

BOSTON-AREA ARCHIVES COLLABORATE to TELL the FULL STORY of SCHOOL DESEGREGATION

Michael Hope, Preservica, based on an interview
with Marta Crilly, Boston City Archives



The history of Boston's public school desegregation in the 1970s is part of a complex web of connected issues and concerns relating not only to education but to housing, policing, urban renewal, and city politics as well. Within the collections of the Boston City Archives, which holds the permanent historical and administrative records of the city's government, various municipal records help untangle the web for better understanding.

On their own, however, the Boston City Archives' collections doesn't give the whole picture, so the archives collaborated with other organizations to create The Boston Public Schools Desegregation Collection. This multi-institutional collaboration, spearheaded by Northeastern University and Special Collections, includes more than 3,900 digital records from a diverse group of Boston repositories that provide researchers and the public access to a more comprehensive picture of this turbulent period in the city's history.

A Nuanced and Complicated History

Although the state of Massachusetts outlawed "de jure" segregated schools in 1855, "de facto" segregation persisted into the 1960s and 1970s because of housing segregation and economic circumstances. In addition, the Boston School Committee's school districting policies sustained de facto school segregation.

In 1965, the state legislature passed the Racial Imbalance Act, which concluded that racial imbalance represented a serious conflict with the American creed of equal opportunity, and a report called *Because it is Right, Educationally* revealed that half of the city's black students attended only 28 schools. The predominantly black schools often were overcrowded and underfunded with fewer teachers and supplies. Black students were not benefiting from equal opportunity.

In 1972, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People filed a class action lawsuit against the Boston School Committee to address this racial imbalance, and a decision was reached in 1974. Judge William Arthur Garrity told the School Committee to design a permanent school integration plan. However,

when the committee failed to design a plan that Garrity deemed adequate, he ordered that schools be integrated by busing 18,000 school children outside of their neighborhoods. This led to extreme and startling violence, beginning on the opening day of classes in 1974. School buses were pelted with eggs, bricks, and bottles, and police in combat gear fought to control angry protesters besieging the schools, especially in South Boston, a heavily Irish Catholic neighborhood. At South Boston High, police outnumbered students. Protests continued for months, and many parents, both white and black, kept their children at home. In October, the National Guard was mobilized to enforce the federal desegregation order and would remain on duty in South Boston for three years.

Enabling New Perspectives

In looking through records from various municipal collections in the Boston City Archives, the story of its residents begin to emerge. Daily police blotters report on police activity and document violence such as rock throwing, attacks on students, and bomb threats. Yet there are also notes that "12 grandmothers appeared at Greenwood School with big welcoming signs, baskets of fruit and candy" on September 13, 1974. On another day, a Ku Klux Klan rally was held at City Hall, while three miles away 7,000 people marched in protest. Essays written by students at an integrated middle school reflect on their experiences of being bused.

With digital preservation and access technology, this picture expands. One of the collections at the Boston City Archives includes the records of Mayor Kevin White, the mayor during this period of school integration. These records were accessioned and processed in 2013. Prior to that, they weren't available to the public, even in analog

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Students at a Boston elementary school during a visit by Mayor Kevin White in 1973.
Courtesy of Boston City Archives.

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form, so anything written about school integration and busing in Boston lacked significant insights from the mayor's papers. After digitizing these records, new inside information about the desegregation initiatives became available.

A Multi-Institutional Collaborative Collection

Records do have a perspective. Most of Boston City's records were created by either municipal government or anti-busing activists. In a collaborative project with Boston-area repositories, these collections were placed in context with collections from pro-integration activists and other creators that provide a much broader perspective. While these collections are important, they also are created by very specific entities. A larger cross-institutional collection gives a more comprehensive look at a complex historical period.

Sharing records between multiple institutions is a major benefit of digital preservation and access. The Boston Public Schools Desegregation Collection has made more than 3,900 primary sources available online. This combined collection documents the experiences of politicians, parents, students, community members, and school staff and provides context for the city's struggle to integrate Boston Public Schools and the court-ordered busing effort.

Researchers can access these items, along with contextualizing timelines and exhibits, via an online portal (<https://bpsdesegregation.library.northeastern.edu/>) created by project lead Northeastern University Archives and Special Collections. The items are available nationally via the Digital Public Library of America (DPLA), and Massachusetts' partner hub, Digital Commonwealth. The collection will continue to grow as archival material from participating institutions is digitized.

Behind the scenes at the Boston City Archives, Preservica's standards-based APIs are used, which allow metadata to

On its own, our repository's story doesn't give the whole picture.

be harvested and made searchable on state and national aggregation sites. With standardized metadata, Boston

City Archives records can easily be found by researchers and the public using the DPLA or Digital Commonwealth sites.

Ongoing Repercussions

Historical events have serious and present consequences. In the 1970s during the first five years of desegregation, primarily middle-class parents took 30,000 children out of the city school system by either moving to the suburbs or enrolling them in private schools, thus disrupting the balance that integration intended to promote. Today, the city still feels the effects of desegregation—half of the city population of Boston is white, but only 14 percent of public-school students are white. By digitally preserving and providing wider access to these desegregation records, we are providing scholars, researchers, and the public access to information that helps us better understand the present and shape future decisions. ■