

Interview with Tom Blake of the Boston Public Library

Elizabeth: Hello, and welcome to Beyond the Stacks: Innovative Careers in Library and Information Science. I'm Elizabeth Reilly, and I'm here at the Boston Public Library with Tom Blake.

Before I dive into the interview, I want to take a moment to thank Derek Murphy for all the wonderful work he did on creating and producing this podcast. Plus a huge thanks for sticking around to show me the ropes! I am the new fellow for Dean's Initiatives at Simmons School of Library and Information Science and I know I have some big shoes to fill! So, without further ado, let me introduce my very first guest, Tom Blake!

Tom Blake has been working at the [Boston Public Library](#) as their Digital Imaging Production Manager, Digital Projects Manager, and Content Discovery Manager since 2005. He is currently responsible for the creation of beautiful, versatile, and sustainable digital objects for all BPL digital initiatives. Since 2010, he has managed an ambitious project to help digitize collections from across Massachusetts in conjunction with [Digital Commonwealth](#), a statewide repository service, and as a pilot Service Hub of the [Digital Public Library of America](#).

Tom came to the BPL from the [Massachusetts Historical Society](#), where he was involved in several digital projects including the online version of the diaries of John Quincy Adams. He also served as a photographer and imaging specialist for nine years at [Boston Photo Imaging](#) and as an archives assistant at the MIT Special Collections and Archives. Tom holds a BFA in Professional Photographic Illustration from the Rochester Institute of Technology, and an MS in Library and Information Science with a concentration in Archives Management from Simmons College.

As some listeners may recall, back in April 2016 on Episode 7, Derek interviewed Eben English, who is a front-end developer for Digital Commonwealth at BPL. In that episode, Eben and Derek discussed user experience and interaction with the online repository, developing the look and feel of the site, deciding on the granularity of search options and working with open source technology. In this episode, I plan to pick Tom's brain about the history of the Digital Commonwealth repository and BPL's digitization efforts as well as the future of librarianship in general.

Hi Tom! Thanks so much for joining me.

Tom: Hey, you're welcome. Thanks for having me!

Elizabeth: To get started, can you tell us about your educational background including any advanced degrees?

Tom: Sure um so I have a degree in photography. I went to the Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT) where I got my BFA. After that, I got my master's degree at Simmons. Um, library science with a concentration in archives.

Elizabeth: Great. So why, why did you choose to get your master's degree at Simmons in library science?

Tom: Um, it kind of chose me. I had been working in a photo lab here in Boston. When I graduated RIT I moved to Boston thinking I was going to be this cool artist, doing cool art, selling it and being famous and all that thing. Um it didn't really work out, I wasn't really that great at the business side of things. So obviously I had to pay my bills so I started looking into "alright how am I going to make money here?" so I wound up taking a job at a local imaging lab, it's still in existence, it's called Boston Photo Imaging. That was about 20 years ago. I was kind of dragged kicking and screaming into the digital world. When I, when I left RIT with my photo degree, I only knew about analog stuff. I was the guy that, um you know, I like the film, I like the chemicals, I like the wet stuff, I didn't want anything to do with computers or anything like that. So I started working at this imaging lab as the guy who did color enlargements for, you know, architects and artists. You know, everything you know from fun design things to hospitals. Hospitals would bring in film um from you know you'd have like cut up eyeballs and surgeries and all that gross stuff. I got to take that film, print them up. I guess, you know, I don't know...Doctors put them in their portfolio or something like that, I'm not really sure.

Elizabeth: Maybe.

Tom: So as time went on in that place, I you know, as more and more things became digital. It was kind of like digital was chasing me. The enlargers, both black and white and color that all converted into digital equipment where people were scanning things. People were scanning things and exporting them. I didn't want anything to do with computers whatsoever. Whatever wasn't digital that was the next department I moved to. So eventually I moved to the camera studio where we increasingly had more and more clients who were coming from the museums, archives, libraries and they wanted to get their collections put online. So they'd be bringing in these stacks of historic photos and stuff, which was, which I loved. It's kind of like, there's kind of like that visceral, you know, just paging through a history book looking at old photographs. So that's kind of what my job became. The cameras weren't digital at the time. Imaging, imaging equipment hadn't advanced enough. Film scanners were more advanced than cameras at that point. So, I would get sent out to different libraries and archives. So places like the Mystic Seaport Museum in Connecticut, the Hartford Athenaeum, the Clark Art Institute out in Western

Massachusetts. So that became my job it was really cool. I would travel with a film camera; these wonderful collections would be brought down to me. I got to hang out with the librarians. They taught me about...I started developing a love of the actual, you know, information science side of things. About the organizational principles and all of the library stuff that I was learning. These people taught me what MARC records were before I even understood what the acronym meant. They would show me all this stuff. I eventually wound up getting laid off and this was probably part of the reason why I got laid off, I wasn't the most productive worker because I'd just be hanging out with the librarians. It's really hard not to ask questions, you're flipping through all of these old photos and you start asking questions, what's this? I remember being at the Mystic Seaport Museum and all these beautiful photos of the ship building yards and of course librarians can't help but to start telling you about this. I should have been shooting 500 things a day, I was probably shooting 300 things a day because we were having conversations about history and photography and stuff like that.

So eventually I did get laid off. So I'm like alright, how am I going to survive? What can I do with my life that actually would interest me? The two things I came up were I really enjoy cooking so I was like "oh maybe I can become a chef." Or, I kind of I looked back at what I had been doing at Boston Photo and my photo career and I was like you know I really like this library science thing, or library thing, I didn't even know it was a science at the time. One of my friends who I went to school with her mom had just been through a degree program and she was a children's librarian and I talked to her about it a little bit and I just remember deciding I think I'm gonna pursue this. So I applied for Simmons. And I remember getting the, getting the letter that was gonna either be accepted or denied and thinking, "Ok am I going to be a chef or a librarian?"

Elizabeth: *[Laughs]* Yeah.

Tom: So that's how I wound up at Simmons.

Elizabeth: Very cool. So you studied archives at Simmons and as you're going through your program, I guess what did you, what did you see yourself doing after you graduated? Or what did you think you were going to do?

Tom: I knew what I wasn't going to do. I was pretty convinced that I was never going to pick up a camera again.

Elizabeth: Ok.

Tom: It's astounding that I've wound up where I am. I didn't even know how to use a computer when I started at Simmons outside of just the few things that I learned in my previous job. I knew a little bit of Photoshop; I knew how to use a Mac because that's what I was using. I knew how to use some camera capture software and that was about it. Everybody joked around about what a Luddite I was, you know, "Tom's the one that's you know, don't let Tom near the computers because it just upsets

him and frustrates him!" So I really thought I was just gonna be, I would have been totally happy being a processing archivist, I really have always enjoyed collecting and organizing. In fact that's one of the things I put on my admissions narrative letter that we all have to write for Simmons, "why do you want to be a librarian?"

Tom: I talked about how I used to collect rocks and bottle caps and turtles and baseball cards and I was...I had this table in my bedroom and I was always organizing and reorganizing them. By shape by size, by, I don't know how I organized turtles; I think I just threw them in one big, big box. Or something like that. They all survived though.

Elizabeth: That's good.

Tom: So yeah like I said I didn't think I was ever gonna pick up a camera again, I was going to be a processing archivist, my dream job, the more I thought of it, was to get a, I like baseball, I thought you know maybe I could get a job at the Baseball Hall of Fame, wouldn't that be cool to organize all the bats? And catalog the bats and autographed baseballs and stuff like that. That's kind of what I pictured. But then I wound up getting hired by the Massachusetts Historical Society because of my imaging background and that's when I started to realize that I may actually be able to combine these two things. Previous to that I had taken on a part time job, I was lucky enough to get a part time job over at the MIT Special Collections and Archives, just helping out with processing and that's kind of where I started learning how it's done. I really enjoyed it. They had really good food trucks there. But I didn't get that job for any reason that had to do with my imaging background. Once I got to the Massachusetts Historical Society that's when I started realizing I might be able to combine these two degrees. My job there was to work with scanned microfilm from the John Quincy Adams diaries so there was a variety of image quality that came out of the microfilm that was scanned so my job was to go through and kind of look at each batch and optimize it for viewing on a screen. So I'd play around with the contrast and stuff like that. And then I also learned how to encode XML at that time. So that's kind of what got me started in the whole digital library world.

Elizabeth: Right, so that's interesting you learned XML on the job and not, not at school.

Tom: Yeah at the time, um I'm old I went to school a while ago, at the time I don't think they were teaching XML. Really one of the most important classes I took at Simmons was kind of the precursor to the Digital Libraries class that is taught by Candy Schwartz. At the time it was called World Wide Web and Information Systems and she taught us how to hand code in HTML, a nice clean, valid website so that introduced me to markup languages which then leads to XML eventually, it leads to information architecture so that's when I started becoming aware and really interested in digital library systems. I didn't really know it at the time; I don't think I was calling it digital library systems. You know, back then they were just websites but then you start thinking what's a digital library and that's kind of the path I took.

Elizabeth: Yeah, so how did you get from the Massachusetts Historical Society to here?

Tom: Ah! So this is an interesting, this is an interesting part of the story. So one of the most valuable things that I think I could say about Simmons was just the connections you make and that's the same anywhere, whether it's Simmons or some other college or some other program you're there with your, this is why I really don't like, believe it or not I'm not a huge fan of online learning I think its really important to be in a classroom and rub elbows with people and get to know people.

Elizabeth: Yeah.

Tom: So when I was at Simmons I had a classmate who wound up...we wound up becoming friends and she got a job here at the Boston Public Library managing the John Adams...there was a grant that the BPL back in 2004 I think to put the John Adams library on display and get a significant portion of it catalogued and digitized. So she wound up managing that project, I wound up down at the Massachusetts Historical Society working with John Quincy Adams so it's a father-son team and we kept in touch. She called me up one day and said, "hey we just got \$134,000 dropped on our laps and we want to start an imaging studio" and she remembered I had a background as a photographer. So she was like would you be interested in coming to the BPL as a contractor and helping scope out imaging equipment for me?" And I agreed to do that. I was still able to keep my job at Mass Historical so I kind of did a little consulting thing to help design the lab and that eventually led to me getting, getting hired here. Don't be the stereotypical librarian that doesn't talk to people, you know rub elbows with people. I mean you never know where your connections are gonna take you.

Elizabeth: Yeah. So then what is it that you do now, what is your official title here?

Tom: My official title now...I had been...I started off as Digital Imaging Production Manager and then I became Digital Projects Manager and now I am Content Discovery Manager so in addition to...so really it's everything that has to do with making our collections findable and usable and more than that, more than just usable I think one of the main focuses we're gonna have moving forward is really pushing the collections out into the digital humanities. Understanding...not just making our collections available as these one offs, you know let's scan a book, let's put it online so somebody can read the book but understanding collections potentially as data sets. That they're really...I think early digitization projects focused on the quote on quote "treasures" let's put our cool things online and then show it off. Now as digital library systems have evolved and matured, I think we're understanding once you get large collections online they can be queried and researched in so many different ways, beyond just singularly. We need to get beyond the search, find and deliver. I think understanding that an entire corpus of

text that gets digitized can be run through natural language processing and stuff like that. So I think we need to become more...like I said, beyond use. Actually figuring out what types of research are being done in digital library systems and making our collections available in that way.

Elizabeth: So how are you doing that? How are you pursuing finding out what people are researching?

Tom: We haven't eliminated all the preliminary stuff and we still have to you know select things to get digitized. We have to make sure our collections are cataloged. So that's now my responsibility, especially in the Special Collections, which traditionally...a lot of what I'm in charge of now is very non digital this is the weird thing about having a digitization program in any library it kind of forces you to do the stuff that's very non digital that makes digitization more effective. So having good descriptive records that you can base metadata on. Making sure everything is you know, item level processed to a certain extent, I know the archivists who are listening are like "oh my god! We can't do item level processing!" Don't worry it doesn't have to be a full record for everything. I was just at Narrow, looking at folder level items that we are going to digitize and that's fine, you can do that. So just understanding how digital objects are put together, how we can present them, has become an important part of my job.

Elizabeth: So what is one of the, like, the biggest projects you've worked on during your time here?

Tom: So I think one of the biggest and most important, and still to this day, projects that we are working on here is our partnership with Digital Commonwealth. We get money from the state through Our Library for the Commonwealth program so even though we are the Boston Public Library, we get funding from the Massachusetts legislature to provide statewide services. One of those services that we've developed out over the last few years has been free digitization. So we get a certain amount of money every year to maintain the Digital Commonwealth repository system, it's a statewide digital object repository. You might notice there is no BPL repository system, we basically, because we're getting the state funding we thought it was a better idea to create a system for the state and put our stuff into it. And that's always been one of the problems, I think with early digitization projects was that we were just re-siloing our collections. You can digitize things and put it on your own website but you know, it's, we already have buildings that do that it and it became important to us to start federating all of these collections to make them a little more discoverable because nobody is gonna know that the public library in Raynham has a Helen Keller collection, like there's no way you would know that. So we want to make sure that these collections are all put together in one spot because we get the state money we offer free digitization so we also understand that a lot of, if not most public libraries, historical societies, museum and archives, don't necessarily have the funds to create their own imaging lab. Like we got lucky, we had some money kind of fall on our, we didn't really get lucky the money came from flood insurance

from a flood we had back in 1998. But you know, we're the BPL, we were able to put together a pretty nice imaging lab and it doesn't make sense for every archives and historical society and library to get their own imaging equipment so we basically said if you agree to make your collections open and available online to whatever extent copyright will allow, we will digitize your collections for you.

Elizabeth: Wow so is that just for Massachusetts?

Tom: It's just for Massachusetts libraries for now but also keep in mind that we are a service hub of the Digital Public Library of America.

Elizabeth: Ok.

Tom: So everything that we put into Digital Commonwealth is subsequently connected to the Digital Public Library of America system.

Elizabeth: Oh wow.

Tom: They basically harvest our metadata on a regular basis, every few months so you can be Harvard or you can be the Jamaica Plain Historical Society your collections are going to live next to the Smithsonian, the Library of Congress pretty soon, the National Archives so we're really trying to enable this idea if that there's really no such thing as a small library in an online environment, all of our collections compliment each other and we're...because of the services we offer, we're making that a reality.

Elizabeth: That's really cool. So has the program always been state funded?

Tom: No, it was initially funded through an LSTA grant which is actually federal money that comes from IMLS, the Institute of Museum and Library Services, we had to apply to Massachusetts Board of Library Commissioners...we conceived the grant as a feasibility slash desirability study so it seemed crazy, like we have 26 million things why would we offer to digitize everybody else's stuff? So there's a few different reasons for that. Number one, it builds good will and we do have a state wide mandate to provide services for the state and this seems like the perfect fit digitization isn't meant to be this thing that you just do locally, it's really you're really not harnessing the power of it unless you kinda go big with it. It's also a strategy to start rebuilding after the recession in 2008, a lot of, a lot of our budget was cut so this was kind of a strategy to start rebuilding that and really reinventing what the library for the commonwealth meant and we want to provide a service that was very direct, that was very hands on so this isn't just something where we wait for people to mail us stuff we get in cars, we visit people. I think it demonstrates that we are truly here to help our colleagues get their collections online and that builds support. And frankly, when you're providing this service and we just reached our 300th unique partner applying for our services there's just that many people who now become your advocates so this isn't about us asking for money for us this is

about us helping trying to get more resources to build up our services, to build out our services that are helping other libraries in the state because frankly, this is a stressful thing. If you're a librarian in a small town and all of a sudden, you know, I mean you're barely scraping by with the staff you have and now you're expected to digitize and put stuff online, too? That's a stressful event in any career. It's not like they're saying, "OK, you don't have to do reference anymore, you can now do digitization." You still have to do all this stuff! We have the capacity to do that for people and I think that's one of the best reasons we're doing this.

Elizabeth: Yeah, that's really cool. It sort of goes back to what we were talking about like fostering connections and networks and it seems like, or at least the little bit I've heard is libraries and archivists are all about sharing and collaborating.

Tom: Definitely becoming more so, I think this program has really helped that. Early on it wasn't as much. I think there was a lot of feelings that you know these are our collections and if we digitize them...We still hear this a lot from the small historical societies they're afraid that if their collections are digitized and put online they're going to lose revenue because a lot of these places think that they can license the images but the reality is the cost of doing that business it really kind of overwhelms any revenue...I'm not aware of any examples where that's profitable. So that's always a tricky conversation to have because every local institution feels like their collection is important and worthwhile and it certainly is but not necessarily like as a stock photo agency.

Elizabeth: Yeah that makes sense.

Tom: Those are some of the harder conversations to have to tell people "yes your collections are awesome and wonderful but you're not going to make any money licensing it and locking it down," if you do want to bring in revenue your best policy is to open it up and let people access it for free. It makes the public aware of what you have, which drives attention to your institution. If you want, you know take a TIFF file and make it into a poster and sell that, that's fine. But we're really...and this is why this is the most important part of the deal that we offer is we'll digitize stuff for free for you if you make it open. And we give people files, there's nothing proprietary about what we do, we'll hand you a hard drive and say do whatever you want with these. Make posters, make T-shirts, make mugs, put it on umbrellas and underwear, whatever you want.

Elizabeth: So we've talked about, you know the partnership with Digital Commonwealth, which is really great, um are there any other sort of exciting or unique opportunities that you've had in your professional career?

Tom: Honestly, I mean internally the collections here are amazing. As wonderful as it is traveling across the state and digitizing yearbooks, I know it sounds mundane it's really cool to see how things that are otherwise considered mundane kind of take on a life of their own online. Yearbooks is a perfect example we've seen data

mining and research done with high school year books it's blown my mind that it's even possible. But the stuff that's here is really what's inspirational. I mean we have amazing collections; we have a Shakespeare exhibit opening this week. To be able to, you know, hold the first folio in your hands...I think I talked about this earlier, I felt a little bad when my career changed because, you know, I wanted to be this cool artist and now I kind of gave it up for more technical things but because of my technical background and my staff's technical background its giving us access to these amazing creative works that we have here. To be able to page through Romeo and Juliet and know that's the first Romeo and Juliet ever! And yeah so I'm taking a copy photo of it but it's cool, you're communing with this thing and to know...I've always been a really big show and tell fan I loved show and tell when I was in grammar school. Um this is a big show and tell, it's like "Look at this cool stuff we have!" People don't even realize this stuff is here so that's really exciting for me. Almost on a daily basis things come through my studio...we had some Edgar Allen Poe manuscripts about a month ago, one of which was him in his own hand correcting The Raven to his publisher because he had spelled a few things wrong and he had broken the lines up wrong. It makes you feel more connected to these people, to have...so it's weird it's really not about the digitization it's about the opportunity that this career path I've taken has given me to be able to hold things like this in my hand and show them to people in a virtual way. These people, the Edgar Allen Poes, the George Washingtons, the Founding Fathers, they were not much different from you and I. These were actual people they had actual penmanship so you feel more connected with history and the arts and culture that way, I think.

Elizabeth: Yeah, definitely. So when I walked in here there are these huge like digital screens of pictures you can zoom in and zoom out - what are those?

Tom: So we're calling those Digital Stacks. What's exciting about that is so they what you're looking at is it's drawing from the everything from Digital Commonwealth that comes from the Boston Public Library. I think soon we want to flip the switch and talking about making all the statewide stuff available, too. But essentially it's four different ways to browse the BPL collections there's 4 different lenses we're calling them. Each screen has a different lens. You can explore our Special Collections that we've digitized by creator, by color, by subject and by location so um of the 4 of those, 3 working off metadata that we've created so that would be this is part of what my team does; creates really good metadata, make sure it's authorized you know using linked data URLs. We are geocoding things that should be geocoded and you know, applying authorized name headings to creators so you can walk up to any of those screens, you can go to, you can touch, creators are listed alphabetically, you can go to 'Poe' and you can see all the stuff we've digitized by Poe. The color one is really interesting, it's a special algorithm that our design firm put together that looks at the RGB values of the pixels and looks at what types of clusters they're in. So if you want to see everything we've digitized that's blue, you can do that. If you expand up the blue selection, it breaks down into blue and green,

blue and red, and you can keep going more and more granular. It's just 4 different ways to explore the collection.

Elizabeth: So are those new or...? This is my first time here, so...

Tom: Oh yeah! Those are new, those were unveiled at our opening, which was back in July, I believe it was? What was really exciting about that for me was to see the stream of people come in and interact with those screens. It kind of struck me that more people on that day have probably seen things in our Special Collections than have in the last 50 years combined.

Elizabeth: Wow!

Tom: Um, to have...so these are collections that are stored, you know, in closed stacks they're not necessarily catalogued the same way books are so they're tricky to find and unless you're an experienced researcher, at least for now my job is going to make them become more discoverable and this is part of that, these things you know they're not sitting on shelves, they're not circulating so the fact you know now we have a way to have these otherwise hidden collections front and center, like as soon as you walk into the building is absolutely amazing. So the two most popular comments I got on that opening day when we had 100s and 100s of people coming through and touching the screen, number 1 "how do I search this?" Everybody wanted...we have these browsing features but everybody wants that Google search bar. And my answer was, "Well it's not intended...you know, you can go to Digital Commonwealth and search this. This is meant to be a little more browsy. The second most common comment I got was "This is cool! Where is this?" And when I tell people that this is here, this is in your library, this is what your tax dollars have been going to collect, these are your collections! Just jaws drop. I had people say, "I had no idea you guys had this stuff." So I think early on everybody thought digital was going to replace the actual object...I remember one of the first trustees meetings I had here when I started, one of our trustees said "What's gonna happen to...are we gonna have to lock our doors once you put everything online? Why would people come here?" And the answer is people are always gonna come here, people want to see that object, digitization is not meant to be a replacement or a surrogate, it's meant to be a complimentary kind of thing, it enhances the real thing.

Elizabeth: That's a really nice way to put it because I've heard that argument, too before that's going to you know no researchers are going to come in to the actual library.

Tom: Nope. More will. I guarantee it. I think we see that across the board.

Elizabeth: Yeah that's really great. So what do you think librarianship, digital and otherwise, will look like 5, 10, 20 years, like where do you think it's going?

Tom: I think, I don't know how long it's gonna take but eventually there is gonna be no digital librarianship, it's just going to be librarianship. There's not gonna be a distinction, it kind of annoys me that there's a distinction already. We have books and we have eBooks. Why do we make the distinction? At one point we had scrolls and now we have codex. I mean, did we have...I mean that's goofy. These are just formats, these are mediums and it's just a library, they're just books, they're things, whether it's digital or analog. I think as time goes on we're not going to make that distinction. We have paper books sitting on shelves and we have data sets sitting on spinning metal disks, so what? A book is a screen it's not a glowing screen but it's a screen and you know text on a spinning metal disk is text on a spinning desk. I think as time goes on we're just not even gonna make the distinction. I think digitization and libraries kind of understanding that we're not in the business of just hoarding things and hoping people come to see them. It's not digital libraries, it's not digitization per se, I think digitization and digital you know just being aware of digital libraries is kind of making us aware of what our mission really is and that's what it's always been, which is access to information, building communities. Digitization is just one other way to do it, the same way a bookshelf with books on it is. These are collections that people are going to gather around, network around and that's what we've always done and that's what we're going to continue to do, whether if it's on a piece of paper or on a computer screen.

Elizabeth: Right. Yeah I hadn't really thought of it that way. That's a really nice way to put it. That's great. Um, so to wrap up, just are there any upcoming events that you'd like to plug here, I know you mentioned the Shakespeare...

Tom: Yeah the Shakespeare, the [Shakespeare Exhibit](#) is opening on October 14th, running to March, it's gonna be amazing there's stuff in this, in our collection that nobody else has. Definitely want to encourage people to come out for that. It's system wide, so there's gonna be a primary exhibit in the McKim Building, our Map Center has a Shakespeare related exhibit up there's programs...it's the 400th anniversary of his death, we're commemorating not celebrating yeah but almost for several months there will be a lot of Shakespeare related stuff going on.

Elizabeth: That's awesome. I just wanna plug the Beyond the Stacks Twitter it's [@BeyondStacks](#). I don't know if you have a Twitter presence...?

Tom: I do.

Elizabeth: Ok.

Tom: I am [@TomBlake18](#).

Elizabeth: Ok. Great. Thank you.

Tom: You're welcome.

Elizabeth: Um well, thank you so much for talking to me today.

Tom: You're welcome.

Tom: Thanks for coming in, I enjoyed it.

Elizabeth: Yeah, thank you!

Elizabeth: Thank you for listening to Episode 12, which concludes Season 3 of Beyond the Stacks. I wish you a very happy holiday season and hope you'll join me on February 1 for the first episode of season 4, which is a conversation with Jenny Benevento, taxonomist extraordinaire.