



From the *Illustrations of the Birds of the United States*, by Audubon and Silliman, 1826.

American Sparrow-Hawk, *Falco sparverius* (L.)

Illustration by John James Audubon and John G. Silliman, 1826.



Commonwealth of Massachusetts, Department of Environmental Affairs

Hidden treasure

The state's library and archives are underfunded, understaffed, and inaccessible to both researchers and ordinary citizens

BY COLMAN M. HERMAN

A sense of awe envelops Nancy Powell as she waxes eloquently about *The Birds of America*, a multi-volume set of John James Audubon's hand-painted prints of life-size images of 435 birds like the ruff-necked hummingbird, the cerulean warbler, and the gold-winged woodpecker.

"It is a staggering accomplishment," says Powell, the curator at the Audubon Center in Audubon, Pennsylvania. "If you have a chance to see an original set of Audubon prints, nothing beats the experience. It is hard to wrap one's mind around it until you actually see them."

But that's difficult in Massachusetts, even though the state owns one of the 200 or so sets of prints that Audubon

produced. The state's copy—purchased in 1833 for \$800 and worth millions of dollars today—is stored deep in the bowels of the State House, largely hidden from public view because the State Library doesn't have the funds to exhibit it.

It's an all-too-familiar pattern in Massachusetts. The State Library and the Massachusetts Archives oversee a vast treasure trove of historic records and artifacts. They handle the basics of cataloguing them well, but they are woefully underfunded and, as a consequence, mount few exhibitions and do very little public outreach. They don't have the resources to pursue lost, and likely stolen, items. And while other states are using the Internet to bring historic records to the public, the library and archives in Massachusetts operate websites that are little more than card catalogues for their collections.

"The State Library has

an amazing collection. Some of the things there are priceless," says Joffrey Smith, a member of the library's board of trustees and a Worcester city councilor. "But the public has no idea that it exists. We need to do a much better job telling the public we're here."

William Fowler, a professor of history at Northeastern University and a former member of the archives advisory board, says the archives, overseen by Secretary of State William Galvin, is suffering from neglect. "It is scandalous that Secretary Galvin and the Legislature pay so little attention to the archives, which has one of the most incredible historical collections in the country," he says. "I do not understand why they are not willing to invest in the archives. It's a sad situation. It's a very sad situation. They are neglecting our history."

Galvin declined comment, but a top aide, Alan Cote, says funding is tight because there is little support on Beacon Hill for many of the tasks the archives performs. "We do the best we can with what they give us," he says.

It's gotten to the point where professional librarians and archivists alike are starting to wonder whether the state would be better off loaning out or selling off pieces of its collection to institutions willing and able to exhibit them properly.

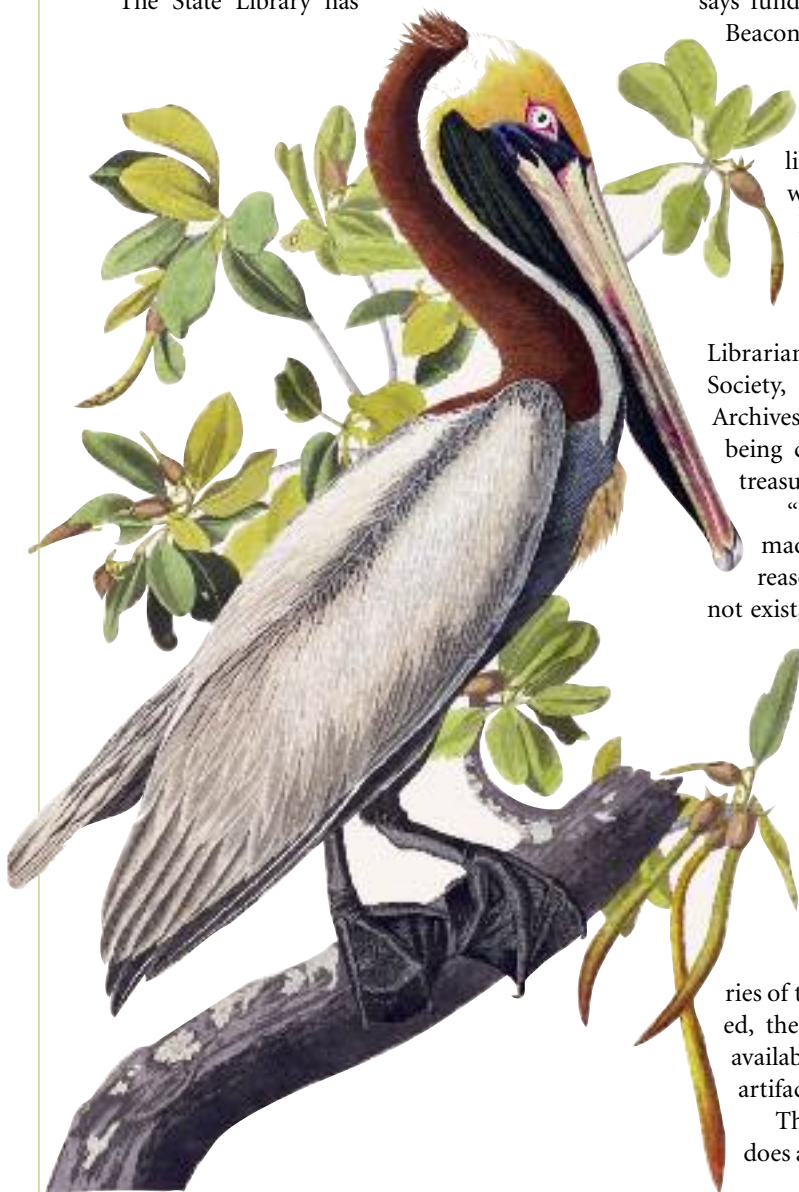
Peter Drummey, the Stephen T. Riley Librarian at the nonprofit Massachusetts Historical Society, says the challenges facing the Massachusetts Archives and the State Library are the same challenges being confronted by many repositories of historical treasures across the country.

"If research collections are not protected and made available to the public in a responsible but reasonably convenient manner, they might as well not exist, and I would predict that in the not-very-long term they won't," Drummey says in an email. "The question then becomes whether to change the priorities of institutions and/or to rationally redistribute their holdings, or to see collections lost to neglect or worse."

DREARY AND UNINVITING

The Massachusetts Archives and the George Fingold State Library, named for a former attorney general, are the two primary repositories of the state's documents and artifacts. Broadly stated, their mission is to collect, store, preserve, make available for individual use, and showcase records and artifacts that document and reflect the state's history.

The distinction between what the State Library does and what the Massachusetts Archives does is lost



on most people. Officials acknowledge their duties overlap, but the primary job of the archives is to collect primary source material—the permanent, noncurrent records of state administrations—whereas the library gathers secondary source, or published, materials.

The state archives is a fortress-like building that is rapidly running out of space for new documents.

The library, part of the governor's executive office of administration and finance, was established in 1826 by the Legislature because so many documents were literally piling up in the halls and chambers of the State House that lawmakers needed to find some place to put them.

Located on two separate floors of the State House, the library features a cavernous main room with publications allowing you to track the history of any piece of state legislation. There are many other state and some federal

publications available as well. The library's "special collections," located in the basement of the State House, include rare books and maps, broadsides, the Audubon prints, and William Bradford's manuscript history of Plymouth Colony from its founding to 1649.

The special collections room can best be described as dreary and uninviting. The storage areas may also not be safe for the many priceless documents. "Proper storage of the collection is a major problem," says Sharen Leonard, a library trustee. "The humidity control in the basement is not good. It's less than ideal conditions."

The Massachusetts Archives used to be located at the State House. But after the state's oldest document—the 1629 Charter of Massachusetts Bay—was stolen in 1984, the decision was made to build a new archives near the John F. Kennedy Library and Museum at Columbia Point in Dorchester. It is a fortress-like building that is rapidly running out of space for the paper records it is required by law to hold. Also at the facility are the State Records Center; the Commonwealth Museum, a sister agency that maintains an interactive exhibit on the history of Massachusetts and displays



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founding documents; and the Massachusetts Historical Commission, whose mission is to identify and preserve historic buildings.

The archives caters to a wide constituency, everyone from historical researchers to the reporters who sorted through former Gov. Mitt Romney's records when he ran for president. The bulk of visitors, more than 12,000 a year, come to trace their genealogy using birth, death, and marriage certificates, as well as immigrant passenger manifests.

The Massachusetts Archives counts among its treasures the state's own copies of the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights, the 1780 Massachusetts Constitution, the recovered 1629 charter, and Revolutionary and Civil War records. It also has numerous documents signed by the likes of George Washington, John Adams, and John Hancock, as well as treaties made with Native American tribes, and slave and witchcraft records. There are also many artifacts, including Paul Revere's engraving plate of the Boston Massacre, and military accouterment from the Civil War to World War I.

But as rich as the archives and library are in terms of history, financially they have not done well, particularly during the recent economic downturn. There was even talk of shutting the library down last October, but it survived with a state appropriation of \$709,000, a 45 percent reduction from the previous year. Gov. Deval Patrick is proposing to cut \$24,000 more from state funding for the next fiscal year. The number of library employees has fallen from 17 in fiscal 2008 to 10 this year and is expected to drop to nine next year. Elverny Johnson, the head librarian, is paid \$100,000 a year.

The state appropriated \$390,000 for the archives this year, a 29 percent reduction from the year before. State funding overall for the archives, the archives facility, and Commonwealth Museum is \$951,000. The three agencies together, all overseen by Galvin, employ 26 people, with 12 at the archives, according to budget records. John Warner, the head archivist, makes \$66,634 a year.

The archives budget appears to be one of the lowest in the country. Massachusetts did not respond to a 2008 survey conducted by the Council of State Archives, but its \$550,000 budget for that year would rank it above only two of the 27 states that did report financial data. Comparing Massachusetts with the six states listed in the survey whose archives are managed the same way, Massachusetts ranked next to last. The Bay State was ahead of New Hampshire, whose budget then was \$418,000, but well behind states like New Jersey (\$33 million), Washington (\$11.9 million), and Delaware (\$2.5 million).

Sam Reed, the secretary of state in Washington, which has roughly the same population size as Massachusetts, says he constantly uses "my bully pulpit" to advocate for

his archives. As for Massachusetts, he said, “I’m shocked to hear that a state with such an amazing collection has such a small budget.”

Warner says Washington’s archives operates very differently from the Massachusetts Archives. “Comparisons are rather invidious, in my opinion,” he says.

EXHIBITS FEW AND FAR BETWEEN

The key to running a successful archives or a state library is not simply storing historic documents and artifacts, but also introducing the materials to the public in an interesting and entertaining way. Across the country, state libraries and archives regularly host exhibits using their collections, and more and more of them are digitizing their holdings and presenting exhibits online.

“Fewer people are coming in to our physical location to view our collection,” says Bobbie Athon, public information officer for the agency that oversees the Kansas archives. The archives recently mounted an online exhibit called “Kansas War Letters,” which showcased letters sent to loved ones back home by soldiers who fought during conflicts ranging from the Civil War to the Vietnam War.

Visitors to the Maine State Archives website can view



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a wide range of documents, everything from a letter written by Daniel Webster to the governor of Maine to a mundane petition by George Woodcock seeking permission to change his name to George Woodman. There's even a photo of Red Sox slugger Ted Williams fishing in Maine.

The Alabama Department of Archives and History, the first state archives in the nation, posts a lot of its documents online, including former Gov. George Wallace's 1963 inaugural address in which he proclaims: "Segregation today, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever."

"Our online presence is now our primary tool of service to the state as well as to people out of state," says Edwin Bridges, director of the Alabama Archives. "It makes it far more convenient for the people we serve, and it frees up our staff to do other things."

Sandra Treadway, the head librarian at the Virginia Library, which includes the state's archives, says her state's investment in a virtual online archives has paid off. "We find that researchers love the ability to do online investigation of our holdings on their own, and those who still need to visit us to use the collections in person are much better prepared and focused than they would be if they

could not do preliminary reconnaissance," she says.

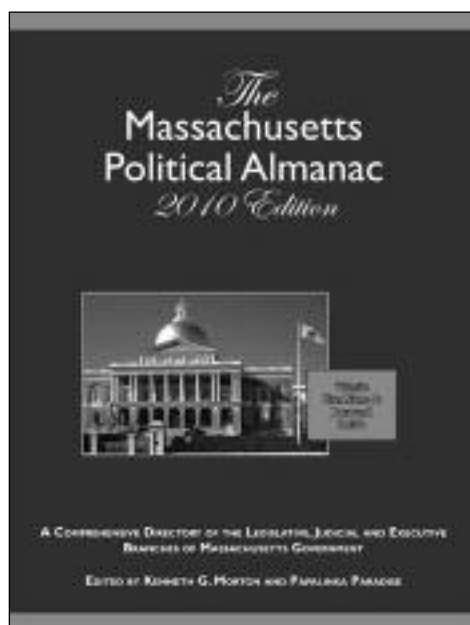
In Massachusetts, the archives and State Library are trying to keep pace, but their limited budgets make it difficult. Exhibits at the archives are few and far between, and its website is basically a card catalogue of its collection. "The website is so basic it gives the impression that no one in government cares about it," says Tom Now, mar-

The archives and library are trying to keep up with other states, but limited budgets make it difficult.

keting director for Website Marketing Now of Arlington.

The archives, through its sister agency, the Commonwealth Museum, has a permanent exhibition titled "Our Commonwealth: The Massachusetts Experiment in Democracy," which attracts many student field trips.

The State Library, working with the library at the University of Massachusetts at Boston, has put more than

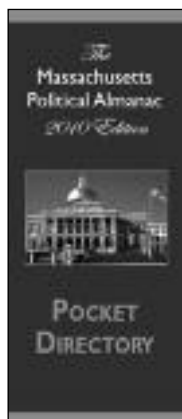


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250,000 of the state's acts and resolves online. It is scanning maps and manuscripts for an exhibit on transportation in the 19th and 20th centuries and it also mounts exhibits in glass cases just outside the library itself. The current exhibit is titled "Holyoke: Queen of Industrial Cities" and consists of papers written by a former state representative named Walter DeFilippi, a few maps, and some pictures of Mount Tom. The Holyoke exhibit is not viewable online.

"They are really amazing treasures that we have, and these are the people's treasures," says Johnson, the head librarian. "I would love, love, love to show everything we have, but we don't have the ability to do that. We don't have that type of security in our cases."

Both the library and the archives say they will bring out their historic treasures upon request by members of the public. Alison Singer, an intern at MassINC, put in a call to the archives and asked to view engravings done by Paul Revere that are stored in the archives vault. Michael Comeau, the assistant archivist, told Singer she could set up an appointment to come in and look at them.

I wasn't so lucky. I asked to see the Audubon prints, but Johnson, the head librarian, declined, saying they were fragile. I called the library at a later time and asked staffer Lacy Crews if I could take a look at a few of the Audubon prints. When a week passed without word, I followed up and was told by Crews that Johnson said, "I'm not bringing up the Audubon prints for anybody." Johnson later denied saying that, insisting that people can see the Audubon prints by making an appointment to come in. When asked about the discrepancy, Crews said, "It has been standard policy not to show the prints."

Outside experts say the state's historic treasures should be displayed for everyone to see. "If they're not going to put the prints on display, they probably should sell them," says Robert Newman, owner of the prestigious Old Print Shop in New York City. He says the last two sets of Audubon prints that were offered for sale netted their owners between \$9 million and \$12 million.

Treadway, the Virginia official, says public exhibition is always the goal. "If we have it, we will show it, unless there are legal restrictions, or the documents are still being processed," she says. "We are the stewards for the people."

WHERE HAVE YOU GONE, JOHN HANCOCK, ET AL.?

Sometime in the 1940s, the Massachusetts Archives discovered that close to 400 documents from the 17th and 18th centuries documents were missing from its main collection. The documents included letters written by George Washington to John Hancock while Hancock was governor of Massachusetts, as well as letters from other luminaries such as John Adams, Paul Revere, Benjamin

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Franklin, Benedict Arnold, John Paul Jones, Abigail Adams, John Jay, and Marquis de Lafayette.

“There are certainly unidentified items that are missing from other series as well,” says Comeau, the assistant archivist. Martha Clark, the archives curator, says she lacks the resources to monitor eBay and other websites for dealers trying to sell documents belonging to the state.

Johnson, who has been head librarian at the State Library for the past two years, says she has no idea if anything is missing from its collections.

Other states are far more aggressive in pursuing missing documents. The Texas Archives, for example, lists its missing documents on its website, with the notation, “This list is published to create a greater public awareness, should any of these records be offered for sale.”

In 2005, North Carolina became involved in an FBI sting operation to recover its copy of the Bill of Rights that was stolen from the State Capitol by a Union soldier in 1865. The matter wound up in court, which, after a lot of legal wrangling, ruled in the state’s favor.

Jeffrey Crow, head of the North Carolina State Archives, says that the court’s decision underscores two important principles: Public records created by the state belong to the people of North Carolina, and North Carolina will not pay

to have its public records returned. “We don’t apologize for going after what belongs to us,” Crow says.

INNOVATIVE FUNDING ELSEWHERE

Budget shortfalls are not unique to Massachusetts. Other state archives and libraries have been innovative in securing funding for their operations. The Maine State Archives, for example, has an online store where people can purchase prints and posters of items in the archives’ collection. David Cheever, the head of the Maine Archives, says that the revenue from the online store is used to purchase supplies and equipment.

The Alabama Archives sells autobiographies of some of its famous citizens, including Rosa Parks, Hank Aaron, Nat “King” Cole, and Paul “Bear” Bryant. The Maryland Archives will conduct specialized research for \$50 an hour, while the South Carolina Archives will even do conservation work such as book repairs and encapsulations of documents for a fee.

Many states, including Georgia, Indiana, and Maryland, have groups that raise money for special projects. The Friends of the Maryland State Archives, for example, helped raise \$625,000 in private matching funds to

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acquire George Washington's personal copy of the speech he gave to the Continental Congress in 1783 at Annapolis, Maryland, in which he announced his resignation as commander-in-chief of the Continental Army. The Massachusetts Archives doesn't have a "friends" group; the State Library has one, but no filing was listed for it with the attorney general's charities division.

Some states, including Virginia, Texas, and Florida, consolidate their archives and library under one organization. Treadway, the head of the Virginia Library/Archives, says researchers like having the records all in one place.

"The advantages to having the library and archives within one organization are huge," she says. "There are vast economies in the support services—HR, IT, fiscal services,

Some states run their archives and libraries under one organization.

etc.—by the state having one organization, not two, to cover the library and archival functions."

New York established the New York State Archives Partnership Trust, a quasi-public entity focused on raising government and private money. Christine Ward, chief executive of the Archives Partnership, says the trust doesn't raise money for the archives' core functions but instead finds funding for projects with a strong educational component.

None of these approaches have been tried in Massachusetts. In addition, the Massachusetts Historical Records Advisory Board, which is coordinated by Warner as the head state archivist, was dormant for years. The board was set up to serve as the review body for grant proposals submitted to the federal government's National Historical Publications and Records Commission, but the last grant the board received was in 2004. The state body was recently reactivated at the urging of the national commission's executive director, Kathleen Williams.

Fowler, the Northeastern history professor, says one of the problems at the Massachusetts Archives is its management. He says Warner, the head archivist, "exhibits no leadership skills and has no vision."

Warner brushes off Fowler's criticisms by saying the archives are much better off today than they were before he arrived. But when asked about his biggest challenge, he acknowledges the difficulty he faces by using a biblical reference to doing a job without the proper resources. "You're kind of making bricks without straw," he says. **CW**



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