Kenneth Cobb at the Surrogate's Courthouse. (Frankie Alduino)
Alumni

The Secret Keeper of New York City

After forty-plus years with the New York City Department of Records and Information Services, Kenneth Cobb ’78GSAS knows where all the files are buried.

By
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|
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Kenneth Cobb at the Surrogate's Courthouse. (Frankie Alduino)

Nearly every day for more than forty years, Kenneth Cobb ’78GSAS has put on a jacket and tie, packed his lunch, and taken the subway from his home in Morningside Heights down to the Surrogate’s Courthouse at 31 Chambers Street. The building, a 1907 Beaux Arts masterwork with a Siena-marble atrium, opera-house staircases, arched entranceways, and a vaulted ceiling with gold and blue mosaics, houses the New York City Department of Records and Information Services (DORIS), where Cobb is assistant commissioner. All New York City government records pass through his office.

Cobb, seventy, is a gentle-spoken, dedicated public servant who is forever delighted by the secret treasures and surprises of the vast collection. He came to DORIS as a graduate-student volunteer in 1977, and he has never left. In 2005 he became assistant commissioner, tasked with overseeing the endless paper trail of New York: hundreds of miles of boxes, the pulp and ink of fifty-odd city agencies — the DAs’ offices, the courts, the education department, the mayor’s office, the NYPD, the FDNY, the parks department, and dozens more — as well as birth, death, and marriage records stretching back almost four centuries.

“The minute the Dutch colonists got off the boats,” Cobb says, “they began keeping records. Whatever they were doing — buying and selling property, assaulting each another — they wrote it down.” This habit only grew as the city became British and then American.

By 1977 the “paperwork monster,” as City Council president Paul O’Dwyer once called it, was “crowding bureaucrats out of their offices.” To deal with this beast, the city created DORIS.

Kenneth Cobb in the stacks of DORIS. (Frankie Alduino)

As Cobb explains, DORIS brings together three key city entities: the Municipal Library, which has books and other materials related to city agencies and institutions; the Municipal Records Management Division, which stores the bulk of the city’s records in warehouses in Queens and Brooklyn; and the Municipal Archives, which retains records that Cobb’s team has judged to have permanent historical value, and thus be of interest to researchers. (About 10 percent of all city records are in the archive.) Supervising the record-appraising process is a big part of Cobb’s responsibility, along with managing digitization projects, negotiating licensing agreements for the use of DORIS materials, conducting research for government offices, and — his favorite part — assisting patrons.

“I help people find what they’re looking for — maybe it’s the marriage certificate of their great-grandparents or an old court record — and then I help them interpret it,” Cobb says. “They get so excited. It’s so powerful for them to see the actual document.”

On a recent Tuesday, Cobb appears in the marble atrium to give a reporter a tour of DORIS. The first stop is a ground-floor public room with tables and computers where people can retrieve New York City birth, death, and marriage records. These are the records that people ask for the most, says Cobb.

“This is where patrons used to come to do family-history research,” Cobb says. “In the past they would have needed to look at microfilm, mostly. But eventually we digitized those records. And then in March 2022, we put them online for free.” Cobb chuckles at the unintended consequence of this technology. “Now we’re having to rethink this space.”

But not everything at DORIS is digitized, and in the Municipal Library, on the other side of the atrium, patrons sit at tables and look through books and files brought out to them by a librarian. Cobb goes in and stops to admire a long rectangular drawing on the wall: it’s an 1855 topographical survey map for a proposed Central Park, dotted with farms and settlements.

One of DORIS’s top-drawer collections is the 3,300 nineteenth-century drawings of the future park, created to help sell the outlandish idea to the city. Cobb considers them works of art. They also tell their own stories. “Notice that in this drawing, the park cuts off at 106th Street, not at 110th. So what happened? Well, the surveyors later realized that the topography was so rocky past 106th Street that it could never be developed. It was better to make it part of the park.”

Cobb’s brain is filled with this sort of lore, a side effect of his daily engagement with documents churned out by the colossal machinery of local government. He turns and goes through a door into the library stacks, which are packed with books, annual reports, and vertical files of pre-Internet newspaper and magazine clippings. Stopping at a shelf of old reports from Brooklyn agencies (Brooklyn was an independent city before the consolidation of 1898), Cobb extracts a bound volume from the Commissioners of City Works, which contains data and drawings for such things as the latest sewer technology. “Look at this beautiful cover,” Cobb says. It’s tortoise green with black filigree, dated 1877. “That’s before the Brooklyn Bridge

was finished.” Cobb often refers to the great structure of granite towers and steel cables looming just outside his office. At DORIS, the bridge is a dominant presence, and Cobb thinks about it a lot.

He proceeds from the library into the atrium, where afternoon light dapples the marble floor, and descends the staircase into the basement, to what he calls “the secret vaults” — the Municipal Archives. One room is filled with aisles and aisles of metal shelves holding thousands of white boxes. Stopping in front of mayoral files from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Cobb takes out a box on Mayor La Guardia. The label says “Nazi Protest Meeting.” “Once,” recalls Cobb, “a patron saw this and said, ‘Nazis? That’s a European thing in the 1930s. What does it have to do with New York City?’ I said, ‘Let’s open the box.’”

A 1924 photo of Riverside Drive at W. 165th Street.

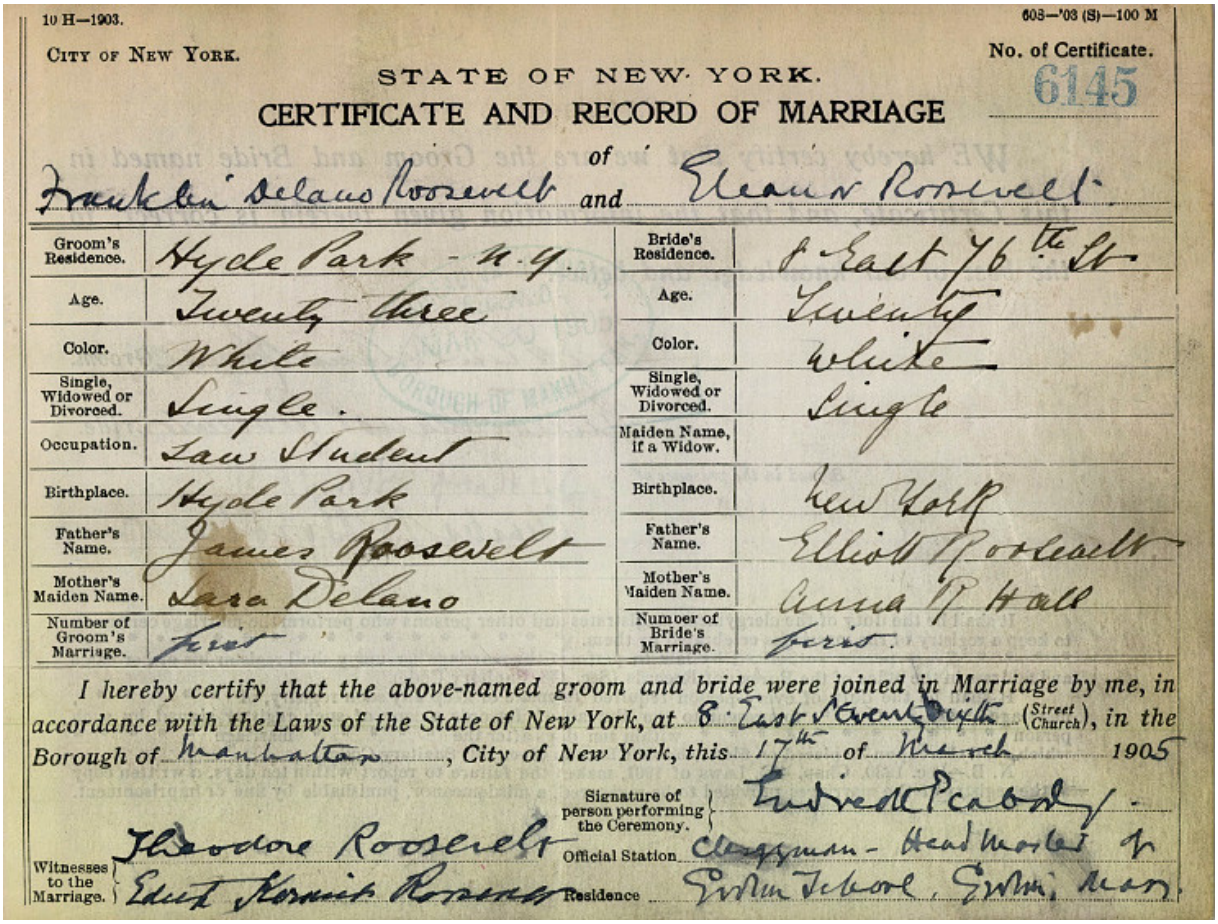
Cobb sets the box on a table and opens it. “This one turned out to contain letters, mostly from German-Americans. Here’s one from 1934: ‘Your Honor, [as an] American citizen resident in the city, I protest against your unfair tax on Germany and its duly elected Chancellor, Adolf Hitler.’ That’s in 1934. La Guardia was an

extraordinary mayor in many ways, and one was that he was very aware of what was going on in Europe — he was speaking out, urging boycotts, and holding rallies — long before anybody was paying attention."

Cobb moves from mayors to crime, declaring that DORIS has the most comprehensive collection of records on the administration of criminal justice in the English-speaking world, dating from the 1600s to the 1980s. He pulls down a random box of Bs from 1892 (the files are arranged alphabetically by defendants' last names), and the ghosts of tenement-and-typhus New York float up: here are accused pickpockets, thieves, violators of liquor laws, and keepers of houses of ill repute, their alleged misdeeds handwritten on yellowed cards. Cobb thumbs through the names and exclaims at the number of women: Rose, Ruby, Sadie, Kate, Matilda, Mary. But most of the Bs are men. "Oh, here we go: Robert Buchanan, tried and convicted of murder in the first degree." (A search of another archive, the Internet, reveals that Buchanan, a doctor, was found guilty of murdering his wife with morphine — one of the first cases to rely on forensic science — and was electrocuted at Sing Sing. This underscores Cobb's remark that "each one of these little packets is a whole little drama.")

Then there is Charles Bush, accused of grand larceny for stealing a watch and chain worth thirty-five dollars. His file includes a letter to the judge from his attorney, vouching for his character ("upright and honorable in every respect"). Nonetheless, Bush was convicted and sent to the state penitentiary. Says Cobb, "If you happen to be a descendant of this man, you would be thrilled to find this." The same applies to James Buckley, age nineteen, a laborer living at 269 W. 124th Street, who wrote "I am not guilty" on his court questionnaire.

"There's a good chance," says Cobb, "that this record of poor James Buckley is the only record of his existence. James Buckley did not write a diary that you can find in a library. That's really the value of this stuff: it tells you that these people existed, that they lived."



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CITY OF NEW YORK.

No. of Certificate. 6145

STATE OF NEW YORK.

CERTIFICATE AND RECORD OF MARRIAGE

of Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Eleanor Roosevelt

Groom's Residence.	Hyde Park - N.Y.	Bride's Residence.	8 East 76th St.
Age.	Twenty three	Age.	Twenty
Color.	White	Color.	White
Single, Widowed or Divorced.	Single.	Single, Widowed or Divorced.	Single
Occupation.	Law Student	Maiden Name, if a Widow.	
Birthplace.	Hyde Park	Birthplace.	New York
Father's Name.	James Roosevelt	Father's Name.	Elliott Roosevelt
Mother's Maiden Name.	Sara Delano	Mother's Maiden Name.	Anna G. Hall
Number of Groom's Marriage.	First	Number of Bride's Marriage.	First

I hereby certify that the above-named groom and bride were joined in Marriage by me, in accordance with the Laws of the State of New York, at 8 East Seventy Sixth (Street Church), in the Borough of Manhattan, City of New York, this 17th of March 1905

Signature of person performing the Ceremony. Endicott Peabody

Official Station Clergyman - Head Master of

Witnesses to the Marriage. Theodore Roosevelt

Residence Groton School, Groton, Mass.

The marriage certificate of Franklin D. Roosevelt '08HON and Eleanor Roosevelt, witnessed by President Theodore Roosevelt 1899HON.

Cobb grew up in Poughkeepsie and studied economics at SUNY Albany. But he'd always loved history, and in the fall of 1977 he entered Columbia's master's program. One of his classes was Kenneth T. Jackson's New York City seminar. That October, when the Yankees won the World Series and the Ramones played CBGB and Congressman Ed Koch campaigned for mayor, Jackson took the class downtown to tour the Municipal Archives.

At the time, the archive was located at 23 Park Row. Cobb had never been in an archive, but he could feel a current running through those stacks of boxes. At one point during the tour, Jackson gave his students a choice: they could either write a paper or volunteer at the newly established DORIS. Cobb perked up. He didn't see himself becoming a professor and often wondered what other jobs were out there for history lovers. He raised his hand.

Cobb's services were welcomed at DORIS. He was assigned to help process records from the Department of Buildings that dated back to the 1860s. If you wanted to

build something in New York, you had to send the department your rolled-up plans. These fragile scrolls were the recipe for the built environment, the very building blocks of New York real estate. Cobb found the whole thing so fascinating that he applied for an internship, which led to a part-time job, which led to his taking the civil-service exam and getting a full-time position. He followed DORIS through two moves, first to the Tweed Courthouse at 52 Chambers Street and then, in the early 1980s, across the street to the Surrogate's Courthouse.

The Department of Buildings records are one of DORIS's most popular collections. Andrew Dolkart '77GSAPP, a professor of historic preservation at Columbia's Graduate School of Architecture, Planning, and Preservation, has been using it since the 1970s, when he was on the research staff of the Landmarks Preservation Commission, writing landmark designation reports. "You always want to know who the architect of the building is, the date of the building, and who built it," says Dolkart. "The Municipal Archives has something called docket books, which contain a chronological list of every building application. You can go down and find all the basic information about a building."

Dolkart and Cobb have worked together throughout their careers. "Ken is incredibly knowledgeable about the holdings," Dolkart says. "There's this vast array of records there, plus maps and atlases and photographs, and Ken really has his finger on all of it."

Today, Dolkart sends his students to DORIS to research buildings through photographs and tax records from the Tax Department. And in his own recent work — he is writing about the garment industry — he has been looking at records of garment factories. "Not only does Ken know the collection," says Dolkart, "but he is enthusiastic about sharing it, which is important. Not all archivists are like that. Ken really loves what he does."

Last year, in recognition of this devotion, the Fund for the City of New York, a nonprofit created by the Ford Foundation in 1968, awarded Cobb its prestigious 2023 Sloan Public Service Award, which honors civil servants "who exhibit an extraordinary level of commitment to the public."

The award is well deserved, but the unassuming assistant commissioner would rather talk about that bridge. DORIS, he says, holds all the original technical drawings for the Brooklyn Bridge: a spectacular trove of ten thousand items

rediscovered in 1969 in one of the city's carpentry shops in Brooklyn. The drawings date from the late 1860s (construction began in 1870 and was completed in 1883), and many are signed by bridge engineer Washington Roebling. As with the Central Park drawings, Cobb considers them to be artworks, and in 2021 DORIS received a federal grant to preserve them. Today, in DORIS's conservation lab, conservators work to clean, flatten, and mend these delicate artifacts, the largest of which are more than fifteen feet long.

In the same room, against a wall, stands an enormous cabinet — a safe — and this is where Cobb concludes the tour. The vault is so big that Cobb has no idea how it got there and jokes that the building must have been constructed around it.

Original Dutch records, vol. 1, 1647-56. (Frankie Alduino)

He unlocks the cabinet and opens the doors, revealing shelves of boxes marked "Original Dutch Records." These are divided by periods (vol. 1, 1647–56; vol. 2, 1656–60; vol. 3, 1660–62, and so on). Here lie the oldest items in the archive, the elemental matter of the city's bureaucracy: reams of pages of council minutes, proceedings, and resolutions, created in New Amsterdam and written by hand in seventeenth-century Dutch (they have since been translated into English). Cobb

takes out one of the books and opens it. The pages are dense with ink, fashioned into an elegant script no longer written.

This primary-source evidence of European settlement on the island of Manhattan, beginning with the year of director-general Peter Stuyvesant's arrival in 1647, forms an instant bridge across time. And it induces a silence that Cobb, after a moment, ventures to fill.

"You can see why, if you're interested in New York City history, this is where you want to be," he says. He closes the book, puts it away, and closes the safe. "That day in October 1977 when I first volunteered here — that was a lucky day for me."

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