

Report on the Present Status

Providence City Archives

On May 21, 2009 the Providence City Council passed Resolution 258 calling for the creation of a “Special Commission to Study Archival Storage.” Subsequently, a five-member commission chaired by City Clerk Anna Stetson, conducted an analysis of archival operations, the records management program, as well as examining the conditions under which both archival and non-permanent records are stored. On April 27, 2010 the Commission submitted their findings to the City Council. Their report contained seventeen separate recommendations designed to enhance operational efficiency, improve environmental conditions in public and storage areas, enact security measures, and facilitate convenient use of the records stored there. In June 2010, Paul R. Campbell was appointed by the City Clerk as Archivist and given the task of implementing the recommendations made in the report. Presented below is an assessment of progress being made to date as well as some additional commentary on new initiatives being undertaken by the archives staff.

Recommendation

Relocate City Archives to a Cleaner, Accessible and Environmentally Stable Location

The Commission Report noted that the City Archives is situated in an area of the 5th floor of City Hall that is inaccessible to anyone with a physical handicap. In addition, both the public reading room and storage spaces were subject to recurrent water damage from rain and snow due to failure of roof drains, flashing and falling slate roof tiles. Damage to archival records and photograph collections was noted in several areas. Also, in many areas along the mezzanine and storage rooms there were visible signs of falling plaster and peeling paint. Given these conditions, the Commission recommended relocation of the City Archives as the most practical method of resolving the above-mentioned issues and ensuring a suitable environment for staff, visitors as well as the records stored there. Failure to implement some form of remedial action would, no doubt, result in loss or severe damage to irreplaceable city records. In addition, it was evident that regular dusting and/or general cleaning had not taken place in some time.

Relocation of the archives, however, has not been implemented partly due to the current lack of an alternative space as well as the city’s current fiscal condition. Given the reality of remaining in the present space, the Archivist initiated several steps to improve and/or stabilize the physical plant. The Archivist conducted a number of discussions with the Director of Public Property which resulted in a commitment to identify and repair roof leaks. This work was carried out in the fall of 2011. Both Public Properties and Archives staff are now monitoring the affected areas to ensure that no leaks reoccur. If no problems become evident, contractors will repair areas of fallen plaster and paint surfaces along interior walls.

In the summer of 2010, archives staff began a systematic shelf cleaning and purchased an air cleaner. Also, after exploring several temperature/humidity control options, the archives is

pursuing the purchase of a dehumidification system designed to stabilize the environment in the archives vault, public research area, as well as the mezzanine and contiguous storage rooms. Controlling humidity levels, however, offers only a partial solution. Optimal conditions require constant temperature and humidity levels (68 degrees F; 50% relative humidity) which would be costly given the present space.



Mezzanine Deck 2010



Mezzanine Deck 2012

The inaccessibility of storage areas within the archives was identified as a major area of concern. The Commission noted that several rooms, including the graphics storage area, were so crowded with boxes that entrance into the room was very difficult if not impossible. One “cell” storage room in the Atrium had been locked shut some time ago and the entrance key had been lost. Boxes were scattered about the corridors within atrium storage areas. More than 1,500 boxes of records were stored in basement rooms, some stacked on the concrete floor susceptible to flooding. Water damage was evident to records particularly in the so-called “Assessor’s Room.” Many mayoral portraits were found resting against damp and/or damaged walls along the archive’s mezzanine resulting in damage to canvasses and frames. Boxes lined both walls of the lobby entrance into the archives. In accordance with the Commissions recommendations, the archives staff has:



Graphics Room 2010



Graphics Room 2012

- Implemented a series of measures to improve storage conditions. Since June 2010 more than 1,000 linear feet of new shelving has been installed, principally in Atrium storage areas.
- More than 1,100 cubic feet of non-permanent records (mostly from basement storage rooms) have been destroyed
- A regular cleaning schedule has been implemented
- Plastic has been installed as a barrier to falling plaster and/or rain
- An interior gutter was attached to the north wall to catch rain water and direct it to a sink
- The Graphics storage room has been cleared of boxes and made accessible
- A storage corral for paintings was constructed and installed in the mezzanine
- All boxes were eliminated from the lobby entrance and this area has been transformed into an archive's exhibit space
- Assessor's records are being relocated to a dryer, cleaner area within the basement
- Conducted a condition survey of mayoral portraits
- Obtained cost estimates on portrait restoration



Atrium Storage 2010



Atrium Storage 2012

Recommendation

Provide Resources for the Preservation of Archival Material

The Commission observed that many of the archives' most valuable records were at risk due to adverse environmental conditions, improper safeguards to protect the records from theft, or lack of a consistent effort (partly due to lack of proper training) to carry out a sustained preservation program. These conditions led to the much publicized relocation of the Roger Williams deed in the summer of 2009 to the Rhode Island State Archives. Since the summer of 2010 a number of measures have been undertaken to protect and preserve the city's valuable collection of records:

- The Archivist conducted an analysis of current conditions and produced a priority list of records to be preserved and/or conserved
- Currently three preservation book binders are at work repairing damaged bindings and/or making repairs to manuscript maps or other paper records
- Staff has been trained in basic preservation techniques
- Archival acid-free boxes and folders are now used to store materials
- Important documents (including the recently discovered 1648 Providence Town Charter) have been conserved by the Northeast Documents Conservation Center
- Processed early Council and Aldermen papers that are being cleaned, "relaxed," indexed and placed in acid-free folders and boxes
- Volunteers are treating deteriorated leather bindings with a liquid stabilizer
- Restricted use/copying of fragile materials
- Began a program to encapsulate heavily used 19th century city atlas maps



**1875 Census
Before**



**1875 Census
After**



**School Reports
Before**



**School Reports
After**

Recommendation

Centralize Records Management within the Archives

The Archives Commission's analysis found that the city's records management program lacked a centralized system of non-permanent records retention and disposition. In many cases, individual departments of city government, lacking proper training, simply boxed records and transferred them to the city's designated storage facility. Equally concerning was the fact that many boxes lacked proper identification and little effort was made to destroy records that had exceeded their retention. The result was increasing storage fees as records accumulated at the storage facility. Also, more than 2,000 cubic feet of records had been stored in offices, the City Hall basement, along corridors and in the building's dome. Other repositories for municipal records at the City Engineer's Office, the Police Department (Chad Brown), the Planning Department, the School Department and the Traffic Engineer's Office were not investigated by the Commission.

Since June 2010 the Archivist has taken the following steps:

- Worked in conjunction with the Rhode Island State Archives in conducting training sessions for city departmental staff in records management procedures
- Supervised the centralization of municipal records management under the Division of Archives and Records
- Assigned the Deputy Archivist supervisory role as city records manager
- Initiated a systematic review of all non-permanent records with the purpose of destroying all records (pending final review by archivist) that have exceeded their state-mandated retention schedule
- Began a "retrieve and review" program with records currently stored in the off-site storage facility to identify and destroy records beyond their retention
- Both above-mentioned initiatives have resulted in the removal of more than 1,100 boxes of records during the past 18 months and have saved the city money in reduced storage fees
- Have established a close working relationship with State Archives and off-site Records Center staff to better facilitate the records management program
- Developed simplified records management guidelines for use by departmental staff
- All non-permanent records now labeled with predetermined destruction dates

Recommendation

Improve Document Retrieval, Accessioning of Incoming Records and Cataloging

The Commissioners examination noted the lack of approved standards in the basic cataloging of archival materials. In many cases items retrieved for departmental use or by patrons had accumulated in the reading room. A paper based card catalog was still in use. An earlier system of organization established by professional archivists in the late 1970s along with the production of collection's finding aids had fallen into disuse. Staff had begun conversion to an electronic based cataloging system, however, data entry does not conform with current archival cataloging standards. Most outside inquiries to the archives came via the postal service or e-mail. Although the City of Providence had created a web site more than a decade earlier, the archives still lacked a stand alone web site presence.

In addition, major collections of 19th and early 20th century City Council and Board of Aldermen records were scattered throughout the archives storage areas and were unavailable for research. During the summer of 2010 the Archivist instituted a program to recruit volunteers to begin processing these important collections. Close collaborations have been formed with the MET School, the West Bay Collaborative, and Providence College. A recent call for volunteers was highly successful, attracting librarians, a retired teacher among others to assist us with various tasks. Currently nine volunteers are working on various projects to improve access to the archives' collections.



19th Century Aldermen Records

Since the issuance of the Commission report the archives staff has:

- Phased out the paper based card cataloging system
- Explored the purchase of software to standardize electronic cataloging of records in conformance with existing standards (funding constraints have prevented purchase of the software).
- Re-instituted designation of standardized archival records organization to facilitate retrieval and accessibility of records
- Begun development of web based finding aids for researchers
- Created a city archives web site
- Re-established a records accessioning system for incoming records

- Recruited groups of volunteers to process major collections of City Council and Board of Aldermen records and recatalog the graphics collections

The Archives new web site has dramatically increased the number of inquiries being serviced by archives staff. These requests for information, coming from such diverse locations as Belarus, New Zealand and Japan, are both a welcome change and a challenge for us to respond in a timely fashion to the increased traffic.

Recommendation

Take Action to Improve Security

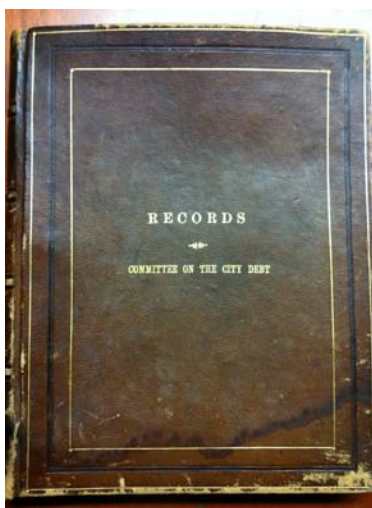
Commissioners noted that no security measures were in place to prevent the theft of materials from the archives. Patrons were allowed to bring bags and knapsacks into the reading room and were given free access to roam through shelving areas. Second egress door to telephone operators' room was left open allowing easy and unobserved access into and out of shelving areas. No security cameras were in place. It is noted, however, that security cameras are in place immediately outside the archives entrance area. No call slips were used to access archival material making it impossible to track usage.

A shelf reading of printed books was undertaken shortly after the arrival of the new Archivist. This inventory revealed the disappearance of several important books from the collection. Since the summer of 2010 the following improvements have taken place:

- A security camera has been requested for the reading room compliant with existing Labor Union contract requirements
- Lockers have been installed with the requirement that all patrons must use them
- A system of call slips has been instituted. This allows staff to trace the use of documents by patrons.
- Patrons are no longer allowed access to stack areas
- Second egress is locked when not in use.
- Staff must be present when maintenance cleans archives areas after hours
- Security copies have been assembled and moved to off-site storage
- Staff and volunteers track auction sites for municipal documents/records



On the last point, there have been two instances in the past year where alert friends and volunteers notified archives staff regarding city documents that were scheduled for auction. In one instance, stolen council papers from the Civil War period were returned following timely action by the Solicitor's Office and Providence Police after being alerted by Archives staff. A second incident resulted in the return of 19th century financial records working in conjunction with a cooperating local antiques auction gallery. Both staff and volunteers continue to monitor auction announcements and the Archives, working closely with the Solicitor's Office, will continue to use its legal authority if necessary to recover municipal records.



Returned Record Book

Recommendation

Develop a Disaster Response Plan

Archives staff was not aware that a disaster response manual had been formulated for the archives. The plan, dating from the early 1990s is incomplete and no procedures were in place in 2010. Since that time the archives has taken the following steps:

- Both Archivist and Deputy Archivist attended an all-day workshop on Disaster Response and Recovery
- In August the Archivist participated in a Disaster Response Training workshop
- The Deputy Archivist attended an all-day “hands on” disaster training exercise
- The Archivist attended a May 12, 2011 Security Training session at City Hall
- Archives purchased a disaster response equipment package
- Security copies of important documents have been moved to off-site storage
- Preventative measures have been taken to minimize potential of water damage from roof leaks
- Archives staff working to complete a formal Disaster Response Plan

Our recent training has been put to use on several occasions. On the weekend of October 27, 2010 a plumbing problem in a second floor bathroom caused severe damage to the offices of the City Engineer’s Office on Ernest Street. Archives staff, assisted by staff from the RI State Archives, took the lead in disaster response, drying wet documents, and assessing the value of a large number of records stored in flooded basement areas. On January 3, 2011 roof leaks in a storage area administered by the Recorder of Deeds office at City Hall caused damage to bound volumes of military pension and mortgage records. Another storm on April 1st damaged books in the archives printed collection. Books were dried using accepted conservation methods, however, some had to be rebound.



Water Damage



Leaks along Archives Wall

Recommendation

Explore Additional Funding to Support Archival Operations

In making their series of recommendations, the Commissioners worked under the basic assumption that funding to undertake many of the improvements needed for the archives would not be available via increased financial support from the city. The Commission’s analysis detailed a number of alternative financial resources from federal, state and private agencies that could provide funding support for various archive’s initiatives. Following his arrival, the

Archivist developed a strategy to secure funding support that contained three basic elements; 1) follow up on federal and state grants identified in the report; 2) seek support from the corporate community, private institutions, non-profits, and individual donors; 3) secure volunteers to accomplish tasks in lieu of scarcity of funding opportunities. Actions taken thus far are:

- Met with members of Congressional delegation to specifically identify federal funding opportunities
- Partnered with Brown University on a federal grant to digitize a portion of our map collection
- Secured small grant from the National Park Service
- Awarded a \$1,000 grant from the RI Genealogical Society
- Two donor commitments made to date to seed the mayoral painting restoration effort
- Preparing federal NHPRC grant to catalog and restore sewer plans, maps and other large format plat plans
- Worked with MET School and West Bay Collaborative who supplied volunteers for records processing projects
- Providence College graduate student in history recruited to process early town/city records
- General volunteer solicitation resulted in recruiting a corps of nine volunteers who are working on a variety of projects
- Secured funding for a collaboration with Brown University that resulted in the installation of an exhibit at City Hall in the summer of 2010
- Commitment from the Rhode Island Department of Transportation for the purchase of a map/plan storage cabinet



Volunteers at work

The above-mentioned collaborations with the MET School, Providence College and West Bay Collaborative have been mutually beneficial and are expected to continue. In addition, other area colleges have expressed interest in supplying interns and/or work study students to assist the archives. The Archives is also in preliminary discussions with the University of Rhode Island's Graduate Library School with a view towards supplying library school students to assist with

accelerating the archives' cataloging effort. A concerted effort has begun to raise the funds necessary to underwrite the cost of restoring 16 mayoral portraits in need of restoration. Mayor Taveras has agreed to act as honorary chairperson for this campaign. The Archivist is also confident that recent positive news accounts regarding the archives, our presence on the web, and well received speaking engagements all serve to raise the profile of the program and will result in attracting additional funding support.



**Cherry Bamberg (left)
representing the Rhode Island
Genealogical Society presents a
check to Paul Campbell and City
Clerk Anna Stetson**

Other Improvements Utilizing Technology

The Archives has increased its effort to utilize technology to make records more readily available for use by other departments of city government and the general public. Two new computer stations were added in 2010 and are now used primarily by volunteers for processing records and creating electronic finding aids. Also that year a city archives web site went on line. The site provides a wide variety of information on archival collections, offers news on current activities, and allows inquiries to the archives to be sent via the web site. This has resulted in an increase in the number of research requests, some contacting us from such diverse locations as Belarus, Scotland, and New Zealand.

The archives now has "wi fi" capability which allows archives' visitors the capability to conduct searches on line.

This spring the archives purchased a flat bed scanner which will serve a variety of purposes including preservation scanning of fragile documents, digitization of historical photos for inclusion on the archives web site, and also allows archives staff to copy and e-mail documents electronically. In addition, the archives recently established a Flickr "Photostream" account linked to the web site that will allow us to load thousands of historical photos from our collections on to subject file galleries for use by anyone. The acquisition of a new color printer will also add to the archives patron service capabilities.

Making collections available to a wide audience is a central mission of the archives and the utilization of electronic technologies and social media will help facilitate this process.

Education and Outreach

In December 2010 the Archives set a recent record for attendance in a single month. City departmental staff, genealogists, those conducting house research, and title searchers comprise the bulk of archives customers. Other users include architects, lawyers, engineers, historians, preservationists, archaeologists, and state agencies. Student use has seen a steady and dramatic increase. College students from virtually every educational institution in the state have visited the archives in groups to tour the facility and many have returned to use archival collections for research projects.

Local school children are also discovering the archives as well. During the summer of 2011 a group of middle school students worked in the archives as part of an effort to develop a historical walking tour of Smith Hill. Another group of students from the city's West End found our collections valuable in producing a resource book on their neighborhood.



**Archivist Paul R. Campbell (left)
with 5th Grade Student Amadou
Kaba and his father Mamady.**

The Archivist has conducted frequent tours of City Hall and the archives and has worked with staff in the Mayor's Office to develop a new self-guided tour of City Hall. He has also delivered several talks before the RI Genealogical Society, the Providence Art Club and at the John Hay Library to better educate local residents on the value of the city's archives. These talks have resulted in donations to the archives in both funding and historical documents and photographs.

The city's 375th anniversary of its settlement offered another opportunity to promote the archives. In the spring of 2010 the archives partnered with Brown University's John Nicholas Brown Center in producing "Capital Ideas"; an exhibit detailing visionary plans and ideas for the city that never became reality. The exhibit was located on the 2nd floor at City Hall and was seen by a number of visitors that summer. A narrated version now appears as a YouTube video.

Recently, the lobby entrance to the archives has been transformed into an exhibit area and the “Capital Ideas” exhibit has been re-installed there. Currently, the Archivist is collaborating with Brown University on a new exhibit commemorating Providence’s participation in the Civil War. The exhibit opening is tentatively scheduled for May 2013.



New Archives Exhibit Area

The Archives also worked with more than 20 area historians to produce an essay series on various aspects of the city’s history. A number of these essays appeared on the Commentary pages of the *Providence Journal* and have been uplinked to the City Archives web site.

Recent Discoveries

Shelf reading, cleaning and reorganizing efforts have resulted in some surprising discoveries. In October 2010 staff members conducting a survey of storage areas in the basement of City Hall came across 30 boxes of early town and city papers that included original manuscript Revolutionary War era town meeting records. The following May, the Archivist discovered the original Providence Town Charter (March 1648) in a remote corner of the archives. This important historical document, written on deer skin and signed by one of Providence’s earliest settlers John Warner, had been lost for 170 years. Twelve canvass bags of parking meter coins stored in the archives for nearly 60 years were recently analyzed by coin experts and were found to contain rare tokens and silver among thousands of foreign coins. Among a box of books sent to the archives recently from a city department was a manuscript tax ledger dating from 1780. Other surprising discoveries are bound to be made as we continue processing collections and reorganize archival collections.



Recently Discovered 1648 Town Charter

Conclusion

Substantial progress has been made in carrying out the recommendations outlined in the Commission Report. Deputy Archivist Claire Bestwick has been particularly helpful in implementing the plan to centralize records management operations. Despite these improvements, much remains to be done. The archives facility remains in a location that presents substantial challenges to optimal operational efficiency. The reading room is still inaccessible to those with physical disabilities and analysis has shown that installing both temperature and humidity control systems would prove prohibitively expensive. Making substantial progress in cataloging collections using nationally recognized standards will require grant or other funding support that the city cannot presently provide. Additionally, stabilizing the important collection of more than 3,000 blueprints and plans will necessitate both substantial funding and relocation of the collection to a more favorable storage environment. Assessing, organizing, and properly storing large collections of municipal records stored in the basement of the City Engineer's Office, warehouses at the School Department and at the Police Department's Chad Brown facility, presents a major challenge given the present staffing at the archives. Although repairs have been carried out along leaking roof areas, falling plaster and peeling paint along the mezzanine walls and in the graphics room remain a problem.

We are, however, confident that with continued help from our volunteers, supporters and donors, the leadership role taken by City Clerk Anna Stetson and City Councilman Terrence Hassett in providing support for the above-mentioned improvements, that the City Archives will become a more valuable resource for the citizens of the capital city and those who seek our services from around the globe.

Respectfully Submitted,

Paul R. Campbell
City Archivist
January 31, 2012