help identify the boxes.
5. Increased the number of staff training courses and meetings from 1-2 staff training a year and occasional meetings with departments to multiple training courses concentrating on the departments' needs and specific functions. Meetings are also on-demand. This also includes active training, with being onsite with the departments while they process through records and advising when necessary.

Additional Accomplishments

1. Secured a contract with ArchiveSocial (CivicPlus) to help monitor and archive the city's social media accounts. This software allows the city to archive and monitor all social media platforms. This also allows the city to comply with any Freedom of Information Act Requests (our APRA is also through CivicPlus.).
2. Secured a contract with InfoShred that will allow departments to complete disposition bi-annually and as needed with shred bins. The Archives also plans to coordinate all shredding activities under one contract, not multiple. This will occur as the department's contracts with other shredding organizations expire.
3. Internal implementation of Microsoft Teams to help improve accountability and workflow. This has also added to the tracking of our metrics throughout the year. This includes the number of patron and departmental requests we receive, tracking what type of records are requested with tags, the number of processed records, the number of cataloged records, the number of records digitized, and the number of records classified.

Closing Remarks

Despite the challenges of the City Archives' physical space, the department continues to prosper. It has made vast strides in its records management program, digitization efforts, and public history and outreach efforts. The City Archives will continue to expand these efforts vigorously.

A special thanks to City Clerk Tina Mastroianni for supporting the department's projects and continuing to work with the administration to find a new building for the City Archives or discuss plans to renovate our current physical space. We will continue our efforts to make the resources necessary to preserve and make available these irreplaceable manuscripts, books, photographs, and other objects that chronicle our city's past. We look forward to the future with a great deal of optimism and commitment to serve the city and all who seek to learn more about our city, its people, and its civic and architectural development.