

EXPLORING THE CITY

BY JIM MURPHY

National Archives at Philadelphia

Last February, our *Reporter* designer noticed a sign for the National Archives at Philadelphia on Chestnut between 9th and 10th Streets, and suggested I check it out.

She didn't know a National Archives office was located in the city. Neither did I. But after several visits, I can tell you it is a treasure trove of important documents and a valuable resource for area residents.

Whether you are putting together a family history, trying to prove citizenship, learning how to evaluate primary sources, or doing any type of historical research, it's worth a visit to the National Archives at Philadelphia, one of 13 regional archives. Admission is free, but there is a charge for copying documents.

What you'll find: key documents from 1789 to the present, including those from 1790 to 1800, when Philadelphia was the temporary capital of the United States.

Among them:

Custom House records — to raise money to pay its Revolutionary War debt, the U.S. collected taxes on goods entering and leaving the country. **U.S. Mint records** — the new government's efforts to pull the country together with a federal monetary system. **U.S. District Court records** — from nine districts and more, plus 80 federal agencies.

With these historic documents, says Leslie Simon, Director, Archival Operations, "You see the Constitution taken from paper and made operational." Many of these records do not exist anywhere else in their original form.

Genealogy accounts for about 40 percent of visitors, Leslie says. To assist family researchers, the facility holds Genealogy Open Houses on the First Friday of the month, noon to 2 p.m., and invites the public to bring lunch.

Other frequent visitors to the Philadelphia archives include people researching pollution records, writing novels and doing historic research.

To minimize deterioration, the facility's documents are stored in non-acidic archival files and boxes and kept in a rigidly controlled environment.

Items of interest:

Sooty records: During one visit, Leslie pulled out U.S. Admiralty records from Pittsburgh in 1888. Not only were they tied with red tape, they also had "ambient coal dust" on them, reflecting the environmental conditions of the city at that time. This kind of external evidence does not show up in digital records, she says.

Interactive demo: A lobby display currently highlights court documents on the subjects of "separate but equal" schooling and the rights of freedom of speech. You use a "hearing wand" to answer questions and see if you are correct.

Slaves' rights: In 1807, Judge Richard Peters of the District Court of Pennsylvania made a major decision that went against then-current thinking. He permitted six slaves on board the brig *Catherine* to share their portion of salvage from the wrecked schooner *Messenger* — "for their own separate use."

Coming Soon: Avid genealogists are counting down the days to the release of the 1940 census on April 2, 2012. That's the day personally identifiable data will be available.

Under federal law, this information must remain private for 72 years.

Other activities: To promote usage by the public and encourage youngsters to look at primary sources, the National Archives at Philadelphia sponsors and leads students in this area's National History Day competition. Recently, it also held a special art exhibit titled: *Libro Curio: Reconstructing the Book*. Using old book spines, covers and tabs, 15 artists from the Philadelphia Center for the Book developed their own creative visions of the books.

When you go: Since you are entering a Government building, you will need to have an ID and sign in with your address. Bags must be placed in lockers, so bring a quarter. You can get it back when you leave.

Free access to genealogical records, court documents and more.



The Libro Curio exhibit opened on September 27th at the National Archives.

FAST FACTS

Name: National Archives at Philadelphia

Address: 900 Market Street Philadelphia, PA 19107

Entrance: Chestnut Street between 9th and 10th Streets

Hours:

Mon. - Fri., 8:30 a.m. - 4:30 p.m.
Second Saturdays, 8 a.m. - 4 p.m.
Closed on all Federal holidays

Genealogy Open Houses:
First Fridays, noon to 2 p.m.

Phone: 215-606-0100

Website:
www.archives.gov/midatlantic