ON THE JOB

Biology Museum Curator

DALE PASINO

At Metcalf Science Center, efforts to bring an 1800s biology collection to life

Welcome to what is unofficially known as BU’s Biology Natural History Museum.

Dale Pasino, the anatomy lab coordinator in the College of Arts & Sciences biology department and the museum’s de facto curator, opens a cabinet and slides out a drawer with dozens of cicadas, each pinned in rows and labeled in a meticulous hand. “An insect that was alive during the Civil War—that’s pretty neat,” he says.

In fact, most of the specimens in the room were gathered in the 19th century by amateur scientists, members of the Boston Society of Natural History, a forerunner of today’s Museum of Science, Boston. By the early- to mid-20th century, financial problems and the museum’s new emphasis on public education led members to donate much of their early collection to Harvard University’s Museum of Comparative Zoology, and the rest to BU. The collection has been preserved and maintained over the years and is in remarkably good shape, considering that the room has no specialized climate control or dedicated staff.

Pasino says it’s impossible to know exactly how many specimens the museum holds because there is no complete inventory, and many records are missing.

For years, the museum remained largely forgotten. Now Pasino and Kathryn Spilios, director of instructional labs and a CAS senior lecturer of biology, have begun to oversee efforts to preserve the collection and make it more widely accessible to members of the BU community. (It is currently open by appointment.)

Students have been hired to help care for the specimens. The long-term goal is to create a thorough, searchable database of the collection. Headway has already been made in cataloging and labeling the collection’s bees, wasps, and ants. One student is organizing the museum’s collection of bats. And efforts are under way to label all the New England plants in the collection for researchers at Yale, who have a grant to produce a digital collection of the region’s flora.

Anatomy lab coordinator Dale Pasino has been working tirelessly at the Metcalf Science Center to organize what is unofficially known as the Biology Natural History Museum.