

Researching in Boston's Back Bay: The Boston Public Library and the Massachusetts Historical Society

By Rod D. Moody

If you are coming to Boston for a research visit, you probably plan to spend all of your time at the NEHGS Research Library, right? However, if you have some extra time on your hands, there are two other noteworthy repositories in the immediate area that may help you add a tiny twig or two to your family tree.

Start at the Boston Public Library in Copley Square, just a very short walk from the NEHGS Library. Here you will find a goldmine of research materials and fascinating historical collections, including

- An extensive collection of colonial United States and Massachusetts newspapers from 1704
- Indexes to obituaries published in selected Boston and New England newspapers (1740-1840, 1875-present)
- City directories
- Land and probate records
- Passenger arrival lists
- Indexes to the genealogical columns published in the *Boston Transcript* and *Hartford (CT) Times*
- An index of family coats-of-arms, chiefly from the British Isles, with over 20,000 entries
- New England Naturalization Petitions Index, 1790-1906
- City of Boston Lists of Residents (Voter Lists), 1861-present
- Plymouth Colony Records, 1633-1692
- Extensive military records

Especially worthwhile is the Boston Pictorial Archive, which contains the country's largest collection of early Boston photographs. The BPL also has many photographs from the Civil War, image collections of the American West, and the entire archives of the old *Boston Herald Traveler* (500,000 images from 1906-1972). The archive is organized into both biographical and subject files, and cover local, national, and international subjects. You never know, your ancestor may be in there somewhere.

If you feel like a little light reading, the library's rare book and manuscripts collections are home to the entire library of President John Adams (3,209 volumes). But that might distract you from your research (and chances are, the staff won't let you thumb through these volumes anyway!). Although the rarest titles and manuscripts in these collections are only accessible to serious researchers, the library's official policy is that "each request is judged on its own merits." Items that may be of interest to genealogists include:

Elijah Adlow Papers

Contains over 10,000 legal documents relating to Suffolk County and Massachusetts, starting before the Revolution.

- Colonial Court Records
- Supreme Judicial Court records
- Writs of attachment and execution
- Criminal complaints
- Prisoner lists

Ellis Ames Collection

About 2,000 letters and documents detailing legal cases, deeds, and other related subjects in nineteenth century Massachusetts. (mainly Norfolk, Plymouth, and Bristol Counties).

- Boston City Records
- Tax assessor's records from 1789
- Paul Revere's tax bills
- City Clerk files from 1629
- Early manuscript records of Brighton, Charlestown, Dorchester, Hyde Park, and West Roxbury.

Boston Latin School Collection

The Boston Latin School, founded in 1634, is the oldest public high school in the United States. The 2,500-item collection is focused on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and includes much ephemeral material from this time. Printed items are now online and may be searched on the computer.

- Student catalogs, publications, and photographs
- Volumes of admissions
- Attendance records
- Student correspondence
- Books by or belonging to former students
- Records of the Boston Latin School Association.

City Directories

The library has about 13,000 directories from across the country, including bound Boston directories from 1809 to the present. The earliest one on microfilm is dated 1789.

Mellen Chamberlain Collection of Autographs

In addition to his astounding collection of autographs, former BPL Librarian Mellen Chamberlain also gathered manuscripts from the end of the fifteenth century through the nineteenth century. In all there are about 20,000 letters, documents, portraits, autographs, and engravings in the collection, mostly relating to history and literature.

The Map Collection includes about 500 atlases and 2,300 rare and early maps of Europe, the Americas, and the world.

20th Regiment Collection

This collection, primarily containing materials relating to the Civil War and Massachusetts, was established from funds donated by the 20th Regiment Association of Volunteer Infantry.

- Regimental histories
- General Orders of the various Departments of the Union Army
- Nine portfolios of the battle and camp photographs by Mathew Brady and Alexander Gardner
- Diaries, reports, and letters provided by the 20th Regiment Association
- Items from the War of 1812, the Mexican War, official records of the 1st and 2nd Divisions of the American Expeditionary Force, and 345 volumes of personal narratives on World War I.

If you need a diversion from your research, walk around and get acquainted with this beautiful facility. The library consists of two buildings, one older and the other more modern. The research library is the older one, opened in 1895. The many architectural details are sure to catch your eye, as will the John Singer Sargent Gallery, whose mural "Judaism and Christianity" dominates the third-floor gallery. And while we are on the subject of art, be sure and tour the Puvis de Chavannes Gallery, named after the French artist who painted wonderful murals for the second floor corridor; the gorgeous Abbey Room, which features *The Quest of the Holy Grail* by American artist Edwin Austin Abbey; and the Wiggin Room, which displays the Albert H. Wiggin collection of prints and drawings. There are so many magnificent rooms to explore and beautiful architecture and art to admire that you may forget what you came here for. If that is the case, you may wish to take the guided "[Art and Architecture Tour](#)" that the library offers. Whatever you decide, you should stop and take a breather in the lovely interior courtyard found by the main staircase.

A mile west from the BPL and past the Prudential Center you will find the Massachusetts Historical Society Library. The society was formed in 1791 and its library, according to its website, "serves primarily as a repository for collections of the personal papers of individuals and families who lived in Massachusetts."

The manuscript collections are the heart of the MHS holdings, and they keep over 3,200 such collections comprising more than 10 million pages. Most of these are personal and family papers, but they also keep some institutional and business records. The most important of these collections are the John Adams family papers (over 250,000 pages) and the Coolidge Collection of Thomas Jefferson manuscripts.

That is all fascinating, you might say, but what is there for me? Well, while the focus of the Society is more on history than genealogy, there are plenty of opportunities for the two paths to cross. It is always good practice for genealogists to know as much as possible about the history of the place being researched, and if that place is Boston (or anywhere in Massachusetts), you cannot beat the Massachusetts Historical Society.

First-time visitors will be asked to fill out a registration form and present valid photo identification. Whenever a collection is available in microtext or a form other than the original (many manuscript collections have been filmed), visitors must use the copies instead of the originals. Visitors may only bring personal computers into the reading room. MHS staff will provide pencils and notepaper.

Books

The MHS General Research Collection includes about 12,000 biographies and over 10,000 local histories primarily covering the history of Massachusetts from the time of European settlement to the present.

Family History Resources

As quoted from the MHS website: "While the MHS has strong collections of published biographical, genealogical, and local history information that support research on its manuscript collections, its holdings do not duplicate the exhaustive family and New England local history collections or services provided by The New England Historic Genealogical Society. Researchers working primarily on family history should consult the collections of the NEHGS first."

That being said, you will want to pay attention to the part of the statement claiming that the holdings of the MHS do not duplicate those of NEHGS - yet another great reason for researchers to explore the collections at MHS.

Pamphlets

"Almost every facet of 19th- and early-20th-century life in Massachusetts, and to a lesser extent in New England, appears in contemporary pamphlet literature." The MHS keeps approximately 25,000 pamphlets from 1820 to the present, covering a wide range of subjects. Among the titles: "Smith's animadversions upon, and refutations of sundry gross errors, mistakes and blunders, contained in a certain pamphlet handed about in this government, in the form of a sermon or speech" and "An answer to the pamphlet entitled The conduct of the Paxton men, impartially represented: [microform] : wherein the ungenerous spirit of the author is manifested, &c. And the spotted garment plucked off," which apparently denounced "the Paxton men" as murderers.

Early Imprint Collection

This collection consists of books and pamphlets printed before 1820 and broadsides and newspapers printed before 1821. Highlights of the collection include the first historical account published in English-speaking North America (1645), the first Bible printed in any language in America (1663), and the first American anti-slavery tract (1700).

Map Collection

The MHS map collection consists of more than 5,000 maps and charts, mainly of Boston, the state of Massachusetts, and New England.

Photograph Collection

There are more than 100,000 images in the photograph collections of the MHS. These are divided into roughly 200 separate collections. Photographs of individuals and families make up the bulk of the collections. Included are hundreds of daguerreotypes, tintypes, ambrotypes, and cabinet cards as well as thousands of carte-de-visite portraits and glass plate negatives.

So there you have it. Between the Boston Public Library, the Massachusetts Historical Society, and of course, the NEHGS Research Library, you should find more than enough reasons to spend a research day (or ten) in the Back Bay. Please consult the Plan a Trip to Boston page on this website to find hotel and dining information. If you miraculously find yourself with an extra day or two to see the sights, walk the [Boston Freedom Trail](#) and/or take a [Duck Tour](#) of the city. Enjoy your visit!

Ready to Plan Your Visit?

[Boston Public Library](#)

700 Boylston St.

Boston, MA

02116

Tel: 617-536-5400

Hours:

General Library & Research Library:

Monday-Thursday 9-9

Friday and Saturday 9-5

Print Department: Monday-Friday 9-5

Rare Books & Manuscripts: Monday-Friday 9-5

[Massachusetts Historical Society](#)

1154 Boylston St.

Boston, MA

02215

Tel: 617-536-1608

Hours:

9:00 am-4:45 pm Mon., Tues., Wed., Fri.

9:00 am-8:00 pm Thurs.

Closed Weekends

[Boston's Official Visitor Website](#)