

Karl Niederer, left, director of the New Jersey State Archives in Trenton, and Joseph Klett, acting chief of archives, show some of the stored materials.

Staff photo by Martin Griff



History on the move to new archives site

By LISA CORYELL
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TRENTON — New Jersey is moving 300 years of history one block and into the 21st century.

The new state archives building, located just down the road from its old home at the state library, is an ultra-modern facility that allows researchers to use up-to-the-minute technology to access documents centuries old.

A climate-controlled atmosphere, rotating electronic shelves and a comprehensive computer system make the building a contrast in new and old.

"Our mission is to make sure the historic documents handed to us are handed to future generations in as good or better condition than we found them," said Karl Niederer, archives di-

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rector. "This facility is the single most significant achievement in the past century in terms of providing a proper environment for preserving public records and making them more accessible to the public."

For the first time, researchers will be able to find all of New Jersey's Colonial and state government records under one roof, Niederer said.

For years the archives have been split between the cramped quarters at the state library and a storage facility in Ewing.

The new headquarters, on two floors of the former state Department of Education building, is bigger and brighter with a much better atmosphere, literally.

A climate-control system will help preserve delicate, valuable documents by regulating the temperature and humidity levels and keeping them constant.

"When temperatures and humidity levels fluctuate, records deteriorate and bindings fall apart much more quickly," Niederer said. "We can arrest that problem in this building. What that means is that my grandchildren and great-grandchildren will be able to come and view these documents."

RESEARCHING those documents also will be easier in the new building. An orientation room will present a video showing fledgling historians how to use the archives.

"Most people who come here have not done a lot of research," said Joseph Klett, acting chief of archives. "They're people researching their family tree or the history of their home and they're not experienced in how the archives are organized or what resources are available."

The new facility has seating for 60 people, six computer terminals for locating records, two study rooms and 30 microfilm machines — three times as many as the old building.

"With only 10 machines we had to

limit the time people spent on them," Klett said. "Now they can take as much time as they want. And the viewing area is much brighter and airier. It has some elbow room for researchers. It's a vast improvement over what we could offer at the old place."

The state's collection includes an original parchment manuscript of the U.S. Bill of Rights and the original copy of New Jersey's Constitution, signed two days before the Declaration of Independence in 1776. The state's ratification of the U.S. Constitution and a letter signed by President-elect Abraham Lincoln are also part of the collection.

Researchers also can find marriage and death certificates, maps, court and military records, land use documents and just about any other public record dating back to the 1600s.

MOVING the documents — 30,000 cubic feet of data in all — into one building gave archivists the chance to bring all the records under one tracking system.

"Under the old system we didn't have 100 percent control over all documents in one data-base system," Klett said. "This will make it much easier to keep track of our collection."

In the building's basement is a room full of shelves designed to hold hundreds of years of documents. To make the most of the space, the shelves are tightly packed with no aisles between them. When an archivist needs to access a document, a switch will part the shelves for easy access.

"In terms of modern archive installations, this place is top-notch," Klett said.

The building will open to visitors tomorrow. The old building was closed two weeks ago when movers began transporting documents to the new facility.

Next year the state plans to open an exhibit area in the building that Klett hopes will attract visitors.

"It's a very exciting time for us," he said.

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