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City's History Rewritten From Municipal Archives

By **GLENN COLLINS**

Of all the remarkable things about New York City's Municipal Archives, the most extraordinary, by far, is its very survival.

The collection — three million pounds of material, ranging from the original 1654 Dutch sales slip for the purchase of Coney Island, to a trove of stereoscopic Victorian pornography assembled by an antivice crusader — has weathered centuries of profound neglect. It has been appallingly lodged in a succession of makeshift spaces, including a city pier and the attic of a fire-prone pizza parlor. And it even dodged the budget axes wielded after "Ford to City: Drop Dead."

But through the stewardship of two dedicated men over the past 35 years, the Municipal Archives has managed to grow an astonishing tenfold, as its tiny band of civil servants has rescued documents from sub-basements and trash bins.

And an improbable thing has happened as archivists have made these records available to scholars in recent

years: New York City's history has been rewritten.

Where historians once focused on the doings of Great Men, scholars are increasingly interested in mining the social history that has been preserved in abundance in the Municipal Archives — tax bills, liquor licenses, disorderly conduct arrests. The new availability of these records has helped spur "a flowering of insights and innovation regarding New York City's past," said Dr. Kenneth T. Jackson, president of the New-York Historical Society and the editor of "The Encyclopedia of New York City."

The new streetwise histories of New York have looked at gender, race, class, crime, sexuality and night life in the city. "In the last 15 to 20 years, the best history about New York has been written," said Timothy J. Gilfoyle, a professor of history at Loyola University of Chicago. "The accessibility of the archives has given us a whole new way of looking at New York City."

Already, the archives have informed Professor Jackson's own work as well as the 1999 Pulitzer Prize-winner for history, "Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898" by Dr. Mike Wallace and Dr. Edwin G. Burrows. Insights from these and other recent city histories have won a national audience through such televised events as the 10-part series "New York: A Documentary Film."

The titles of such new histories can be racy (like Dr. Gilfoyle's "City of Eros: New York City, Prostitution and the Commercialization of Sex, 1790-1920"), but the archives' holdings tend toward the dry-as-dust: city paperwork, letters and financial ledgers that are the operating records of New York City's government since 1625.

This roster happens to include the largest collection of criminal court records in the English-speaking world, dating to 1684. There are more than a million photographic images going back to 1889, and records of the assessed valuation of city real estate starting in 1789. There are 8,000 original drawings of the Brooklyn Bridge, and 1,500 original drawings of Central Park. There are thousands of reels of movie film from the 1940's to the late 1970's and thousands of lacquer recording discs going back to the 1930's.

As part of a tax assessment project from 1939 to 1941, the archives has images of every building then standing in the five boroughs, some 720,000 photographs.

And the treasures include pictures of the Lusitania before its fatal voyage, James Cagney's 1899 birth certificate and city paychecks made out to Frederick Law Olmstead (\$406.25) and Calvert Vaux (\$200) for work on Central Park.

Scholars are lucky that any of this material remains. Utterly without coordination or oversight, archives were assembled by individual agencies through the centuries; frequently, materials were jettisoned when bureaucrats ran out of office space.

It wasn't until 1948 that Mayor William O'Dwyer gave modern impetus to the creation of an archive. Materials didn't begin coming together until 1950.

"It's very fortunate that New York has such a rich collection, given all that it had to go through," said Kenneth R. Cobb, director of the archives since 1990.

He understates. After 1950, the archives were stored in the Rhinelander Building (where today's Police Plaza now stands) and major components of the collection were banished to temporary quarters in Manhattan, Brooklyn and Queens.

In the late 1970's the archives were stored over a pizza parlor at 23 Park Row. One night the kitchen erupted in a grease fire that was quelled by the Fire Department. "We were lucky, because most of the important records were above that kitchen," said Idilio Gracia Peña, director of the archives at the time. "The building next door blew up in a gas explosion."

Subsequently the pizza parlor morphed into a Burger King. Dr. Sean Wilentz, Dayton-Stockton professor of history at Princeton University, spent months working on his dissertation above the restaurant. "I'll never forget studying documents while hearing the loudspeaker saying 'Two Whoppers to go, a shake and fries,' " he said.

Then, when the collection was removed to the third floor of the Tweed Courthouse, "there was an inch of water on the floor," Professor Wilentz said, "and I remember splashing around in my boots to get access to the Court of Common Pleas records." Ultimately, a leaking drain pipe was fixed.

Not to mention the fly infestation there. "The mounted police kept their horses downstairs," Mr. Cobb said, "so clouds of horseflies came through the archives' windows, which had to be open because there was no air conditioning."

Through all the upheaval, the archives benefited from

the kindness of certain city workers and volunteers, but many scholars say that the collection would not have survived without the devotion of Mr. Cobb, its current director, and his predecessor, Mr. Gracia Peña.

Mr. Gracia Peña, who arrived from Puerto Rico in 1960 with little but a high school diploma, spent 30 years in the archives. In his early years, the collection "was being managed, not expanded," he said. "Everyone thought that archives were to be put in the basement and forgotten about."

Mr. Gracia Peña — who found himself in charge of the archives as a clerk but actually won reclassification as a manual laborer to increase his salary — was pretty much alone in the archives for three years. He became frustrated that the archives weren't being expanded, cataloged or cared for. In the late 1960's, the better to understand the materials, he began attending college at night and earned a history degree from City University after five years. In 1978, he won the formal title of director of the archives.

Mr. Gracia Pena planned the 1983 move of the frequently used portions of the collection to a secure, climate- controlled space in the landmark Beaux Arts Surrogate's Court building at 31 Chambers Street, its current home. In 1990, he became commissioner of the Department of Records and Information Services, retiring in 1994.

It was Mr. Gracia Peña's dogged dedication in expanding the archives that has been especially praised. On his watch, the archives grew from 16,500 cubic feet to 100,000 cubic feet by 1990, when he handed it over to Mr. Cobb, whom he had trained. Mr. Cobb has since

expanded the collection an additional 50,000 cubic feet.

"They can't possibly be praised highly enough — secular civic saints, they are," said Dr. Wallace, co-author of the "Gotham" history.

Often the archives were augmented spontaneously when Mr. Gracia Peña used station wagons and borrowed trucks to collect records that had been unceremoniously dumped outside city agencies. This won him the nickname "the Lone Ranger," and Mr. Cobb has continued the tradition.

But Mr. Gracia Peña cultivated co-conspirators. "Many construction contractors had respect for old records and plans, and called me," he said. In the early 1970's, one contractor broke through a wall in the fallout shelter of the New York City Municipal Building, and found himself staring at very old records in very old boxes. "It turned out to be 8,000 cubic feet of the city's financial records going back to 1799," Mr. Gracia Peña said. "It was very valuable; I found letters from Hamilton and Burr."

And in the late 1970's, Mr. Gracia Peña saved most of the city's land records back to the 17th century when he found them waiting to be junked at a city pier near Canal Street.

Mr. Cobb, 47, first encountered the archives in the fall of 1977 as a student in Professor Jackson's history class at Columbia University. He was so intrigued that he became an intern, then went to work full time in the archives in 1979. "I never really left," he said.

Historians say that the archives have benefited from

four decades of continuity spanning the two administrators, who have, essentially, been the collection's living card catalogs.

"Too much of this is still in my head," said Mr. Cobb. "That's why it's so important to make knowledge of the collection accessible everywhere."

But cost-cutting has hit records-keeping hard. The archives' funding is down by half since the late 1980's.

The current budget for the archives division, \$1.1 million, is about what it was last year and what it will be next year. "Given our size and the scope of our responsibility, we should have a bigger staff," said Mr. Cobb of his 20 employees. Salaries are so low, he added, "that I lose some of my brightest help."

Beyond this, the bulk of the collection — 120,000 cubic feet of documents in a warehouse in Sunset Park, Brooklyn — is not in climate-controlled space.

"My dream is that the city will build a professional facility to house the archives in one place, make it accessible, and permit public exhibitions of the materials," said Mr. Gracia Peña, 61, who is now a project archivist at the Center for Puerto Rican Studies at Hunter College in Manhattan.

Meanwhile, the archives are open for business. "There's enough there," said Professor Jackson, "to keep people busy for another half-century or so."