

Rhode Island State Library



VISIT US

ADDRESS

82 Smith St., Rm. 208, Providence

HOURS

Mon. - Fri. 8:30 a.m. - 4:30 p.m.*

* During the legislative session, the Library is open until the rise of the General Assembly.

☎ 401-222-2473

✉ StateLibrary@sos.ri.gov

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Gregg M. Amore
Secretary of State

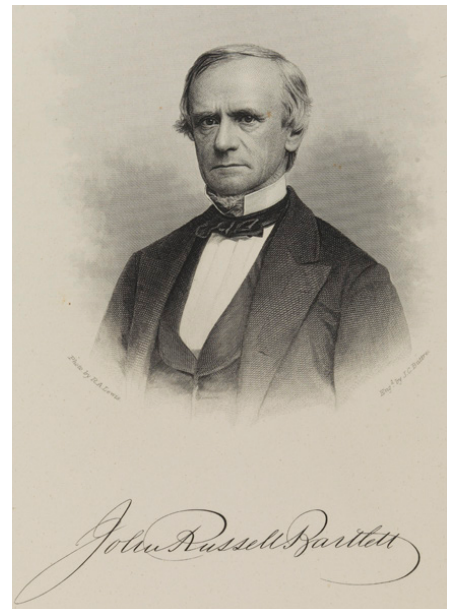
MISSION



The Rhode Island State Library has collected and provided public access to government publications since 1852. Under the supervision of the Rhode Island Secretary of State, the State Library has supported transparent government and empowered citizens for almost 175 years.

This legacy, established by the founder of the State Library, Secretary of State John Russell Bartlett, continues under current Secretary of State Gregg M. Amore. The State Library remains a space for research and reference and has grown to offer programming and host events that support civic engagement

RESEARCH
EMPOWER
CIVIC
ENGAGEMENT





About the collection

The State Library (Library) is a public, non-circulating research library that includes both State and federal publications. Librarians provide research assistance for the Rhode Island legislative and executive branches, State employees, and the general public.

The Library collection includes an estimated 213,500 physical items stored in approximately 14,900 linear feet of shelving (that's almost 3 miles!) in the State House. The Library also provides access to and long-term preservation of over 21,000 digital items.

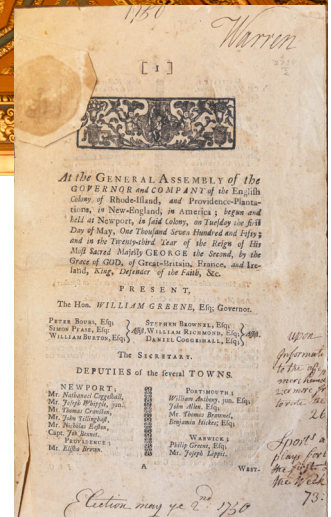
The largest portion of the State Library's collection documents the work of the Rhode Island General Assembly and State government departments and agencies. The Library is prioritizing the digitization of State publications to increase remote access.

Some of the most highly utilized volumes from the historical collection include:

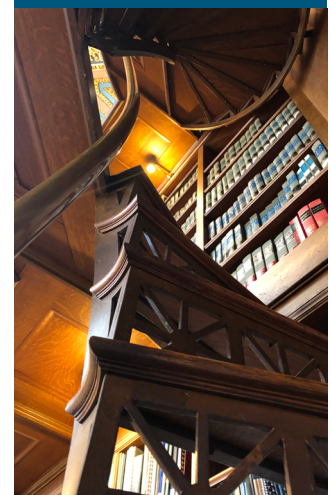
State Publications

- Rhode Island Public Laws, Acts & Resolves
- State Agency Annual Reports
- Executive Orders of the Governor
- Official Election Count Books
- Rhode Island Government Owner's Manual

In addition, the Library is statutorily responsible for the State Publications Clearinghouse, which distributes State publications to a number of libraries across Rhode Island to ensure access to State information to residents throughout the state.



The oldest book in the collection is the 1750 printed volume of the Rhode Island Acts & Resolves from the first year the laws were published.





Federal Depository Library Program

The State Library has received federal publications since the late 19th century. In 1895, it officially became a member of the Federal Depository Library Program (FDLP), which is administered by the US Government Publications Office (GPO) to provide free, ready, and permanent public access to government information.

Currently, the Library receives about a quarter of all materials distributed by the GPO annually.

In addition to larger annual publications such as the US Congressional Serials Set and US Census data, the Library collects items of state and regional relevance as well as national significance.

The Library holds federal publications such as:

- Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the Rebellion (1908)
- Investigation of the Pearl Harbor attack (1946)
- America 200: The Legacy of Our Lands (1976)
- The 9/11 Commission Report (2004)



2024 Highlights



31,276

VISITORS
(INCLUDING RESEARCHERS,
LOBBYISTS, LEGISLATORS,
STATE EMPLOYEES, TOURISTS,
AND THE PUBLIC)



1,177

**TOTAL
REFERENCE
QUESTIONS**



73%

**OF INQUIRIES
CAME FROM THE PUBLIC**

51%

**OF INQUIRIES
WERE IN PERSON**



114

**EVENTS HOSTED
IN THE LIBRARY**

5,451

**EVENTS
ATTENDEES**

Today and into the Future

Today, the State Library collections include approximately 235,500 items, including State and federal publications in both print and digital format. Hosting over 31,000 visitors annually, librarians answer thousands of research questions each year for Rhode Islanders as well as national and international researchers.



A History of Preservation and Access

- 1663** The Royal Charter of the English Colony of Rhode Island established the role of the General Recorder to collect the Official Records of the Colony. That role later became the Secretary of the Colony, and then the Secretary of State.
- 1852** The Rhode Island General Assembly passed a resolution to establish the Rhode Island State Library within the Office of the Secretary of State.
- 1855** Secretary of State John R. Bartlett advocated for the conditions of the records and papers of the State and was authorized by the General Assembly to arrange and classify the materials. For the first time, the public papers relating to the period from 1647-1842 (about 25,000 in number) were put in order, restored, and bound. These volumes became the nucleus of the State Library collection. Storage space was allocated in the Secretary's office in the Old State House on North Main Street in Providence.
- 1860** The storage conditions of the State Library were first cited as one of the main reasons that a new State House building was needed. A plea in the Providence Journal noted, "... we want a large room for the State Library and another for the public archives...The state is deficient in a legislative library for the reason that there is no place to put the books...A few of these are put upon the shelves, to make room for which others are packed away in heaps in the garret, where certain destruction awaits them." (Providence Journal, March 21, 1860)

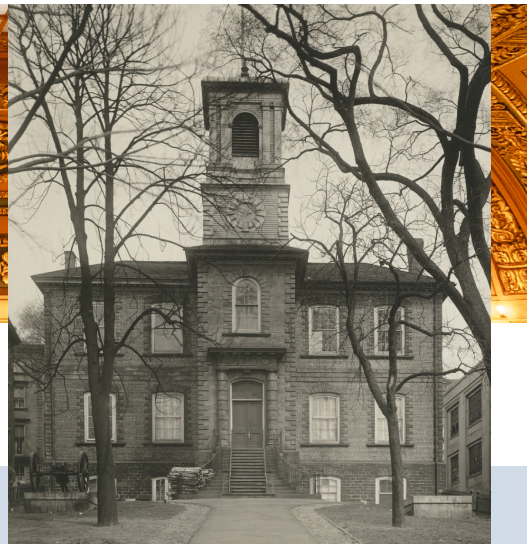
Secretary of State

John Russell Bartlett (1805-1886)

John Russell Bartlett (1805-1886) served as the Rhode Island Secretary of State from 1855-1872. During his term, he established the State Library and created the emphasis on access to State history and public information that informs the State Library's mission today.

Bartlett was well-known as an author, editor, bibliophile, and historian. After beginning his professional career in commercial dry goods, he opened a bookstore in New York which became the epicenter of a literary community. He was instrumental in the founding of both the Providence Athenaeum and the Rhode Island Historical Society and served as the librarian of the John Carter Brown Library at Brown University. Soon after being elected Secretary of State, he began organizing, cataloging, and advocating for the records of the Colony and State of Rhode Island. He also started a collection of portraits of the Governors of Rhode Island, preserved early Rhode Island records including Roger Williams' papers, and arranged for the printing of State papers and records to increase public access to original documents.

He organized, edited, and published the ten-volume Records of the Colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations, 1636-1792, which is still considered the essential primary reference for early Rhode Island history. He compiled, wrote, and published numerous historical publications over the remainder of his term as Secretary and beyond.



- 1886** The State Library received a large collection of United States Congressional documents and began actively collecting federal materials.
- 1895** The State Library officially joined the Federal Depository Library Program (FDLP) to collect and provide access to materials published by the US government.
- 1901** Coinciding with the General Assembly's first legislative session in the new State House, the State Library moved into its current location in the spring of 1901.
- The General Assembly established the role of State Librarian and Frank Greene Bates was appointed by the Secretary of State.
- 1903** State Librarian Frank G. Bates called for the creation of the Library Association of Rhode Island to advocate for professional library interests across the state.

State Librarians

Frank Greene Bates (1901-1903)
 Herbert O. Brigham (1903-1937)
 Grace M. Sherwood (1937-1962)
 Elliott E. Andrews (1963-1982)
 Beth I. Perry (1983-1988)
 Richard A. Bidnick (1989-1990)
 Thomas R. Evans (1991-2016)
 Megan Hamlin-Black (2016-2024)
 Kate L. Wells (2024-Present)

State Library at the Colony House, Providence

From 1760-1901, the Library collections were stored at the Colony House (now known as the Old State House) on North Main Street in Providence, in the Secretary of State's office as well as in the attic and basement. With bookstacks already over capacity, pressure on collection storage was increased with the addition of federal publications in the late 19th century. The conditions were a large part of the rationale for the construction of a new State House.

An editorial in the Providence Journal noted, "Those who appreciate the value of the State Library and recognize its worth and possibilities will rejoice when the new State House is completed. Then, and not before, the collection of literature, scattered from cellar to garret in the old building on North Main Street may receive proper attention, and the danger of losing all or a large proportion of it in case of fire will be materially lessened, for the marble palace on Smith's Hill is being erected on fire-proof plans." (Providence Journal, February 28, 1897)



- 1907** The State Library established a Legislative Reference Bureau to support the work of the General Assembly. This included research assistance as well as drafting legislation for the legislature.
- 1939** The State Library sponsored a Historical Records Survey of Rhode Island by the Works Projects Administration.
- 1944** In recognition of State Librarian Grace Sherwood's volunteer work sending books to service members during World War II, the RI General Assembly created the "Grace M. Sherwood Armed Forces Book Pool" to use appropriated funds to send books to military personnel.
- 1959** The Rhode Island Legislative Council was created by the General Assembly and took over the drafting functions of the Legislative Reference Bureau from the State Library.
- 1964** The Department of State Library Services, known today as the Office of Library and Information Services (OLIS), was established under the Department of Administration. It expanded monetary aid to public libraries and increased statewide library support services.
- 1987** The State Library launched its first online catalog.
- 1989** The State Archives and the position of State Archivist are established by the General Assembly in the "State Archives and Historical Records Act."
- 2016** The State Library began offering use of its space for events that support civic education and engagement.
- 2021** The State Library began digitizing the State laws of Rhode Island and other State government publications.
- 2025** The State Library celebrates its 130th anniversary as a Federal Depository Library.





The State Library: Architecture and Design

Designed by architects McKim, Mead & White, and purpose-built to serve as a library, the design of the room celebrates the history of printing.

The architecture and ornamentation of the State Library includes many notable features:

- The staircases and balcony catwalks are made of iron cantilevered into the marble walls and painted to match the mahogany casework.
- The stunning coved ceiling includes a glass milk skylight and decoration in stucco and gold leaf that is reminiscent of the spine of a leather-bound book.
- The ceiling ornamentation includes sixteen printers' marks of European Renaissance printers originally sculpted by Domingo Mora for the Boston Public Library.
- Rhode Island's display of "Goodwill Rocks" from the Apollo 11 moon mission in 1969 are held in the State Library. Gifted by President Nixon, the display includes several pieces of lunar regolith from the Sea of Tranquility encased in leucite and mounted with the Rhode Island flag that accompanied astronauts on the lunar landing. Lunar regolith is at least 3 billion years old and is considered the rarest rock on earth.

