

Spotlight on the Providence Public Library

By Maureen A. Taylor

Rhode Island really is the smallest state in the Union hence the nickname, "Little Rhody." Researchers can take advantage of its size by accessing several different repositories in a single day. If you find yourself undecided about where to begin your search for family history in The Ocean State then go directly to the Providence Public Library (PPL). It's an amazing place to visit full of unique resources you won't find elsewhere in the state or anywhere in the world.

The Providence Public Library opened its doors to the public on February 4, 1878. Don't let the name fool you. This institution is privately operated and funded. It's independent of city government and seeks financial support from many sources. From its humble beginnings in the old Butler Exchange building in what is now known as Kennedy Plaza, the PPL still occupies a central spot in the downtown area of Providence with several neighborhood branch libraries.

I spoke with Betty Fitzgerald, a PPL Reference Librarian who also oversees the Rhode Island Collection about what researchers can find in this library.

Rhode Island Index

Anyone who loves old style card catalogs will fall in love at first sight with the wall size Rhode Island index. PPL officially funded a special position in 1963 to index newspapers and books on Rhode Island topics. A quick glance at one of the index drawers will convince you of the importance of this resource. You can find references to articles in the Providence newspapers, historical books, maps and photographs all arranged topically. I've used it to find photographers, learn more about the history of certain streets and to follow the development of the revitalization of downtown Providence known as the Capital Center project. Indexing of these materials stopped in 2004.

Rhode Island Collection

This is a researchers dream come true. While a good portion of the picture collection (25,000 images) is accessible online http://www.provlib.org/ri_image/providence_library/index.html the Rhode Island index and the PPL online catalog provide users with call numbers for other materials in the collection. There are a few rules regarding usage. You can only see three items at a time and you must leave identification at the Reference desk. Within this vast collection of state related material are three commonly used resources:

City Directories

The Library has Providence City Directories from 1824 to the present. Twentieth century volumes are in print, the rest are on microfilm. There are a few directories for other cities as well. Patrons request films at the Reference desk.

Daughters of the American Revolution Grave Registration Book

If you can't get to Washington, D. C. to use this resource, it's available at PPL. It contains the names of every veteran from the Revolutionary War to Vietnam arranged by town.

Rhode Island Maps

Topographical maps, ward boundary maps, state maps and published state atlases are all available. PPL also has a complete set of Sanborn Atlases, but patrons must use the online version.

State Documents

Need to look at a state document, don't worry. PPL has been collecting state documents since the Acts and Resolves of 1842. Use the online catalog to find what you need.

Newspapers

While the Rhode Island Historical Society <http://www.rihs.org/> is the state repository for newspapers published in the state, PPL has the Providence Journal and Bulletin on microfilm back to the first issue in 1829 as well as some other papers. Patrons need identification to use the microfilm department.

In addition to an extensive general reference department and material directly related to Rhode Island, the Special Collections department has some specialized collections. Access is possible only when the Special Collections Librarian is available during limited hours. Call or email the library in advance of a visit. A full list of these resources is available on the PPL website. <http://www.provlib.org/resources/books/special/special.html>

Special Card Files

Ask at the Reference desk about card indexes relating to Rhode Island artists and photographers. There are also files of clippings, promotional pieces, exhibit announcements and reviews, bibliographic references to Rhode Island artists and photographers from Gilbert Stuart to the present.

George W. Potter and Alfred M. Williams Memorial Collection on Irish Culture

It's non-RI related, but a wonderful resource for anyone interested in Irish, Scottish and Celtic culture. It's the collection of two former editors at the Providence Journal who according to Fitzgerald, "loved everything Irish." You'll find books, pamphlets and broadsides. A published catalog exists, *The Irish Literary Renaissance in Providence* (PPL, 1996).

C. Fiske Harris Collection on the Civil War and Slavery

Acquired in 1884, it's the largest collection in the library with 10,000 books and pamphlets and more than 100 scrapbooks of newspaper clippings from the Civil War period. It includes letters written by Rhode Island soldiers.

Updike Pamphlet Collection and Updike/Arnold Autograph Collection

Originally comprised of primarily 17th and 18th century pamphlets and books from Boston printer Daniel Berkeley Updike's family home in Cocumscussoc, near Wickford., another collector, Frederick Arnold donated letters and manuscripts relating to Rhode Island history.

Nicholson Whaling Collection

The PPL website describes this material as follows: "Mr. Paul C. Nicholson, the son of the founder of the world-renowned Nicholson File Company, formed an outstanding collection of 750 manuscript logbooks describing 1,000 whaling voyages, as well as several thousand printed books on whaling." It includes material on whalers from New Bedford, Fall River and Nantucket, Massachusetts. The original whaling logs are closed to the public, but available on microfilm in the Library. If you're curious about how Nicholson built this internationally known collection read a selection from Stuart C. Sherman's book about the collection, *The Voice of the Whale Man*.

While all these materials are available to users in the library, if you live out of town the staff accepts short requests for research through the "Ask the Librarian" option on the Providence Public Library <http://www.provlib.org/> website menu. According to Fitzgerald over fifty-two percent of the questions received are Rhode Island related.

Rhode Island is rich in resources for individuals with roots in the state's history regardless of when your family arrived. After contacting this major repository you'll be able to branch out to more specific facilities and local history collections in other public and private libraries in cities and towns around the state.

Maureen Taylor is The Photo Detective. She was recently profiled in the Wall Street Journal. She's the author of several books on family history and photography.