History without a home
State archives are scattered

By COLLEEN O'DEA
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An invisible wall of slick, menacing dry heat almost blocks the entrance to the hallowed treasury of New Jersey's past.

Through slender alleyways of gray boxes, yellowed papers and dusty book covers, a modern gauge confirms the obvious: 77 degrees with 35 percent humidity - a deadly day for the rich history in the New Jersey State Archives.

Ideally, the temperature should be 50 degrees with 45 percent humidity.

"This is not appropriate," says Karl J. Niederd, chief of the Bureau of Archives and Records Preservation. "The building is under renovation. Under normal circumstances it wouldn't be this bad.

Construction in the New Jersey State Library in Trenton also has meant a temporary loss of space. The ESSEX call system that the archives occupied in the basement.

New Jersey, where much of the Revolutionary War was fought, is the only one of the original 13 colonies that does not have a permanent archives building and one of just a handful of states that does not have such a facility.

"We are second to none in the richness of our history," said Charles Ince, director of the Division of Archives and Records Management. "Before this facility opened, the area set aside for the archives was believed to be adequate for all the records that existed. We know now that is not so.

The archives area holds only about one-quarter of the state's 30 million historic documents. These are perpetually stored in state buildings, basements and attics, and in rented warehouses.

"We personally have gone into a warehouse and seen an 18th century geological study on the floor," Ince said. "That is not appropriate.

In the basement, the shelves of the Long Island archives are stuffed. "What do we do with this?" Ince asks.

A mountain of records awaits the new office space available at 150 State St. in Trenton.


State-of-the-art preservation carries a high price tag: $3,000 per volume. And the archives' budget for preservation had plummeted to nothing during the current budget crisis.

Colonial deed books: top one is restored.
belongs in an archives." So he keeps dreaming of a $11 million climate-controlled building that could display New Jersey's priceless "pearls of history"—original, signed copies of the U.S. Constitution and Bill of Rights. At present, these five framed parchments are packed in plastic bubbles and crammed in a corner of a vault.

"Maryland has a 100,000-cubic-foot facility with a reference room, security . . . a rare books area," Jacovone said, showing pictures of a bright, spacious building. "New Jersey does not have its own Bill of Rights." "We've been lucky because it has not lost its most precious documents—at least not for long periods of time. "Prior to the creation of an archives, documents were stored in the basement of the Statehouse and, yes, some historical documents walked," Jacovone said. "Given the almost total absence of caring for the documents in New Jersey, it's amazing we have what we have and that what we have has survived."

"Two of those temporarily missing—the U.S. Constitution and New Jersey's colonial laws—indeed were up at Rutgers University and Glassboro State College, respectively. The archives has retrieved them."

Building plans

For the last five years, Jacovone has been annually before the Common Council's Capital Budgeting and Planning with building plans. Prison, schools and other projects have been a priority, and Jacovone understands that, but he is concerned that the lack of funding could wind up being truly harmful.

"Without proper housing and environmental controls for the documents we have, there is accelerated deterioration," he said.

Priceless and irreplaceable deeds dating from the late 1600s, Supreme Court actions from 1740 and regimental records from the Revolutionary War were suffering that recent, dry Wednesday afternoon.

"Human get dry hands but they can put hands on them," Jacovone said. "Documents act like a sponge. The damage done to them is irreversible."

He opened one thick imposing book to a scratched, cracked page, a marriage certificate from the mid-1740s. White flecks flaked to the floor. After running over another volume's brown cover, his fingers were caked with rust-colored "leather rot.

"We are trying to reverse the tide of 200 years of neglect," Niederer said.

Most of those old documents are on microfilm so the original books would not be handled, but the archives has been slowly restoring its oldest and most deteriorated holdings.

"The pages were taken out, cleaned and decalcified," Niederer said, displaying a newly bound "Basse's Book of Surveys, 1687-1792."

"The most severely worn were mended with wheat starch and Japanese paper," he said. "Then they were encapsulated. They're just floating between the plastic. This book is 300 years old, but I can give it to you and you can handle it."

But this state-of-the-art preservation carries a high price tag: $3,000 per volume. And the archives' budget for preservation has plummeted from $100,000 about four years ago to nothing during the current budget crisis. In addition to the Constitution and the Bill of Rights, the oldest and most precious documents are the state's original colonial laws from the 1660s, the three revisions of the Constitution and the state's copy of the ratification of the Treaty of Paris. Those are kept in a safe within the vault.

Also stored in the vault are the original court stenographer's tapes from the Lindbergh baby kidnapping trial and a Feb. 6, 1841, letter from President-elect Abraham Lincoln to New Jersey Gov. Charles S. Olden. In his letter, Lincoln accepted an invitation to visit the state on his way to his inauguration and cautioned, "Please arrange no ceremonies that would waste time."

But most of the 5,000 who visit the archives each year are not interested in anything nearly so glamorous, Niederer said. The vast majority are tracing their genealogies by searching birth, death, marriage and employment records.

Scholars, too, frequent the archives to research every topic imaginable and they often search in the governor's papers.

Fled back to 1475, these details not only the growth and complexity of New Jersey government but the increasing power of the governors.

The first papers kept, comprising 46 boxes, were those of Gov. Alfred K. Dravo. By contrast, it took the archives' staff of seven a full year to catalog Gov. Thomas H. Keane's papers into 1,800 boxes and they only kept two-thirds of what they were given, Niederer said.

Because of the size of the archives' entire collection and because it is stored in so many places, it is virtually impossible to say exactly what is stored there. The archives staff can refer researchers to those people within the state departments who oversee their records for help in finding what they might need.

"Genealogy, title work bring researchers to state archives" by Colleen O'Dea

Attorneys searching land titles, lobbyists researching laws and citizens tracking their roots made up the majority of the 1,000 people who visited the New Jersey State Archives last year, despite its near secret location.

One must venture into the basement of the New Jersey State Library on West State Street in Trenton to discover the rich history.

The archives' 12,000 cubic feet of documents range from 352-year-old land deeds to the last merion Gov. Thomas H. Keane wrote before leaving office in January 1990.

Most of those who visit and write to the archives are trying to map their roots. The archives keeps birth, marriage and death certificates from the mid-1800s as well as wills and court and military records to help genealogical researchers.

Researchers are not allowed to use pens, which could mar important papers, and must keep briefcases and other bags in lockers.

While visitors can examine most books, some are too fragile and instead are viewed on microfilm.

It is open 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. weekdays. Its address is 185 West State St., CH 307, Trenton 08625.