

### **Introduction**

The Othmer Library at the Brooklyn Historical Society is a nationally recognized research library comprised of library, special collections, archives and manuscripts, and artifacts, including image and oral history collections. We serve the mission of the larger Brooklyn Historical Society to "connect the past to the present and make the vibrant history of Brooklyn tangible, relevant and meaningful for today's diverse communities, and for generations to come" through supporting research in to the history of Brooklyn and Long Island, and by collecting, preserving, and promoting access to our library and archival materials. The Library also supports the larger mission of the Society through collecting to foster and enrich the Society's rich exhibits, education activities, and programming.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this policy is to outline the scope and rationale behind collecting at the Othmer Library, in order to:

- assist in furthering our mission and upholding the professional standards of the library and archival community;
- aid the library and archives staff and Collections Committee of the Board of Trustees in selection of materials in a way that is planned, realistic, cohesive, and tied to the institution's resources and priorities; and
- inform the public of our selection priorities, and encourage the donation of materials which support our mission and goals.

### **How the policy was created**

This policy was created in response to Strategic Planning initiatives set out by the Society and Board of Directors in 2007, specifically Initiative IV, to "*Manage our historic resources at the highest professional standards, providing protection and care for the collections while making them available and useful to the community.*" In response to this initiative, library staff, and members of the Collections Committee of the Board of Trustees set out to create policies and documentation consistent with professional best practices in the museum and library communities. To that end, a Collections Policy was developed in 2008-2009, and this policy was created in 2009-2010.

The policy was written largely by Othmer Library staff, with input from exhibition, education, and oral history staff, and the Society's President. In preparation for writing the document, professional literature about collection development and sample policies from other institutions were consulted, and staff and the Collections Committee of the Board of Trustees participated in discussions of the content and purpose of the policy, as well as of the scope of collecting. The Collections Committee also regularly reviewed drafts of the policy, and formally approved the policy on July 13, 2010. The full Board of Trustees approved the policy in September 2010. The policy will be reviewed every five years.

### **Audience**

The Othmer Library makes its materials available to all researchers on equal terms. While our holdings primarily support scholarly research, the Library encourages anyone interested in the rich history of Brooklyn and Long Island to do research in its holdings. We welcome scholars; historians; teachers and students at all levels; genealogists; amateur historians; artists; documentarians; and anyone else curious about the history of the area.

In addition to external audiences, the larger Society staff is an important constituent of the Library, who use Library resources in developing and presenting exhibits, education activities, and programming.

### **History of Collections**

The Brooklyn Historical Society was founded in 1863 as the Long Island Historical Society, with a mission "to discover, procure, and preserve whatever may relate to general history, especially the natural, civil, literary, and ecclesiastical history of the United States, the State of New York, and more particularly of the counties, towns, and villages of Long Island." (By-Laws of the Long Island Historical Society, 1863) Over time, the mission and collecting scope of the institution narrowed in focus, and the Society began to concentrate its activities and acquisitions more specifically on the history of Brooklyn and Long Island.

Much of the original, late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century collecting focused on Brooklyn and Long Island, but a significant portion of collections were national, and sometimes international, in scope, including materials relating to genealogy, religion, and military history, as well as a significant book collection relating to the history of each of the original 13 American colonies.

In the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, the institution began to narrow its collecting scope and deaccessioning materials from all of its collections that were deemed out of scope. In the 1980s, the institution changed its name to the Brooklyn Historical Society. Around this time, programming and collecting focus also shifted toward centering on the communities of Brooklyn, most notably with the beginning of a significant Oral History Program. Beginning in 1973 with the *Puerto Rican Oral History Project*, the Society undertook several oral history projects between 1973 and 1998. The majority of these were part of larger documentation projects or exhibits, and centered around a specific Brooklyn neighborhood, event, or community. The Oral History Program was re-invigorated in 2006 with the hiring of a full-time Oral Historian who is actively conducting interviews and continuing to build this collection.

The sum of these collecting strategies is the Othmer Library Collection today: a remarkable and unique collection of Brooklyn and Long Island materials that document the area's history and development, and provide important insights into both our local and national history and heritage. Though often described in separate collections—library, special collections, oral history, photography, maps, archives and manuscripts, artifacts, works on paper—the sum of these parts is a tightly interrelated collection with materials about our local history spanning the period from colonial settlement to today. The collections, in general, date heavily from 1850-1920, with notable exceptions being photographic and oral history materials. Some of the early collecting themes continue to be our strengths—general, civic, and ecclesiastical history, and genealogy. We have also built significant collections documenting land use, development, and real estate; political and social engagement and activism; and printing and publishing on Long Island.

### **Collecting Rationale**

Scholarly research value is the primary criterion for collecting materials; exhibit and educational value are also considered. Collecting foci are based upon our knowledge of researcher needs, and are guided by current strengths as well as areas where we see a need or

opportunity to build the collection. Condition, extent, and preservation or conservation needs of materials, as well as our ability to meet those needs, are also considered in any collecting decision.

### **Scope of Collecting**

We collect materials of enduring historical and cultural value that document the rich histories of Brooklyn and Long Island, from the beginning of the written record of settlement of the area to the present day. Further detail within this broadly outlined scope, including current holdings, strengths, and collecting goals, is set out below:

### ***Format & Types of Materials***

We collect a variety of formats and types of materials. Within the library, we collect all manner of published, printed materials, including books, pamphlets, rare books, newspapers, and serials. Within the archives, manuscript and special collections we collect original, unpublished materials, including personal papers and organizational records; maps and atlases; oral histories in both transcript and audio and video formats; photography and moving images in print, negative, and digital formats; works of art on paper; paintings; artifacts; architectural records; and printed materials and ephemera. We do not collect textiles at this time (2010, 2015).

### ***Geography***

The main geographic scope of collecting is Brooklyn, New York. Long Island, New York City and New York State are also included, given the deeply intertwined histories of these areas. Both library and archives collections hold significant materials on the early history of all of Long Island. Collecting mainly concentrates on Brooklyn. However, we will continue to collect Long Island materials dated or referring to the period prior to Brooklyn's consolidation with New York City in 1898.

### ***Time Period***

Collections span the period from the mid-17th century to the present day. Currently, the bulk of the materials in the archives, manuscript, works on paper, and book collections are from the late-19th and early 20th centuries; the materials in the photographic collections are primarily from the early to mid-20th century. We will continue to collect within the entirety of these time periods, both adding more modern materials and building upon our existing strengths.

### ***Language***

Currently, collections are primarily in English, with a small but significant portion in Dutch, as well as a few items in a variety of other languages including but not limited to Spanish, Italian, French, Arabic, Mandarin, Hebrew, and Yiddish. We will continue to collect primarily in English, but will consider collections with a portion of materials in other languages as they represent the population and communities of Brooklyn.

### ***Subject Areas***

The subject areas listed below are meant as a general guide to the top collecting priorities, rather than an exhaustive list of all subjects covered in our collections. Some of these build on existing strengths in the collection, while others outline more recent acquisition initiatives for collecting areas we wish to develop. The list is in alphabetical order.

### Agriculture

We do not seek to collect in the agricultural sciences, but rather to document the farms and farmers in Brooklyn and Long Island. The collections are currently strong in documenting 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century farming; we will continue to collect in this area and would like to add holdings to reflect the current return to an interest in agriculture in the borough through such activities as roof-top farming, community gardens, farmers' markets, and community-supported agriculture.

### Architecture & Civil Engineering

We will collect materials that document the built environment in Brooklyn, including residential and commercial structures, bridges, roadways, and docks. In particular, we wish to document the city planning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century as Brooklyn shifted from largely agrarian to dense urban landscape; development of public housing, apartment housing, and other uniquely urban kinds of housing; well-known or prolific architects and city planners; and iconic structures or buildings in the borough.

In addition, we hold three large documentary-style photographic collections that document a significant portion of the buildings in the borough. We will continue to seek out similar visual collections that comprehensively document the built environment of Brooklyn.

### Business & Industry

We will seek out materials about the predominant industries in Brooklyn; individual businesses with strong identification with Brooklyn, or those that are major employers or have economic impact; national businesses based in Brooklyn; as well as a representation of the small, family-owned, neighborhood businesses that have long been an iconic and vital part of the economy of our borough.

### Education

We will collect materials that document public and private schools and colleges in Brooklyn.

### Educational collaboration projects

Projects created by BHS staff with students that produce bodies of work will not be considered for formal accessioning by the Collections committee; items and collections that fall into this category may be added to the Institutional Archive.

### Genealogy

Though national in scope in the past, collecting in this area will concentrate on families with strong connections to Brooklyn and Long Island, and on materials that capture a large portion or subsection of Brooklyn residents. Potential genealogical interest in larger archives collections will be considered in acquisitions decisions.

### Geography

The library holds an extensive collection of maps and atlases documenting Brooklyn, Long Island, and New York City, with a particular strength in 19<sup>th</sup> century maps of Brooklyn. Map collecting will continue to be a priority, with particular focus on collecting maps of Brooklyn up to the present day, and maps depicting any portion of

Long Island in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. We also hold two collections of aerial photography, and would like add other aerial photography collections.

#### Immigration

Immigration to Brooklyn and Long Island is currently predominantly documented through oral history interviews and projects; we seek to build both textual and visual collections in this subject, including materials documenting statistics and patterns of immigration and migration, immigrant communities, and individual immigrant experiences.

#### Journalism

The library holds a significant collection of early Brooklyn and Long Island newspapers, periodicals, and newsletters. We will continue to collect Brooklyn-specific periodicals.

#### Land Use & Real Estate

We will collect broadly in this topic, including urban planning, preservation, development of residential and commercial properties, and the business of real estate as it has been practiced in Brooklyn. Of high priority are materials documenting 20th century cycles of neighborhood decline and gentrification, neighborhood preservation and revitalization activities, and landlord/tenant relations. We currently hold a sizable collection of real estate advertising and marketing materials, and seek to add to this collection.

#### Military History

We will collect material documenting the service of Brooklyn residents stationed in the military, the service of soldiers based in Brooklyn and Long Island, and the experiences of non-military personnel in Brooklyn in their war support efforts or during wartimes. Particular strengths and continued priority collecting areas are materials relating to the roles of Brooklyn and Long Island residents in the American Revolution and Civil War; Civil War relief efforts in Brooklyn; and materials relating to the Brooklyn Navy Yard. We would like to build collections related to World Wars I and II, and all other 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century wars, conflicts, and military operations.

#### Organizations

We seek to document advocacy, arts, civic, fraternal, philanthropic, professional, and social organizations in Brooklyn.

#### People and Families

We are dedicated to documenting the lives and experiences of a broad range of Brooklyn residents. The archives will collect the papers of individuals and families who are long-time residents or have other strong connections to the area. The archives are primarily interested in aggregations of materials which document full or significant spectrums of lives and experiences.

#### Performing & Fine Arts

Current holdings include several archives collections documenting the once thriving theater and vaudeville circuit in Brooklyn; it will remain a priority to build this

collection. We also will collect artists' visual interpretations and representations of Brooklyn and the work of Brooklyn-based artists.

### Photography

We are interested in collecting photography not just as a medium with which to document areas of topical interest, but also as a subject in its own right. We will collect representation of how photography was practiced in Brooklyn, including the work of portrait studios, and the work of professional and amateur photographers who practiced in Brooklyn or produced a large body of work documenting the borough.

### Politics & Public Affairs

The current holdings in this category are mainly city publications and reports, including a large collection on 19<sup>th</sup> Century City of Brooklyn annual reports and Brooklyn Common Council minutes. We also hold a small number of collections of people who held public office in city government, and would like to continue collecting the papers of those involved in Brooklyn city politics and government.

### Recreation, Sports, and Leisure

We will collect in order to document the leisure time activities of Brooklyn residents, including resorts, amusement parks, yachting, cycling, baseball and other sports. We will also collect materials documenting professional sports teams based in Brooklyn and the business of sports here, with special attention paid to the Brooklyn Dodgers.

### Religion

Religion will be represented in the collection mainly through documentation of churches, synagogues, and other places of worship. We hold a small amount of materials about many Brooklyn churches, as well as the records of several large churches and papers of a few well-known members of the clergy. The main representation is currently of Christian, and specifically Protestant, denominations. We would like to build more diverse holdings representative of the many religions practiced in Brooklyn.

### Social Action and Activism

We wish to document a broad range of social and political movements that have played out in our area. Though given its own category here, evidence of community engagement and activism will be documented throughout many topical areas of the collection, and will be taken into consideration in the acquisition of all materials, including those about organizations, people, real estate and land use, and religion.

### Transportation

We will document the history of water, surface road, and rail transportation in Brooklyn and on Long Island. Materials of specific technical detail related to the subway and bus systems, such as engineering drawings or large collections of photos of rolling stock, will not be collected.

### Under-documented Communities

We will continue to develop relationships, programs, and opportunities to build out our collections in order to better represent the broad ethnic, religious, and cultural

diversity of the population of Brooklyn throughout history and particularly in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

#### Writing, Publishing & Printing

The library holds a significant collection of Brooklyn and Long Island imprints, and seeks to continue to collect works published in Brooklyn. In addition, we will collect material relating to the business of publishing and printing; published materials by local authors; fictional works set in Brooklyn; and critical or biographical works about the area's literary figures. The archives and manuscripts will not, in general, collect literary manuscripts or the papers of Brooklyn-based fiction writers.

Acquisitions may, on occasion, be considered that do not fall within the areas listed above, in anticipation of new emphases, emerging research trends, and institutional exhibition and program planning.

#### **Collecting Methods**

Donation is the preferred method of acquisition of materials; gifts of materials are accepted from both individuals and organizations. Deposits where ownership is not transferred to the Society will only be considered in exceptional circumstances. Purchases of collection material also only occur in exceptional circumstances. The same criteria for selection are applied to both gift and purchase acquisitions. Items to be accessioned into the collection require recommendation by library staff and approval by the Collections Committee of the Board of Trustees, as detailed in our Collections Policy.

#### **Retention**

A maximum of three copies of any item will generally be retained; exceptions will be made based upon popularity, rarity, age, and condition.

Duplicate, out of scope, and other unwanted items donated with archival and manuscript collections will be disposed of in accordance with the stipulations of the Donation Agreement. In the absence of a Donation Agreement, the library staff will exercise their best professional judgment as to appropriate disposition method. Additionally, collection appraisal is a continuing process and the scope of collecting of the institution may change over time. The acceptance of material into the collection does not commit the institution to keep materials in perpetuity. Disposition usually occurs via return to the original donor, transfer to another appropriate institution, sale, or disposal. Any removal of accessioned materials from the collections will be done so in accordance with procedures set out in the Society's Collections Policy.

#### **Exclusions**

Materials with restrictions on access or use will generally not be accepted; in some cases, materials of great research value with clearly stated restrictions of limited duration will be considered. Materials will not be accepted if the donor's legal ownership of them is uncertain. Photocopies of manuscript or other original materials are generally not accepted. Within the photography collections, obvious copies of original prints will not be collected. Exceptions will be considered, but will become part of a reference collection rather than formally accessioned into the photographic archives.

**Related Collections**

The Othmer Library works to have a strong relationship with other area repositories whose collecting missions complement and coincide with our own. These include, but are not limited to: The Brooklyn Collection at the Brooklyn Public Library, New-York Historical Society, The New York Transit Museum, Brooklyn College Archives and Special Collections, Museum of the City of New York, the Archives @ Queens Library, and the Brooklyn Museum. Staff will make referrals whenever possible when materials offered to the Society that do not fall within our collecting scope may be appropriate for these repositories.

**Next Steps**

We recognize that collecting focus may change over time in response to a variety of factors. In response to this, we will review this policy every five years, with the next scheduled review in January of 2020.

Creation of a policy to guide acquisitions for art and artifacts is in development. This document will be amended when the policy is created.