

# editorial

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## A home for the archives

It was a narrow escape last week for some of New Jersey's most precious historical treasures.

A restroom pipe at the State Library broke, and water poured through the ceiling of the state archives in the basement. Fortunately, the situation was detected immediately, and water damage was kept to a minimum. The state's priceless documents — including its original Bill of Rights and its three constitutions — were unharmed.

But the might-have-been is enough to make you shudder. What kind of logic sanctions the storing of a state's documentary heritage underneath plumbing? The state archives have been in this vulnerable position for years.

What's needed is a safe new repository for the archives, one that is easily accessible to the public. Such a facility could also house other irreplaceable artifacts, such as the fading battle flags long crammed into cases in the State House Annex.

As it happens, the ideal building for this purpose is at hand.

On Barrack Street, across one thoroughfare from the Old Barracks and another from the War Memorial, stands the elegant Masonic Temple. Built in 1928 at a then-extravagant cost of \$800,000, it features the amenities of another age — a two-storied grand salon with marble floors, high windows and a ceiling of rosettes set in gilt-framed squares; elaborate ceremonial chambers on the upper floor; a large kitchen and dining room in the basement. It's one of Trenton's architectural treasures, but the Masons no longer need it, and apart from the guests who attend the handful of receptions and parties held there, it is never seen by the public.

In 1980, County Executive Bill Mathesius unsuccessfully proposed that Mercer County acquire the building and convert it to court use. Today, its physical assets and its location in the Capitol Complex argue that its true destiny is as a home for the state's archives, flags and other prized possessions, a place that would welcome visits from tourists and townspeople alike. This would require far less conversion than any other conceivable use and would ensure the building's permanent functionalism.

Such an action would put the cap on the rehabilitation of the State House and Annex — a project which is about to enter its second phase, with construction of an underground parking garage and the restoration of Stacy Park behind the Capitol. State and city officials should begin talks with the Masons about the mutual benefits that would flow from public acquisition of their building.