

City of Boston Archives and Records Management Division

Guide to the City Council Committee records

1828-1912 (bulk, 1860-1895)

Finding aid prepared by Kristen Swett This finding aid was produced using the Archivists' Toolkit

Repository:	City of Boston Archives and Records Management Division
Title:	City Council Committee records
Collection No.:	0140.001
Dates:	1828-1912 (Bulk, 1860-1895)
Quantity:	34.0 Cubic feet (250 volumes, 24 record cartons, 5 oversized boxes and 1 document case)

TABLE OF CONTENTS SERIES LIST

Historical note	Series I: Summary minutes
Scope and Contents note	Series II: Summary minutes - Individual Committees
Related Material	Series III: Committee dockets
<u>Nelated Material</u>	Series IV: Docket documents
<u>General note</u>	Series V: Correspondence

Historical note

Boston was incorporated as a city on 23 Feb 1822 by chapter 110 of the Acts of 1821. This act was adopted by the voters on 4 Mar 1822. The City Charter established the form of government as a Mayor; a Board of Aldermen, consisting of eight elected at large; and a Common Council, of forty-eight elected by wards; to be called when conjoined, 'the City Council." The Mayor and Aldermen were vested with the administration of the police, and executive power of the corporation generally, with specific enumerated powers. All other powers belonging to the corporation were vested in the Mayor, Aldermen and Common Council exercised by concurrent vote. City Council committees oversaw the operation of the city. With the executive power shared by the Mayor and Board

of Aldermen, early Mayors ensured unity by appointing themselves as head of committees.

The Mayor served as ex officio Chairman of the Board of Aldermen until 1855. Section 29 of Chapter 448 of the Acts of 1854, an act to revise the charter of the City of Boston, provided for the choice of a permanent chairman by the Board of Aldermen who presided at all meetings of the board and at conventions of the two branches in the absence of the Mayor. The administration of the police, together with the executive powers of the corporation generally, all the powers formerly vested in the Selectmen of Boston, and all the powers subsequently vested in the Mayor and Board of Aldermen, as county commissioners or otherwise, were vested in the Board of Aldermen. The Mayor if present continued to preside but without a vote. All other powers belonging to the corporation continued to be vested in the Mayor, Aldermen and Common Council, exercised by concurrent vote.

The charter revision of 1854 and the removal of the mayor from participation in the committees of the City Council strengthened committees and the Committee system reached its height of power in the 1860s. However, the committee system began to decline by the 1870s for many reasons. Defects in the system included a lack of responsibility, difficulty from getting efficient service from an unpaid board and the changing composition of committees on a yearly basis. Also, due to the rapid growth of the city, the committees were not qualified to deal with the executive powers. In the early 1870s, a movement began towards taking away the executive powers of the Aldermen. The first result of this movement was the appointment of the Board of Street Commissioners in 1872. Powers relating to the laying out and construction of streets were transferred from the Aldermen to the new board. At this time, the reformers were unwilling to transfer executive power to the mayor fearing so much authority in the hands of one man. Other boards established in the 1870s include the Parks Commission, Water Board and the Police Commissioners.

This movement towards the separation of the legislative and executive powers led to the charter revision of 1885. Chapter 266 of the Acts of 1885, an act to amend the charter of the City of Boston, transferred to the Mayor the power to appoint, subject to the approval of the Board of Aldermen, all officers and boards elected by the City Council or Board of Aldermen, and all offices that may be established in the future. The positions of City Messenger, Clerk of Committees and other clerks of the City Council were exempted from this provision. All executive powers vested in the Board of Aldermen were transferred to the Mayor to be exercised through the several officers and boards of the City in their respective departments, under the general supervision and control of the Mayor. The Mayor no longer would be a member, nor preside at any meeting, nor appoint any committee of the Board of Aldermen.

Chapter 486 of the Acts of 1909, an act relating to the administration of the City of Boston and to amend the charter of the said city, abolished the City Council and both branches thereof and the positions of City Messenger, Clerk of Committees, Clerk of the Common Council, Assistant Clerk of Committees and subordinates. The act established a City Council consisting of nine members elected at large. The City Council, subject to the approval of the Mayor, could establish such offices that it deemed necessary for the conduct if its affairs and at such salaries it may determine. The City Council retained the power to approve ordinances and loan orders presented by the Mayor and the budget. All heads of departments and municipal boards, excluding the school committee and those appointed by law by the governor, would be appointed by the mayor without confirmation by the City Council.

Return to the Table of Contents

Scope and Contents note

This collection includes records of various City Council committees during the nineteenth and early twentieth century. The collection spans the years 1828-1912 with the bulk of the material dating from 1860-1895. These records were kept by the Clerk of Committees and include minutes of committee meetings, correspondence, reports, bids, petitions, programs, etc. Committees represented include Police, Fire, Claims, Arrangements, Common & Public Grounds, Underground Wires, Public Instruction, Public Institutions, Stony Brook, Harbor and many others.

The collection is divided into 5 series: Summary minutes, Summary minutes - Individual committees, Committee dockets, Docket documents, and Correspondence. The Summary minutes span the period 1851-1912 and include minutes of the different committees recorded together in volumes by the Clerk of Committees. The Summary Minutes - Individual Committees span the period 1847-1911 and include minutes of individuals kept separately in single volumes. The Committee dockets span the years 1833-1876 and record each item referred to a committee. The Committee docket documents span the years 1828-1893 and include supporting documentation that went before committees but did not become an official part of the Board of Aldermen or Common Council docket documents. These records were previously stored trifolded in boxes with no organization except for rough chronological groupings. Interns unfolded, cleaned and grouped these records chronologically and by City Council committees using the minutes and the municipal registers as guides. There is some overlap in the dates so it is best to search a few years around a given date. The Correspondence series includes three letter copy volumes of correspondence from the Clerk of Committees for the years 1867-1890.

Return to the Table of Contents

Related Material

City Council proceedings (#0100.001)

City Council meeting and hearing transcripts (#0100.002)

Committee on the Extension of Faneuil Hall records (#0140.010)

Committee on the Alien Passenger records (#0140.011)

Committee on the Army and Navy Monument records (#0140.012)

Committee on Public Celebrations records (#0140.013)

Return to the Table of Contents

General note

Processing of this collection was completed over many years by several interns from the Simmons College Graduate School of Library and Information Science including Ashley Deveny, John Cooper, Sarah Gustafson, Lani Smith and Zachary Enright.

Return to the Table of Contents

Volume	
I-1	1851-1857
I-2	1858-1859
I-3	1859
I-4	1860
I-5	1861
I-6	1862
I-7	1863

I-8-12	1863 (5 volumes)
I-13	1865
I-14	1866
I-15	1866
I-16	1867
I-17	1867-1868
I-18	1869-1870
I-19	1870-1872
I-20	1873
I-21	1874
I-22	1875
I-23-25	1876 (3 volumes)
I-26-28	1877 (3 volumes)
I-29-31	1878 (3 volumes)
I-32-34	1879 (3 volumes)
I-35-37	1880 (3 volumes)
I-38-40	1881 (3 volumes)
I-41-43	1882 (3 volumes)
I-44-46	1883 (3 volumes)
I-47-49	1884 (3 volumes)
I-50-52	1885 (3 volumes)
I-53-55	1886 (3 volumes)
I-56-58	1887 (3 volumes)
I-59-61	1888 (3 volumes)
I-62-64	1889 (3 volumes)
I-65-66	1890 (2 volumes (1 missing))
I-67-69	1891 (3 volumes)
I-70-72	1892 (3 volumes)
I-73-76	1893 (3 volumes)
I-76-78	1894 (3 volumes)
I-79-80	1895 (2 volumes)
I-81-82	1896 (2 volumes)
I-83	1897
I-84	1898
I-84	1908
I-86	1909
I-87	1910-1911
I-88	1912

Return to the Series List

Series II: Summary minutes - Individual Committees, 1847-1911 (151 volumes and 1 document case) Accounts, 1854-1885 with gaps (2 volumes)

Volume	
II-1	1854-1864
II-2	1872-1885
	Armories, 1873-1875 (1 volume)
Volume	
II-3	1873-1875
	Assessor's Department, 1867-1875 (2 volumes and 1 folder)
Volume	
II-4,	1867-1869
Box II-1	
II-5	1870-1875
	Back Bay Improvements, 1858-1859 (1 volume)
Volume	
II-6	1858-1859
	Bathing, 1868-1872 (2 volumes)
Volume	
II-7	1868-1869
II-8	1870-1872
	Betterment Law, Parties Assessed under, 1867-1869 (3 volumes)
Volume	
II-9	1867
II-10	1868
II-11	1869
	Census & Division of Wards, 1875 (1 volume)
Volume	, , , , , ,
II-12	1875
	Church Street District, 1867-1868 (2 volumes)
Volume	
II-13	1867
II-14	1868
	City Charter, Revision of, 1884 (1 volume)
Volume	
II-15	1884
11 10	City Debt, Reduction of, 1867-1870 (1 volume)
Volume	City Debt, Reduction of, 1007 1070 (1 volume)
II-16	1867-1870
II 10	City Hospital, Free, 1860 (1 volume)
Volume	City Hospital, Free, 1000 (1 volume)
II-17	1860
11-17	City Hospital, 1863-1864 (1 volume)
Volume	City 1105pital, 1005-1004 (1 volume)
II-18	1863-1864
<u>11-10</u>	City Surveyor's Department, 1869-1885 (2 volumes)
Volume	City Surveyor 5 Department, 1007-1005 (2 volumes)
v Uluille	

II-19	1869-1872
II-20	1873-1885
	Claims, 1852-1866 (5 volumes)
Volume	
II-21	1852-1858
II-22	1859-1861
II-23	1862-1863
II-24	1863
II-25	1864-1866
	Common & Squares, 1867-1875 with gaps (3 volumes)
Volume	
II-26	1867-1868
II-27	1870-1872
II-28	1873-1875
	County Accounts, 1869-1875 (2 volumes)
Volume	
II-29	1869
II-30	1870-1875
	County Accounts - Registry of Deeds, 1860 (3 volumes)
Volume	
II-31-33	1860 (3 volumes)
	East Boston Ferries, 1870-1872 (1 volume)
Volume	
II-34	1870-1872
	East Boston Ferries and Bathing, 1873-1875 (1 volume)
Volume	1070 1075
II-35	1873-1875
X 7 1	Elections, 1860 (1 volume)
Volume	1070
II-36	1860
V - I	Elections - Contested, 1861-1862, 1864-1865, 1868, 1881, 1886 (3 volumes)
Volume II-37	1861
II-37 II-38	1862, 1864-1865, 1868
II-38 II-39	1881, 1886
II- <i>37</i>	Enlistment of Volunteers, 1862 (1 volume)
Volume	Emistment of Volunteers, 1862 (1 Volume)
II-40	1862
H 10	Finance, 1862-1885 (5 volumes)
Volume	2 marce, 2002 2002 (2 + 074mles)
II-41	1865-1872
II-42	1873-1876
II-43	1877-1879
II-44	1880-1884

II-45	1884-1885
	Fire Alarms, 1868 (1 volume)
Volume	
II-46	1868
	Fort Hill Improvements, 1871-1874 (2 volumes)
Volume	
II-47	1871-1872
II-48	1873-1874
-	Free Markets, 1865 (1 volume)
Volume	
II-49	1865
	Harbor, 1847-1875 with gaps (3 volumes and 1 folder)
Volume	
II-50	1847-1857
II-51,	1867-1868
Box II-1	1007 1000
II-52	1870-1875
	Independence Day, 1856-1857 (1 volume)
Volume	
II-53	1856-1857
	Institutions, 1850-1857 (1 volume)
Volume	
II-54	1850-1857
	Invitees, List of, undated (1 volume)
Volume	
II-55	undated
	Licenses, 1860, 1865 (2 volumes)
Volume	
II-56	1860
II-57	1865
H 37	Memorial Services, 1895 (1 volume)
Volume	Weinorial bervices, 1055 (1 volume)
II-58	1895
11-30	Military Equipment, 1861 (1 volume)
Volume	wintary Equipment, 1001 (1 volume)
II-59	1861
11-39	Municipal Expenditures, Retrenchment of, 1877 (1 volume)
Volume	Wunicipal Experiatures, Retrenchment of, 1877 (1 volume)
	1077
II-60	1877 Musical Fastinal 1872 (1 maluma)
Volumo	Musical Festival, 1872 (1 volume)
Volume	1972
II-61	1872
Volum	National Quarantine and Sanitary Convention, 1860 (1 volume)
Volume	

7

II-62-64	1860 (3 volumes)
	Ordinances, 1851-1875 with gaps (3 volumes)
Volume	
II-65	1851-1862
II-66	1867-1868
II-67	1870-1875
	Police & Watch, 1851 (1 volume)
Volume	
II-68	1851
	Police Commissioners, Hearings on, 1881 (1 volume)
Volume	
II-69	1881
	Police - West, Mary, Case of, 1873 (1 volume)
Volume	
II-70	1873
	Post Office, Laying of cornerstone, 1871 (1 volume)
Volume	
II-71	1871
	Printing, 1868 (1 volume)
Volume	
II-72	1868
	Public Buildings, 1883-1885 (1 oversized volume)
Volume	
II-73	1883-1885
	Public Instruction, 1850-1875 with gaps (3 volumes and 1 folder)
Volume	
II-74	1850-1854, 1857
II-75, Box II-1	1867-1868
II-76	1870-1875
II-70	Public Library, Opening on Sunday, 1870 (1 volume)
Volume	Tuble Elbrary, Opening on Sunday, 1070 (1 volume)
II-77	1870
п //	Railroad locations - South Boston, 1887 (1 volume)
Volume	
II-78	1887
	Recruiting, 1863-1864 (3 volumes)
Volume	g , (c ·)
II-79-80	1863 (2 volumes)
II-81	1864
	Rowing Regattas, 1874-1883 (1 volume)
Volume	
II-82	1874-1883
	Schools, 1888 (1 volume)

8

Volume	
II-83	1888
	Soldiers Relief, 1863-1865, 1907-1911 (2 volumes)
Volume	
II-84	1863-1865
II-85	1907-1911
	South Bay Commissioners, 1859-1860 (1 volume)
Volume	
II-86	1859-1860
	South Bay Investigation, 1860 (1 Volume)
Volume	
II-87	1860
	State Aid, 1878-1907 (26 volumes)
Volume	
II-88	1878-1879
II-89	1879
II-90	1880
II-91	1881
II-92	1882
II-93	1883
II-94	1884
II-95	1885
II-96	1885
II-97	1886
II-98	1887
II-99	1888
II-100	1889
II-101	1890
II-102	1891
II-103	1892-1893
II-104	1894
II-105	1895
II-106	1896
II-107	1897
II-108	1898
II-109	1899
II-110	1900
II-111	1901
II-112	1901-1906
	Statue, Paul Revere, 1882-1887 (1 volume and 1 folder)
Volume	
II-113,	1882-1887
Box II-1	
	\mathbf{G}_{4} and \mathbf{D}_{12} and \mathbf{D}_{12} (1 and \mathbf{D}_{12})

Stony Brook, 1883 (1 volume)

Volume	
II-114	1883
	Streets - Tolls on East Boston Ferries, 1860 (1 volume)
Volume	
II-115	1860
	Streets, Laying out & widening, 1848-1851 (1 volume)
Volume	
II-116	1848-1849
II-117	1849-1851
	Streets - Committee meetings, 1864-1881 (31 volumes)
Volume	
II-118	1865
II-119	1866
II-120	1867
II-121	1868
II-122	1869
II-123	1870
II-124	1871-1872
II-125	1873
II-126	1874-1875
II-127	1876
II-128	1877
II-129	1878
II-130	1879
II-131	1880
II-132	1881-1883
II-133	1884
	Streets - Unfinished and Current business, 1864-1869 with gaps (11 volumes)
Volume	
II-134	1864-1865
II-135	1867
II-136	1867
II-137-	1868
138 II-139-	1868
140	1808
II-141-	1869
142	
II-143-	1869
144	
	Streets - Fort Hill, 1869 (1 volume)
Volume	
II-145	1869
II-146	1869
	Streets - Jt. Standing Committee, 1871-1875 (2 volumes) 10

Volume	
II-147	1871-1872
II-148	1873-1875
	Telegraph Hill, 1851 (1 volume)
Volume	
II-149	1851
	Water Commissioners, 1882-1883 (1 volume)
Volume	
II-150	1882-1883
	Water, 1849-1858 (1 volume)
Volume	
II-151	1849-1858

Return to the Series List

Series III: Com	Series III: Committee dockets, 1833-1876 (6 volumes)		
Volume			
III-1	1833-1836		
III-2	1837-1840		
III-3	1841-1845		
III-4	1874		
III-5	1875		
III-6	1876		

Return to the Series List

Series IV: Docket documents, 1828-1893 (bulk, 1867-1893) (23 record cartons, 4 flat boxes and 1 shoe box) City Solicitor's opinions, 1828-1867

Box	Folder	
1	1	1828-1844
1	2	1847-1867
	1857-1859	
Box	Folder	
1	3	Fuel, Proposals for, 1857-1859
	1860-1870	
Box	Folder	
1	4	Accounts, circa 1867
1	5	Accounts, 1869
1	6	Annexation, 1866-1868
1	7	Annexation of Dorchester, 1869
1	8	Annual excursion, 1869-1870
1	9	Armories, 1869
1	10	Arrangements: Abraham Lincoln, 1865

1	11	Arrangements: Visit of President Johnson, 1867
1	12	Arrangements: Visit of Chinese Embassy, 1868
1	13	Art Museum, circa 1860s
1	14	Assessors' Department, 1869-1870
1	15-17	Baths, Public, 1867-1870
1	18	Bells, 1867
1	19	Bells and Clocks, 1869
1	20-21	Bridges, 1867-1870
1	22	Burlingame, Anson, Memorial to, 1870
1	23	Burrill Case re: enlistment of soldiers for quota in 1864, circa 1866-1870
1	24	Charlestown Water Works, 1865
1	25	Chimney, 1869
1	26	Church in South Boston, 1868
1	27	Church Street District, 1868
1	28	City Hospital, 1862
1	29-32	Claims, 1866, 1868-1870
1	33	Clerk of Committees, 1866-1867
1	34	Common etc., circa 1860-1869
1	35	Constables, 1869-1870
1	36	Correspondence from Patrick Curley, soldier to James M. Bugbee, Esq., circa 1864
1	37	County Accounts, 1866-1869
1	38	Draft Riots, Papers relating to, 1863
1	39	East Boston Ferry, 1868
1	40	Eastern Avenue, 1868
1	41	Elections, Common Council, 1867-1868
1	42	Elections, 1869
1	43	Expenditures for Architectural Services, 1857-1866, 1863, 1866
1	44	External Health, 1866-1867
1	45-50	Ferries, circa 1865-1869
1	51	Fire Department, circa 1868-1869
1	52	Free Concerts, 1868
1	53	French Cable, Celebration on the landing of the, 1869
1	54-56	Fuel, Proposals for, circa 1863-1870
1	57	Gas, circa 1867-1868
1	58-60	Harbor, 1860-1870
2	1	Harbor: Proposals for Dredging machine and dumping scows, 1866
2	2	Harbor excursion, circa 1860s
2	3	Harvard Boat Club, 1869
2	4	Homeopathic Convention, 1869
2	5	Hospital for Insane, 1867
2	6	Humboldt Celebration, 1869
2	7	Inspector of Oil, 1867
2	8	Institutions at South Boston and Deer Island, 1867
		10

2	9		Jail, 1869
$\frac{2}{2}$) 10-11		Lamps, 1860-1862, 1869
2	12-13		Licenses, 1862, 1868-1869
2	12 13		Military, 1862-1863
2	15-16		Miscellaneous, circa 1860-1869
2	13-10		Music on the Common, 1869
2	18		Nomination of Assistant Assessors, 1864
$\frac{2}{2}$	18		Ordinances, 1866-1868
$\frac{2}{2}$	20		Overseers of the Poor, circa 1860-1869
$\frac{2}{2}$	20		Peabody Funeral, 1869-1870
2	22-25		Police, 1868-1869
2	26		Printing, circa 1868-1869
$\frac{2}{2}$	20 27		Prisons, Inspectors of, 1869
$\frac{2}{2}$	27		no folder
$\frac{2}{2}$	28 29		Public Buildings, 1866-1869
$\frac{2}{2}$	29 30		Public Garden bridge
$\frac{2}{2}$	30 31		Public Institutions, 1869
2	32-33		Public Instruction, 1866-1867, 1869
$\frac{2}{2}$	32-33 34		Public Library, 1867-1869
$\frac{2}{2}$	34 35-36		Public School buildings, 1866, 1868-1869
$\frac{2}{2}$	33-30 37		Roxbury records, circa 1868
2	37		Salaries, 1866, 1868
$\frac{2}{2}$	38 39-40		Sewers, 1864, circa 1867
$\frac{2}{2}$	39-40 41		Sheridan reception, 1867
$\frac{2}{2}$	42-43		South Boston flats, 1866, 1868
$\frac{2}{2}$	44		South End drainage, 1868
2	45-46		State Aid, circa 1862-1864, 1869
2	47		State Fild, circa 1862-1864, 1869 Steam Engines, 1869
2	48-49		Streets, 1866-1869
2			Summer Street, Protect drain on, 1863
2	50 51		Tenement Houses, 1866
2	52		Tickets, 1862
2	53		Water boat
2	55 54		Washington Statue
2	51	1870-1872	Washington Statue
Box	Folder		
2	55		Arrangements: Reception of Grand Duke Alexis, 1871
2	56		Arrangements: President U. S. Grant, 1871
3	1		Annexation of Charlestown, 1870
3	2		Armories, 1871-1872
3	3		Assessors' Office, 1871
3	4		Assessors, Nomination of Principal, 1870
3	5		Auditor's Estimate, 1870-1871
3	6		Badges, 1871

3	7-8	Bathing, 1870-1872
3	9	Board of Aldermen, 1871
3	10	Bridges: Dover Street, 1870
3	11	Bridges, 1872
3	12	Boston Society of Architects: Resolution on how to rebuild city after of the fire
		of 1872, 1872 November 15
3	13	Census, 1872
3	14	City Engineer, 1872
3	15	City Officers, 1870
3	16	City records, 1871
3	17-18	Claims, 1871-1872
3	19	Committee appointments, 1870
3	20	Common Council, 1870
3	21-28	Common and Public Grounds, 1870-1872
3	29-31	County Accounts, 1870-1872
3	32-33	Elections, 1870, 1872
3	34	Ferries, 1870-1871
3	35	Fort Hill, Removal of dirt from, 1871
3	36-37	Free Markets, 1870
3	38-40	Fuel, 1870-1872
3	41-42	Harbor, 1870-1872
3	43	Health, Establishment of new Board of, 1872
3	44	Jail, 1872
3	45	Lamps, 1870
3	46	no folder
3	47	Legislative Acts, 1870
3	48-49	Legislative matters, 1870-1872
3	50-51	Licenses, 1870-1872
3	52	Markets, 1870
3	53	Military Affairs, 1871-1872
3	54	Military Affairs: Bills for expenses on account of fire of 1872, 1872
3	55-56	Miscellaneous, circa 1870-1872
3	57	Mt. Hope Cemetery, 1870-1872
3	58	Music: Evening concerts, 1870
3	59	Music on the Common, 1871
3	60	Nautical School: Memorial of Capt. Forbes, circa 1870-1872
3	61	Ordinances, 1870-1871
4	1	Overseers of the Poor, 1871
4	2	Paving, 1870
4	3-47	Police, 1870-1872
4	48	Post Office, Laying cornerstone of new, 1871
4	49-50	Printing, 1870-1871
4	51	Prisons, 1870
4	52	Public Buildings, 1871-1872

4	53-54	Public Institutions, 1870, 1872
4	55	Public Instruction, 1870-1872
4	56	Public Library, 1870
4	57	Public Schools, 1870, 1872
5	1	Reardon, Michael, Inquest into death of, 1871-1872
5	2	Relief, 1872
5	3-4	Salaries, circa 1870-1872
5	5-6	Schools, circa 1870-1872
5	7	Sewers, 1872
5	8-11	Small pox Hospital, 1872
5	12	Soldiers' Relief, 1870-1871
5	13	State Aid, 1870-1871
5	14	Steam engines, circa 1870-1872
5	15-17	Streets, 1870-1872
5	18	Suffolk County Courthouse, 1871
5	19-20	Suffolk Street District, 1869-1871
5	21	Water, 1870
5	22-23	Chelsea, 1872
	1873-1874	
Box	Folder	
5	24	Accounts, 1874
5	25-27	Armories, 1873-1874
5	28	Army and Navy Monument, 1874
5	29	Assessors, 1874
5	30	Badges, 1874
5	31-33	Bathing, 1873-1874
5	34-41	Bridges, 1873-1874
5	42	City Hospital, 1874
5	43-44	Claims, 1873-1874
5	45-51	Common and Public Grounds, 1873-1874
5	52-53	County Accounts, 1873-1874
5	54	Courthouse, 1874
5	55	Decoration Day, circa 1873-1874
5	56	Eight Hour law, circa 1873-1874
5	57	Election of Common Council, 1873
5	58	Ferries, 1873
5	59	Fire Department, Reorganization of, 1873
5	60	Fire Department, 1873
6	1-2	Fuel, 1873-1874
6	3	Harbor, 1873
6	4-8	Home for the Poor, 1873-1874
6	9	Horse Railroad Regulation, circa 1873-1874
6	10	Inspection of ballast, 1874
6	11	Inspectors of Prisons, 1873

6	12	Jamaica Pond, Papers concerning the purchase of, 1874
6	13-14	Legislative matters, 1873-1874
6	15	Licenses, 1874
6	16-18	Markets, 1873-1874
6	19	Military, 1874
6	20	Miscellaneous, circa 1874
6	20	Music on the Common, 1873
6	22-23	Ordinances, 1873-1874
6	24-25	Parks, circa 1874
6	26	Concerning F. A. Peters, 1874
6	27-46	Police, 1873-1874
6	47	Police: Papers in the case of Mary West, 1873
0 7	1	Post Office, 1873
, 7	2-3	Public Institutions, 1873-1874
, 7	2-5 4-5	Public Instruction, 1873-1874
, 7	6	Railroads, 1874
, 7	7	Report opposing permit to build at 947 Fourth St., 1874
, 7	8	Rules & Orders, 1873
, 7	9-11	Salaries, 1873-1874
, 7	12	Smallpox Hospital, 1873
, 7	12	Soldier's Relief, 1873
, 7	13	Streets, 1873-1874
, 7	18	Sudbury River, 1874
, 7	19	Extension of Swett Street, 1873-1874
, 7	20	Washington Statue, circa 1873-1874
, 7	21-22	Water, 1873-1874
·	1875	
Box	Folder	
7	23	Armories, 1875
7	24	Assessor, 1875
7	25	Bathing, 1875
7	26-28	Bridges, 1875
7	29	Census and Division of Wards, 1875
7	30	Claims, 1875
7	31	Common and Public Grounds, 1875
7	32	Free Concerts, 1875
7	33	Fuel, 1875
7	34	Harbors, 1875
7	35	Homeopathic Practice, Introduction of, 1875
7	36	Markets, 1875
7	37	Nomination of Clerk of Committees, 1875
7	38	Ordinances, 1875
7	39	Paving, 1875
7	40-43	Police, 1875
		10

8	1		Printing, 1875
8	2		Public Institutions, 1875
8	3		Public Library, 1875
8	4		Streets, 1875
8	5		Streets, Laying Out and Widening of, 1875
8	6		Treasurer, 1875
0	0	1876	
Box	Folder	2010	
8	7		Armories, 1876
8	8		Assessor, 1876
8	9-10		Bridges, 1876
8	11		Claims, 1876
8	12		Common Council, 1876
8	13-14		Common and Public Grounds, 1876
8	15		Elections, 1876
8	16		Faneuil Hall, 1876
8	17		Fire Department
8	18		Fuel, 1876
8	19		Harbors, 1876
8	20		Improved Sewerage, 1876
8	21		Markets, 1876
8	22		O'Neil case, Statement re:, circa 1875-1876
8	23		Ordinances, 1876
8	24		Overseers of the Poor, 1876
8	25-29		Police, 1876
8	30		Printing, 1876
8	31		Public Buildings, 1876
8	32		Public Institutions, 1876
8	33		Public Instruction, 1876
8	34		Streets, 1876
8	35		Surveyor, 1876
8	36		Treasurer, 1876
8	37		Washington's Birthday, Committee on Celebration of, 1876
8	38		Water, 1876
		1876-1878	
Box	Folder		
8	39-40		Armories, 1877-1878
8	41		Arrangements: President Hayes, 1877
9	1-2		Assessor's, 1877-1878
9	3		Bathing, circa 1877
9	4		Board of Aldermen, 1877
9	5-6		Bridges, 1877-1878
9	7		Buildings, Inspector of, 1877
9	8		City Hospital, 1877
			·-

9	9-10	Claims, 1877-1878
9	11	Clerk of Committees, 1876-1877
9	12-16	Common and Public Grounds, 1877-1878
9	16a	County Accounts, 1877
9	17	Disposition of pauper dead, 1878
9	18	East Boston Ferries, circa 1877
9	19	Elections, 1878
9	20	Fire Department, 1877-1878
9	21	Free Concerts, 1877
9	22-23	Fuel, 1877-1878
9	24-25	Harbor, 1877-1878
9	26	Health, 1877
9	27	Historical monuments, 1877
9	28	Improved Sewerage, 1877-1878
9	29	Judiciary, 1877
9	30	Labor, 1878
9	31	Legislative matters, 1877
9	32	Lights, 1877-1878
9	33	Markets, 1877
9	34-36	Miscellaneous, circa 1877-1878
9	37	Monuments, 1878
9	38	Municipal Expenses, Reduction of, 1877
9	39	Ordinances, 1877
9	40	Parks, 1877-1878
9	41	Paving, circa 1877
9	42-45	Police, 1877-1878
10	1-16	
10	16a	Providing labor for unemployed, 1878
10	17	Public Buildings, 1877-1878
10	18	Public Instruction, 1876-1878
10	19	Public Lands, 1878
10	20	Public Library, 1877-1878
10	21	no folder
10	22	Railroads, circa 1877
10	23	no folder
10	24	Registrar Nominations, Circa 1877
10	25	Retrenchment of Municipal Expenses, circa 1877
10	26	Rules and orders, 1878
10	27	Salaries, 1877
10	28	Schools, 1877
10	29	Sewers, 1876-1878
10	30	Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, 1878
10	31	Stony Brook, 1878
10	32-33	Streets, 1877-1878
		18

10	34	Treasury, 1878
10	35	Water, 1877
	1878-1880	
Box	Folder	
10	36-37	Assessors, 1879-1880
10	38	Badges, 1880
10	39-41	Bathing, 1879-1880
10	42	Bonds, 1880
10	43-49	Bridges, 1880
11	1	City Hospital, 1879
11	2	City Registrar's Office, circa 1879-1880
11	3-4	Claims, 1879-1880
11	5-12	Common and Public Squares, 1879-1880
11	13	Common Council, 1880
11	14	County Accounts, 1880
11	15	Eaton Square, 1879
11	16	Emancipation Group, 1879
11	17-18	Ferries, 1879-1880
11	19	Fire Department, 1880
11	20-22	Fuel, 1879-1880
11	23	Harris case, Papers in, 1879
11	24-26	Improved Sewerage, 1879-1880
11	27	India Wharf, 1880
11	28-29	Interment, 1879
11	30	Kemp Street Sewer, 1879
11	31	Legislative Matters, 1880
11	32-33	Miscellaneous, 1879-1880
11	34	Mt. Hope Cemetery, 1879
11	35	New Court House, 1880
11	36-39	Ordinances, 1880
11	40	Police, 1878-1879
11	41-43	Public Instruction, 1879-1880
11	44	Public Library, 1880
11	45-46	Salaries, 1879-1880
11	47	Statue of Samuel Adams, 1879
11	48	Statue of Josiah Quincy, 1879
11	49	Statues, 1879-1880
11	50	Steam Engines and Furnaces, 1880
11	51	Stony Brook, 1880
11	52-54	Streets, 1879-1880
11	55-56	Treasury, 1879-1880
11	57	Ward 18 - Political Party tickets, circa 1879-1880
11	58	Water, 1880
11	59	Weighers and Inspectors of Lights, Nomination of, 1880

11	60	West Springfield St., 1880
	1880-1882	
Box	Folder	
11	61	Acknowledgement of receipt of Suffolk Deeds, 1880-1881
11	62	Annual Dinner of Common Council, 1882
11	63	Armories, 1880-1882
11	64-65	Arnold Arboretum, 1881
12	1	Assessors, Nomination of, 1881-1882
12	2	Assessors Dept., 1881
12	3	Badges, 1882
12	4	Ballot Boxes, 1881
12	5	Bridges, 1881-1882
12	6-7	Candidate lists, 1881-1882
12	8-9	Celebrations, 1881-1882
12	10	City Solicitor, Nomination of, 1881
12	11	Claims, 1881
12	12-14	Common and Public Squares, 1881-1882
12	15	Constables, 1881
12	16	County Accounts, 1882
12	17-18	Elections, circa 1881-1882
12	19	Ferries, 1880-1881
12	20	Free Concerts, 1882
12	21-22	Fuel, 1881-1882
12	23	Garfield, James Abram - Memorial Service, 1881
12	24	Grade Crossing, 1881
12	25	Harbor, 1881
12	26-27	Health, circa 1881-1882
12	28	Improved Sewerage, 1881
12	29	Jamaica Pond Aqueduct, 1880-1881
12	30	Land of the Institute of Technology, 1882
12	31	Judiciary, 1881-1882
12	32	Legislative Affairs, 1881
12	33	List of Officers attached to the Naval Station, Boston, 1882
12	34	Markets, 1881
12	35-36	Miscellaneous, circa 1881-1882
12	38	New Bridge to Charlestown, 1881
12	39	Nominations, 1881
12	40	Ordinances, 1881-1882
12	41	Paving, 1881-1882, 1885-1886
12	42	Police, 1880-1882
12	43	Powers of Aldermen, 1882
12	44	President's Reception, 1882
12	45	Prison Point Bay, 1881
12	46	Public Institutions, 1882

12	47-49	Public Instruction, 1881-1882
12	50	Public Library, 1881
12	51	Public Parks, 1881-1882
12	51a	Railroads, 1881
12	52	Rules and Orders, 1880-1882
12	53-54	Salaries, 1881-1882
12	55	Stony Brook, 1881-1882
12	56	Streets, 1880-1882
12	57	Treasury Dept., 1881-1882
12	58	Water, 1881-1882
12	59	Williams, Moses - Funeral, 1882
12	60	Yorktown Guests, 1881
	1882-1883	
Box	Folder	
13	1	Armories, 1882-1883
13	2	Arrangements, 1883
13	3	Assessors, 1883
13	4	Badges, 1883
13	5-6	Bridges, 1882-1883
13	7	Celebration of the 4th of July, 1883
13	8	Celebration of the 17th of June, 1883
13	9	Cemeteries, 1883
13	10	City Architect, 1883
13	11	City Hospital, 1883
13	12	City Messenger - Information on prisons in other cities, 1882
13	13	City Solicitor, 1883-1884
13	14	Claims, 1882-1883
13	15-22	Common and Public Squares, 1882-1883
13	23	County Accounts, 1883
13	24	East Boston Ferries, 1883
13	25	Elections, 1883
13	26	Electric Wires, 1883
13	27	Fire Department, 1881, 1883
13	28	Foreign Exhibitions - Visit to Deer Island by North Carolina Press, 1883
13	29	no folder
13	30	Fuel, 1883
13	31	Harbor, 1883
13	32-35	Improved Sewerage, 1882-1883
13	36	Improved Sewerage - Stony Brook Improvement, 1883
13	37	Judiciary, 1883
13	38	no folder
13	39	Legislative Matters, 1883
13	40	Library Site, 1883
13	41	Licenses, 1883

10	10	T 1000
13	42	Licenses, Theatre, 1883
13	43	Markets, 1882-1883
13	44	Massachusetts Volunteer Militia, 1883
13	45	Miscellaneous, 1883
13	46-49	Nomination of 2nd Assistant Assessors, 1883
13	50-51	Ordinances, 1882-1883
13	52	Ordinances - Regulation of Plumbing, 1883
13	53-54	Parks, 1881-1883
13	55	Police, 1882-1883
13	56	Public Buildings and Public Education, 1883
13	57-58	Public Education, 1883
13	59	Public Institutions, 1883
13	60-64	Public Library, 1880-1884
13	65	Retrenchment of Expenses, 1883
13	66	Rules and Orders, 1883
13	67-68	Salaries, 1883
13	69	School Site, 1883
13	70	State Aid, 1882-1883
13	71	Stony Brook, 1883
14	1-2	Streets, 1881-1883
14	3	Treasury, 1883
14	4	Underground wires, 1883
14	5-6	Water, 1881-1883
14 Volume		Water, 1881-1883
		Water, 1881-1883 "Number of Committee Meetings", 1880-1883
Volume		
Volume		
Volume IV-1	1883-1884	
Volume IV-1 Box	1883-1884 Folder	"Number of Committee Meetings", 1880-1883 17th of June, 1884
Volume IV-1 Box 14	1883-1884 Folder 7	"Number of Committee Meetings", 1880-1883 17th of June, 1884 Accounts, 1884
Volume IV-1 Box 14 14	1883-1884 Folder 7 8	"Number of Committee Meetings", 1880-1883 17th of June, 1884 Accounts, 1884 Assistant Assessors, 1884
Volume IV-1 Box 14 14 14	1883-1884 Folder 7 8 9	"Number of Committee Meetings", 1880-1883 17th of June, 1884 Accounts, 1884
Volume IV-1 Box 14 14 14 14 14	1883-1884 Folder 7 8 9 10	"Number of Committee Meetings", 1880-1883 17th of June, 1884 Accounts, 1884 Assistant Assessors, 1884 Armories, 1883-1884 Bids, 1883-1884
Volume IV-1 Box 14 14 14 14 14	1883-1884 Folder 7 8 9 10 11	"Number of Committee Meetings", 1880-1883 17th of June, 1884 Accounts, 1884 Assistant Assessors, 1884 Armories, 1883-1884 Bids, 1883-1884 Board of Alderman, 1884
Volume IV-1 Box 14 14 14 14 14 14 14	1883-1884 Folder 7 8 9 10 11 12	"Number of Committee Meetings", 1880-1883 17th of June, 1884 Accounts, 1884 Assistant Assessors, 1884 Armories, 1883-1884 Bids, 1883-1884 Board of Alderman, 1884 Special Committee on the Common Council – Bribery, 1884
Volume IV-1 Box 14 14 14 14 14 14 14 14 14	1883-1884 Folder 7 8 9 10 11 12 12a 13	"Number of Committee Meetings", 1880-1883 17th of June, 1884 Accounts, 1884 Assistant Assessors, 1884 Armories, 1883-1884 Bids, 1883-1884 Board of Alderman, 1884 Special Committee on the Common Council – Bribery, 1884 Bridges, 1883-1884
Volume IV-1 Box 14 14 14 14 14 14 14 14 14 14	1883-1884 Folder 7 8 9 10 11 12 12a 13 14	"Number of Committee Meetings", 1880-1883 17th of June, 1884 Accounts, 1884 Assistant Assessors, 1884 Armories, 1883-1884 Bids, 1883-1884 Board of Alderman, 1884 Special Committee on the Common Council – Bribery, 1884 Bridges, 1883-1884 City Charter, 1884
Volume IV-1 Box 14 14 14 14 14 14 14 14 14	1883-1884 Folder 7 8 9 10 11 12 12a 13	"Number of Committee Meetings", 1880-1883 17th of June, 1884 Accounts, 1884 Assistant Assessors, 1884 Armories, 1883-1884 Bids, 1883-1884 Board of Alderman, 1884 Special Committee on the Common Council – Bribery, 1884 Bridges, 1883-1884 City Charter, 1884 City Clerk's Department, 1884
Volume IV-1 Box 14 14 14 14 14 14 14 14 14 14 14 14	1883-1884 Folder 7 8 9 10 11 12 12a 13 14 15 16	"Number of Committee Meetings", 1880-1883 17th of June, 1884 Accounts, 1884 Assistant Assessors, 1884 Armories, 1883-1884 Bids, 1883-1884 Board of Alderman, 1884 Special Committee on the Common Council – Bribery, 1884 Bridges, 1883-1884 City Charter, 1884 City Clerk's Department, 1884 City Registrar's Department, 1883
Volume IV-1 Box 14 14 14 14 14 14 14 14 14 14 14 14 14	1883-1884 Folder 7 8 9 10 11 12 12a 13 14 15 16 17	"Number of Committee Meetings", 1880-1883 17th of June, 1884 Accounts, 1884 Assistant Assessors, 1884 Armories, 1883-1884 Bids, 1883-1884 Board of Alderman, 1884 Special Committee on the Common Council – Bribery, 1884 Bridges, 1883-1884 City Charter, 1884 City Clerk's Department, 1884 City Registrar's Department, 1883 Claims, 1884
Volume IV-1 Box 14 14 14 14 14 14 14 14 14 14 14 14 14	1883-1884 Folder 7 8 9 10 11 12 12a 13 14 15 16 17 18	"Number of Committee Meetings", 1880-1883 17th of June, 1884 Accounts, 1884 Assistant Assessors, 1884 Armories, 1883-1884 Bids, 1883-1884 Board of Alderman, 1884 Special Committee on the Common Council – Bribery, 1884 Bridges, 1883-1884 City Charter, 1884 City Clerk's Department, 1884 City Registrar's Department, 1883 Claims, 1884 Cogswell Fountain, 1884
Volume IV-1 Box 14 14 14 14 14 14 14 14 14 14 14 14 14	1883-1884 Folder 7 8 9 10 11 12 12a 13 14 15 16 17 18 19-20	"Number of Committee Meetings", 1880-1883 17th of June, 1884 Accounts, 1884 Assistant Assessors, 1884 Armories, 1883-1884 Bids, 1883-1884 Board of Alderman, 1884 Special Committee on the Common Council – Bribery, 1884 Bridges, 1883-1884 City Charter, 1884 City Clerk's Department, 1884 City Registrar's Department, 1883 Claims, 1884 Cogswell Fountain, 1884 Common and Public Grounds, 1884
Volume IV-1 Box 14 14 14 14 14 14 14 14 14 14 14 14 14	1883-1884 Folder 7 8 9 10 11 12 12a 13 14 15 16 17 18 19-20 20a	"Number of Committee Meetings", 1880-1883 17th of June, 1884 Accounts, 1884 Assistant Assessors, 1884 Armories, 1883-1884 Bids, 1883-1884 Board of Alderman, 1884 Special Committee on the Common Council – Bribery, 1884 Bridges, 1883-1884 City Charter, 1884 City Clerk's Department, 1884 City Registrar's Department, 1883 Claims, 1884 Cogswell Fountain, 1884 Common and Public Grounds, 1884 Special Committee on the Common Council –Death Investigation, 1884
Volume IV-1 Box 14 14 14 14 14 14 14 14 14 14 14 14 14	1883-1884 Folder 7 8 9 10 11 12 12a 13 14 15 16 17 18 19-20	"Number of Committee Meetings", 1880-1883 17th of June, 1884 Accounts, 1884 Assistant Assessors, 1884 Armories, 1883-1884 Bids, 1883-1884 Board of Alderman, 1884 Special Committee on the Common Council – Bribery, 1884 Bridges, 1883-1884 City Charter, 1884 City Clerk's Department, 1884 City Registrar's Department, 1883 Claims, 1884 Cogswell Fountain, 1884 Common and Public Grounds, 1884

14	23		Eulogy-Wendell Phillips, 1884
14	24		Finance, 1882-1884
14	25		Fourth of July, 1884
14	26		Fuel, 1882-1884
14	27		Harbor, 1884
14	28		Hospital, 1883-1884
14	29		Improved Sewerage, 1884
14	29a		Special Committee on the Common Council - Investigation of Departments, 1884
14	30		Joint Rules and Orders, 1883-1884
14	31		Judiciary, 1884
14	32		Licenses, 1884
14	33		Mayor, 1884, 1876
14	34		Military, 1884
14	35		Miscellaneous, 1884
14	35a		Special Committee on Opium Joints, 1884
14	36		Police, 1884
14	37		Public Buildings, 1884
14	38		Public Education, 1884
14	39		Public Education-Blossom Street School, 1884
14	40		Public Institutions, 1882-1884
14	41		Public Library, 1883-1884
14	42		Public Parks, 1883-1884
14	43		Railroads, 1882-1884
14	43a		Special Committee - Refreshment, 1883-1884
14	44		Rebuilding Warren Bridge, 1884
14	45		Revised Ordinances, 1884
14	46		Salaries, 1884
Volum	e		
IV-2			Special Committee on the Common Council - Entertainment of Siamese Embassy, 1884
Box	Folder		
14	47		
Box	Folder		
15	1		Special Committee on South Burying Ground, 1884
15	2		Stony Brook, 1884
15	3		Streets, 1882-1884
15	4		Treasury Department, 1883-1884
15	5		Underground Wires, 1884
15	6		Water, 1884
		1885	
Box	Folder		
15	7		17th of June, 1885
15	8		Armories, 1885

15	9	Assessors' Department, 1885
15	10	Badges, 1885
15	11	Bridges, 1885
15	12	City Hospital - O'Neil death, 1885
15	13	Commission of Public Works, New York, 1885
15	14	Commissions and Boards, 1885
15	15-16	Common and Public Grounds, 1882-1885
15	17	Common Council, 1885
15	18	Division of Wards, 1885
15	19	Election Returns, 1885
15	20	Elections, 1885
15	21	Electric Wires, 1884-1885
15	22	Entertainment of the President, 1885
15	23	Eulogy on President Grant, 1885
15	24	Faneuil Hall and County Building, 1885
15	25	Ferries, 1885
15	26	Fuel, 1885
15	27	Funeral of President Grant, 1885
15	28	Funeral of Vice President Hendricks, 1885
15	29	H Street Sewer, 1885
15	30	Harbor, 1885
15	31	Improved Sewerage, 1885
15	32	Inspection of Prisons, 1885
15	33	Investigation of Water Board, 1885
15	34	Jenkins investigation, 1885
15	35	Legislative Matters, 1885
15	36	Licenses, 1885
15	37	Military, 1885
15	38	Miscellaneous, 1885
15	39	New Cambridge Bridge, 1885
15	40	Nomination of City Engineer, 1885
15	41	Ordinances, 1885
15	42	Overseers of the Poor, 1885
15	43	Parks Investigation, 1885
15	44	Paving, 1885
15	45	Police, 1885
15	46	Public Education, 1885
15	47	Public Institutions, 1885
15	48	Public Lands, 1885
15	49	Public Libraries, 1885
15	50	Public Parks, 1885
16	1	Railroads, 1885
16	2	Rules and Orders, 1885
16	3	Salaries, 1885

16	4	State Aid 1885
16	4 5	State Aid, 1885
16	6	Steam engines, 1885 Streets, 1885
16	8 7	Survey and Inspection of Buildings, 1885
16	8	
16	8 9	Treasury Department, 1885
10	9 1886	Water, 1885
Box	Folder	
16	10	Aldermanic Districts, 1886
16	11	Appropriations, 1886
16	12	Architects, 1886
16	13	Armories, 1886
16	14	Assessor, 1886
16	15	Badges, 1886
16	16	Bridges, 1886
16	17	Building Inspection, 1886
16	18	Cemeteries, 1886
16	19	Civil Service, 1886
16	20	Claims, 1886
16	21-23	Claims of the Boston Belting Co., 1886
16	24	Common and Public Grounds, 1886
16	25	Common Council, 1886
16	26	Contingent Expenses, 1886
16	27	East Boston Ferries, 1886
16	28	Elections, 1886
16	29	Electric Wires, 1886
16	30	Faneuil Hall and County Buildings, 1886
16	31	Finance, 1886
16	32	Fire Department, 1886
16	33	Health, 1886
16	34	Improved Sewerage, 1886
16	35	Joint and Special Committees, 1886
16	36	Joint Rules and Orders, 1886
16	37	Judiciary, 1886
16	38	June 17 Committee, 1886
16	39	Lamps, 1886
16	40	Legislative Affairs, 1886
16	41	Licenses, 1886
16	42	Long Island Investigation, 1886
16	43	Markets, 1886
16	44	Mayor's Address, 1886
16	45	New Court House, 1886
16	46	Ordinances, 1886
17	1	Paving, 1886

17	2		Police, 1886
Volume	9		
IV-3			President's reception, 1886
Box	Folder		
17	3		
Box	Folder		
17	4-5		Printing, 1886
17	6		Public Buildings, 1886
17	7		Public Institutions, 1886
17	8		Public Library, 1886
17	9		Railroads, 1886
17	10		Schools, 1886
17	11		Standing Regulations, 1886
17	12		Streets, 1886
17	13		Treasurer, 1886
17	14-15		Water, 1886
		1887	
Box	Folder		
17	16		Armories, 1887
17	17		Artillery Reception, 1888
17	18		Assessor, 1887
17	19		Badges, 1887
17	20		Bridges, 1887
17	21		Bunker Hill Celebration, 1887
17	22		Cemeteries, 1887
17	23		Charges Against Councilman Lauten, 1887
17	24		City Collector, 1887
17	25		Claims, 1887
17	26		Common and Public Grounds, 1887
17	27		Common Council, 1887
17	28		County Accounts, 1887
17	29		East Boston Ferries, 1887
17	30		Elections, 1887
17	31		Electric Wires, 1887
17	32		Faneuil Hall, 1887
17	33		Finance, 1887
17	34		Fire, 1887
17	35		Fourth of July, 1887
17	36		Hospital, 1887
17	37		Improved Sewerage, 1887
17	38		Inspection of Buildings, 1887
17	39		Joint Rules, 1887
17	40		Judiciary, 1887
17	41		Kearsarge Burial Ground, 1887

17	42	Lamps, 1887
17	43	Legislative Affairs, 1887
17	44	Licenses, 1887
17	45	New Cambridge Bridge, 1887
17	46	Ordinances, 1887
17	47	Parks, 1887
17	48	Police, 1887
17	49-50	Printing, 1887
18	1	Public Buildings, 1887
18	2	Public Institutions, 1887
18	3	Public Library, 1887
18	4	Railroads, 1887
18	5	Reservoir Lot, 1887
18	6	Schools, 1887
18	7	Stony Brook, 1887
18	8	Streets, 1887
18	9	Transfer of Hydrants, 1887
18	10	Treasurer, 1887
18	11	Underground Wires, 1887
Volume		
IV-4		Visit by Queen Kapiolani, 1887
Box	Folder	
18	12	Water. 1887
18	12 1888	Water, 1887
	1888	Water, 1887
Box	1888 Folder	
Box 18	1888 Folder 12a	Ancient and Honorable Artillery Company Reception, 1888
Box 18 18	1888 Folder 12a 13	Ancient and Honorable Artillery Company Reception, 1888 Appointments, 1888
Box 18 18 18	1888 Folder 12a 13 14	Ancient and Honorable Artillery Company Reception, 1888 Appointments, 1888 Appropriations, 1888
Box 18 18 18 18	1888 Folder 12a 13 14 15	Ancient and Honorable Artillery Company Reception, 1888 Appointments, 1888 Appropriations, 1888 Armories, 1888
Box 18 18 18 18 18	1888 Folder 12a 13 14 15 16	Ancient and Honorable Artillery Company Reception, 1888 Appointments, 1888 Appropriations, 1888 Armories, 1888 Assessors' Department, 1888
Box 18 18 18 18 18 18 18	1888 Folder 12a 13 14 15 16 17	Ancient and Honorable Artillery Company Reception, 1888 Appointments, 1888 Appropriations, 1888 Armories, 1888 Assessors' Department, 1888 Badges, 1888
Box 18 18 18 18 18 18 18 18	1888 Folder 12a 13 14 15 16 17 18	Ancient and Honorable Artillery Company Reception, 1888 Appointments, 1888 Appropriations, 1888 Armories, 1888 Assessors' Department, 1888 Badges, 1888 Bridges, 1888
Box 18 18 18 18 18 18 18 18 18	1888 Folder 12a 13 14 15 16 17 18 19	Ancient and Honorable Artillery Company Reception, 1888 Appointments, 1888 Appropriations, 1888 Armories, 1888 Assessors' Department, 1888 Badges, 1888 Bridges, 1888 Cemeteries, 1888
Box 18 18 18 18 18 18 18 18 18 18	1888 Folder 12a 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20	Ancient and Honorable Artillery Company Reception, 1888 Appointments, 1888 Appropriations, 1888 Armories, 1888 Assessors' Department, 1888 Badges, 1888 Bridges, 1888 Cemeteries, 1888 City Auditor's Department, 1888
Box 18 18 18 18 18 18 18 18 18 18 18	1888 Folder 12a 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21	Ancient and Honorable Artillery Company Reception, 1888 Appointments, 1888 Appropriations, 1888 Armories, 1888 Assessors' Department, 1888 Badges, 1888 Bridges, 1888 Cemeteries, 1888 City Auditor's Department, 1888 City Collector's Department, 1888
Box 18 18 18 18 18 18 18 18 18 18 18 18	1888 Folder 12a 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 20 21 22	Ancient and Honorable Artillery Company Reception, 1888 Appointments, 1888 Appropriations, 1888 Armories, 1888 Assessors' Department, 1888 Badges, 1888 Bridges, 1888 Cemeteries, 1888 City Auditor's Department, 1888 City Collector's Department, 1888 City and County Employees, 1888
Box 18 18 18 18 18 18 18 18 18 18 18 18 18	1888 Folder 12a 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 20 21 22 23	Ancient and Honorable Artillery Company Reception, 1888 Appointments, 1888 Appropriations, 1888 Armories, 1888 Assessors' Department, 1888 Badges, 1888 Bridges, 1888 Cemeteries, 1888 City Auditor's Department, 1888 City Collector's Department, 1888 City and County Employees, 1888 City Hospital, 1888
Box 18 18 18 18 18 18 18 18 18 18 18 18 18	1888 Folder 12a 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 20 21 22 23 23	Ancient and Honorable Artillery Company Reception, 1888 Appointments, 1888 Appropriations, 1888 Armories, 1888 Assessors' Department, 1888 Badges, 1888 Bridges, 1888 Cemeteries, 1888 City Auditor's Department, 1888 City Auditor's Department, 1888 City Collector's Department, 1888 City and County Employees, 1888 City Hospital, 1888 City Treasurer's Department, 1888
Box 18 18 18 18 18 18 18 18 18 18 18 18 18	1888 Folder 12a 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 20 21 22 23 24 25	Ancient and Honorable Artillery Company Reception, 1888 Appointments, 1888 Appropriations, 1888 Armories, 1888 Assessors' Department, 1888 Badges, 1888 Bridges, 1888 Cemeteries, 1888 City Auditor's Department, 1888 City Collector's Department, 1888 City and County Employees, 1888 City Hospital, 1888 City Treasurer's Department, 1888 City Treasurer's Department, 1888
Box 18 18 18 18 18 18 18 18 18 18 18 18 18	1888 Folder 12a 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26	Ancient and Honorable Artillery Company Reception, 1888 Appointments, 1888 Appropriations, 1888 Armories, 1888 Assessors' Department, 1888 Badges, 1888 Bridges, 1888 Cemeteries, 1888 City Auditor's Department, 1888 City Collector's Department, 1888 City and County Employees, 1888 City Hospital, 1888 City Treasurer's Department, 1888 Claims, 1888 Common and Public Grounds, 1888
Box 18 18 18 18 18 18 18 18 18 18 18 18 18	1888 Folder 12a 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 20 21 22 23 24 23 24 25 26 27	Ancient and Honorable Artillery Company Reception, 1888 Appointments, 1888 Appropriations, 1888 Armories, 1888 Assessors' Department, 1888 Badges, 1888 Bridges, 1888 Cemeteries, 1888 City Auditor's Department, 1888 City Collector's Department, 1888 City and County Employees, 1888 City Hospital, 1888 City Treasurer's Department, 1888 Claims, 1888 Common and Public Grounds, 1888 Common Council, 1888
Box 18 18 18 18 18 18 18 18 18 18 18 18 18	1888 Folder 12a 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28	Ancient and Honorable Artillery Company Reception, 1888 Appointments, 1888 Appropriations, 1888 Armories, 1888 Assessors' Department, 1888 Badges, 1888 Bridges, 1888 Cemeteries, 1888 City Auditor's Department, 1888 City Collector's Department, 1888 City Collector's Department, 1888 City and County Employees, 1888 City Hospital, 1888 City Treasurer's Department, 1888 Claims, 1888 Common and Public Grounds, 1888 Common Council, 1888 Contingent Expenses, 1888
Box 18 18 18 18 18 18 18 18 18 18 18 18 18	1888 Folder 12a 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 20 21 22 23 24 23 24 25 26 27	Ancient and Honorable Artillery Company Reception, 1888 Appointments, 1888 Appropriations, 1888 Armories, 1888 Assessors' Department, 1888 Badges, 1888 Bridges, 1888 Cemeteries, 1888 City Auditor's Department, 1888 City Collector's Department, 1888 City and County Employees, 1888 City Hospital, 1888 City Treasurer's Department, 1888 Claims, 1888 Common and Public Grounds, 1888 Common Council, 1888

18	31	Elections, 1888
18	32	Electric Wires, 1888
18	33	Engineer's Department, 1888
18	34	Fourth of July, 1888
18	35	Franklin Fund, 1888
18	36	Free Soup, Hearing re: distribution by Police Department, 1888
18	37	Funerals, 1888
18	38	Harbor, 1888
18	39	Harvard Bridge, 1888
18	40	Joint Rules and Orders, 1888
18	41-42	Kearsarge Burial Ground, 1888
18	43	Laborers, 1888
18	44	Lamps, 1888
18	45	Legislative Matters, 1888
18	46	Licenses, 1888
18	47	Markets, 1888
18	48	Mayor's Address, 1888
18	49	Miscellaneous, 1888
18	50	Mount Hope Cemetery, 1888
18	51	New Court-House, 1888
18	52	Ordinances and Law Department, 1888
18	53	Overseers of the Poor, 1888
18	54	Police Department, 1888
18	55	no folder
18	56	Philadelphia City Council, Extend Courtesies to, 1888
18	57-59	Printing, 1888
18	60	Public Buildings, 1888
18	61	Public Institutions, 1888
18	62	Public Library, 1888
18	63	Public Parks, 1888
18	64	Public Schools, Establishing advanced grade in, 1888
19	1	Railroads, 1888
19	2	Rules and Orders, 1888
19	3	Sale of Reservoir Lot, 1888
19	4-5	Schools and School-Houses, 1888
19	6	17th of June, 1888
19	7	Sewer Department, 1888
19	8	South Bay District, 1888
19	9	South Boston Flats, 1888
19	10	State Aid, 1888
19	11	Stony Brook, 1888
19	12-13	Streets, 1888
19	14	Telephonic Service, 1888
19	15	Underground Wires, 1888

19	16	Water, 1888
19	17	Wilson Hotel, 1888
	1889	
Box	Folder	
19	18	Aldermanic Districts, 1889
19	19	Annual Dinner, 1889
19	20	Appropriations, 1889
19	21	Badges, 1889
19	22	Bridges, 1889
19	23	Bunker Hill Tablets, 1889
19	24	Caucuses, 1889
19	25	Cemeteries, 1889
19	26	Charles River Bridges, 1889
19	27	Chinese Quarter, 1889
19	28	Claims, 1889
19	29-30	Common and Public Grounds, 1889
19	31	Common Council, 1889
19	32	Consolidation of City Departments, 1889
19	33	Contingent expenses, 1889
19	34-35	Electric Wires, 1889
19	36	Election returns, 1889
19	37	Finance, 1889
19	38	Fire, 1889
19	39	Fourth of July, 1889
19	40	Free Baths, 1889
19	41	Funerals, 1889
19	42	Health Department, 1889
19	43-45	Hillard, James L., Clerk of Committees personal papers, 1889
19	46	Inspection of Buildings, 1889
19	47	Investigation of Bribery Common Council, 1889
19	48	Investigation of Sewer Department, 1889
19	49	Labor Day, 1889
19	50	Laying Out and Widening of Streets, 1889
19	51	Legislative Matters, 1889
19	52	Licenses, 1889
19	53	Lighting streets, 1889
19	54	Mayor's Address, 1889
19	55	Miscellaneous, 1889
19	56	News clippings, 1889
20	1	Naval Reception, 1889
20	2	Orchard Park, 1889
20	3	Ordinances, 1889
20	4	Parks, 1889
20	5	Paving, 1889

20	6-13	Printing, 1889
20 20	14	Public Library, 1889
20 20	15	Railroads, 1889
20 20	16	Rules and Orders, 1889
20 20	17	Schools and School-houses, 1889
20 20	18-19	Sewers, 1889
20 20	20	
20 20	20 21	Sheridan eulogy, 1889
20 20		South Bay, 1889
20 20	22	South Boston playgrounds, 1889
20 20	23 24	State Aid, 1889
20 20	24 25	State House extension, 1889 Statues to Grant and others, 1889
	25 26	
20		Steam Engines and Furnaces, 1889
20	27	Story Brook, 1889
20 20	28-29 30	Streets, 1889 Voting Presingto, 1880
20 20	30	Voting Precincts, 1889
		Water, 1889
20	32 1890	Work of city laborers, 1889
Box	Folder	
20	33	Annual Dinner, 1890
20	34	Appropriations, 1890
20	35	Architect's Department, 1890
20	36	Armories and Military Affairs, 1890
20	37	Auditor, 1890
20	38	Badges, 1890
20	39	Bathing, 1890
20	40	Bituminous coal, 1890
20	41	Bridges, 1890
20	42	Bunker Hill Memorial, 1890
20	43	Carroll Family, 1890
20	44	Cemeteries, 1890
20	45	Claims, 1890
20	46	Common and Public Grounds, 1890
20	47	Common Council, 1890
21	1	Commonwealth Avenue, 1890
21	2-3	Consolidation of Departments, 1890
21	4	County Accounts, 1890
21	4a	Covering of Boston and Albany R.R. tracks, 1890
21	5	Durginville, 1890
21	6	Elections, 1890
21	7	Electric wires, 1890
21	8	Finance, 1890
21	9	Fire, 1890

21	10		Funerals, 1890
21	11		Health, 1890
21	12		Height of buildings, 1890
21	13		Improved Sewerage, 1890
21	14		Inspection of buildings, 1890
21	15		June 17th, 1890
21	16		Labor Day, 1890
21	17		Legislative Matters, 1890
21	18		Licenses, 1890
21	19		Lighting streets, 1890
21	20		Manufacturing of water gas, 1890
21	20		Mayor's address, 1890
21	22		Mt. Hope Cemetery, 1890
21	22		Ordinances, 1890
21	23		Parks, 1890
21	25		Police, 1890
21	26		Public Buildings, 1890
21	27-29		Printing, 1890
21	30		Procession routes, 1890
21	31		no folder, 1890
21	32		Railroads, 1890
21	33		Rules and orders, 1890
21	34		Salaries, 1890
21	35		Sales by minors, 1890
21	36		Schools and School-Houses, 1890
21	37		Smoke nuisance, 1890
21	38		State Aid, 1890
21	39		State House extension, 1890
21	40		Statues, 1890
21	41		Steam engines, 1890
21	42-43		Streets, 1890
21	44		Voting precincts, 1890
21	45		Water, 1890
		1890-1891	
Box	Folder		
21	46		Assessing Department, 1890-1891
21	47		Cemeteries, 1890-1891
21	48		Dudley Street crossing N.Y. & N.E. R.R., 1890-1891
21	49		Elections, 1890-1891
21	50		Electric Wires, 1890-1891
21	51		Fire Department, 1890-1891
21	52		Joint Standing committees, 1890-1891
21	53		Mayor's Address, 1890-1891
21	54		Public Grounds, 1890-1891
			21

21	55	Rules and orders, 1890-1891
21	56	Schools and School-Houses, 1890-1891
21	57	Sidewalks, 1890-1891
21	58	Statues to Grant and others, 1890-1891
21	59	Streets and Sewers, 1890-1891
21	60	Use of Streets by private corporations, 1890-1891
	1891	
Box	Folder	
21	61	Ancient records, 1891
21	62	Appropriations, 1891
21	63	Auditing Department, 1891
21	64	Badges, 1891
21	65	Bituminous coal, 1891
21	66	City Clerk's Department, 1891
21	67	City Hall extension, 1891
21	68	Clerk of Committees Department, 1891
21	69	Closing drawbridges, 1891
21	70	Collecting Department, 1891
21	71	Consolidation of Departments, 1891
21	72	Construction of Basin Five, 1891
21	73	Contingent expenses, 1891
21	73	Disposition of Franklin Fund, 1891
22	1	East Boston Bridge, 1891
22	2	Eulogies, 1891
22	3	Ferry Department, 1891
22	4	Finance, 1891
22	5	Fourth of July, 1891
22	6	Funeral of former Mayor Cobb, 1891
22	7	Funeral of General Devens, 1891
22	8	Funeral of General Sherman, 1891
22	9-11	Grade Crossings, 1891
22	12	Harbor fortifications, 1891
22	13	Health Department, 1891
22	14	Improvement of Durginville, 1891
22	15	Inspection of Buildings, 1891
22	16	Inspection of Milk and Vinegar, 1891
22	17	Inspection of Prisons, 1891
22	18	Labor Day Celebration, 1891
22	19	Library Department, 1891
22	20	Licenses, 1891
22	21	Nautical Training School, 1891
22	22	New Court-House, 1891
22	23	Orchard Park, 1891
22	24	Ordinances, 1891
		······································

22	25	Park Department, 1891
22	26	Playgrounds, 1891
22	27-28	Printing, 1891
22	29	Public Buildings, 1891
22	30	Railroads, 1891
22	31	Reception of Squadron of Evolution, 1891
22	32	Registration of Voters, 1891
22	33	Salaries, 1891
22	34	Sealing of Weights and Measures, 1891
22	35	Seventeenth of June, 1891
22	36	South Boston Grade Crossings, 1891
22	37	State Aid, 1891
22	38	State House extension, 1891
22	39	Stony Brook, 1891
22	40	Street Department, 1891
22	41	Surveying Department, 1891
22	42	Tremont Street Crossing, Old Colony Railroad, 1891
22	43	Watering Streets, 1891
	1892-1893	-
Box	Folder	
22	44	Appropriations, 1892-1893
22	45	Architect Department, 1892-1893
22	46	Assessing Department, 1892-1893
22	47	Badges, 1892-1893
22	48	Bituminous Coal, 1892-1893
22	49	Bridges, 1892-1893
22	49a	City Messenger Department, 1892-1893
22	50-57	Claims, 1892-1893
23	1	Claims (Stony Brook), 1892-1893
23	2	Clerk of Committees Department, 1892-1893
23	3	Closing Drawbridges, 1892-1893
23	4	Columbus Day, 1892-1893
23	5	Elections, 1892-1893
23	6	Faneuil Hall, Etc., 1892-1893
23	7	Ferry Department, 1892-1893
23	8	Finance, 1892-1893
23	9	Fire Department, 1892-1893
23	10	Fourth of July, 1892-1893
23	11	Grade Crossings, 1892-1893
23	12	Health Department, 1892-1893
23	13	Inspection of Buildings, 1892-1893
23	14	Joint Rules and Orders, 1892-1893
23	15	Labor Day Celebration, 1892-1893
23	16	Lamps, 1892-1893

23	17	Library Department, 1892-1893
23	18	Licenses, 1892-1893
23	19	Mayor's Address, 1892-1893
23	20	Memorial Day, 1892-1893
23	21	Miscellaneous, 1892-1893
23	22	Mount Hope Cemetery, 1892-1893
23	23	New Court-House, 1892-1893
23	24	Ordinances and Law Department, 1892-1893
23	25	Park Department, 1892-1893
23	26	Police Department, 1892-1893
23	27-29	Printing, 1892-1893
23	30	Public Buildings, 1892-1893
23	31-32	Public Grounds, 1892-1893
23	33	Public Institutions, 1892-1893
23	34	Railroads, 1892-1893
23	35	Schools and School-Houses, 1892-1893
23	36	Seventeenth of June, 1892-1893
23	37	State Aid, 1892-1893
23	38	Steam-Engines, Etc., 1892-1893
23	39	Stony Brook, 1892-1893
23	40	Streets and Sewers, 1892-1893
23	41	Treasury, 1892-1893
23	42	Water, 1892-1893
	Oversized	
Oversize	e	
1		circa 1870-1893
2		circa 1870-1893
3		circa 1870-1893
4		circa 1870-1893
5		circa 1870-1893

Return to the Series List

Series V: Correspondence,	1867-1890 (1 record carton (3 volumes))
Box	
24	1867-1890

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