

# Publication Program of the Philadelphia Archives

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THE precise boundary between related fields is generally difficult to establish. There is, as we all know, an indefinite area where the work of the archivist and the historian merges, and it follows that historical training for an archivist helps him understand the researcher's problems. This is true not only for the archivist but for any other administrator of records having research value. Nevertheless, a complete grasp of the substantive content of his holdings is the best qualification that a keeper of records can have. In many public records offices, for instance, clerks with a thorough knowledge of the contents of the records under their jurisdiction are able to give highly satisfactory aid to seekers of historical information.

A second basic reason for training the archivist in historical research, however, is to enable him to understand and analyze his accessions. In fact, such training is vital in determining *what* to accession. In this area, however, the archivist must always keep in mind that, despite his historical training, he is functioning as an archivist and not as a historian; for there are many record series (such as financial records or economic and sociological surveys) for which some other type of training might be preferable. In installations with larger staffs, it might be desirable to employ specialists from each of the social sciences. In any case, it must be kept in mind that an archival function is being performed.

Although the emphasis in Philadelphia has always been archival, it became apparent very soon after our local archives was established that making certain historical studies and publishing some of them were necessary to acquaint the users of the archives with our records and with the contents of individual record series. These studies were undertaken always as aids in the use of our

\*The author is the Assistant City Archivist of Philadelphia. For a previous contribution, "Court Records—Orphans Among Archives," see *American Archivist*, 23: 167-174 (April 1960). Mr. Weinberg's current work, as related to the publication program about which he writes, includes a study of testamentary documents of Philadelphia County from 1682 and another study of the county's early court records from 1730.

holdings. The first to be published reflected the national importance of early Philadelphia in the founding of the Nation. In August 1953 archival examiners came upon a long-unused safe in the city solicitor's office and found in it a number of historically important papers. Among them was a 1715 patent to a plot of land on what is now Independence Square. This led us to the full collection of title papers to Independence Square. The Square was not among the five original ones dedicated for public use to the citizens of Philadelphia by William Penn but was later put together from various plots of privately owned land. Here was the information (in the form of deeds, releases, patents, trust instruments, and other papers) that made possible a comprehensive

presentation of the devolution of title to the Square. The whole plot had been acquired for building on it Pennsylvania's Provincial Capitol, which ultimately became Independence Hall. In 1818 William Findley, then Governor of Pennsylvania, deeded to the Mayor of Philadelphia the State House, the Square, and a large clock, for a consideration of \$70,000. Our resulting study<sup>1</sup> includes a plot plan as well as a chain of title for each of the individual plots that compose the Square. In line with our general policy the study was not made solely because of its intrinsic interest, great though that might be, but as an aid to the better use by researchers of records in the Philadelphia Municipal Archives.

In 1954, after two preliminary years of gathering records of archival value, the City Archivist felt it appropriate to establish formally a Municipal Archives as a separate section within the Department of Records. This decision happily coincided with an offer by M. O. Anderson, Superintendent of the Independence National Historical Park, to permit the archives to be housed and operated in a Federally owned building, the Second Bank of the United States. After the material was suitably arranged our immediate task was to inform interested researchers of the nature and extent of our holdings. It was decided that we would publish a preliminary guide, with concise listings rather than a detailed descriptive catalog. For this decision there were sound administrative reasons besides the desire to announce that we were open for business. First, the quantity and importance of source material previously inaccessible to researchers required early notice of its availability. Second, though our holdings were impressive, we had accessioned only about 25 percent of the eligible material scat-

<sup>1</sup> City of Philadelphia, Department of Records, *Independence Square; Devolution of Title* (Philadelphia, 1956). 13 p.

tered through city departments. Unlike the nature of public res

of Philadelphia County.<sup>4</sup> On the theory that a picture is worth at least a thousand words, a map format was used, showing the ward boundaries of the entire city at every stage of its existence, so that the substantive information in the publication consists of a series of maps.

These same records also stimulated another study—on the tax records themselves.<sup>5</sup> The period embraced by the records was one of transition from an agricultural to a mercantile society. Those unfamiliar with the older tax structure—and this includes *almost* everyone who uses the records—are in danger of misunderstanding the implications of the data they use. Thus, again, our motivation for making the study derived from our archival work. Furthermore, several advantages accrue to the Archives in publishing a study on a single record series. Such a publication provides both help in using the records and a professional and dignified means of publicizing them. The success of this and other “series studies” has led us to the informal policy of attempting to publish one such study annually or biennially for at least the next few years, until detailed information has been disseminated to introduce interested persons to all our major collections.

Preliminary work has been completed on our next major publication. This is concerned with a group of land warrant and survey books compiled in 1759 by direction of the Provincial Assembly. The citizens of the Province suspected that the Proprietaries, Penn’s sons, were not treating them fairly in the granting and survey of land. The assembly, over the Proprietaries’ objections, passed an act requiring a public recording of all land records in the offices of the surveyor general and Proprietary secretary. The Penns prevailed upon the King in Council to veto the act. However, because of the time required to get the act to England, obtain the Royal veto, and get the news back to Pennsylvania, the records in question were copied and made public before news of the veto was received. Our warrant and survey books are these records, and because of the Royal veto are not in a sense public records at all. They are, however, an invaluable source of information about the earliest settlers of Pennsylvania. This study is now ready for the press. It contains lists of every name appearing in the records, including names of witnesses, arranged alpha-

<sup>4</sup> An interesting sidelight was that we found that a recently created ward, from which a State legislator had already been elected, had never been officially created. When we brought this to the attention of the court, a convenient legal phrase, *nunc pro tunc*, solved the problem.

<sup>5</sup> Allen Weinberg, *Philadelphia Early Tax Records* (Philadelphia, 1960). [iv], 58 p.

betically and by county. This "witness information" has proved, in the past, to be important both in substantiating and suggesting relationships between persons.

Our collection of early wills, letters of administration, and related papers—perhaps the richest in the Archives—is particularly useful for testamentary documents of important naval figures of the Revolution such as John Barry, John Paul Jones, and William Bainbridge. The files of the 1876 Centennial Commission are also frequently used and are of general interest. Publications about these two collections are projected. We have also in the Philadelphia Archives an extensive collection of early civil and criminal court records; these begin in the 1730's and continue in unbroken series to the present. They provide all sorts of unexpected information (such as Edgar Allan Poe's application to study law) in addition to a complete record of the judicial process for the period covered. These records, because of their completeness, are a rich source for studies of early American law; in fact, a local law professor is currently using them for a history of Pennsylvania law. We plan a publication on this group.

We have hesitated to undertake the immensely difficult and time-consuming task of printing annotated texts of manuscripts. There is one group of records, however, for which this type of study would be especially appropriate, our manuscript Minutes of Council, 1789–1837. We have hopes that in the future, with an increase of staff and appropriations, we may be able to embark on this project.

Our experience indicates that an archival installation, even with a very small staff, can produce publications, based on sound research, to aid in the use of and stimulate interest in the collections. This activity can be justified, however—and particularly in small repositories—only if the subject of the study derives from the needs of the archival work. I do not mean by this that only work of the type described in this paper is justified. It is certainly proper for the archivist to do research where the motivation is historical, but it seems to me that he should restrict such research to those areas in which archives are the only source of the information sought. It is for the professional working historian to make studies in specialized areas, no matter how important the results may be for the archivist. The archivist fulfills his primary role by making known the potentialities of the source material he administers.