

The New York City Police Museum: 16mm Film Collection Revealed

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Training video entitled “Handling the Mentally Ill” and filmed in 1969 demonstrates the tactics used to deal with uncooperative and potentially dangerous individuals. The staged scene in this film depicts two policemen confronting an aggressive businessman wielding a knife.

Still image taken from footage belonging to the NYPD. Image courtesy of Rachel Moskowitz.

Since 2001, the New York City Police Museum has called 100 Old Slip its own. Built on the site of a late-nineteenth-century station house, the current building, completed in 1911, formerly housed the First Precinct of the New York City Police Department (NYPD). Now officers have given way to museum educators, and halls once trod by guardians of the city’s peace and safety serve as memorials to those very occupants.

The New York City Police Museum, a non-profit municipal organization, was established in 1929 as part of the Police Academy by members of the force who were distressed to see law-enforcement items they deemed important being carelessly discarded. Museum visits soon became an integral part of recruit instruction, supplementing classroom training with tangible evidence of the department’s history. Recognizing the historical value of the materials, the police department opened the collections to outside visitors, by appointment only. In 1998, Police Commissioner Howard Safir transformed the museum from an official unit of the NYPD into an independent non-profit institution.

Three floors of gallery space now allow the museum to present the history of the “world’s largest and most famous police service,” with exhibits of artifacts dating from as far back as the city’s first Dutch

REPOSITORY REVIEW



Top: View of the front door of the New York City Police Museum with the original First Precinct Police Station engraving.

Bottom: Prior to the start of the project, all the films were stored in boxes or loose on shelves in a room with little to no climate control.

Photographs courtesy of Rachel Moskowitz.

settlers, to as recently as September 11, 2001. The museum recreates and interprets three centuries of life, law, and corrections policies within the city of New York. But what is not evident to the ordinary visitor is the extensive archival collection housed beyond the exhibit walls. This collection includes both manuscript and audiovisual materials and provides another dimension to the study of New York City's law enforcement agency.

The archival collection ranges from

officer identification forms and issues of *Spring 3100*, an NYPD magazine published for members of the force, to film and video produced over several decades by and for the department. The museum houses over one hundred reels of 16mm film, which the Police Academy transferred to the museum when it moved to its present location in downtown Manhattan. With the museum lacking time and resources and even a projector on which to view the footage, the newly acquired films sat unwatched, aging and deteriorating in storage.

As a graduate student at New York University in its Archival Management program, I began a systematic process of identifying the films. With over one hundred films in the collection, I knew I would have to be judicious in selecting the films I would watch. I compiled an initial inventory of the films, from which I determined my viewing schedule, prioritizing films that lacked labels or that had only vague references to their contents. In order to view the footage, I transported the films in large boxes from the museum to the Film Study Center at NYU's Tisch School of the Arts, where I was graciously allowed to occupy hours of time on the CineScan.

I watched nearly half of the films in the collection, some in greater depth than others. The footage ranged from professionally edited training films to uncut b-rolls of ticker-tape parades, protests, and police department members in action. Many of the films, especially those whose producers were unknown, but who might very well have been members of the NYPD, required more thorough screening in the hope of better identifying their creators and copyright holders.

A partial inventory of the film collection — once entirely hidden from both outside researchers and museum employees — now allows researchers the opportunity to benefit from the New York City Police Museum's audiovisual holdings. The newly revealed footage offers remarkable documentation of the NYPD's programs and activities during the mid-twentieth century. Complementing its value for the study of the police department, the film collection also provides an unedited documentary history of New York City itself, capturing the people, the places, and the activities of the city's past.

Among the footage are several reels highlighting the New York City Mounted Unit and the various equestrian competitions in which its members participated. Many of these competitions were held at one of Madison Square Garden's former locations. This footage sheds light not only on the competition and its competitors, but also on the Garden itself, documenting a landmark of New York City history. Several reels highlight monumental events for which New York City served as a backdrop, and the police department's response to such events. Efforts at crowd control are revealed in footage documenting the historic 1960 visit to the United Nations of Nikita Khrushchev and Fidel Castro; an Elijah Muhammad rally in Harlem in 1962; and ticker-tape parades for astronauts John Glenn and Major L. Gordon Cooper in 1962 and 1963, respectively. As with the footage for the Mounted Unit competitions, these films illuminate not only police department policies and practice, but also the political, social, and religious atmosphere in the city at the time.

Questions, though, remain unanswered. Were all of the Police Academy's archival films transferred to the museum when it moved to downtown Manhattan? Might there be additional films of historic value still in the police department's possession and inaccessible to researchers? Who now holds ownership and copyright: the museum, the police department, or the individual producers of each of the films? Before a researcher can use or reproduce the footage, these and similar questions pertaining to copyright and ownership must be resolved. One thing is clear: the archival film collection of the New York City Police Museum holds enduring research value not only for the history of the department, but for a much broader subject field.