

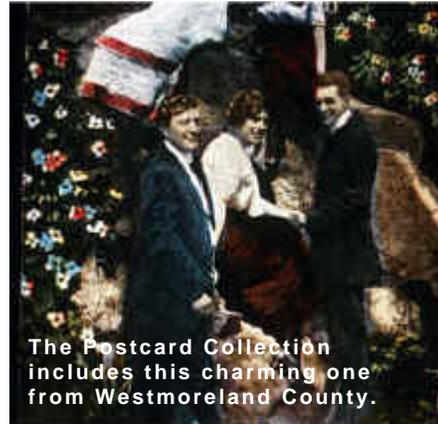
This article first appeared in the Spring 2000 issue of [Pennsylvania Heritage®](#), the quarterly magazine of the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission and the Pennsylvania Heritage Society®.

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

By Sharon Hernes Silverman

Technology is both a boon and a complication. Yes, computer records require less storage space than paper. On the other hand, constantly changing hardware and software make it almost impossible to have the “right” machines and programs to access these computer files; equipment becomes obsolete quickly. “The state has been creating machine-readable records since the 1950s,” says Harry Parker. “We would have to be a computer museum to be able to read everything created by the different agencies.” Another hazard that rises as the shift from paper to electronic record-keeping accelerates is the ease with which information may be inappropriately deleted. With a few unintentional keystrokes, vital information can be obliterated—permanently.

As more and more agencies and institutions migrate their records from traditional paper to electronic records-keeping systems, the State Archives is focusing on acquiring the expertise, authority, and technology to guarantee both the readability and retrievability of historically valuable electronic information in spite of rapid changes in hardware and software. Archives have long been concerned with the survival of information with long-term value, the continuing availability of this information, and the cost of maintaining records over time. However, hardware- and software-dependent electronic records pose a far different and greater challenge to archivists than ever posed by records on clay tablets, papyrus, paper, and microfilm.



Many who use Search Room are researching their families

To those who use the State Archives, format is less important than content. Last year more than five thousand people visited the Archives’ search room. In addition, the staff fielded eighty-seven hundred telephone and mail inquiries from researchers all over the world, while responding to seven thousand requests for professional and technical assistance from hundreds of state and local officials relating to the preservation and eventual transfer of public records in their care. “Every day it’s a new and different situation,” Parker says. “Everybody who walks in here has a potentially interesting event or question that they are researching. It’s exciting to hear their questions and help them find the information they need.”

About eighty percent of the visitors who research at the State Archives, located at Third and Forster Streets in Harrisburg, are chiefly interested in genealogy and community history. The balance consists primarily of academics, students, writers, people seeking

support for claims to government benefits, legislators, and individuals interested in specific topics such as the Civil War, railroading, or black history.

It's electrifying to discover some of the documents and memorabilia contained in the Archives. Covering the period from 1664 to the present, more than seventy records groups offer a window back in time. Genealogical records, including passenger lists, oaths of allegiance, deeds, estate papers, and military service records are on file. Records of the colonial, revolutionary, and Commonwealth governments are stored here, beginning with the original 1681 Charter from King Charles II to William Penn, hand-decorated with iron gall ink on animal skin (see [“Preserving This Venerable Document”](#) by Linda A. Ries and Jane Smith Stewart, Winter 2000). Patent books, Native American deeds, physicians' licenses, World War II bonus files, minutes of the Board of Canal commissioners, Chambersburg Civil War damage claims, epidemic reports, governors' papers, and corporate charter books are just a few of the thousands of records series that help document the administration of government functions over three centuries.

Although the majority of the records at the Pennsylvania State Archives were created by agencies of state government, they are complemented by personal papers, manuscripts, and non-governmental records maintained because of their historical value. While governmental records are maintained and described by a “Record Group,” or “RG,” title corresponding to the name of the agency of origin, family papers, business archives, and special media collections are maintained and described as “Manuscript Groups,” or “MGs.” Papers of political figures and business corporation records are well represented in the manuscript groups, as well as important documentation of other areas of human experience. Manuscript groups are especially rich in photography and map collections. Some groups are named for individuals, families, or others who collected and contributed the items. The Penn Central Railroad Collection and Deposit is the largest manuscript group.

It is often referred to as the “Pennsylvania Railroad Collection” because that is its largest component. The State Archives is one of several major repositories holding part of the records of this enormous corporation.



An 18th-century map of Philadelphia.

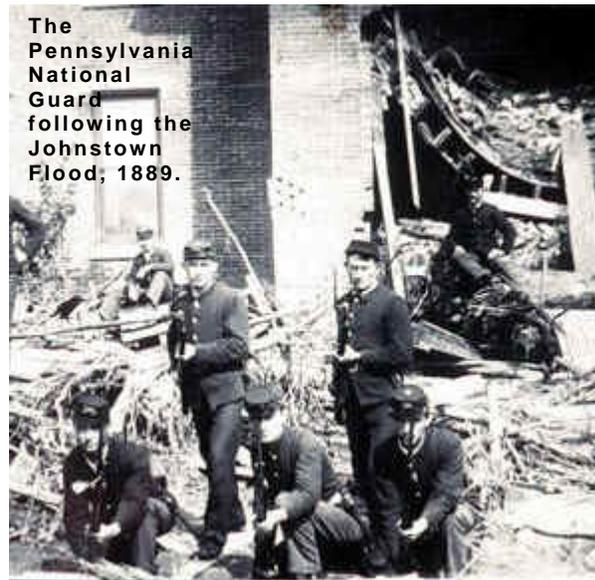
Security and proper storage are paramount

Because of the unique and precious nature of the Archives' holdings, stringent security rules apply for anyone using the search room. After filling out a registration form, all bags, parcels, briefcases, and outerwear must be placed in a locker. Each visitor may bring in only one notebook or folder, which must be surrendered to the Search Room attendant when original manuscripts are being used. The staff attendant may supply lined paper, note cards, and pencils. Individuals using original records in the search room are taped by security cameras. The ratio of customers to staff is never more than four to one. When a manuscript is requested, a staff member retrieves it (patrons are not allowed

beyond the search room), which illustrates another way Archives differ from libraries where stacks are open to the public. Notes are inspected before they can be removed from the search room. Of course, no manuscripts may be removed.

As one would expect, storage space is an ongoing concern. At its inception in 1903, the Archives was housed in the State Library and Executive Building, now the Speaker Matthew J. Ryan Building. The entire archival program was allotted some seventeen hundred and fifty square feet in the building's basement. It moved, along with the State Library, to the Education Building in 1931. In 1965, the Archives found adequate space in the William Penn Memorial Museum (now The State Museum of Pennsylvania) and Archives Building.

“Since the Tower is almost filled to its seventy-five thousand cubic feet capacity with government archives and personal papers, we must convert ground floor space for records storage,” says Suran. “We need to find space to store thirty-five thousand cubic feet of records on the ground floor, which should hold us for the next twenty years.” Renovation of The State Museum of Pennsylvania and Archives Building, improvements to the existing State Records Center Building, the construction of a State Records Center Annex, and the allocation of significant space in the Keystone Building, now under construction, should ease the space crunch.



A short-term project of removing library shelving and adding more space-efficient records center shelving to the Archives Tower will provide an additional eighty-five hundred cubic feet of storage capacity in the Tower. Renovations in the Archives will accelerate after several PHMC divisions move to the completed Keystone Building in summer.

Improvements are planned

Plans for the redesign of the State Archives call for an exhibit area and orientation room. This will allow some of the special and beautiful items housed in the Archives to be displayed on a rotating basis. Perhaps these might include colored-pencil drawings of the state's canal system dating to the 1820s, seventeenth-century Indian deeds, or architectural renderings of buildings in the Capitol Complex. The lobby will feature patron computer terminals and workstations to facilitate access to the State Archives' finding aids, records on CD-ROM, the Archives' components of the PHMC's Web site, as well as the electronic information resources of other state agencies. A special room to allow access to audio/visual records is also planned.

With room to breathe, and an upgrade in technology, the Pennsylvania State Archives will continue to meet its mandate to acquire, preserve, and make accessible the

permanently valuable paper, films, and electronic media-based records of the Commonwealth in a cost-effective manner. In doing so, it will enable state government to meet its basic responsibility to safeguard and document the civic and property rights of its citizens while preserving an accurate record of the performance of its officials.

The [Pennsylvania State Archives](#), located at Third and Forster Streets in Harrisburg, is open to the public for research Tuesday through Friday, 9:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.; Saturday, for microfilm use only, 9:00 a.m. to noon, and 1:00 to 4:00 p.m. (except state and legal holidays). For information, write: Pennsylvania State Archives, 350 North Street, Harrisburg, PA, 17120-0090; telephone (717) 783-3281; or visit the PHMC's Web site at www.phmc.state.pa.us.

Persons with disabilities who need special assistance or accommodation should call the State Archives in advance to discuss their needs. Persons who are deaf, hard of hearing, or speech impaired who wish to contact a hearing person via Text Telephone may use the PA Relay Center at 1-800-654-5984.

Visit the State Archives and see local attractions

The capital city abounds with attractions for individuals interested in history and culture. Adjacent to the Pennsylvania State Archives, [The State Museum of Pennsylvania](#) showcases the Commonwealth's past through four floors of exciting exhibits, dioramas, installations, and inter-active galleries (see "Preserving the Past, Protecting the Future": The State Museum of Pennsylvania, by Sharon Hernes Silverman, Winter 2000). The State Capitol, featuring original works of art by Violet Oakley, Edward Austin Abbey, George Grey Barnard, and Henry Chapman Mercer, is one of the most beautiful state houses in the country. Other popular area attractions include the John Harris-Simon Cameron Mansion, Fort Hunter Mansion and Park, the Fire Museum of Greater Harrisburg, the Art Association of Harrisburg, the Hershey Museum, Whitaker Center for Science and the Arts, and the National Civil War Museum.

For more information, write: Hershey Harrisburg Regional Visitors Bureau, 112 Market St, fourth floor, Harrisburg, PA 17101; telephone (717) 231-7788 or toll-free 1-800-995-0969; or visit its Web site at www.hersheyharrisburg.org.

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End of part two. [Click here to return to part one.](#)

An Archives Update

How the Historical and Museum Commission proposes to serve the public in the future

Designed and constructed in the early 1960s, the Pennsylvania State Archives facility has entered its fifth decade facing a number of issues regarding its continued ability to serve the public and preserve the history of the Commonwealth. The building is approaching its storage capacity and in four years or less every shelf will be full. Its public spaces, which

were designed for much smaller audiences and different public expectations, no longer meet the needs of visiting researchers. Exhibit space is limited as is available parking.

Integrating modern technology into the facility for both the public and staff remains a challenge, and the building is also showing its age in many ways. The stone cladding of the tower must soon be replaced, and the collection storage area requires a vapor barrier and sprinkler system to provide adequate environmental and security protections for the documents. Renovation plans have been drafted to address these and other concerns. The estimated cost of these improvements is \$34,300,000.



Even renovations of this magnitude leave unaddressed many long-term issues facing the State Archives facility. The current plan would provide storage capacity for another fifteen to twenty years of growth using compact shelving. The

building's infrastructure would be updated, but at its core it would remain outdated, especially in terms of the basic logistics and uses of space.

The continuing limitations of the renovated State Archives facility prompted a recent analysis of the costs and advantages of the construction of a new archives facility at a new location. It was discovered that a new facility with the capacity necessary for the next thirty to forty years would cost approximately \$30,000,000 or nearly \$5,000,000 less than the renovations (including the cost of demolition of the Tower). A new State Archives building would provide more and better space for the valuable historical resources of the Commonwealth for less money than renovating the current building.

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