

CHAPTER 8

Government Libraries

There are not many who know of its existence, and few who have heard of it know of its location.

New York Times (1898)

LIBRARY: THE MUNICIPAL LIBRARY

Address: 31 Chambers Street, Room 112, New York City, NY 10007

URL: www.nyc.gov/html/records/html/about/chlibrary.shtml

Transportation: Subway A&C line Chambers Street

I rode from Penn Station to the Chambers Street station on the A line and walked east on Chambers Street for about two blocks to find the library. I spoke with Christene Bruzzese (pronounced Brew Zi Si), the supervising librarian. The library is one of the agencies housed in a dark, ornate marble building dating back to the early twentieth century, across the street from the City Hall complex. Walking into the library, my first impression was that the facility is bright and inviting. There is a reading area with comfortable leather chairs next to a fireplace that reminds me of some of the lush university alumni houses that you see uptown, such as the Yale Club or the Princeton Club. There are a number of glass display cases, highlighting useful books and manuscripts.



Reading area.

Bruzzese said that the library has a collection of 400,000 books and pamphlets. The prevailing holdings are publications of city agencies—some of them dating back to the 1600s. This includes police department reports as far back as 1860 and fire department reports going back to 1850.



Display area in East room of the library.

“Typical users here are authors, students, and city researchers,” Bruzzese said. This morning, there were a number of people who would have used the New York State Unified Court System Library, a few blocks up Centre Street, but that library had been closed for renovations for a few weeks. The court system library had printed out flyers that recommended substitute libraries, and City Hall Library was at the head of the list. I had asked about genealogy researchers, but was told that those records were kept in the Municipal Archives, a few doors down.

In the 11 years that Bruzzese had been working at City Hall, the most famous visitor was Mayor Bloomberg, who was in the library to shoot a video. She also mentioned helping Deputy Mayor Cas Holloway and a team of people from the Rudolph Giuliani campaign.

I asked her what was the most unique or valuable item in their collection. She told me that the Common Council minutes dating back to the 1700s would be the most likely answer. “We even have council minutes dating back to the Dutch period.” I asked if these were the original handwritten books, but was told that they are printed transcriptions. However, in their display cases you will see centuries-old manuscripts that are owned by the Department of Records–Municipal Archives.

Bruzzese said that the two departments work very closely together.

The library is arranged in three large and equal-sized rooms. You enter into the central room, which houses the service desks, an extensive map collection, and a ready reference area. This room contains the journal and newspaper reading area. Otherwise, it is filled with ranges of books and pamphlets. The nongovernment books are arranged in Dewey order. City and state volumes are given their own classification scheme, loosely based on Library of Congress classification.

The east room contains a substantial number of bound volumes and pamphlets. There is a substantial biography binder collection that includes mainly newspaper clippings of famous New Yorkers. Checking the Ro volume, there was no reference to former police commissioner Theodore Roosevelt, but it did have obituaries, including one for Eleanor Roosevelt, so the project seems to date back to the early 1960s. Each mayor has their own binder, and Robert Moses has a series of them. There are also more display cases with visually appealing items from the library’s collection.

The west wing is a new addition to the library—a visitors’ center that features items given to the various mayors of New York over time. If the main room of the library is bright and inviting, the visitors’ center positively glows. It also contains a gift shop and a collection of crime scene

photographs, often featuring mob hits lying in the streets of Brooklyn. One of the more poignant displays is a flag recovered from the ruins of the World Trade Center in 2001.



World Trade Center flag.

A separate room celebrates the long history of the WNYC radio and television station. Devices such as a large reel-to-reel tape deck may need further explanation for younger visitors. The library maintains a collection of all the shows ever produced for the station.

After taking my leave of the City Hall Library, I went to the Municipal Archives. I will admit to being intimidated by microfilm machines, but theirs were some of the most intuitive I have seen. The staff members here are quite knowledgeable and beyond helpful. One of them showed me how to go from a computerized index to the actual birth and marriage records on microfilm. I was on my case within minutes.

Before leaving I spoke with Kenneth R. Cobb, Assistant Commissioner of the New York City Department of Records & Information Services, who is justifiably proud of the work that goes on here.

LIBRARY: NATIONAL ARCHIVES AT NEW YORK CITY

Address: 1 Bowling Green, New York, NY 10004

URL: archive.gov

Telephone: (212) 401-1620

E-mail: newyork.archives@nara.gov

Access: Open to the public

Transportation: Subway line 4 or 5 Bowling Green Station

I had been to this library some 10 years ago when it was on Varick Street in Greenwich Village. At that time, it was a bustling genealogical library where I looked through ships' passenger lists in search of my great grandmother. Now it is in the Customs House Building along with the Smithsonian Museum of the American Indian. I am told that it was moved south in 2013, right after the Hurricane Sandy disaster. The library's function appears to have been trimmed back to being substantially a repository of government files and court records. Its Web page does list the genealogical component, however, so you would be advised to come see for yourself if possible. When you walk in you are greeted with a striking logo for the archive, as well as giant maps of New York. The exterior of the Customs House did not show any mention of the archive at the time I was there, but I was told that this would be fixed soon.



Main entrance to the National Archive in Lower Manhattan.

Bowling Green is the oldest section of New York City—the location where a mob tore down the statue of King George. It is said that the pillars surrounding the park are the oldest standing structures in the city. The

library's north window gives a view down to Bowling Green, and that could hardly be more perfect. When I arrived I had a special mission. Weeks before, I had filled out their online form, explaining what I was doing and asking to speak to someone when I came to visit. When I arrived, I mentioned this to the reference librarian, who seemed slightly horrified. However, she was a good sport and began answering my questions. Further, she called the library director, who agreed to come out in a few minutes and talk to me. I had only hoped to schedule a future meeting, so I was quite pleased to chalk this up in one visit.

It was a slow day, but I have seen this library when it was swamped, so I know what can happen here. I asked which holding they considered to be their most valuable. I got the same answer from both librarians—a copy of *Batman No. 1* that had been an exhibit in a copyright case, and it never went back to its original owner. They have court records for other famous cases—including one about The Beatles. They own papers with the original signatures of both Alexander Hamilton and Aaron Burr. There are also court records of the Alger Hiss and Rosenberg trials. They also have court records in the *Titanic* liability case.



Research shelves at the National Archive.

Famous users of their library include Ken Burns and Matthew Broderick, as well as the National Archivist of Finland. They do not have an active digitization program, but they do offer digitization on demand for people

who need a JPEG image of a certain resource. I was told that the users of the facility tended to be genealogists, academics, lawyers, and legal historians.

I made my visit before I devised the question of which restaurants the librarians recommend, so I will throw in one of my own. Ulysses' on Pearl Street is a 5- to 10-minute walk and highly recommended.

FURTHER READING

Alexander Hamilton: <http://www.titanicinquiry.org/lol/lolh.php>.

Batman Issue 1: http://batman.wikia.com/wiki/Batman_Issue_1.

Customs House information: http://www.tripadvisor.com/Attraction_Review-g60763-d116392-Reviews-United_States_Custom_House-New_York_City_New_York.html.

Titanic Inquiry Project: <http://www.titanicinquiry.org/lol/lolh.php>.