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## A Treasure Trove of Historical Records: The Pennsylvania State Archives (part one)

By Sharon Hernes Silverman



The Pennsylvania State Archives tower houses millions of records.

The challenges of keeping up with life's paperwork are over-whelming. There are so many documents: receipts, tax forms, deeds, wills, insurance policies and claims, pay stubs, check registers, warranties...a never-ending stream of information that has to be handled. And for each slip of paper, there's a set of questions that must be answered. What to keep? How to file? Where to store? For how long? How to retrieve?

Anyone who has ever rummaged through a desk drawer or a file cabinet looking for an important document that "must be here somewhere!"—and who hasn't?—should be in awe of what the Pennsylvania State Archives does on a Commonwealth-wide basis. The State Archives, administered by the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission (PHMC), is the official custodian of the records of all three

branches of state government and its political subdivisions and serves as a repository for papers and records of individuals, families, businesses, and organizations that possess statewide historical significance. This collection of one hundred and sixty-five million pages of documents, seventeen thousand reels of microfilm, and one million special collection items, including photographs, maps and blueprints, motion picture rolls, and audio and video tapes, nearly fills the twenty-story Archives Tower.

By dint of sound planning, superior organizational skills, and an unwavering commitment to its mission, the State Archives staff preserves a wealth of information about Pennsylvanians and their communities for use by scholars, historians, genealogists, legislators, and the public. A proactive approach for handling diverse technology and an ever-growing amount of materials means that the State Archives has positioned itself to continue serving the citizens of the Commonwealth in the twenty-first century.

### **Records have been kept for thousands of years**

Historian and archival theorist Waldo Gifford Leland (1879-1966) noted, "The chief monument of the history of a nation is its archives, the preservation of which is recognized in all civilized countries as a natural and proper function of government." Governments and nations have long known the value of the records they create, and the importance of maintaining them, believes Frank M. Suran, state archivist and director of

the PHMC's Bureau of Archives and History [at the time of the writing of this article]. "We can trace this back more than five thousand years to the ancient Sumerians of Mesopotamia, where the growth in trade and the rise of cities necessitated the creation and storage of business and property records," he says.

"Records were not kept for cultural purposes, but because they documented ownership of property and the transaction of business they had long-term legal and fiscal significance." Inexplicably, however, this country's federal and state governments were slow to establish official archives. The first state archives was founded in the 1890s; the National Archives was not created until 1934. The Pennsylvania State Archives was established in 1903 as the Division of Public Records within the State Library, but it was combined in 1945 with the State Museum and the Pennsylvania Historical Commission to create the PHMC. The original placement of the Archives in the State Library, the same arrangement used by many other states, was just an administrative convenience, but it reinforced a blurring—in the minds of the general public—of the functions of books and of "archival materials," a term just coming into use.

#### **An archives is not a library**

Harry F. Parker, chief of the PHMC's Division of Archives and Manuscripts, explains the distinction: "Libraries have discrete items that are not unique. We have unique items that are not always discrete." For instance, a library would have a copy of a book, one of many published items, while archivists accession series of unpublished documents that are unique in that they are the actual working files of an office or organization. The holdings of a library are the products of intellectual activity intended for broad cultural purposes, whereas the "records" maintained by archives are the products of the business activity of an institution or organization.



"The records we keep were consciously created by a government agency in the course of doing business. They provide an official record of how each department did its job," says Suran.

"Whenever possible, we maintain them in the exact same order and filing arrangement as they were created in the originating office. We keep the files in their original filing system so historians and researchers can understand how agency staff responded to their assignments. Destroy or lose that order and it becomes impossible to study and understand an agency's reaction to a major issue.

"Every time a record is lost or destroyed," Suran continues, "we lose a part of the real story—a part of history. Reading the correspondence, reports and records created at the actual time of an event helps us to determine what actually happened." For example, a scholar researching the hanging of Jack Kehoe, leader of the Molly Maguires, was better able to determine the thinking and motives of Governor John Frederick Hartranft in deciding whether to grant a pardon to

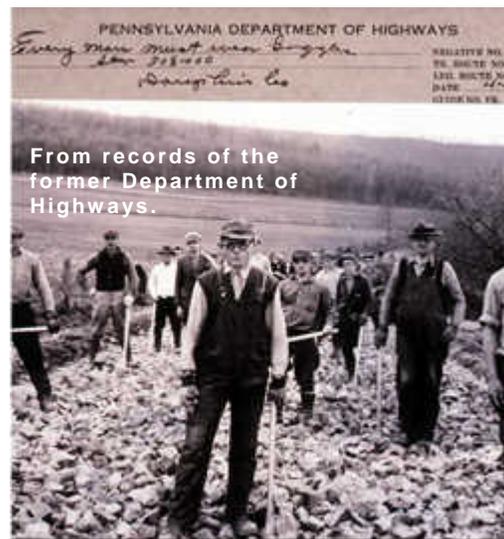
Kehoe because he had access to recently acquired correspondence between the governor and his attorney general discussing the possibility of clemency.

### Paper must be cared for properly

Paper doesn't last forever, and so the State Archives takes special precautions to stall its degradation. The temperature in the Archives Tower is maintained at sixty-eight degrees Fahrenheit and humidity is kept at forty-five to fifty percent. Records are stored in acid-free folders and boxes.

“Light is the enemy of paper,” says Suran. Therefore, the stack areas of the Tower are windowless, and artificial light is used only when retrieving records for use in the Archives search room.

“The single greatest danger to the preservation of records is people,” adds Harry Parker, referring not only to the oils in human fingertips and to the occasional miscreant intent on thievery, but also to something seemingly innocuous yet potentially devastating: the human propensity to toss things into the wastebasket or, more often, to simply neglect and eventually lose records. A crucial part of the Archives' responsibility is appraisal and education—in other words, helping state and local government agencies to determine which documents get destroyed, and which need to be maintained because they have continuing administrative, fiscal, or legal value, or possess historical significance. The Archives staff either prepare or assist government agencies in preparing records retention and disposition schedules that provide records officers with a list of all records actually created and filed and how long they should be kept.



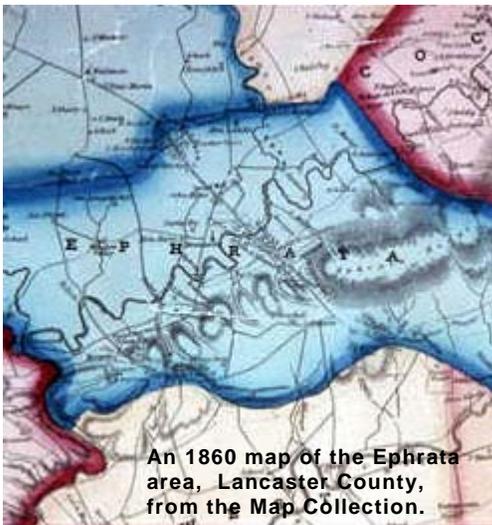
What is the continuing value, one might ask, of massive collections and series of records of routine entries—minutiae of long-forgotten accounts and minor events? Why save them? A famous authority on archives, Theodore R. Schellenberg, defended such records when he said that the materials could be both “evidential” and “informational.” Evidential value is the capacity of documents to show the work duties of the particular office or institution that produced those documents. Information value exists when researchers are able to use the documents to prove matters beyond the duties of the office or institution. For example, the fact that John Doe was one of thousands who paid a few cents in excise tax on a particular day in the nineteenth century says little, by itself, about the taxing agency, although a large number of similar tax payments proves that the agency performed its function. But to a Doe descendant the single entry for John's tax payment may be very valuable genealogical information.

### Preserving records of state and local government is top priority

Frank Suran, who has been on staff at the State Archives for more than thirty years, especially likes the outreach aspect of his work. “One of the most enjoyable parts of the job is having the pleasure of working with all kinds of government records-keepers and officials—prothonotaries (civil court clerks), judges, borough managers, heads of state departments, boards and divisions, recorders of deeds, and county commissioners, to name a few,” he says. “They depend on us for advice. We also help local governments run their own archives and records management programs. It’s nice to meet a wide variety of officeholders from large and small municipalities all over the state. We also sponsor seminars and public programs as part of our work with universities, historical societies, genealogical associations, and any private group interested in preserving and making available the Commonwealth’s documentary heritage.”

Currently, the Archives’ staff is developing a course on the proper disposition of records maintained on government personal computers. Staff members are planning to initiate a training session on disaster recovery and the protection of vital records. Long-term, the State Archives is working with public and private repositories and various interest groups to formulate a ten-year strategic plan to preserve the Commonwealth’s documentary legacy.

The Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission works through two divisions of the Bureau of Archives and History to meet its archival and records management responsibilities for all three branches of state government and more than five thousand local governments.



An 1860 map of the Ephrata area, Lancaster County, from the Map Collection.

The Division of Archives and Manuscripts is responsible for preserving, publicizing, and making available historical records at the Archives’ search room and responding to inquiries about its holdings. The Division of Archival and Records Management Services is responsible for appraising and scheduling records on all levels of government and helping government officers meet their responsibilities for creating and maintaining records.

“We accession fifteen hundred to twenty-five hundred boxes of agency records a year,” Suran says. “We are even busier when there is a change in administration since the governor’s official records usually amount to a transfer of five hundred to six hundred boxes for each four years in office. Records that come to the Archives don’t have to be old, as long as they are of long-term value and are no longer needed to transact business.”

*End of part one. [Click here to continue on to part two.](#)*