

EXPLORING THE CITY

BY JIM MURPHY

Historical Society of Pennsylvania

Want to see history really come alive? Just stroll over to the Historical Society of Pennsylvania (HSP).

Here you'll find an astonishing collection of unique documents, watercolors, genealogical records, letters, diaries and more. Together, they provide a rare behind-the-scenes look at our country's triumphs and tragedies.

What's more, they allow once-dim historic figures to become real flesh-and-blood people.

For example, here you can read Tobias Lear's vivid eyewitness account of George Washington's last minutes of life. Or, learn about the heavy human price of slavery in the pages of William Still's *Underground Railroad Journal, 1852-57*.

"Luckily, no one ever got hold of it," says Lee Arnold, Senior Director of the Library and Collections at HSP. Capture of the diaries by the wrong hands could have put many people in danger.

Why? William Still carefully listed the old and new names of the runaway slaves, described their appearance and sometimes revealed who was hiding them. In addition, he meticulously noted what it cost to harbor the runaways, clean their clothes or buy new ones to disguise them.

The Society's extraordinary collection includes:

- The first handwritten draft of the U.S. Constitution, July 1787
- The first map of Philadelphia, 1683
- A copy of the Emancipation Proclamation signed by Abraham Lincoln, 1864
- A copy of "The Star Spangled Banner," handwritten by Francis Scott Key, about 1840
- The earliest surviving American photograph — taken in 1839 near Chestnut and Juniper Streets

One of the more interesting treasures is a draft copy of the Constitution written by James Wilson of York. One side of the page contains the draft text, with corrections on the other side.

Another begins: "We the People of the States of..." and lists the full 13 states (including "Providence Plantations"). Later he refers to the country's new name as "United People and States of America." Obviously, some of that language changed in the final version.

While some of these treasures are only available to the general public during special exhibitions, HSP is expanding its digital portal — which already has over 55,000 digitized images — to include even more important documents online.

"Preserving American Freedom," part of a new special project funded by Bank of America, will present key documents in way that allows for research, understanding and analysis. The target date for this effort is early 2013.

HSP's physical collection is staggering in both size and value. It contains more than 20 million manuscripts and graphics (such as 35,000 prints and maps, 20,000 watercolors and drawings, and 250,000 photographs) plus over 600,000 printed items (including 10,000 published family histories), all in 19 storage areas.

After a merger with the Balch Institute for Ethnic Studies, HSP has become a leading repository for immigrant and ethnic history.

Researchers at HSP get free access to Ancestry.com, and the society possesses all the collections of the Genealogy Society of Pennsylvania (which cover every state east of the Mississippi). For military buffs, HSP also has an extensive Civil War collection.

Some 4,500 visitors use the society's resources in person each year. Half are researching family histories. The others are scholars, historians, professors and writers.

In the Reading Room, you can request three documents at a time, and you'll get them within 45 minutes. "That's faster than the Library of Congress," Lee says.

To preserve its extraordinary collection, HSP houses these precious documents in a special fireproof building. When built in 1910, there was no wood inside except for the banister, not even for bookcases or furniture. Ingenious glass fire doors close automatically in the event of a fire.

When you visit 1300 Locust Street, think about the fact that you are in the same building as General George Meade's account of the Battle of Gettysburg, a printer's proof of the Declaration of Independence and Martha Washington's cookbook!

There's something for everyone here.

Many of America's most treasured documents are housed at 1300 Locust Street



Fast Facts:
Historical Society of Pennsylvania
1300 Locust Street
215-732-6200
hsp.org
Call or see website for exact hours.



William Still, whose "Underground Railroad Journal, 1852-57" provides specific details about many of the slaves he helped escape to freedom.

Photos courtesy of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania.