I love footnotes.

All that tiny print at the bottom of a page might strike fear in some hearts, but to me it’s an art form. That little superscript number, placed in the just the right spot, explaining exactly what you were just beginning to wonder about—I call it a thing of beauty.

Footnotes do a lot of heavy lifting for historians. They “show our work,” reassuring readers that we’ve done enough research to know what we’re talking about. They keep a story from getting bogged down in too much detail.

All that citing and confirming and clarifying can look like a morass of unnecessary information—and sometimes it is—but when they’re done right, footnotes make everything simpler. To me those little superscripts are reinforcement troops, helping me to tell my own story, clearly, honestly, and forcefully.

That reality has come home to us at the Congregational Library & Archives this past year, in important partnerships that have sharpened our sense of mission. The collaboration has come in all forms—co-hosting public events with our neighbors, the Boston African American Historical Site and the Boston Athenaeum, and forging alliances with other historical societies and churches, cooperation that has resulted in major grants for New England’s Hidden Histories, our church records digitizing program.

Partnerships bring students to our doors, the library interns from Simmons College and the researchers we help support through the New England Regional Fellowships Consortium. And then there was the class of third-graders from a small town in Kansas, who, with the expert help of our archival staff, got excited about American history when they discovered the wonderful old documents on our website.

These relationships succeed only because of our donors, who help us to be an effective and willing partner for others, whether they are third graders or ancient New England historical societies.

All of our partnerships are immensely valuable. They bring funding, resources, and visibility we would never achieve on our own. And in the end they help us to be who we are, the curators of a priceless historical legacy who are committed to keeping the past alive and relevant to twentieth-century people. There is beauty in that task too, especially when the work is compelling, challenging, and carried out in the company of friends.