

ARAC Meeting Minutes for 23 March 2023

In reviewing the Archivist's report, John McColgan and Archives Division staff summarized the work of the Division since the last meeting, while highlighting notable challenges and experiences.

Facility Issues

Reporting on facility issues, John provided an update on both the City of Boston Archives Center (COBAC) and EMT Training Center capital projects. First, John discussed the COBAC project addressing space depletion, described in the Archivist's report as "The most challenging issue facing the Archives ... a critical situation preventing the accessioning, preservation, archival processing and public access of thousands of cubic feet of non-current, permanent City records expensively and unproductively retained in department custody."

Recounting the origins of the Archives project, John noted that the "Boston Archives Preservation and Collections Storage Study", initiated in 2017, got as far as completing its first task, a space requirements study, which it completed with a report submitted in March 2019. With prodding from the Clerk's Office over the next two to three years, the City again picked up the project in early 2022 hiring Merge Architects as consultants. Merge expects to wrap up the design phase by summer 2023, with construction scheduled to begin in September, contingent upon approval by the Office of Budget Management. Under its construction phasing strategy, Merge sees the records storage areas environmentally upgraded and equipped with compact shelving within 153 work days, which could mean as early as May 2024 presuming budget approval and absent unforeseen hindrances. Further work in BPL areas and acquisition of a back-up generator and permanent AC equipment extends the project as a whole for another year, but current phasing has Archives and BPDA storage upgrades done in a little over a year. John asked the Archives Commission to consider urging the City to grant construction phase budget approval when the construction documents bid set is completed and brought before OBM for approval.

Regarding the EMT Training Center project, John commended PFD and the construction contractor for endeavoring to inflict minimal impact on the Division's work environment. Both have been consistently approachable and responsive to our needs, convenience and concerns. Also, the Division's space losses do not vitally impair its operations. At the same time, it is a construction project, and staff are performing their duties in a relatively intense construction environment. Workers may be up on ladders in office areas installing communication wires in the ceiling. In John's office in particular, the noise of hammers, saws, drills, and crowbars clanging as they hit the floor, waft intrusively through the walls and ceilings. Together with the banter of workers and the rap and reggae on their radios above our heads, the cacophony encroaches upon the serene ambience that would normally foster staff's intellectual productivity. John confessed to indulging a bit in the dramatic here, admitting that serenity returned around two o'clock when the laborers went home. He nonetheless hoped that our patience, fortitude and cheerful cooperation in the face of a construction environment have contributed to the smooth management of the project.

But then, once the project is done and the Training Center is up and running, nobody knows what will be the impact on the operations of existing tenants. The idea of putting the Training Center at Rivermoor was born among the upper echelons of City Hall without consultation with existing occupants. It is unclear how much consideration and thought the original City Hall planners gave to the possible

compatibility between a public safety training center and agencies responsible for preserving the City's cultural and historical legacy in this one building.

The Wu administration has at least given the green light to the design phase of the Archives Center capital project. It is vital now, as far as the Archives Division is concerned, for the Archives Center project to proceed with construction this year, and we hope that light stays green at the budget approval intersection.

Collections Management

Turning to collections management, Kristen Lafferty reported on the Division's preparations for compact shelving, and its recent accessions.

Kristen reported that in the past year the collections management program has focused mainly on planning for the high density compact shelving which is part of the upcoming capital project. Working with the project consultant we have quantified our needs for shelving and identified the different types of shelving we will need for the many different types of containers, formats etc. that we have. Also, in preparation for temporary relocation of the records during the construction phase, barcoding is under way for all storage containers. This has required shelf reading of all records cartons, ensuring locations are correct in ArchivesSpace and identifying uncataloged records and cataloging them. Shelf reading was completed several months back enabling records carton barcoding to commence. Records carton barcoding should be complete within the next month, when the task moves on to other types of storage containers, and thence to bound volumes. The high density mobile shelving will greatly assist us by increasing the amount of storage space, allowing us to properly shelf oversized volumes, plans etc. and reduce the physical demands on the staff retrieving and storing boxes. The new shelving will be single deep as opposed to the double deep shelving we currently have.

Despite storage space depletion, the Division still finds room for new accessions by shifting collections around, putting volumes in trays and consolidating boxes. Recent acquisitions include photographic negatives taken by Fire Department photographers from the early 1960s to 2000s. These include photos taken at fires as well as department personnel, events, and activities. From the former Traffic & Parking Department, we also accessioned microfilm of correspondence files and street files from the early 1900s to the 1980s. Valuable information is to be found in these files relating to work on streets and the history of streets. It is fortunate for the City's history to have found these reels, which had been sitting unused and forgotten in the department for many years. Journeying to Salem Kristen and Kayla also accepted records from Gray Architects which was going out of business. J.M. Gray was an architectural firm which designed many city buildings. The accession includes rolled plans, drawings and framed renderings of several City facilities including L Street bathhouse, Fire Headquarters, Long Island Hospital and Charlestown Housing Project.

John added that the most important and historical of our anticipated accessions are the early Town records that the library cares for in its Rare Books Department. Among the many proud accomplishments of the Library in its history has been the preservation of the City's records when the City Clerk and other departments lacked resources for their proper care and preservation. Prior to the establishment of the City Archives, the Library held such a volume of City records, from so many departments, of such diverse characteristics and needs, that their transfer would take place in a great many instances over many

years. Transfers large and small would take place in several initiatives spanning three decades. Between 1992 and 2019, the Library remitted to the the City Archives over 16,000 cubic feet in forty-five transfers.

Town records transfer will begin shortly with the return of the master microfilm of these records that were placed with the Library for safekeeping by the City Clerk in 1941. Archives staff will also soon be getting together with archivists in the BPL Rare Books department to discuss how the best interests of the records are served in the way forward.

Digital Archives

Moving on to digital records, John asked Marta Crilly to update the meeting on the management of our digital repository and its contents. Marta reported that she and Kayla have been working with DOIT to transfer, ingest, and process the google drives of Mayor Martin Walsh and Acting Mayor Kim Janey administrations. Google drive poses some technical challenges, but we've formed a good partnership with our colleagues in DOIT and have made good progress on ingesting and processing those drives.

They have also been working with the Photographers' office to standardize a transfer process for their photographs. One of the challenges with the Photographers' office is the ever increasing size of digital photographs, which poses a challenge for both storage costs and processing time. We've had a longstanding and positive relationship with the photographers' office and we've leveraged that to work out a transfer process that gets us a smaller quantity of quality photographs with good metadata

She and Kayla have also been working with DoIT to kick off a project to transfer and process City email from 2009-2013. This is about 4 tb of .pst files. The majority does not need to be kept, but we know that there are historically important records in that 4 tb, so we've been collaborating with DOIT on a project to identify the email that needs to be kept so that we can preserve that and destroy the rest – thus saving the City a fair amount of server space. We're working with our digital preservation vendor Preservica on this project and DoIT is funding that work, which is a big help to us. Once again, we're really happy with how we have been developing a really productive, collaborative relationship with DoIT.

Finally, we have continued to digitize materials and we currently have a harvest with Digital Commonwealth in progress. Our hope is that that harvest will be complete by the end of April but there have been some technical issues on their end that have been slowing things down.

Records Management

Kayla Skillin, Archivist for Records Management, provided an update on the ways we've been assisting departments to carry out their records management responsibilities. The Archives has provided consultation services for various departments including Boston Fire Department Arson Unit, Boston Public Library, Treasury, Transportation, City Council, Registry and the Mayor's Office. With the unusual circumstances of having three mayors in 2021, we have been working with the Mayor's Office to ensure that all appropriate records are retained, including both physical materials and born digital records. This involved coordinating with DoIT in order to initiate transfer of digital materials. The majority of records created by the Mayor's Office and Cabinet Heads are in their native, digital formats, thus increasing the need for budget investment into digital preservation and storage as more and more permanent records are in these formats.

In order to streamline the process of records destruction, and make it easier for departments to comply with statutory procedures for authorized disposition, we have worked with Dolt to create an electronic records destruction form using City-sponsored software. This past year, there have been 75 cubic feet of records approved for destruction.

We have also designed a database of department file plans, obviating renewal of the \$4,500 three-year contract with Virgo, and enabling us to put the money in the coming year's budget to more productive alternative use.

Reference and Access

Marta Crilly, Archivist for Reference and Access, noted that the construction in the building has impacted our ability to have in-person researchers. The temporary reading room capacity is three people. We've been increasingly busy with researchers, and we've had a significant number of research requests that require more in depth research. We've also been doing more in-depth remote research since we don't have as much room for people to come in and do their own research. While due to lower reading room capacity we may not reach the high numbers of FY 2022, we nonetheless expect over 2,000 research requests in the current fiscal year.

To deal with increasing reference requests, Marta reported working with the Mayor's Office to design a paid internship to assist with reference and access. Preliminary interviews conducted earlier this month have produced some good candidates, and we hope to give a local college or graduate student a paid experience in the public history and archives field.

Assistant Archivist Meghan Capone also commented on the reading room move into temporary space in the lobby due to the construction and its impact. The space is small and can only accommodate two or three at one time. Despite this, we've still been quite busy with appointments. Meghan has recently seen an uptick in genealogy requests and requests from graduate students. In the last two weeks she's had several requests for House of Corrections and House of Industry records. She also recently serviced someone researching tailors and dressmakers in Back Bay in the 19th / early 20th centuries, helping the researcher with tax records to track the businesses over time. Among the multiple reference appointments in recent weeks were students from a class Marta is working with at UMASS Boston about the history of Faneuil Hall. And among the wide variety of reference requests included requests for building plans, student records, city council, annual reports, tax records, and more. Additionally, in an effort to accommodate more requests while we have limited space we have been doing more in-depth remote reference and scanning records like yearbooks and reports for researchers.

Summarizing reference activity for the fiscal year thus far, Marta reported 1420 research requests and 167 in person researchers. Visitors to the digital repository have increased exponentially: as of this afternoon, numbers exceed 20,000 and are expected to surpass the numbers in FY 2022.

Grants

Marta reported on the two grant projects she initiated in the past few years and in recent months has ushered into fruition.

The Mary Eliza Project began with public humanities grant money from Simmons University. With the success of this pilot project Marta led the Archives' successful initiative to apply for a Community Preservation Act Grant. The \$78,000 grant award funded the transcription of the City's 1920 Women's Voter Registers into a searchable, sortable dataset. Thus, while the transcription of the registers is being paid for by CPA, the interpretative work – programming, blog posts, research etc. continues to be funded by Simmons. This project has been incredibly successful; we're getting both local, national, and international engagement which is wonderful. The dataset is also useful to a wide variety of researchers – genealogists, various historians, data scientists etc. The dataset we're creating is being used in classrooms around the country as well as by local Bostonians. This project has also given us the opportunity to do some really great public programming. We've been at the South End and Dorchester Historical societies. We'll be at the East Boston Library on April 1 and at the African American Historical and Genealogy Society.

Simmons also funded a faculty collaborative fellow to start work on the pre-1920 women's voter registers. They recently added a second fellow to do this. We released a preliminary batch of records in January and should have an additional release coming soon.

The second grant is the CLIR Recordings at Risk Grant, funding digitization of oral history recordings collected in 1976 as part of the Boston Bicentennial celebration. These recordings were in awful shape, and when our vendor NEDCC started transferring them, they ran into some significant issues. So we're very glad that we got this grant and had the money to go with a vendor that had the expertise to deal with these tapes. NEDCC used a number of experimental, groundbreaking methods on tapes exhibiting something called "soft binder" syndrome and were able to get audio off of all of them, even the ones in the worst condition. We are now processing and making these available in our digital repository. Currently the "Black Bostonia" recordings are available and the recordings from West Roxbury are about to be available. We're currently working on the Dorchester and East Boston recordings.

These recordings are rich for a number of reasons, but we're already doing a fair amount of outreach with them, even though they're in process. WBUR has highlighted two of the recordings; one of a nurse at Dr. Cornelious Garland's Plymouth Hospital, a groundbreaking Black Hospital in the South End. The other recording was featured on a WBUR piece about the pandemic and the Flu of 1918.

Archives Staff Reclassification

John offered his opinion that the need to reclassify Archives Division staff is the most important item in today's discussion. It would be impossible for him to overstate his appreciation for the professionalism, skill, dedication of everyone of these individuals. In all functions of the office, this team excels. Archives is a calling, and these people are all archival warriors. But as this report emphasizes, they do not get compensated for the full value of their labor. They aren't just "administrative assistants" and "analysts". These official City titles depreciate the value of their professional labor. Archives is a profession like law, science, education and medicine. Staff pay grade should reflect the professional value they render the City. He hoped that the Commission would consider passing a resolution supporting the reclassification of the Division's archivists to higher grades reflecting the professional qualifications and requirements of their responsibilities.

He also believed this be the appropriate moment to announce his retirement as of 31 March, setting off a wave of congratulations and praise from Commission members for his contributions to the City during his many years of service.

John's praise of the work of the Archives Division staff met with concurrence from Commission members, Henry Luthin stressing that reclassification to appropriate grades was "a matter of justice".

Alex indicated that he wants to undergo this process for the entire Clerk's Office in the coming year.

MBTA Bus Service

Alex mentioned he is working with the Mayor's Office and the MBTA in order to figure out a solution to the number 36 route changes that have been proposed. Service cuts that will seriously impact access to the Rivermoor Archives Center, forcing passengers to walk the better part of a mile of terrain hazardous to pedestrians.

Other Comments

Giordana commented that they are very happy about the focus we put on making records available.

David from the BPL said that while the BPL does have questions about the next phase in the renovation project, they do support the project moving forward beyond the design phase.

Paul said that he's enjoyed working with Kayla and Kristen recently and becoming more of the archives and what we do.

Alex mentioned that the whole City Clerk department will be doing reclassification likely next fiscal year and Paul from the registry offered to send Alex documents from the registry's efforts going through that process.

Alex also mentioned that there has been some acknowledgment/response from the mayor's office regarding the busing situation. David Leonard expressed support as the situation also affects library staff.