Local and Family History

Scope: Local history and family history are tightly interwoven. Any family history will mention location and local historic events. Any town’s history will report on early settlers, prominent citizens, and local institutions of interest to family historians. The Local and Family History collection includes materials from the 17th-21st centuries. Because the collection began without a geographic focus, the historical collection is wide-ranging; it now focuses on obtaining materials concerning the six New England states.

There are more than 30,000 items listed in the online catalogue for this collection. The number that has not been added from the old catalogue is hard to gauge. Close to 6,000 items relate to individual families, and nearly 2,000 more in the local and family history field are available for circulation.

The family histories in the collection trace families back many generations – or only as far back as necessary to prove a family connection to an individual, to participation in an event, or to an original immigrant. In the case of Sir William Besham’s 1785 Genealogical Tables of the Sovereigns of the World, digitized by the Library for the Internet Archive, the genealogies trace back to Adam.

The local histories include histories of cities/towns, counties, and states. It also is comprised of histories of local industries, institutions, transportation, schools, and more.

Materials in this collection include, but are not limited to:

- Biographical resources
- Boston School Committee/School Department material
- City, town, county, and state histories
- Early Boston city documents
- Family histories/Genealogies
- Heraldry resources
- Local History and Genealogy Collection (160,000 fiches)
- Vital Records

Databases include:

- American Ancestors
- Ancestry Library Edition
- Heritage Quest

Criteria:

1. Uniqueness, rarity, and value: Many libraries have family and local history collections for the town in which they are located. The Boston Public Library’s collection is unique in that it

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includes all of Massachusetts and most of New England. As so many families trace their forebears back to the New England colonies, this collection is both a local and national treasure.

Although many of the works in this collection are available elsewhere, some of the genealogies in our collection are one of a limited number of volumes published, and some are unique. Materials collected from local institutions or donated by them (e.g., annual reports, in-house periodicals, etc.) may not be available to the public anywhere else.

2. **Pre-eminent among libraries and cultural institutions:** Other than the New England Historic Genealogical Society, which collects only in this one subject area (genealogy) and is a private membership library, no other library in New England – and no public library – has as extensive a collection of local and family history. And the Society does not have the related collections that the Boston Public Library does.

3. **Historical significance that reflects the long-term BPL commitment to the collection, buttressed by the past and current generosity of individuals:** As early as the 1857 *Annual Report of the Trustees*, it was recognized that the purchase of books relating to this country should be a priority. From the earliest days of the library, this priority has included local histories and genealogies.

4. **Central to the history of the City of Boston and the communities that inhabit it:** By definition, the local and family history collection is central to the history of Boston and the communities that inhabit it. The collection documents the history of the town, its institutions, and its residents. No one has a greater interest in this collection than the residents of Boston and the communities that inhabit it.

5. **Resonates with communities of scholars and makes the BPL the destination for scholarship in a particular subject:** The BPL is well-known as a depository for New England-related genealogical materials. While most genealogists are not scholars per se, the BPL’s *Local and Family History* collection draws researchers from all over the country and, to a lesser extent, the world.

Additionally, local university history professors have brought/sent classes every semester for years to use the local and family history resources for class projects and research. We regularly receive inquiries from graduate students about the resources available for further research on Boston history.

6. **Universality of subject matter and furthers the purpose of the BPL by contributing to a democratic education:** Everyone has a family. And no family is as fascinating to us as our own. Every family leaves a record, and that record is accessible for New England families at the Boston Public Library. Whether the family is public or private, wealthy or indigent, native or immigrant, the Boston Public Library’s *Local and Family History* Collection seeks to document all and make our resources available free to all.

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There is a great interest in the history of Boston and surrounding communities nationwide, even worldwide, as the cradle of democracy, the birthplace of the American Revolution, and the home of so many people’s forebears. When visitors and researchers come to the area, they expect the BPL to have every book ever published on the history of Boston. They hope for the same for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts and pray for the same for New England. We often hear how pleased scholars are that our materials are available to anyone who walks in the library, no appointment necessary.

**Provenance:** As long as there has been a Boston Public Library, works on local and family history have been collected. As early as 1879, the collection was important enough to be featured three times in the *Bulletin of the Public Library of the City of Boston* (Boston: Public Library, April, July, and October 1879). These bibliographies were then collected, revised, enlarged, and published as a monograph, *Catalogue of Family Histories: With Many Works Containing Genealogical Information, in the Boston Public Library*, edited by Arthur M. Knapp, Custodian of Bates Hall, in 1898. Both *The Genealogist’s Note Book* (v. 1, 1899, p. 119) and *Putnam’s Historical Magazine* (v. 7, 1899, p.259) printed identical advice to genealogists, to wit:

> Every well-equipped library should have a copy of *Durrie’s Index* and *Glenn’s List*, or, if lacking these, a copy of the *Bulletin of the Boston Public Library* for October 1891, which contains a valuable but partial list of printed genealogies. [*Durrie’s Index to American Genealogies* and *Glenn’s List of American Genealogies* were standard reference tools of the day.]

Knapp noted in his *Catalogue* that the BPL’s list of local histories containing genealogical information included “…nearly all the works mentioned in *Durrie’s Index to American Genealogies*, besides many that do not appear in that work.”

Local and family histories have continued to be added to the collection ever since, both through purchase and donation.

**Access:** The *Local and Family History* collection is available in many formats. The majority of the collection is available in print. There is a supplemental card catalogue for genealogies catalogued before 1974 in Bates Hall. There are still significant sources on microfiche or film, and databases are now an integral part of the collection. Print sources are being digitized both as they go out of copyright and as circulating items while in copyright.

Most of the collection is listed in the BPL’s online catalogue because, when an online catalogue was first instituted at the BPL, it was determined that *Local and Family History* catalogue records were an ideal collection to convert to online records due to its popularity and size.

Family histories were one of the first collections to be suggested for digitization. Family, heraldic, and local history titles remain among the most downloaded titles the BPL has added to the Internet Archive. As of October 2012, 20 of the 50 most downloaded titles digitized by the Boston Public Library for the Internet Archive dealt with genealogy, local history, or heraldry.

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**Languages:** Primarily English, with select sources in mainly western and eastern European languages.

**Related Collections:**
- Boston City Records (Rare Books and Manuscripts Department)
- *Boston Herald-Traveler* photo morgue (Print)
- City of Boston Documents, 1836-present (Soc/Gov)
- Directories (Microtext, Soc/Gov)
- Newspapers (Microtext)

**Funding Support:** No specific funding is dedicated to this collection.

**Special Note:** Visitors coming to the Boston Public Library expect to be able to find any and all histories, no matter how obscure, of Boston and Massachusetts. It is a daunting task to meet that expectation. The BPL’s *Local and Family History* collection has come close for much of the library’s existence.

Sometimes what makes a collection one of distinction is not its wealth of unique or rare items, but rather its depth and breadth. It would be a sin against scholarship and a failure of responsibility to the citizens of the city and Commonwealth to abandon the library’s historical commitment to “… contain all those [works] pertaining to its local history, or that of the State or the nation of which it is a part” (*Annual Report of the Trustees of the Public Library of the City of Boston*, 1865).