

COURIER LIFE PUBLICATIONS

03/05/2007

Othmer treasure trove reopens to researchers - Brooklyn Historical Society heralds return of information and artifacts

By Helen Klein

The riches contained within the Brooklyn Historical Society's library are open to view, once again, after seven years during which the resource was closed for renovation.

BHS's Othmer Library reopened in January, allowing professional researchers and scholars, as well as students, genealogy hunters and the simply curious to access rare books and primary source materials that shed light on the borough's history, its changing streetscape and the lives of Brooklynites both famous and unknown.



The Brooklyn Historical Society's Othmer Library.

"Our belief is that research should really be available to anyone who wants it," noted Deborah Schwartz, BHS's president.

Advertisement There is a great deal of material within the institution's archives, said Schwartz. Besides innumerable books of historic interest, there is, "An extensive collection of people's letters, journals and manuscripts," she remarked. "The more you get to know it, the more you learn about it, the more thrilling it becomes. It's a treasure trove of information and artifacts."

Among the standouts are the papers of abolitionist Henry Ward Beecher, who preached at Brooklyn Heights' Plymouth Church before the Civil War. Beecher's papers, "Are very important," explained Schwartz, "because he was a major figure in the anti-slavery movement."

Along with Beecher's handwritten sermons, Schwartz said, BHS also has more personal scribbles – "notes on what he wanted for dinner," for example. Through such a broad selection of documents, Schwartz pointed out, "You can get a picture not only of the man's political life but also his personal life and social life."

While Beecher was a man of great renown, BHS also has papers that bring vibrancy to the lives of ordinary people. These, said Schwartz, add to the ability of researchers to understand what living in Brooklyn in past eras was like.

Not surprisingly, much of what is available at BHS has a Brooklyn connection. The institution has "a huge collection of Brooklyn Dodger material," said Schwartz, as well as "a collection of information on fire fighting

in Brooklyn that goes back to the 1770s.”

For literature lovers, it also has a signed second edition of Walt Whitman’s revolutionary volume, *Leaves of Grass*, which, in its introduction of free verse, helped reshape the poetic voice and lead it into the 20th century. Whitman, who spent much of his childhood in Brooklyn, lived in Brooklyn at various times during his adult years, prior to the Civil War.

For those who are interested in how the borough evolved physically, there are also original land use maps dating back to the early 19th century, said Schwartz. “You can see as the streets were laid out in Brooklyn, how land use evolved, and how neighborhoods changed and became more urbanized,” she remarked. “The maps are fascinating, and they are also very beautiful, all hand-colored.”

A recent gift of 250 19th century children’s books printed in Brooklyn by McLoughlin Brothers adds another dimension to BHS’s collection. These, said Schwartz, are likely to be the subject of a future exhibit.

Much of the material at BHS has wider implications. The institution has “an original copy of the Emancipation Proclamation signed by Abraham Lincoln,” said Schwartz.

There is also a growing collection of oral histories that BHS is soliciting, “From people in all walks of life,” said Schwartz. These, which encompass, “Interesting stories about growing up in Brooklyn, will become primary source documents in the future,” she noted.

The extensive renovation has resulted in the library being organized in Library of Congress order, said Schwartz. Prior to the renovation, she said, the order was, “Very quirky.”

Besides going in person to the library, those interested in accessing its contents can now view the library’s catalog on line through New York University’s BobCat online catalog, at www.bobcat.nyu.edu. “Now, anyone, anywhere can find out what’s in the collection,” explained Schwartz.

Eventually, said Schwartz, the hope is to have not only a digitized card catalog on line, but also manuscripts and works of art owned by BHS on line, so that those logging on can browse through them.

BHS is located at 128 Pierrepont Street, in Brooklyn Heights. While BHS is open Wednesday through Sunday, from noon to 5 p.m., the Othmer Library is open to the public on Wednesdays and Fridays, from noon to 4:30 p.m., as well as on the third Saturday of every month, from noon to 4:30 p.m. In addition, it is open to members only on Thursday evenings, 5 to 7:30 p.m.

Walk-in visitors can access the books in the library during library hours; for access to manuscripts, an advance call is recommended, said Schwartz, because, “Pulling material out of the archives is a complicated process.”

Admission to BHS, including the library, is \$6 for adults, and \$4 for senior citizens and children over the age of 12. Members and children under the age of 12 are admitted free of charge. For further information, call 718-222-4111 or log onto www.brooklynhistory.org.

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