

## CHAPTER 14

# History

*We learn from history that we've learned nothing from history.*

**George Bernard Shaw**

### **LIBRARY: AMERICAN IRISH HISTORICAL SOCIETY**

Address: 991 5th Avenue, New York, NY 10028

URL: <http://aihs.org/>

Telephone: (212) 288-2263

E-mail: <http://aihs.org/contact/>

Access: Open to researchers by appointment

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/pages/American-Irish-Historical-Society/187462474615362>

Bus access: M70 crosstown bus or the M4 south on 5th Avenue; also the M3/4 bus north on Madison Avenue

I have more than a passing, academic interest in Irish history. During my time as a systems librarian at Quinnipiac University, I managed to get involved in the university's projects in the study of the Irish famine, and I was rewarded with four school-sponsored trips to the west of Ireland. In those visits, I managed to set up a program to digitize actual handwritten pages from the Board of Guardians Minute Books in Killarney and Kenmare, detailing the attempts of authorities to deal with a country that was falling apart owing to crop failures.

In my Quinnipiac years I made one trip to the American Irish Historical Society (AIHS) in its posh 5th Avenue headquarters, so I knew that the society had a substantial collection that would be of interest to any Irish history researcher. In the late winter of 2015, I visited the site again and spent an hour with William Hurley. A soft-spoken but energetic young man, he impressed me immediately with his technical expertise. Like many of the special libraries, AIHS maintained a catalog using Koha. Unlike everybody else, Hurley was proficient enough in ILS technology to run the catalog without any sort of help from the Koha facilitation companies.

As we walked through the many floors of the old mansion, Hurley told me that this was originally a gracious private home, built in 1900, and upgraded by the famous architect and designer Ogden Codman, Jr. Hurley told me that there are more than 12,000 cataloged books in the collection, and a large archive of magazines and newspapers, with the main focus being the Irish immigrant experience in New York. That collection includes the world's only known full set of *The Gaelic American* from the 1880s. From 1898 to 1942, the society published the *Journal of the American Irish Historical Society*. There is also a substantial collection of Fenian pamphlets from the nineteenth century. As we walked through the various floors, I saw a lot of sports trophies, as the new Americans gravitated to team sports.

The parent organization has been around since 1897, and its members have included notables such as Theodore Roosevelt and George M. Cohan. One of the parlors sports a giant painting of Roosevelt (one of 50 founding members), who I would also see later at the Masonic library. The Society is nonsectarian and nonpartisan and exists only to shine a light on the Irish American experience.

Hurley showed me a group of scrapbooks containing newspaper and magazine clippings of Irish American interest, but admitted that the contents, while valuable, do not contain citations, so it is hard to place them in any specific context. The *real* prize in the archive area was a large collection of dictation tapes containing the voice of Brendan Behan, who had no use for a typewriter. This gets the AIHS a lot of attention, but copyright concerns limit the use of this collection.

The major collection of book titles was found in the basement. With its compact shelves and nonambient lighting, it was clearly designed for staff use and not researcher visits. I saw a variety of books, including Irish language and travel books, but the main focus is history. There is also a fairly substantial collection of Catholic history. Most books are in English, but there are many Irish language works. "Books in Gaelic are harder to digitize and OCR," said Hurley.

At the end of the tour, I was shown the book digitization area. The machine we used at Quinnipiac cost more than \$30,000, but Hurley was able to build his only book-friendly scanning machine and outfit it with digital cameras that were programmed in-house. The OCR, or optical character recognition, program they used was FineReader, which is the program we had relied on at Quinnipiac.

As I walked out of the elegant foyer and onto 5th Avenue, I could not help thinking, whoever is watching the St. Patrick's day parade from those upper floors truly has the luck of the Irish.

## **LIBRARY: OTHMER LIBRARY—BROOKLYN HISTORICAL SOCIETY**

Address: 128 Pierrepont Street, Brooklyn, NY 11201

URL: <http://www.brooklynhistory.org/library/about.html>

Telephone: (718) 222-4111

E-mail: [library@brooklynhistory.org](mailto:library@brooklynhistory.org)

Access: Open to the public

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/BrooklynHistory?fref=ts>

Blog: <http://www.brooklynhistory.org/blog/>

When we first moved to New York, we were eager to explore all the sections of the city, so it was not long before I took the family down to Coney Island to see the aquarium and the theme park. To a recently arrived family of Arizonans, Brooklyn held a special place in the mythology of our new city. Furthermore, my family records show a deep connection to Brooklyn, where my grandmother grew up and married a man who had just arrived from Texas to serve in the Navy. I was very happy to find out that the librarians could talk to me on fairly short notice.



One of many quiet corners in the library's research area.

The building is a wonder in itself. It was built in 1881 as the Long Island Historical Society. Even though Brooklyn was adopted by New York City

in the late nineteenth century, they did not change the name until 1985. I was met by reference librarian Joanna Lamaida. She told me that the library owns 33,000 books, 1600 archival collections, 1200 oral history interviews, 50,000 photographs, 8000 artifacts, 300 paintings, and 2000 maps, which document the commercial, residential, community, and civic development of the borough. Of all this, it was hard for them to name one thing that they considered the flagship item, but they had several major contenders, including a copy of the Emancipation Proclamation and a Bernard Rutzer map showing the positions of George Washington's troops at the Battle of Brooklyn.



Research corner displaying one of the library's 50,000 photographs.

The building is notable in several ways. Many of the libraries in this book are more than 100 years old, but this is one of the very few still operating out of its original building. I was told that the construction was an architectural innovation for the time, with columns not in the center of the room, creating a wide open space. They told me that the construction was partially inspired by the Brooklyn Bridge. I asked how the building fared during Hurricane Sandy and was told that they came through unscathed. "We had a few days where we had to close, and lots of our staff people used the time to go out and volunteer with the cleanup effort," said Julie May. That is Brooklyn Pride.

They are heavily into social media, with accounts on all of the major players, as well as a library blog. They are involved in the Brooklyn Digital Heritage Project along with the Brooklyn Museum and the Brooklyn Public Library. They also partner with New York University (NYU) for their online catalog and work with NYU's archivist program to host interns.

Their users are a mixed group of neighborhood people needing a quiet place to study, people needing help with landmark status for their properties, tourists, and genealogists. Whether they are museum members or not, all of the collections are noncirculating.

Going out the door on my way to the Brooklyn Botanical Garden, I was reminded of the signs that we used to see on the Belt Parkway while headed East—"You are now leaving Brooklyn. Fuggetaboutit."

## **LIBRARY: BRONX HISTORICAL SOCIETY**

Address: Bronx County Historical Society, 3309 Bainbridge Avenue,  
The Bronx, NY 10467

URL: <http://www.bronxhistoricalsociety.org/library>

Telephone: (718) 881-8900

E-mail: [librarian@bronxhistoricalsociety.org](mailto:librarian@bronxhistoricalsociety.org)

Access: Open to the public—note limited hours

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Bronx-Historical-Society/115554328467463?fref=ts>

Transportation: Subway line D to 205th Street

There is a wonderful line in the movie *Awakenings*, in which Robert De Niro is playing a patient who has revived after decades of being in a coma. His doctor, played by Robin Williams, is driving him to the beach in the Bronx. "What a beautiful place the Bronx has become!" exclaims De Niro. We saw this in the theaters when it came out, and we gave this a hearty laugh, even though we were regular Bronx visitors. Those visits were due to several things. First, there is the Bronx Zoo, which is one of the wonders of New York. Second, there is a baseball team in the Bronx that has given us many happy moments. Third, there is City Island, a relatively unknown strip of land in Long Island Sound that delivers the best seafood in all of New York.

I wrote to Laura Tosi, librarian at the Bronx County Historical Society, and set up an appointment on a Wednesday afternoon, to follow my visit to the New York Botanical Garden. My plan was to catch a cab and make

my way up the two miles that separated the libraries. I then got a lesson in Outer Borough cab service. The taxi we reserved simply never showed up, so I had to postpone my visit. Next time, I took the subway from Penn Station to 205th Street (Laura had warned me that parking near their facility was the impossible dream). When I got out, I was surprised to learn that I had to walk only two short blocks to see the library, which was housed in a brownstone building across the street from the main museum. The library was started in the late 1960s and moved out of the museum into its current quarters in 1980. The library owns 25,000 books and 35,000 historic photographs.



The main reading room.

The main reading room is divided, with New York State and City books on the right and Bronx-only books on the left. The first are in Library of Congress order, and the second use a homemade classification scheme. They do not have a publicly accessible online catalog, but their card catalog has been replaced with a program called FileMaker Pro, which is available to the library staff. They are particularly proud of their photograph collection. Other significant holdings include *The Bronx Home News*, which is available on microfilm for the years 1907–1948. There are city directories from 1927 to the 1970s and in paper after that. This kind of material gets them attention from genealogy researchers around the world.



One of the library's many historic photographs.

The library is funded by the city and the state, as well as by memberships. It has no regular digitization program yet, but it does offer digitization on demand for patrons who need a JPEG of their materials. For lunch suggestions, they send people to Sal's Pizzeria down the street and to the coffee shop next to the subway station.

## **LIBRARY: STATEN ISLAND MUSEUM**

Address: 75 Stuyvesant Place, Staten Island, NY 10301

Telephone: (718) 483-7122

URL: [StatenIslandMuseum.org](http://StatenIslandMuseum.org)

Staten Island was famous in this project for being the toughest borough to cover. There was a really cool-sounding institution called the Staten Island Tools Library for citizens who were recovering from Super Storm Sandy, but they had no access but a Web page, so when they ignored my message, there was no fallback. I was happy to find the Staten Island Museum for two reasons. First because it assured coverage of five boroughs. Second, they are located at Snug Harbor, which is one of my favorite places in the city.

This was one of only two libraries for which my visit did not involve public transportation. While it was technically possible to take the Long Island

Railroad, the No. 1 subway, the Staten Island ferry, and then a bus to Snug Harbor, that would have involved a day of travel that I could not afford. I took the first exit from the Verrazano Bridge and headed south on what Google assured me was a main road. I finally made it to Snug Harbor with a minute to spare.



A historic map of Staten Island.

I met Cara Dellatte, the archivist in her office, which overlooked the garden, at the beginning of spring. I found that the library is one more for the 100-year club, having been founded in 1881, and the original library was entirely devoted to science. At this time, the museum had already been in existence for 50 years. It was created with a partnership including the city and private nonprofit interests. It has been at its current location since 2009, and Dellatte believes that they will remain for some time. She has been with the museum for nearly 10 years, first as an intern and then being promoted to archivist in 2010.

The collection is not indexed by an online catalog, so inquiries from researchers are handled by the archival staff using a card catalog. The collection is filed in Dewey order. They are currently not working with OCLC to display their holdings in WorldCat, although it is on their wish list to change that. The archive is used by genealogists, authors, and students. They also handle many internal requests from the Museum.





A peek inside of the locked book cabinets at Snug Harbor.

I asked Cara what she considered to be her flagship holding. I was told that Dellatte had discovered a small book sitting in a stack of things for evaluation that turned out to be a gold mine. It was a pencil-written diary of life on the island from 1861 to 1866 that gave a glimpse of northern life in the Civil War and immediately afterward.

The archive also contains documents signed by British General William Howe during the Revolutionary War. Also there is a collection of letters to home from local soldiers during the Civil War. Their oldest holdings include English land grants from as far back as 1605.

## FURTHER READING

An American Family grows up in Brooklyn: <http://www.brooklynhistory.org/exhibitions/lefferts/>.

Brooklyn Historical Society Library blog: <http://www.brooklynhistory.org/blog/>.

Brooklyn Visual Heritage: <http://www.brooklynvisualheritage.org/>.

Brooklyn Waterfront history: <http://www.brooklynwaterfronthistory.org/>.

Brooklyn's Antislavery movement: <http://pursuitoffreedom.org/>.

Irish Central news story about the 5th Avenue building: <http://www.irishcentral.com/roots/genealogy/Who-lived-in-the-spectacular-American-Irish-Historical-Society-building.html#>.

Irish History Digitized: <http://www.greathunger.org>.

Wikipedia entry for The American Irish American Society: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American\\_Irish\\_Historical\\_Society](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Irish_Historical_Society).

Wikipedia entry for Wolfe Tone [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wolfe\\_Tone](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wolfe_Tone).