KATE CORDES: Hi, everyone. Welcome to Doc Chat. I'm, my name is Kate Cordes. I'm the Associate Director of Reference and Outreach at the Stephen A. Schwarzman Building. And this is Doc Chat, a weekly program series from the New York Public Library's Center for Research in the Humanities that digs deep into the stories behind the library's most interesting collections, and highlights the ways that teachers can incorporate them into the classrooms. In this episode, Julie Golia, Curator of History, Social Sciences, and Government Information is joined by Ian Fowler, our Curator of Maps and Geospatial Librarian [inaudible]. We'll discuss the history behind the never built Brooklyn-Battery Bridge. Our guests will speak for about 15 minutes before we open up the conversation. During the program, feel free to use the chat function to share general comments, though, make sure you change your chat mode to panelists and attendees so everyone can be included. And once we begin the question and answer segment, please use the Zooms Q and A function rather than the chat function to pose your questions. And if you wish to remain anonymous, just click that option before submitting your question. And with that, I'll pass it over to Julie.

JULIE GOLIA: Thanks, Kate. Hi, Ian. How are you?

IAN FOWLER: Okay? I'm well. How are you?

GOLIA: Good. I'm excited to be here to talk about bridges and tunnels, and Robert Moses with you, and of course maps.

FOWLER: Of course.

GOLIA: Which we share a love of.

FOWLER: Yes, we do.

GOLIA: So Ian, what are we looking at?

FOWLER: So this is one of two maps that was in the proposal that the Triborough Bridge Authority sent for the proposed Brooklyn-Battery Bridge Project, which you can see helpfully highlighted in red on the lower left corner of the map. This is the context map. So this puts the bridge, the proposed bridge in context with the rest of the Belt Parkway, the Southern Parkway,
the Shore Parkway, etc. And shows how it would connect with the rest of the infrastructure that was already in place.

GOLIA: Bridge, you say? Why, oh, I thought that I drove through a tunnel last weekend. So what --

FOWLER: You did drive through a tunnel last week. But at the time when this was proposed, originally in the 1920s and then at the end of the 1930s, traffic in Lower Manhattan and in South Brooklyn was extremely, it was picking up, it was gridlocked. And so they were looking for a way to relieve that traffic pressure on Southern Manhattan, and a way to link, you know, ever-expanding Brooklyn with already established Manhattan. And so the plan that the Triborough Bridge Authority through Moses came up with was a bridge. The plan that Fiorello La Guardia and the Regional Planning Association came up with was a tunnel, which is what you drove through last week.

GOLIA: Yes. So we're talking today then about one of Robert Moses' kind of rare defeats, actually, where he doesn't quite get his way in defining the landscape of Greater New York City, which makes this kind of an interesting Doc Chat. Of course, like the story of Robert Moses, would take us about 1000 Doc Chats. So, you know, just a caveat to our attendees that we're not going to cover it all today. But also, this really is an era. I mean, I think we often associate bridges with the landscape, with the visual environment of New York. But this really is an era of tunnel building. In fact, I think this is in the same decade, the decade of depression, when we see the Midtown Tunnel actually being built, that serves as kind of a model for this one.

FOWLER: Yes. And one of the reasons that Moses in the TVA wanted the bridge was that the Holland Tunnel had been recently completed a decade before, which vastly increased traffic into Lower Manhattan. And then, of course, a lot of those people also want to just get through to Brooklyn. So that was increasing traffic on the Brooklyn Bridge as well. So yes. It is one of those things where, you know, we build a lot of tunnels, and then those create their own problems. And so they're trying to find solutions to those problems.

GOLIA: I think you and I will have, I think, in a moment, a spirited conversation about the kind of the cultural meaning of tunnels versus bridges. But let's talk a little about where this map came from, how it came to be in the New York Public Library's collection. So this map and another one that we're going to look at in a second is part of a very large archival collection we have here at the New York Public Library of the Robert Moses papers. A big collection, about 140 boxes, and about 57 volumes would take you a very long time just to dig into this collection in detail. What's really interesting is that Moses arranged for this donation. Starting in the mid-1950s, he still had another 30 years or so to live, and made most of the donation to library between the 50s and 60s, though some material was still coming in by the 1980s. A major part of his gift is that the library had to promise not to open this to researchers until after his death. So even at the height of his career, I think he had a sense of some of the controversy that might be behind some of the materials that he was looking at in this. I also think there's something really interesting about
when the collection came open here. And so it opened in, as we can see here in this New York Times headline, in 1987, a very interesting time in the library's history itself, coming off of a decade or two of, you know, underfunding, of lowered patron numbers of cutting back in service. And this really prestige collection that was 30 years in the making, became available for researchers and has fueled lots of literature since. So it almost has its own kind of, its own place in the history of the library itself. It continues to get enormous numbers of researchers. But these maps would turn now in Ian's division and the map division. Are they in your division? Actually, I shouldn't speak ahead. No -- They're part of the archives, I think, which shows the diversity of kinds of materials that you can actually find in our archives. So let's talk about, a little bit more about the context around this bridge. Right? So this is two major players that we're talking about to sort of larger than life 20th century New York political figures. Robert Moses, who in some ways needs no introduction, but who held, you know, over a dozen different posts in municipal life. Probably, the two most significant were his role as the Parks Commissioner, and as the Chairman of the Triborough Bridge Authority, which is what we're going to talk about today. And then, we'll also talk about a very small but larger than life New York figure, that is Mayor Fiorello La Guardia, who, you know, as historian Robert Caro has described, really wanted to envision himself as that painter on the landscape of New York. In a lot of ways, this was La Guardia's idea first, but he lacked the funds, went to the federal government, could not shake enough money out of that tree, and then found himself, kind of in the unenviable position of having to go to Robert Moses to ask for the funds to make this Brooklyn-Battery connection happened.

FOWLER: Yeah. And the key reason that Moses was able to do that is, of course, he is the person who's in charge of all the tolls that come from all of the bridges and tunnels, and roadways, and the parkways, all throughout New York City. And he also was able to use his connections to get some grant money, and actually use the grant money which his predecessors had not been able to do. So it really is, as we'll see throughout this Doc Chat, a story of connections, a story of glad-handing, and some nepotism involved. And that really goes all the way through the planning stage to its failure and the current tunnel.

GOLIA: In fact, I think one of the interesting things about this particular political exchange is that before this time, Moses did not have the control of the funds coming from tunnels, just from bridges. And this was how he was able to grasp that power from La Guardia, was to say, "Sure, sure, sure, I'll let you do this thing. But I'm going to actually need to take over the tunnels as well, and get all the money coming from that." And supposedly, in the, in the La Guardia papers, there's like a memorandum written by Moses, outlining his demands to fund this project, and La Guardia writes across it in big handwritten letters “lousy.” But he wants this crossing bad enough that he's willing to make this kind of devil's deal.

FOWLER: Yes. And so here is the second map as promised. So the first one puts the Brooklyn-Battery Bridge in context of the rest of the parkway system. And this is really just the zoom in. So you can see, it's a very interesting way to look at the built environment in the city as it was in the '20s and '30s versus now. So you can see it starts pretty much where the Holland
Tunnel kind of comes out. It goes through the battery across the river, and then comes into Brooklyn, right from Governors Island then it goes all the way up to the elevated highway on Fourth Avenue.

GOLIA: Yeah. And for those of you who are educators and based in New York City, really great opportunities to do some analysis of built environment, looking at maps and the way something is depicted on paper like this, just, you know, sanitized, an aerial view, and then, actually going to the, some of these places to walk through these areas. I mean, me as a Brooklynite, I'm really struck. You can really see how this, the highway here does sort of mirror both the tunnel that exists today, and the direction of the BQE, off Hamilton Avenue, coming into the Gowanus area. What does this look like on a map versus what does it feel like in real life? What is the heft, this kind of building, which is quite remarkable?

FOWLER: Yeah. And I think another aspect of that that's fascinating is, why a bridge versus a tunnel? Like, why was Moses so adamant about having a bridge versus tunnels, which obviously, already existed and had been hugely popular and successful? So Julie, what are your thoughts on the differing perspectives?

GOLIA: Well, I am a gender historian. And so I think there's something going on here. You know, these, I, we really cannot separate, I think, the kind of ambition of these two men to make a physical imprint on the landscape of New York, from their, you know, very practical desire is to like, that create, you know, reduce congestion and, you know, create toll revenue, and other things like that. One thing, you know, Moses, who always has a, you know, a way with words, you know, called tunnels "tiled vehicular bathrooms," which I think probably resonates with any of us who have driven through a tunnel here in New York City or elsewhere. But a bridge, I mean, if we think about sort of the icons, the physical and sort of visual icons of New York City, I think, you know, bridges lie in our top, that'd be in like our top three, you know, visions of what, kind of, New York can do both in terms of building something that is remarkably practical and also building something that is, you know, iconically visual. What do you think Ian?

FOWLER: I actually agree with everything you've said. I also think it comes down to, you know, like, when La Guardia builds the airport, he does it because he's embarrassed that New York doesn't have an airport. Robert Moses builds thing because he has ego and he wants a legacy. And I think it's very telling that when the Regional Planning Association comes back and suggests widening and adding more traffic on the Brooklyn Bridge, Moses strikes that down immediately because he wants his own new, very big bridge. So yeah.

GOLIA: No, I think that's exactly right. And I mean, another key thing in understanding Moses' ambitions is, if you can go back to the previous map for a second, everybody can see kind of what's going on here in terms of a larger vision of essentially a belt system of highways that connects throughout Greater New York City, and then very importantly, out to the suburbs. I mean, what we're looking at here is not the cause, but one of the, sort of the major corollaries to what is later called, like white flight, suburban flight, the moving out of industry from the city
center to areas outside of it. You know, Moses was deeply tied into sort of the automobilization of what we understand to be transported in Greater New York City. If we came back to New York in the 19th century, your major thoroughfares would be water-based. And in the Moses vision of the city, they become road-based and truck-based, and car-based. And I think this is a, you know, this is sort of a central part of his vision, is creating this sort of interconnected vision of not just this, the bridge or tunnel, but all of the bridges, like connecting all the way up to the Triborough in a very different part of the city. So he has a, and he, and I mean in a lot of ways, Moses’ ego succeeded. You know, we live in a lot of ways in the city that, the infrastructure that he created.

FOWLER: Yes. Because while he succeeded in many ways, this is one where he did not. And so there is a drive to kind of this push-back against the bridge from many people, including the Regional Planning Association, people who, you know, were in the federal government, in the state government, and the local governments. What were some of the arguments that were being made against having this bridge?

GOLIA: I think one thing that this story shows us, and again, this is very early in our sort of history of the preservation movement here in New York City. But that we, sometimes, we associate the preservation as being almost like an activist movement. Right? Something that is perhaps grassroots. And what we see here in this sort of 1939, 1940s period is actually that a lot of the routes of preservation come from very moneyed people. So there was a lot of real estate interest in what a bridge and, particularly, the on-ramp of a bridge like this would do to real estate values and to views in the area. A lot of power and voice here is coming from some commercial organizations, and some of the big leaders of this moment in preservation, the fighting of the, of this bridge, are lawyers, many of whom are very, very well connected to the federal government and FDR’s administration, which is going to come in, I think, in a very important way when we see, you know, the way that Moses loses on this. So, you know, I don't want to say it was a conservative movement, but it is rooted in things like real estate values, in ways that we don't always think about when we think about preservation movements.

FOWLER: Yeah. And I think it's also important to put this in context. So, you know, there's war looming in Europe. We have just gotten out of a war, we're coming out of the depression. And so there's a lot of factors that are larger than New York City, if that's even possible, that are being brought to bear on Moses’ plan for the bridge.

GOLIA: And this project, like many, many other things benefits greatly from some press, from some pretty high up people. And one of the people that calls attention to the shift from a vision of a tunnel to the vision of a bridge is none other than the First Lady, Eleanor Roosevelt, who had a very popular syndicated column, newspaper column at the time. Around this time, late ’30s, early ’40s, you know, 4 million people were reading this in 90 newspaper across the country. So in April of 1939, she brings this up to her readership, pointing out this new plan, shift away from a tunnel and toward a bridge. Saying, yes, I understand that, you know, there's congestion, certainly something needs to be done about this. Then she says, you know, "Isn't
there room for some consideration of the preservation of the few beautiful spots that still
remained to us on an overcrowded Island? After all, Lower Manhattan at Battery Park is one of
the great gateways through which many of us leave and enter our country. These moments are
important moments in our lives and the irritation of an eyesore perpetrated in the name of
progress, great, great harm, will be bad for the souls of many Americans.” And again, going
back to this idea of place-based teaching, I actually do think it's enormously valuable to kind of
go down to the Battery even today, and to have that moment where you look out over the Upper
Bay. And you get a sense coming off of those, you know, that sort of the crowd of skyscrapers,
this opening out to the Statue of Liberty, out to Ellis Island. You know, this is a really, I think, a
remarkable place to do an eyewitness of New York, and she's right.

FOWLER: And she is. And it is the Roosevelt administration that will ultimately scuttle the
bridge, the Secretary of War says it cannot be constructed because it would impact shipping in
the harbor. And also that would be a target for bombing should war break out in Europe. And in
the Robert Moses papers, Moses writes to FDR and pleads with him to overturn the Secretary of
War’s decision, and FDR writes him back personally and says, That's not going to happen. The
bridge is dead. We're building a tunnel.

GOLIA: We have just like one more minute, but let's show everybody this really interesting
document and kind of one of the ways that archives can trick you, and then help you a little bit.
So Ian and I were kind of poring through our digital collections, which is our sort of place to look
at digitized materials in our collections. And we came across this very interesting piece, which I
think we originally, kind of recognized as like some kind of pro or anti-bridge propaganda. And at
first, reading some of the text, I think we really thought this was pro-bridge. We almost didn't
recognize the, you know, 1930's sarcasm or something. And upon looking into a little bit more
detail on this, we saw that the creator of this was actually a person named Albert Sprague Bard,
who we were able then to sort of dig in a little bit. We actually have his papers in the manuscript
collections here at the New York Public Library as well. We learned that he actually was one of
the major players in the opposition to the Brooklyn-Battery Bridge Project. And so we were able
to then go back with fresh eyes and fresh knowledge to have another look, a different look at a
document that at first tricked us a little bit. As we were talking it through, I thought it could be a
really cool teaching opportunity for people who haven't, you know, encouraging students to have
like a naïve encounter with something, and doing a little bit more research on the curator, using
that metadata that we've all worked so hard to build for you guys and then, actually realizing that
there's a totally different way of looking at a document. So that seems like a good time for us to
pause and start to look at questions.

CORDES: Hey! All right? Thank you. We do have a number of questions, some of which I feel
may have been -- -- answered as we went through the presentation. Let me go through them --
-- now. But thank you for that. That was great. I do have an initial question because you
mentioned so many resources that you pulled across state collections. How, you say, you were
talking about how teachers could use this as place-based learning in the classroom. But how
would they go about doing that work? Do they come? Do they stick in the archives? Or do they
use that metadata you referred to kind of pull those things together? And do these maps that are found in the archives, -- -- do they lose something when you remove them from the box in which they were pooled together in?

GOLIA: Oh! That's a great question. Ian, maybe I'll let you tackle the map part of it. But my thought on this is that there's a really, I think you could build a really remarkable unit between coming into the archives and looking at materials in-situ. I mean, there's something very different about observing a document on its own in digital form and looking, for example, at what folder it's in? That's another body of metadata that is really useful, and can teach students a lot about, you know, maintaining original order, for example, of archives, and then use the digital version then to perhaps go to a place. You know, I mean, I'm thinking about the image that we just looked at right now. What does that view look like today? You know, I mean, or what does that view look like if you turn around 180 degrees? And what would it, you know, looking at this, what would it feel like to feel the heft of those, of that on-ramp? Are there other places in the city that didn't fare as well, that have on-ramps that are similar that we could then come to have a comparison of what the built environment feels like in those neighborhoods, and how those on-ramps might have affected those. So I think some combination of the digital and the original would be an ideal situation.

FOWLER: And I would just add to that. I think Julie is completely right but the two maps that we showed today are in lots of information that was put out by the TBA, in proposing the bridge and in trying to gain support for it. These are actually digitized from a document called “A Preposterous Scheme,” which the TBA put out that is against the idea of expanding the Brooklyn Bridge. And there's a third map in that booklet that shows the planned expansion of the Brooklyn Bridge. And so looking at that online versus looking at it actually in situ with the papers, you can put it in context, you can get a very different meaning of what you're actually looking at.

CORDES: Thank you. I have a question about the archives and their digital accessibility. You pulled this map, obviously, it's on the digital collections page, which we'll share soon. But are there plans to digitize the entire collection? Or what's the accessibility of these, let's say, without going physically to a room?

GOLIA: A very small portion of the Robert Moses papers are digitized. We could do a whole conversation on why we digitized what we digitized, but it's often for specific purposes, an exhibition or a digital project, or something like that. To digitize this collection will require a remarkable amount of money and manpower. So again, I think you can sort of dip a toe in things on the digital collections. But then, you could also spend a little time in the finding aid. You can go to our archives portal, archives.nypl.org, put in Robert Moses, and the finding aid will come up, and get a sense of the many, many different kinds of materials that you will find in that, which will go far beyond what you're able to access online.
CORDES: Good. There’s a question, is there a full report that either of these maps is taken from, and I believe that would be the finding aid? Correct, Ian?

FOWLER: The issue, so these two maps are in several reports that were produced by TBA, --

CORDES: Reports.

FOWLER: As well as the Preposterous Scheme that was produced by the TBA. They were reproduced multiple times in different reports.

CORDES: Sorry. We have a question, a couple of questions about the history of the historic preservation movement growing so, with, I guess, a comment that it did not start with Penn Station as the urban historians always suggest. Julie, do you have a, maybe a little more of the origins of their movement, and why Penn Station? Why is that the big one?

GOLIA: Pinpointing origins is always so challenging, like when I’m thinking about the history of preservation, I often think about, like, the building of the Seventh Avenue Subway, and the destruction of Greenwich Village, is earlier than this as well. And I think what you see happening in the first-half of the 20th century is the kind of the awakening of the idea of some of the things that are being destroyed. Right? And so the remarkable buildings and the remarkable culture, literary culture, artistic culture that is destroyed in the, basically, the cut and cover of the Seventh Avenue Subway. By the time we get to Penn Station, I think that kind of consciousness has already begun to develop. Right? And so in some ways, that remarkable building and the kind of -- the spectacle of its destruction is in a lot of ways the straw that broke the camel’s back, and really get that movement moving. But it relied on, I think, several generations, part of what we’re talking about here, of beginning to introduce the idea that the buildings were something that were worth saving, which is not an, a given. It’s a very, very historically rooted idea. I mean, you know, we knocked down the first White House, you know, on Broadway, like, where George Washington lived. There’s a Hallmark there now. You know, historic preservation is a very new thing.

FOWLER: Yeah. And I would just add to that. You know, Jane Jacobs did remarkable work standing up to Robert Moses when they wanted to build the cross Manhattan expressway. And I think, you know, that gets a lot of press because it was an extremely important movement where someone not using their connections, you know, with, you know, the federal sector or the federal government to block something, but something that was using the press and using modern ways of combating something from pretty kind of the ground up.

GOLIA: That’s exactly right.

CORDES: I have one final question about libraries collecting policies that say, and then maybe this is one way of looking at that, doesn't jive with how you too do your work. But when the new public library takes in a collection from an individual or particular side of a major public
controversy, let's say, does the library actively seek out materials on the other side, to add to the collection?

GOLIA: Oh, that's a really interesting question. I love that question. I think there's a did, and there's a should, and there's a do. Right? Like, so did the library seek out, you know, preservationist papers at the time? I don't know. It's a great question, like, was our curator looking for that at the time? I'd have to do a little research into that. I would say that's definitely something that we would do now. Right? And so I would say the library now is very interested in filling what we might call silences in the archives. So if here we have the papers of a man with enormous power, but we don't have the papers of like, you know, the Bronx organization that sought to fight him in the 1950s, I would say a major priority for our library now is to seek out that Bronx organization almost at the expense of the larger voices that are often documented elsewhere. And this is part of, I think, a broader movement in collection development, in thinking about ways that we can creatively prioritize voices that often go silent in the archives, voices that we don't often think are the historically significant ones. So if in the 1950s and '60s, there were still significant remnants of, like, a great man theory of history, if you will, today, we come at collecting, greatly influenced by the grassroots turn, by interest in race, gender, and class, and we are thinking like a very strategically about how to capture the more difficult voices in the story.

FOWLER: I think that's completely correct. I would just add that not all archives are created equal. Obviously, La Guardia and Moses were government figures who knew that they had a lasting legacy and kept everything, small community organizations from the '50s and '60s, you know, things happen to archives. There's fires, things get lost. So it's also something to keep in mind, the reality of who is archiving themselves?

GOLIA: Well, and with that, I will say everybody on here should be thinking about that, right? To think about the community, organizations, mutual aid groups, organizations that don't think that their story is, you know, worth keeping. You know, it often is people with the most privilege that think that their materials are historical. Right? And so it's really I think about building that consciousness, at the grassroots level, at the neighborhood level, and all of us know organizations.

CORDES: Let's learn about digital archiving then. We'll do so. Okay.

GOLIA: Another Doc Chat? Another time, another Thursday. So thank you all. I'm about to drop a large amount of stuff in the chat. So thanks, everyone for attending and for the questions, and I know there were a lot of questions that we couldn't get to. The materials, many of the materials that Julie and Ian spoke about today are available on our digital collections page, and the link to these items and other resources along with the video and transcript of this episode will be published shortly on the library's website, which we'll send out to everyone who registered. All our previous episodes of Doc Chat can be found there as well, in particular line on our blog posts on the website, where you can find a link to that in the chat. And like I said, Doc Chats are
held every Thursday at 3:30. And next episode is on February 10. And it is social networks of photographers, curators, and critics during the photo boom of the 1970s. And in that episode, library's Zulay Chang and photography scholar, Dr. Tal-Or Ben-Choreen will explore Mike Mandel's 1975 series baseball photographer trading cards, which is a work that's composed of baseball cards originally sold in packages with chewing gum, remember those? Are they still doing them? I don't know. Chang and Ben-Choreen will discuss Mandel's motivation for the series in the way that baseball cards provide insight into the networking that occurred between photographers, curators, and critics during the 1970s. So you can register in the link in the chat, and you can look for future Doc Chat event pages on our calendar, research newsletter, and social media. And again, thanks so much, Julie and Ian for the great conversation. It was like, we really packed it in there. That was great, and for all the questions and participation. So with that, have a lovely afternoon everyone. Bye.