

## CHAPTER 3

# Law Libraries

*I learned law so well, the day I graduated I sued the college, won the case, and got my tuition back.*

**Fred Allen**

Of my 50 years in library school, five of them were spent in academic law libraries. I had computer skills, particularly in online catalogs, that made up for my total cluelessness about legal scholarship. This is a common situation in law libraries, where the reference librarians usually have their doctorates in law and the technical services people do their technical thing. You may be curious about someone who spent three grueling years learning the law and then did not practice it. I was curious, but the common answer is that they did not really want to practice and were happy to have a good steady career for life.

### **NEW YORK COUNTY COURTS PUBLIC ACCESS LAW LIBRARY**

Address: 80 Centre Street, New York, NY

Telephone: (646) 386-3715, current information line at (646) 386-3713

E-mail: [rparenti@nycourts.gov](mailto:rparenti@nycourts.gov)

Access: Reference library available to the public

According to Library Director Richard Parenti, state law mandates that each county provide a public access law library for its citizens. I made an unannounced visit to the library in January 2015 when I was in Lower Manhattan to see the American Society of Numismatics Library. Subways are somewhat near, but still entail a bit of a walk. The nearest subway is a 5-minute walk to the No. 6 station at Lafayette and Canal Street or south to the City Hall station. These are best if you are heading to Grand Central. If you want to go directly to Penn Station, it is a 10-minute walk northwest to the Canal Street station of the A, C, and E lines or the Franklin Street station on the No. 1 line. There are bus lines in the area serving Worth Street, but past experience has been that they are as rare in Tribeca as Red

Sox fans. The building is an imposing marble structure that was built during the reign of Governor Al Smith.

After going through intense scrutiny at security, I took the elevator up to the fourth floor and made my way to the northeast corner of the building. I talked to the assistant, who told me that the director would be in soon, so I looked around to get the feel of the place. The library is neatly kept, with its estimated 5000 volumes in ranges of uniformly bound legal volumes. Along the south window, facing Worth Street, there is a table loaded with current issues of New York law newspapers. There are a dozen or so long wood tables, and there were several patrons seated around the room, intent on legal discovery. In the east window, there is a view to Columbus Park, an area that is much better known for its previous name—Five Points.



Research area facing Worth Street.

I sat down at one of the public computer stations and found them to be well equipped with databases, including Lexis, WestLaw, New York Courts Database, Loislaw, and New York Law Journal. Printing is 25 cents per page.

Eventually, Library Director Richard Parenti arrived, and we made plans for me to make a formal visit, which happened about two months later. This time when I went through security, the guards confiscated my cameras, since the building contains a number of courtrooms, and cameras are not allowed in New York courts. I decided to stay quiet about that and just see what Parenti wanted. He thought that I should definitely be able to take

pictures, so he called his boss, and worked his way up the chain of command until a decision was made much higher up that I should be allowed to take a few pictures, as I had done at every library but one so far. Minutes later, the captain of the guard himself came up to deliver my cameras. There were smiles all around.



Richard Parenti, library director.

Richard is a quiet and intense man with a somewhat understated sense of humor. He told me that the library has been going for a bit more than 10 years—founded shortly after the state mandated that every county maintain a law library with full access to the public. This access is a very big thing to Parenti, who told me that lawyers usually have well-stocked libraries in their agencies, but working citizens with legal problems have far fewer options for information. However, there are limits—“We don’t do any reference over the telephone.”

When I was in library school, our main professor drove one thing into our heads: “Librarians are the bridge between people and the information they need.” This seems to come second nature to Parenti, as he showed me a flyer that is handed to would-be patrons who visit the library after hours. It gives the addresses and phone numbers of other law libraries in the area with longer hours, such as the legal collection at the New York Public Library Business and Industry Library on 34th Street.

Beyond that, he also wrote the *New York City Legal Assistance Handbook*, which aspires to be a source for any question a person would have when embarking on a legal reference quest in the city.

I asked about any famous persons who had used the library, but he said that most famous people would tend to send surrogates in to do their research for them, but that one had been somebody accused of supplying drugs to a movie star who had died of an overdose.

He had a more ready answer when I asked about the library's flagship holding. He went over to the ready reference shelf and pulled out a copy of West's volume of landlord/tenant law in New York. "This is something that gets used virtually every day here. Judges specifically recommend this library as a place for combatants to get this kind of information."

I asked which system they use for their online catalog and was told that it was supplied by OCLC. Importantly, since the library has no Web page that I could find, access to the catalog was available only to users inside the library.

## **LIBRARY: QUEENS SUPREME COURT LAW LIBRARY**

Address: 88-11 Sutphin Boulevard, Room 65, Jamaica, NY 11435

URL: <https://www.nycourts.gov/library/queens/>

Telephone: (718) 298-1206

E-mail: [law\\_library\\_queens@courts.state.ny.us](mailto:law_library_queens@courts.state.ny.us)

Access: Open to the public

Transportation: LIRR Jamaica station, E subway line three blocks south of the library, or F subway line, Sutphin Avenue station, two blocks north of the library

This library is on an upper floor in the county courthouse, and past experience had told me that I might not be able to take pictures, and this turned out to be true. On the other hand, I got a good feeling about the visit when the policeman who was working security at the entrance went out of his way to tell me what a great library this is. Despite the fact that I visited on relatively short notice, librarians Denise Naya and Kellie Adams were very helpful in giving me all the information I needed. I was told that the library had been run for decades by a librarian who retired just a few years ago, and it was a shame he was not around to talk to me.



Exterior of the Queens courthouse complex.

It was a shame about photography, because this was one of the more attractive law libraries that I have seen. A sign outside the door makes sure that there is no doubt that everyone is welcome in this library.

As you walk in, there is a circulation desk in the center of the room, and the reference desk is past that, along the windows facing Manhattan to the west. The room is very neatly arranged, with reports from all states shelved along the north side of the room and an equal area of New York materials. On the south side, they keep treatises and regional reports. I was told that the volume count was about 100,000, arranged in Library of Congress order. Of this, there was no one volume they could point to as their most prized possession.

To the right of the reference desk, there are several terminals providing a generous selection of legal tools, including LexisNexis, Westlaw, Loislaw, and HeinOnline. Sirsi/Dynix is the vendor for their online catalog, which includes a smartphone application for frequent searchers. A link at the bottom says that you can use this to search the catalog on Facebook and on a smartphone application, but those did not work on the day I tried them.

With its pleasant Old World look and wood paneling, the library is the image of what a law library should look like, so it is no surprise that it has been used to film motion pictures in the past. In answer to the question about famous visitors, I was told that they were visited by Burt Pugach,

a lawyer who hired men to throw lye in the face of his ex-fiancée Linda Riss. He was convicted and served 16 years in prison. When he was released, he married Riss, even though the attack had left her blind in one eye and seriously impaired in the other. Their story inspired the film *Crazy Love*.

Even though the laws mandating county law libraries did not begin until 1946, the Queens library had begun years before in Long Island City. The current building was a product of the Works Progress Administration. With its Greco-Roman exterior, it is a major signpost for people arriving at the Jamaica railway station from the west. The librarians told me that there had been a subtle shift in usership over the years. It used to be visited overwhelmingly by lawyers, but lately there were a lot more people getting the information they needed to represent themselves. Since much of the library specialty is current legal information, there is little in the way of digitization here.

I noticed that the reference desk held a Mets figurine as a point of local pride; Ms. Adams admitted that she was a Red Sox fan.

## FURTHER READING

Burt Pugach Wikipedia page: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Burt\\_Pugach](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Burt_Pugach).

Burt & Linda Pugach's book: "A very different love story:" <http://www.amazon.com/very-different-love-story-intimate/dp/0688030890/>.

Daniel Finkelstein; Lucas A Ferrara. (1997). West's New York practice series, F, G. St. Paul, Minn, West Pub. Co.

Floor map of the library: [https://www.nycourts.gov/library/queens/FloorMap/tour/tour\\_main.htm](https://www.nycourts.gov/library/queens/FloorMap/tour/tour_main.htm).

NOLO catalog of legal information <http://www.nolo.com/>.