

The City of Newton: A Survey and Inventory of its Historical Records

CPC staff note:

The full final report of this survey is online from the CPC's "City Archives" project web page.

Selected pages are included here as background for Archives Strategic Plan (pre)proposal.

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Water Damage and Mold

Water damage was observed throughout the storage rooms in the City Hall, from the basement to the second floor. Approximately a year ago, after two heavy, consecutive rainstorms, the water table rose and offices and storage rooms in the basement of City Hall were inundated. Offices were evacuated for over four months while the damaged areas were repaired. Some storage areas were affected and many records had to be destroyed. Some of the records destroyed in the flood were permanent ones. While many areas were cleaned extensively, in others record cartons still sit on the floor showing evidence of past water damage.

Water damage was also observed on the first floor, particularly in rooms used for by Veteran's services and the Licensing Board; on the second floor in the storage areas used by the Solicitor's Office (the room behind the Aldermanic Chambers; and in the Ladies' Room opposite Room 214.) In addition, standing water was observed in the Boiler Room (on the floor) and in a sink in a storage room in the basement used by the Planning Department.

Although portions of the basement are air conditioned, there is no climate control. A vent pipe is uncovered in the Engineer's "cage" in the basement, and vermin or insects could easily enter the area, and infect not only that area but adjacent ones. Many records stored in the basement and other areas have obviously sat on shelves uncovered for long periods of time and are extremely dirty. Many show evidence not only of dirt but of mold. It is difficult to eradicate the latter and very likely that a mold could bloom and spread with the environmental conditions observed.



Water damage in City Hall: Above, standing water in the boiler room; at right, in a room used by Veteran's Services, plaster has fallen from a water-damaged area.



Damage was observed in other areas used to store records. The Solicitor's Office uses a shelf in the ladies room opposite its office; the ceiling there shows past evidence of water damage. (Below, left.) The walls and ceiling of the Inspectional Services offices have also been damaged by leaking water (Below, right.)



In early September, when Hurricane Irene threatened to hit New England, areas in the basement were sandbagged so that water would not reach the hallways. While the basement did not flood, the roof above the storage room used by the Solicitor's Office (behind the Aldermen's Chambers) did leak resulting in damage to record cartons stored there.



Recommendations:

Overall:

1. The City of Newton needs to develop a comprehensive archives and records management program such as exists in other municipalities. A good example is the City of Boston, whose “Office of City Clerk Archives and Records Management Division (the “City Archives”) develops and implements citywide policy and procedures for the systematic management and disposition of all the municipal government records of Boston. As per statute, chapter 68, section 6 of the Acts of the Commonwealth of 1988 these records include those of “any city department, agency, board, office, commission or public corporation.”
2. The City of Newton needs to begin planning to create climate controlled, secure storage space for its archives and departmental records. The archives area in the Newton Free Library is full. There are currently more historical records held by City departments than are in the City Archives. Given the current conditions, particularly in the City Hall basement storage areas, it is only a matter of time before there is a devastating loss--not only of historical records but also of the records that departments need to function. In the short term, options such as storing records off-site should be considered.

Specific Recommendations:

- i. The City should move toward centralizing its archives and records management functions. This is particularly important as departments move towards scanning and digitizing records. An archivist/records manager working with the Clerk’s Office would ensure that this process would proceed with the greatest efficiency.
- ii. The Clerk’s Office, the Jackson Homestead, and the Newton Free Library should work together to ensure they are not collecting overlapping materials. In particular, the Jackson Homestead and the Newton Free Library should amend their collections policies so they do not collect documents that are, according to Massachusetts law, the responsibility of the City Clerk’s Office. This of course, may only be done if the Clerk’s Office has appropriate personnel and storage space to carry out this mandate.
- iii. Improve finding aids: the Clerk’s Office, Jackson Homestead and Newton Free Library need to work together to create finding aids to their collections which are accessible to researchers. It would be ideal if there was one place that these could be published and the creation of an on-line archives should be considered.
- iv. Systematically destroy obsolete records that do not have historical, administrative, fiscal or legal value. Many storage areas are filled with records that have passed their retention period and could be destroyed after applying for permission to do so from the Secretary of State’s Office.
- v. Some of the City’s “at risk” records are those which are not listed as requiring permanent retention on the State’s Schedules. However, these files document the history of the City of

Newton, and many should be retained. It is recommended that a group of historical “stakeholders”--working with an archivist--be appointed to discuss and make recommendations about which of these records document the City’s history and should be kept. Departments holding large amounts of these records include: the Executive Office, Health and Human Services, and the Planning Department.

- vi. Create a disaster plan for records so that in the event of a flood or other disaster, a recovery plan is in place.
- vii. Seek out and collect the records of departments that do not have many historical records; encourage departments to collect materials that document their department’s history and activities.

At Risk Records:

Immediate attention should be given to projects that stabilize and improve the conditions where the following records are stored and/or to preservation and conservation of the records themselves:

- a) the approximately 100,000 sets of plans that Inspectional Services has stored in the basement of City Hall. These date back to 1911; most are blueprints, are rolled (they should be stored flat), fragile, and extremely dirty. On visits to this area, mold was observed on the records and on the walls;

- b) records stored at offsite locations, particularly in the records storage room used by Public Buildings, Health and Human Services, and the School Department. All of these have substantial numbers of historical records;

- c) Archival records stored in the basement areas of Newton City Hall. These areas include those containing: records of the Election, Engineering, Planning, Comptroller’s Treasurers, and particularly the Executive offices;

- d) Archival records of the Veterans Services and Licensing departments on the first floor of Newton city Hall;

- e) the Engineering Plans & Maps--a proposal has been submitted to preserve and digitize these records. This is a worthwhile project which would protect materials that are used on a daily basis that area also historically important. However, the records listed in a--d above are at greater risk of destruction due to the extremely poor conditions under which they are stored.

- f) Artwork: several pieces of artwork were found during the course of this survey, and they should be transferred to the City Archives.



Community Preservation Program

Newton City Archives

- location: City Hall, Newton Free Library & Jackson Homestead (Newton History Museum)
- goals: Preserve archival material held by all City departments, including but not limited to the City Clerk, City Engineer, Newton Free Library, and the Jackson Homestead (the City's history museum, as a partner in Historic Newton), by providing state-of-the art, climate-controlled, fireproof, accessible storage; and by preserving fragile or frequently used historic documents digitally, physically, or both.
- funding:
 - \$194,581 CP funds appropriated & spent (historic resources)
 - \$20,000 CP funds requested (historic resources)
- contacts: See individual projects below
- total projects: 4 (listed below in reverse chronological order)

City Archives - Survey & Strategic Plan

- goals: Survey and make strategic recommendations to preserve the historic records held by all 25 City departments, using an appropriate combination of facilities improvements and electronic scanning, and make these records accessible for research.
- funding:
 - \$44,000 CP funds appropriated & spent (historic resources)
 - \$20,000 CP funds requested
- contacts: David Olson, City Clerk
 Newton City Hall
 1000 Commonwealth Avenue
 Newton Centre, MA 02459
email: dolson@newtonma.gov
phone: 617.796.1210

Proposal Review & Appropriations

survey

19 August 2010 [survey proposal](#)

NOTE: This proposal is cosponsored by Historic Newton (specifically, by the Jackson Homestead as the City department in that public-private partnership) and by the Newton Free Library.

14 October 2010 [CPC funding recommendation](#)

15 November 2010 [Board order](#) (appropriation)
strategic plan

3 June 2013 [strategic plan pre-proposal](#)

Project News

6 December 2011 [City Archives Survey - final report](#): *The City of Newton: A Survey and Inventory of its Historical Records*

City Archives - Engineering Plans & Maps

goals: Preserve and digitize the oldest and most fragile engineering maps and plans that the City is legally required to retain. The project will provide backup records as part of disaster recovery planning, and reduce the chance of further deterioration caused by active use, and allow access to the data from these maps through the City's geographic information system.

funding: \$1,903,000 CP funds requested (historic resources)

contacts: Darrell Azure, Engineering Archivist
Newton City Hall
1000 Commonwealth Avenue
Newton Centre, MA 02459
email: dazure@newtonma.gov
phone: 617.796.1027

Proposal Review & Appropriations

15 October 2010 [proposal](#)
[project manager's qualifications](#) (submitted separately)
[photos](#)
[letters of support](#)

17 November 2010 public hearing [presentation](#) (includes photos, may load slowly)

On [18 May 2011](#) the Community Preservation Committee voted to reject this proposal and require a revised pre-proposal by whatever deadline applies to the fiscal year in which this project is identified as a priority in the City's *Capital Improvement Plan*.

<http://www.newtonma.gov/gov/executive/cip/default.asp>

City Archives - Combined

goals: Preserve digitally and physically, as appropriate, archival material

held in the Special Collections of the Newton Free Library, and partially duplicated in the vaults of the City Clerk and collections of the Jackson Homestead/Newton History Museum.

Specific collections covered by this proposal include: city directories from 1868 to 1934; 19th-century photographs of Newton Corner, Nonantum, the Nathaniel Allen House and from the Newell family; the original draft ms. of Samuel Francis Smith's 1880 History of Newton; and 1845-87 materials from the Eliot Church.

funding: \$36,545 CP funds appropriated (historic resources)
 \$7,860 unspent funds returned
 \$28,685 CP funds spent

contacts: Ryan Hanson
 Assistant Director, Newton Free Library
 330 Homer St.
 Newton Centre, MA 02459
 email: rhanson@minlib.net
 phone: 617.796.1404

Proposal Review & Appropriations

16 October 2009 [proposal](#)
 Oct - Dec 2009 [letters of support](#) (incl. review/determination by Newton Historical Commission)
 18 November 2009 public hearing [presentation](#)
 7 January 2010 [supplemental information](#) requested by CPC (long file, may take a while to load)
 2 February 2010 [CPC funding recommendation](#)
 15 March 2010 [Board order](#) (appropriation)

Project News

September 2010 [digitizing historic city directories:](#) request for proposals
 April 2011 Full text of city directories online (1868-1934) from City Clerk's genealogical research webpage:
 <http://www.newtonma.gov/gov/clerk/geneo/default.asp>
 In addition to names & addresses, directories list residents' occupations and information about the City budget, schools, clubs, religious institutions, and many other aspects of community life. Starting in 1889 you can use the "house directory" section to find out who lived in your house, how they were related to each other, and what they did for a living.
 Don't miss the advertisements, like the 1868 one for the drugstore at Centre & Elmwood, where "Foreign leeches will always be kept on hand."
 19 September 2011 [request for revised scope](#) (no additional funds requested)

October 2011 The historic documents, city directories, maps & photos preserved through this project are now online at Digital Newton:
<http://guides.newtonfreelibrary.net/digitalnewton>

This online archive documents Newton's social, cultural and governmental past, with a special focus on the 19th through the early 20th century, a time when Newton was transforming from agriculture to industry and becoming a suburban Boston residential community. Please browse the collection online and leave your comments. Your input can help shape the future of this valuable community resource.

6 December 2011 [project final report](#)

City Archives - City Clerk

goals: Preserve archival material held in the vaults of the City Clerk and City Engineer by providing climate- controlled, fireproof storage facilities, additional shelving to improve access; and preserving documents in danger of deterioration or loss, both digitally and physically.

funding: \$151,846 CP funds appropriated (historic resources)
 \$15,257 unspent funds returned
\$136,589 CP funds spent

contacts: David Olson, City Clerk
 Newton City Hall
 1000 Commonwealth Avenue
 Newton Centre, MA 02459
email: dolson@newtonma.gov
phone: 617.796.1210

Proposal Review & Appropriations

October 2006 [proposal](#), both parts
 9 November 2006 [presentation](#) (PowerPoint)
 21 February 2007 [CPC funding recommendation](#), part 1
 17 April 2007 [Board order](#), part 1 (appropriation)
 December 2007 [proposal](#), part 2
 23 January 2008 [presentation](#), part 2 (PowerPoint)
 14 April 2008 [CPC funding recommendation](#), part 2
 19 May 2009 [Board order](#), part 2 (appropriation)

Project News

January 2009 City Clerk's genealogical research webpage:
<http://www.newtonma.gov/gov/clerk/geneo/default.asp>

Including full text of birth, marriage, & death records and links to City directories.

January 2009

City of Newton's historic maps webpage:

http://www.newtonma.gov/gov/it/gis/historic_maps.asp

including:

- town maps: 1831, 1848, 1855
- insurance/tax atlases with parcel boundaries, platted subdivisions (including some that were never actually built), building footprints & materials, and owners' names: 1874, 1886, 1895, 1907, 1917, & 1929
- 1892 map of wetlands and streams
- 1921 zoning map (Newton's first)