



## The Municipal Archives of the City of New York

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**I**th some 100,000 cubic feet of civic documents, vital and building records, libers, films and photographs, New York City's Municipal Archives is a magnet for researchers. Among those who benefit from centralized access to the wealth of material deposited in the Archives by city government agencies are genealogists, urban scholars and architectural historians.

Determined researchers have always managed to locate the dispersed collections, but use increased substantially after their 1984 relocation in the Surrogate's Court landmark building. At 31 Chambers Street in the heart of the civic center, the Archives' permanent quarters comprise climate-controlled storage facilities, state-of-the-art conservation, microfilm and photolaboratories, and a well-lit, comfortable reference room that welcomes the public.

Though New York's Archives boasts the largest collection of any U.S. city government, the best measure of it is its use by researchers and city officials. Genealogist B-Ann Moorhouse, urban scholar Timothy Gilfoyle, architectural historian Regina Kellerman and a former Department of Parks and Recreation historian, Ethan Carr, are profiled here, with their "working papers".

**When two-year old Patrick O'Brien's mother died in New York Hospital during the yellow fever epidemic of 1798 and his father was on board a frigate, what became of Patrick?**

Genealogist B-Ann Moorhouse had begun researching her family tree as a teenager in Pennsylvania. When she and her family moved to Brooklyn, she researched in the local historical society, tracing her Moorhouse ancestors who had lived in New England. But to sketch a picture of the maternal side, she needed a New York City repository since her great-grandparents had been born in Manhattan. In the 1960s, she consulted the Municipal Archives' huge libers listing births, deaths and marriages-today, researchers read microfilm copies at 31 Chambers Street. Continuing to mine the Archives' vital records, she drew the family trees of over 400 Irish-Americans. Currently, as a professional genealogist, she supplements the vital records with legislative papers dating from 1647, early nineteenth-century court files, the Almshouse collection and the minutes of the predecessor of the Board of Health--the Common Council Committee on Health. According to the Minutes for 1798, young Patrick O'Brien was cared for by the Almshouse.

**Why was there a sharp rise in violent attacks on prostitutes and their brothels between 1832 and 1838?**

Loyola University assistant professor of history Timothy Gilfoyle was a senior at Columbia College, attending Professor Kenneth Jackson's seminar on New York History in 1978, when Professor Jackson used the Archives as an object lesson in primary sources. Five years later, Ph.D. candidate Gilfoyle spent months immersed in 100 years' worth of Mayors' papers, testing the feasibility of his thesis topic. Published in 1992, the 630-page manuscript, "City of Eros: New York City, Prostitution and the Commercialization of Sex, 1790-1920" not only draws on the Mayors' papers but also on the Archives collections of District Attorneys', Police Court and Court of General Sessions records. The cases of *People v Chichester*, *People v Boyd*, *People v Hyer*, and *People v Roberts*, among others in the District Attorneys' indictment records of 1832-1838, persuaded Timothy Gilfoyle that the era's brothel riots multiplied as "Some men found the increased economic and social power of prostitutes threatening. And others intended to shape and control commercialized sex, resorting to terror when necessary."

**When bulldozers threatened world-famous SoHo cast iron architecture, what did preservationists rely on to help rescue building?**

Architectural historian Regina Kellerman began to use the Archives in 1962 when she was the first research director for the city's Landmarks Preservation Commission. Nineteenth-century tax records of great documentary value were then scattered among various agencies; researchers had to guess the right source and request the agency's permission to consult them. These records are now largely consolidated in the Archives, where Regina Kellerman teaches Columbia University graduate students the research methods essential to their use. In the early '70s when city planners advocated razing SoHo, she led a research and documentation effort aimed at preserving the area's cast-iron heritage. On the basis of evidence discovered in the Archives' collections of tax assessor's records, Buildings Department plans and docket books of the last century, the SoHo-Cast Iron Historic District was designated--thus preserving what is now recognized as the world's finest collection of

cast-iron structures. During her tenure as executive director of the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation, she directed another search of the collections to document 356 buildings in the oldest part of Greenwich Village, the waterfront.

**How can we be sure that the crumbling details of Central Park's Bethesda Terrace have been authentically restored?**

City Parks historian from 1985-87, Ethan Carr furthered the task of locating and conserving all Parks Department records as far back as 1858. When, in late 1986, he directed municipal archivists to an obscure storeroom, they rediscovered Parks Commissioner Robert Moses' files for the years 1934-60. The invaluable 25-year record, in precarious condition, needed a safe home, accessible to researchers. Archives staff appraised the 700 cubic feet of records and directed their boxing and transportation to the Archives. But Moses' files are not the only Parks Department treasure in the Archives' care. Over 2,000 original nineteenth century ink-and-watercolor drawings by the landscape designers and architects of New York City's entire parks system were accessioned in 1981. Catalogued and conserved at the Archives, the same drawings used by the masons and stonemasons who built the architectural heart of Central Park in the 1850s made possible the authentic \$4.5 million restoration of Bethesda Terrace, completed in 1987.

## Municipal Archives Collections

**Almshouse, 1758-1953**

Admission, discharge, census and housekeeping records for municipal institutions (Almshouse City Home hospitals) located on Blackwell's (Welfare) Island

**Assessed Valuation of Real Estate  
1789-1979**

Annual record of property assessment for Manhattan, 1789-1792, 1794, 1795, 1799, 1802, 1806-1978/79; Bronx, 1898-1961/62; Brooklyn, 1866-1974/75; Queens, 1899-1975/76; Richmond, 1899-1970/71.

**Brooklyn Bridge, 1867-1938**

Original construction and subsequent alteration plans.

**Department of Buildings, 1866-1975**

New building and alteration applications (including plans) for Manhattan buildings (Blocks 1-968 only); Manhattan Borough application docket books, 1866-1959.

**Census**

MANHATTAN 1890 New York City (Manhattan only) "Police Census." Listed according to address, the census recorded the name, age, and gender of each resident, including children.

BROOKLYN New York State Census, Kings County, 1855, 1865, 1875, 1892, 1905, 1915. Not indexed; listed according to ward, and/or assembly district, and enumeration district number. Recorded name, family relationship, gender, age, nativity, occupation, and citizenship status. No mail search service available.

RICHMOND New York State Census, Richmond County, 1855, 1865, 1875, 1892, 1905, 1915. Not indexed; similar as Kings County Census above. No mail search service available.

**City Council, 1647-1977**

Proceedings, resolutions, minutes, accounts, petitions, correspondence of Dutch (New Amsterdam) and English colonial governments; New York City Common Council, Board of Aldermen, and City Council.

**City Directories**

MANHATTAN 1873-1913, 1915-1918, 1920, 1922, 1924, 1931, 1933

BROOKLYN 1796, 1802, 1811, 1822-1826, 1829-1910, 1912-13, 1933

Listed alphabetically by last name, head of household (male adults primarily; women usually only if widowed), his or her occupation, home address and/or business address. No mail search service available.

**Coroner, 1823-1918**

Inquests, records of death.

**Courts, 1684-1940**

Indictments, case files, docket books for criminal courts: General Sessions, Police, and Magistrate's Courts.

**District Attorneys, c. 1790-1966**

Indictments, case files and docket books for New

York County (Manhattan) District Attorney, 1790-1966; Kings County (Brooklyn), 1940-1945.

**Genealogy, 1795-1956**

Birth, death, marriage records (see Vital Records below); 1890 New York County Census; city directories; voter records.

**Mayors, 1849-present**

Subject files, departmental and general correspondence, scrapbooks, photographs.

**"Old Towns", 1663-1898**

Local government records of cities, towns and villages in areas of Westchester, Queens and Richmond Counties prior to consolidation with New York City.

**Department of Parks, 1850-1960**

Original plans for Central Park and 80 other New York City parks, 1850-1934; Department of Parks central files, 1934-1960.

**Photographs, 1889-1956**

- Borough President Manhattan (1915-1949); Brooklyn (1918-1956); Queens (1889-1950): depictions of street, highway, sewer and public works construction and repair.

- Department of Bridges/Plant & Structures, 1901-1938: bridge and public works construction and repair photographs.

- Department of Docks and Ferries/Marine and Aviation, 1901-1970: waterfront scenes, airport facilities.

- W.P.A. Federal Writers' Project (NYC Unit), 1936-1943: photographs assembled for New York City Guide and other Project publications.

- Mayor's Office, 1934-1993: official ceremonies, special events, celebrities.

- Department of Sanitation, 1900-1970: street cleaning equipment, facilities, departmental activities.

- Brooklyn Law Department, 1935-1945: photographs of buildings condemned for the construction of the Brooklyn/Queens Expressway.

- Department of Public Charities and Hospitals, 1900-1960: buildings, staff and inmates/patients in city institutions.

- Please browse through some our photographs relating to the centennial (1998) of Greater New York.

• Department of Taxes, 1939-1941: photograph of every building in the five Boroughs. Known as the "Tax Photographs," these black and white pictures were taken by the City's Department of Taxes (now called Department of Finance) as part of its real property appraisal system. There is one photograph for each building in the five Boroughs; vacant land was not photographed. If you would like to order a photograph of any house or building, please use the following order form. You may download the form and edit it in overstrike mode or print it blank and fill it out manually. If you do not know the block and lot number of the property, provide the street address and a brief description; e.g. 4-story brownstone. The cost is \$25 for an 8"x10" print and \$35 for an 11"x14" print. You may also visit the Archives to view the photographs on microfilm free of charge. Please call 212 788-8580 if you have any questions. Search service for a copy of a TAX PHOTOS ORDER FORM.

#### **Vital Records 1795 - 1948**

The Municipal Archives holdings include all the extant vital records for the five boroughs of New York City as well as for some of the towns and villages which were consolidated with the City in 1898.

All our records are available for research in the Municipal Archives Municipal Archives Reference Room, open Monday to Thursday, 9am to 1pm.

Search service via mail is available for birth, death, and marriage records. You can download a form to apply for a copy of a birth, death, or marriage certificate.

#### **WNYC, 1936-1981**

Films (1949-1981) and lacquer phono discs (1936-1963) produced by municipal radio and television station WNYC.

#### **W.P.A. Federal Writers' Project (NYC Unit), 1936-1943.**

Manuscripts, research materials, photographs (see above); Historical Records Survey.

#### **N.B.**

The foregoing is not a comprehensive listing of all collections. Span dates provided above do not necessarily reflect dates of particular series within a collection. Certain restrictions and special conditions may apply to collections listed above. Please consult an archivist for further information.

