

# TRUSTEES OF THE PUBLIC LIBRARY OF THE CITY OF BOSTON

## Meeting of the Trustees Special Collections Committee Thursday, May 11, 2023 at 8:30 a.m. Central Library, Commonwealth Salon 700 Boylston Street, Boston, MA 02116

### MINUTES

A meeting of the Boston Public Library Trustees Special Collections Committee was held at the Central Library on Thursday May 11, 2023 at 8:30 a.m. The meeting was also available via Zoom for the public.

Present at the meeting included: Committee Chair Ben Bradlee, Committee Vice Chair K. Matthew Dames and Committee members: Jabari Asim, Joe Berman, Charles Cooney, Elliot B. Davis, Juan Enriquez, Jeff Hawkins, David Leonard, and Beth Prindle. Committee member Lillie Johnson was absent.

Also, present were the Clerk of the Board, Pamela Carver, Chair Priscilla H. Douglas, BPL staff, and members of the public.

Mr. Ben Bradlee presiding called the Meeting of the Trustees Special Collections Committee (“Committee”) to order at 8:30 a.m. Charles Cooney was invited to read the EDI statement. Roll call was taken by the Clerk and determined there was a quorum. Everyone was reminded that the meeting was being recorded and how to sign up for public comment.

The first matter of business was approval of meeting minutes of November 29, 2022. With no comments or edits, the minutes were approved.

Mr. Bradlee began by noting that the theme of the meeting was “new perspectives in special collections”; explaining that curators encounter language that is hostile to the inclusive goals of today. As a result, the BPL staff have developed a “Harmful language” policy which is essentially a disclaimer for the user. He hoped to discuss this and how this may be important as we acquire items in the future and what our outreach strategies regarding this matter are moving forward as this is an important topic across the country.

Next, Beth Prindle, introduced Jay Moschella, Curator of Manuscripts and Rare Books. They reviewed what has been happening in the last six months since the department reopened in September 2022. This included mapping seven miles of shelving, reshelving 2,300 linear feet of archives and manuscripts collections, and moving back the music collections. The web presence was relaunched to enhance patrons’ usage and to make it more accessible and welcoming to all.

They hired 10 positions, scanned 1 million catalog cards, and launched Aeon technology for materials tracking and patron requests.

Mr. Dames commended the staff for all the work behind the scenes, noting that it enhanced the experience to the public and was very aspiring.

Next, Jay Moschella reviewed some statistics from September 2022 - March 2023. The reading room was open to the public. They included 380 research appointments in person and 1273 reference transactions online. They include researchers from 11 countries and 66% from Massachusetts. There were 1970 visitors to the Special Collections lobby, and 17 tours and 132 visitors for 109 items.

Mr. Moschella reviewed a snapshot of what types of collections are requested, which included archival collections from the arts department, music scores, rare books and manuscripts, antiquarian books, and modern books.

Ms. Prindle discussed their targeting public and staff engagement work. They will work to determine what is happening in this calendar year and how to plan to amplify it. She noted that they will be hosting monthly open houses and themed drop-in “samplers” of various combinations of collections. They will collaborate with the communications team on promoting them on social media and in our monthly newsletters. They will also build staff awareness around the collections, digitized materials, and upcoming initiatives.

Next, Ms. Prindle discussed in-house efforts to encourage our staff to understand our collections better. We hope to analyze visitors and how they can amplify for other audiences we are missing. One effort was partnering with Research Services on cross training and collaborative patron services. They hope to have one single reference portal to simplify this process. All special collections questions will go to one single stream to see what types of questions are coming in and learn about the various areas around collections.

Also, they hope to expand their capacity to support class visits and build awareness through outreach to educators exploring and developing fellowship and internship opportunities (with organizations such as NERFC, North Bennet School, and Simmons University).

Ms. Prindle discussed the 2023 collections discovery and stewardship work. They hope to launch the Collection Space content management system for the visual materials collections and focus on projects including Boston Herald Traveler Photo Morgue Pilot, the Connick stained glass digitization, Bates Hall busts conservations, and WHDH audio visual materials pilot. They are rewriting the collections development policy and onboarding many new managers while working on security improvements. There is lots of behind-the-scenes foundational work. They will be prioritizing projects by determining what capacity we currently can handle.

Moving on, Ms. Prindle discussed some bigger topics from the field, including inclusive description and reparative language to address harmful content and legacy cataloging language within collections. We are determining how to respectfully engage with collections we have already, including those that are offensive, and not deny that we have them at the same time.

Mr. Moschella reviewed the BPL’s Harmful Language Statement. It is an introduction to the early stages of work that we are doing where we try to provide context to what the enterprise of collections’ description is, and what are the general challenges of how reparative description fits in with various keywords.

Mr. Moschella gave several examples of descriptions that are transcribed from legacy finding aids and lists that date back sometimes one hundred years. The language used at the time is not infrequently racist, sexist, homophobic, as well as people and names that we consciously or subconsciously elided from these descriptions. A very basic remediation step is the inclusion of the harmful language statement which is available directly from the [Special Collections home page](#). We have also embedded within every finding aid. He gave a few examples of key words that are changed, including recognition that “slave” is recognized as harmful and changed to as “enslaved person.” Mr. Moschella explained this work requires a lot of competency and training and we have only just begun.

Mr. Moschella explained this will be ongoing work in all we do. We cannot erase the original language as they are historical documents but will provide reparative descriptions with the guidelines discussed. It was noted that it is a colossal challenge and is ongoing around the country.

The committee discussed the challenges of interpretation and entering into global databases along with the importance of ongoing training.

Mr. Bradlee asked for any new business. Mr. Berman updated all on the Associates annual event, *Literary Lights*. It was extremely successful, being the second highest grossing event in their history.

They discussed future topics for that would be helpful for the committee. They said they would prefer to have ongoing discussions regarding the reparative language as well as the discovery of our collections.

Mr. Bradlee asked if there was any Public comment for which there was none. With no further discussion, the meeting adjourned at 10:01 a.m.

Respectfully Submitted,

*Pamela R. Carver, Clerk of the Board*