Conserving and Digitizing the Library’s Special Collections

Annual Report 2019–2020

Associates of the Boston Public Library
DEAR FRIENDS,

I hope you and yours are well and safe. The pandemic has impacted every aspect of our lives, from our families and friends to the workplace. For better or worse, circumstances have required us to adapt and change. Change is hard and uneven. It can be painful; but it can also drive innovation and progress. As I contemplate the future, I am reminded of at least one constant, namely, the importance of our great libraries. From history, to literature, to science and art, libraries are the touchstone of free and stable societies.

The uncertainty all around makes us even more grateful for your continued support for the Associates of the Boston Public Library and our work to preserve and protect the BPL’s Special Collections during the past fiscal year. We were especially moved by the outpouring of generosity from so many when we were forced to cancel our Literary Lights dinner last April.

Throughout the closure of the Library to in-person work, the Associates continued to support the Special Collections staff whose salaries are paid through our annual grant to the BPL. Those staff members, in turn, continued to work, although—as you will see in later pages of this report—the projects on which they worked looked a little different. Despite the challenges, these staff members remained dedicated to making the treasures that reside in the Special Collections more accessible, more easily found, and better understood. This is critical work at a time when so many depend on being able to access information online.

We were thrilled that the work we have supported for the past decade to conserve, catalog, digitize, and promote the Library’s literary and historic treasures. Through preservation and by raising awareness of the priceless riches found in the Library’s Special Collections, we hope to inform, inspire, and empower the citizens of Boston, the Commonwealth, and the nation itself.

I hope you enjoy, on the pages that follow, the descriptions of all of the important work your support has enabled this past year.

With my best wishes,

Peter R. V. Brown
CHAIRMAN, BOARD OF DIRECTORS
ASSOCIATES OF THE BOSTON PUBLIC LIBRARY

The Associates of the Boston Public Library supports the cultural mission of the BPL by awarding independent grants to conserve, catalog, digitize, and promote the Library’s literary and historic treasures. Through preservation and by raising awareness of the priceless riches found in the Library’s Special Collections, we hope to inform, inspire, and empower the citizens of Boston, the Commonwealth, and the nation itself.

FRONT COVER: Photograph of a 1965 anti-segregation protest in Boston from the BPL’s Brearley Press Collection, which was cataloged and digitized with funding from the Associates. LEFT: J’aime mieux naviguer sur l’eau, a print by Théophile Alexandre Steinlen, which was digitized with funding from the Associates’ David McCullough Conservation Fund.
CONSERVATION

Over 600 years ago, a missal in Latin for use during Catholic masses was painstakingly written and beautifully illuminated by hand, all 226 leaves of it. Just as miraculous is the fact that this same missal has been preserved and today is part of the Rare Books and Manuscripts Department of the Boston Public Library. Over the past several years, the Library’s Conservation Officer Lauren Schott has worked to rebind this remarkable manuscript and to create a custom enclosure for its protection. The missal can now safely be viewed by scholars and others who wish to learn from it or just experience its extraordinary beauty. This is the culmination of work done over several years, which the Associates was proud to support by underwriting Lauren’s salary.

Critical to the mission of the Associates of the Boston Public Library, and to all those who work in the Library’s Special Collections, is preserving and protecting the treasures that reside there. In this year marked by the pandemic, some projects had—of necessity—to be delayed. Much work, however, was conducted before the BPL was forced to close in March, and new projects were identified after the closure that could be done remotely.

Beyond the missal, Associates-funded conservation projects continued or began on the following important printed books and manuscripts:

• Poesias del González, a book of poetry by Diego Tadeo González, published in Spain in 1812;
• Las Obras de Christoval, the works of Spanish poet Christoval de Castillejo who lived from 1491 to 1555;
• Cancione, authored by 16th century Portuguese novelist and poet Jorge de Montemayor;
• Biblia Bohemica, a very rare 1489 Czech Bible;
• Obras de don Luis de Gongora, an important work by the Spanish Baroque lyric poet who lived from 1561 to 1627; and
• Seder Haggadah Shel Pesach, a 1773 Passover Haggadah that contains over 40 drawings in pen.

CATALOGING

Far from dull and dusty work, cataloging is what makes a book, artifact, or work of art discoverable within a library. For rare books and manuscripts, it also helps us to understand the history of the work, who has owned it, and what small secrets it might contain—a handwritten notation, a remarkable illustration, or a special binding. The Associates is pleased to underwrite this important work.

Two highlights of the work done this year by Rare Books and Manuscripts Librarian Lenore Rouse were:

• Samuel Danforth’s sermon, A brief recognition of New-England’s errand into the wilderness. Written to mark the election of officers to the General Court in 1670, it was also a jeremiad against the moral laxity and lack of religious zeal among the second generation of English settlers. Only eight copies of this edition are believed to be in existence, two of which are in the possession of the BPL. For students of Colonial history, it is hard to overstate the importance of this document.
• Roger Williams’ A key to the language of America or, An help to the language of the native in that part of America called New-England. Published in 1643, this exceedingly rare volume was the first book published by Roger Williams. In his Key, Williams worked to develop an understanding of native peoples in the Americas through their language. He used the work to advocate for the importance of native populations to the developing nation, an extremely unpopular position at the time.
Once work became remote, cataloging focused on transcribing and reformatting information from paper records to documentation that could be added to the Library’s online catalog. Among the most interesting documents uncovered during this project were three statements given to juries of inquest during the Salem Witchcraft Trials of 1692. These manuscripts have the capacity to cast light on a dark time in our history.

Cataloging is equally important, and as much of a puzzle, for those who work with the BPL’s visual materials, especially photographs. These catalogers seek to answer questions like: Who are the people in the picture? Where is a building located? Why was the image taken? The Associates is happy to support the work of Visual Materials Catalogers Monica Shin and Michael Wilkerson. This cataloging is done principally from digitized materials and so continued uninterrupted during the transition to working from home, with metadata for over 6,000 items added to the BPL’s online system. Among the highlights:

- **Photographs by Leon Abdalian**, an Armenian immigrant with a love and talent for photography. After an early career as a railway conductor, Abdalian parlayed his hobby into a vocation, photographing Boston’s parks and historic homes, along with intimate portraits of Boston families.

- **The papers of Victoria Woodhull Martin**, a leading (but highly controversial) suffragist who was the first woman to attempt a run for President of the United States.

- **The Wendy Artin Collection**, a pilot project by the BPL to digitize and catalog the work of a living artist. Wendy Artin has deep ties to Boston. The BPL is using its collaboration with her to identify ways to enhance descriptions of works of art. This project is expected to become a model for future partnerships with working artists.

**EXTERNAL CONSERVATION**

While the Library does house a talented conservation team, some materials require specialized treatment or additional lab capacity beyond what is available at the BPL. For these items, the Associates underwrites the work of external specialists, typically at Northeast Document Conservation Center (NEDCC). Items conserved this year include:

- Three volumes of the etchings by master printmaker Giovanni Battista Piranesi. These works represent one of the great founding collections at the BPL. *Le Antichità Romane* established the artist as a master printmaker. His etchings—originally created for the tourist market—are admired today both for their artistic prowess and for the historic information they contain: city elevations, engineering methods, and views of public buildings offering a glimpse into Roman life before the advent of 19th-century archaeology. The prints in the BPL’s collections were bound in such a way as to obscure some of the original artwork and so are being disbound, repaired, cataloged, and digitized in order to make them available widely. Given the number of volumes of Piranesi prints, this project is likely to span many years.

- A collection of several hundred rolled posters was part of an inventory and assessment project underwritten by the Associates last year. Among these, 27 posters were impossible to inventory properly as they were rolled too tightly and in such fragile condition they could not be handled safely. As a result, the BPL, with the Associates’ support, contracted for external conservation. Among the items rediscovered: an important artist’s proof by Seymour Haden; posters by noted artists Théophile Alexandre Steinlen and Jean-Louis Forain; and a Boston Symphony Orchestra Centennial poster designed by Robert Rauschenberg.
The 125th anniversary of the opening of the Library’s McKim Building occurred on March 11, 2020. With the anniversary in mind, the BPL sought our partnership to conserve the scrapbooks that document this architectural marvel’s creation. The three volumes conserved this year illustrate the creation of the original Copley Square library, revealing structural elements and innovative techniques employed by its architects. This work is especially timely as the Library is in the initial stages of the planning process for a future renovation of the McKim Building.

DIGITIZATION
In these very unusual times, digitization has proven critical to continuing public access to the holdings in the Special Collections. The Associates is pleased to support the digitization of a wide range of manuscripts, prints, and photographs. Our grant to the BPL supported the addition of over 450 books from the BPL’s Special Collections to Internet Archive, and over 29,000 items were added to Digital Commonwealth. The latter came from a variety of collections including the Anti-Slavery Collection, the Colonial and Revolutionary Boston Collection, and over 17,000 photographs from the Brearley Press Photography Collection. Over 8,600 postcards from the Tichnor Brothers Collection were digitized this year. Far from being merely souvenirs, these postcards beautifully document our nation, its cities and states, along with many of its roads, bridges, monuments, buildings, and wonders of nature. This work was completed by a team of Associates-funded part-time photographers and metadata specialists.

Some of the items digitized and added to Digital Commonwealth were not only rare but extremely delicate as well. For these items the BPL’s Fragile Materials Photographer, Julia Featheringill, is responsible for shooting the materials. She is supported through the Associates’ grant. In addition, the Associates underwrote the purchase of additional camera equipment for the BPL’s Digital Lab. Over 35 items were made available online as a result of this work, including:

- A massive, four-volume illuminated 13th century Bible, written in Paris, owned and further illuminated by Cardinal Antoine Duprat in the early 16th century. Beyond its extremely clear hand and beautiful illuminations, the enormity of the size of this Bible makes it very unusual; and

- The Diary of Sarah Prince Gill recording the spiritual musings and life of a pious and highly-educated Bostonian, whose father was Reverend Thomas Prince, minister at the Old South Church.

ANTI-SLAVERY MANUSCRIPT TRANSCRIPTION PROJECT
For the past decade, the Associates has supported the cataloging and digitization of a major portion of the BPL’s extensive collection of Anti-Slavery manuscripts and materials. We have done this because we are deeply cognizant of the importance of the history of turbulent times contained within them. Their importance, notwithstanding, many of the abolitionists’ handwritten letters remained hard to access because of their difficult to decipher script. Three years ago, the BPL took the creative step of partnering with the crowd-sourcing web platform Zooniverse to encourage volunteers to undertake the transcription of the manuscripts. This not only allows the letters to be more easily read, it also allows them to be much more easily found in online searches.
At this time last year we reported that just over 3,600 out of a total of over 10,000 transcriptions were complete. We are thrilled to report that by the end of August 2020, all were finished. Hundreds more were then added that had originally been thought too long to engage volunteers. Those, too, were completed by the end of the summer, for a total of 12,247 transcribed letters. At the end of the project over 26,000 volunteers participated in helping the public better access the words of the abolitionists. In the coming year, the Library plans to integrate the transcriptions with the original texts—a great outcome from some very important work!

**ATLASCOPE**

The Associates also contributed to an innovative project with the Norman B. Leventhal Map & Education Center to digitally transform 39 Boston-area atlases from the 1860s to 1930s, so they could be included in the Map Center’s proprietary Atlascope™ web tool. These multiple-plate atlases, offered in time series editions, are among the most requested of all geographic resources at the BPL, yet in their original physical format they are several feet wide and long, unwieldy to manipulate, and difficult to use to find locations among the atlas plates. The Map Center created Atlascope tool (atlascope.leventhalmap.org) to make these atlases more accessible and multipurpose using digital cartography. With Atlascope, a user on a smartphone, tablet, or computer can instantly call up the relevant atlases for a specific geographic location, either by searching for an address, geolocating one’s real-world position, or by panning and browsing on a map. The resulting historic objects are geographically transformed to appear directly atop a modern-day map or satellite view.

The Associates’ support of this project increased the geographic extent and chronological coverage of the historical materials included in Atlascope. Since January over 14,000 patrons have used Atlascope, and the tool has been used by the Map Center’s educators in K-12 teaching programs on historical geography and community studies.

**SPECIAL COLLECTIONS STAFF**

The Associates was pleased to be able to support a total of six full-time staff positions in the Special Collections during the 2020 fiscal year, as well as an equal number of contractors who carried out photography and digitization work. Two of the positions were brand new this year, the Manager of the Arts and the Curator of Photography.

Kristin Parker joined the BPL in November 2019 to lead the newly formed Arts Department, which includes oversight of the Library’s prints, drawings, photographs, fine arts, and music Special Collections. One major achievement in the Arts Department this year was to bring together five different inventories that include most of the arts holdings. Department staff, under Kristin’s supervision, have been standardizing inventory data with the goal of merging all arts inventories into one database to consolidate and cross-reference this information, better protect the contents, and provide deeper access to background about objects in the collection. At the same time, demographic details have been added to the records regarding the artists in the collection to better represent creators’ nationalities and genders within the holdings, with an emphasis on identifying Black, indigenous, people of color, and women.
Aaron Schmidt spent his first full year as Curator of Photography focused on data about the BPL’s photographic inventory and making discoveries about creators in the collection. In addition, Aaron oversees the collection’s digitization efforts, manages reference requests, identifies conservation needs within the photography collection, and drafts proposals for new acquisitions. Highlights of his work this year include a survey to identify acetate negatives that will require cold storage to prevent deterioration; the successful management of, and access to, Wendy Artin’s collection of drawings; and the identification of several 19th-century female photographers in the Library’s collections.

**BPL STAFF TRAINING**

The Associates is pleased to underwrite professional development and training opportunities for the staff of the Special Collections department. As with so much else, these opportunities—many of which were scheduled to take place in the spring—were unable to go forward as a result of COVID-19. Before the onset of the pandemic, the BPL’s Curator of Interpretation was able to attend the New England Museum Association conference, which included a keynote session on the role of museums and similar institutions in conversations surrounding diversity and social justice. The Rare Books Special Library Assistant was also able to take advantage of a book conservation course at the North Bennet Street School prior to the start of the lockdown. Funds from this fiscal year for professional development will be carried over for future use.

**PROGRAMS AND EVENTS**

**Writer-in-Residence**

The Associates of the Boston Public Library’s Writer-in-Residence is awarded each year to an emerging author who writes for children or young adults. Our 2019-2020 Writer-in-Residence was Shawnna Thomas. She spent the year working on a Young Adult novel titled *Salvagers*. Set three years after a Great Flood destabilizes the Divided States, *Salvagers* follows teen survivors Onyx and Andre as they reluctantly team up to rescue their siblings from a high-security, government-funded orphanage.

A reception was held to welcome Shawnna and to bid goodbye to our 2018-2019 Writer-in-Residence Jorge Vega, who donated to the Library a first draft of his novel, *Bottled*, a fast paced adventure following a middle-school girl and her new best friend, a fugitive genie.

**Hundred Year Retroactive Book Award of 1919**

Each year the Associates considers the books that were published a century earlier and asks the question “are the best still relevant today?” In a presentation that has been called both quirky and charming, three noted writers champion the most enduring works of 100 years ago. The Hundred Year Retroactive Book Award of 1919 offered *Winesburg, Ohio* by Sherwood Anderson, Carl Sandburg’s *The Chicago Race Riots: July 1919*, and *Passionate Journey* by Frans Masereel (likely among the first truly graphic novels) for the audience’s consideration and, eventually, their votes. Arguing for the books were Andre Dubus III on behalf of *Winesburg, Ohio*, Dan Masur on behalf of *Passionate Journey*, and the winning presenter was Kellie Carter Jackson who championed *The Chicago Race Riots*.

**Pierce Performance Series**

For our second annual Pierce Performance, the Associates commissioned an original documentary play from local playwright Lisa Rafferty. *ONWARD—Votes for Women* celebrates the centennial of the passage of the 19th Amendment and draws upon manuscripts in the BPL’s Special Collections that relate to suffrage, among other sources. The documentary play offers the audience the chance to hear the words of such historic figures as Susan B. Anthony, Lucretia Mott, and Lucy Stone performed live in honor of the anniversary of the amendment’s passage. An original musical score for *ONWARD* was created by noted music director Adam McDonald.

As a result of the pandemic, the scheduled performance of *ONWARD* at the BPL in March 2020 had to be postponed. We anticipate that the play will be performed at the Library sometime in the second half of 2021.

**Literary Lights**

As with our 2020 Pierce Performance, our 2020 Literary Lights was also postponed and, ultimately, cancelled as a result of the pandemic and the health and safety risks any gathering posed. The Associates remains tremendously grateful to the many supporters of the event who not only understood the need for cancellation but also made contributions to the organization to help us weather the challenges created by the lack of a fundraiser in this difficult year.

We are deeply grateful as well to the authors whom we planned to honor at the event and who will now be honored as our 2021 Literary Lights. Those renowned writers include: Patrick Radden Keefe, Ibram X. Kendi, Meg Wolitzer, Joseph Kanon, Sy Montgomery, and Henry Louis Gates, Jr.

**BPL Renovation**

Despite a brief delay caused by the need to shutter the Library, construction is well underway on the $15.7 million City-funded renovation of the space housing the BPL’s Rare Books and Manuscripts. The principal goal of the project is to improve the environmental and mechanical systems to better regulate the temperature and humidity to protect the collection. A reopening in late 2021 or early 2022 is currently expected. The renovated space will feature a new lobby display space, reading room, conservation lab, work spaces, and a classroom. When completed, the city will be providing a fitting home for the truly remarkable rare books and manuscripts that reside in the BPL and an inviting space for the Library’s patrons.
DEAR FRIENDS,
Thank you for your continued support and belief in the Associates of the Boston Public Library. Due to your generosity, during Fiscal Year 2020 the Associates was able to make our largest grant to date to the BPL. This grant of $702,000 was used to accomplish the large volume of work outlined in this report.

Financially, the Associates has two goals—to provide the Library with grants to conserve, catalog, digitize, and exhibit the Special Collections, while also saving for the future so that preservation activities can continue at the BPL in perpetuity.

As of June 30, 2020, the Associates’ assets totaled $8,009,100. This demonstrates tremendous growth over the last decade; in comparison on June 30, 2010 our assets totaled $1,757,800.

During Fiscal Year 2020, the Associates raised $863,200 without considering increases in the existing assets’ market value. The total expenses for the year came to $966,500, including our grant to the Library. Some of the highlights from our fundraising efforts include:

- An anonymous benefactor donated $300,000 as the fifth installment of a multi-year grant via The Boston Foundation.
- Although our annual Literary Lights dinner was unfortunately canceled due to the pandemic, $211,800 was still donated in lieu of the event and as pandemic bridge funding.
- Other grant funding totaled $226,000, including increased funding for our Writer-in-Residence program.
- Other fundraising initiatives, including membership and the annual appeal, together raised $125,400.

The following charts provide a picture of our unaudited income and expenses for Fiscal Year 2020, and the Associates’ total grant-making to the BPL over the last six years.

Respectfully,

Anita Lincoln
TREASURER, BOARD OF DIRECTORS
ASSOCIATES OF THE BOSTON PUBLIC LIBRARY
Thank you to all of you who supported the Associates during Fiscal Year 2020. We could not have accomplished all the work described in this report without you!

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Nancy Webster in honor of John Webster
Diane E. Wood
Dr. and Mrs. Richard J. Wurtman

RIGHT: Daguerreotype portrait of abolitionist Charles Lenox Remond from the BPL’s Anti-Slavery Collection; many of the items in this collection were cataloged and digitized with funding from the Associates.
BACK COVER: Etching by Giovanni Battista Piranesi of the Bridge of Hadrian (today known as the Ponte Sant’Angelo) from the fourth volume of his La Antichità Romane, which was conserved and digitized with the Associates’ support.
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