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MONDAY Daily Record

MARCH 11, 1991

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MORRIS COUNTY'S LOCAL NEWSPAPER

VOL. 4 NO. 107

25 CENTS

History without a home

State archives are scattered

By COLLEEN O'DEA
Daily Record

An invisible wall of thick, menacing dry heat almost blocks the entryway into the hidden treasury of New Jersey's past.

Through slender alleyways of gray boxes, flaking yellowed papers and dusty book covers, a modern gauge confirms the obvious. It's 76 degrees with 14 percent humidity — a deadly day for the rich history in the New Jersey State Archives.

Ideally, the temperature should be 65 degrees with 45 percent humidity.

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

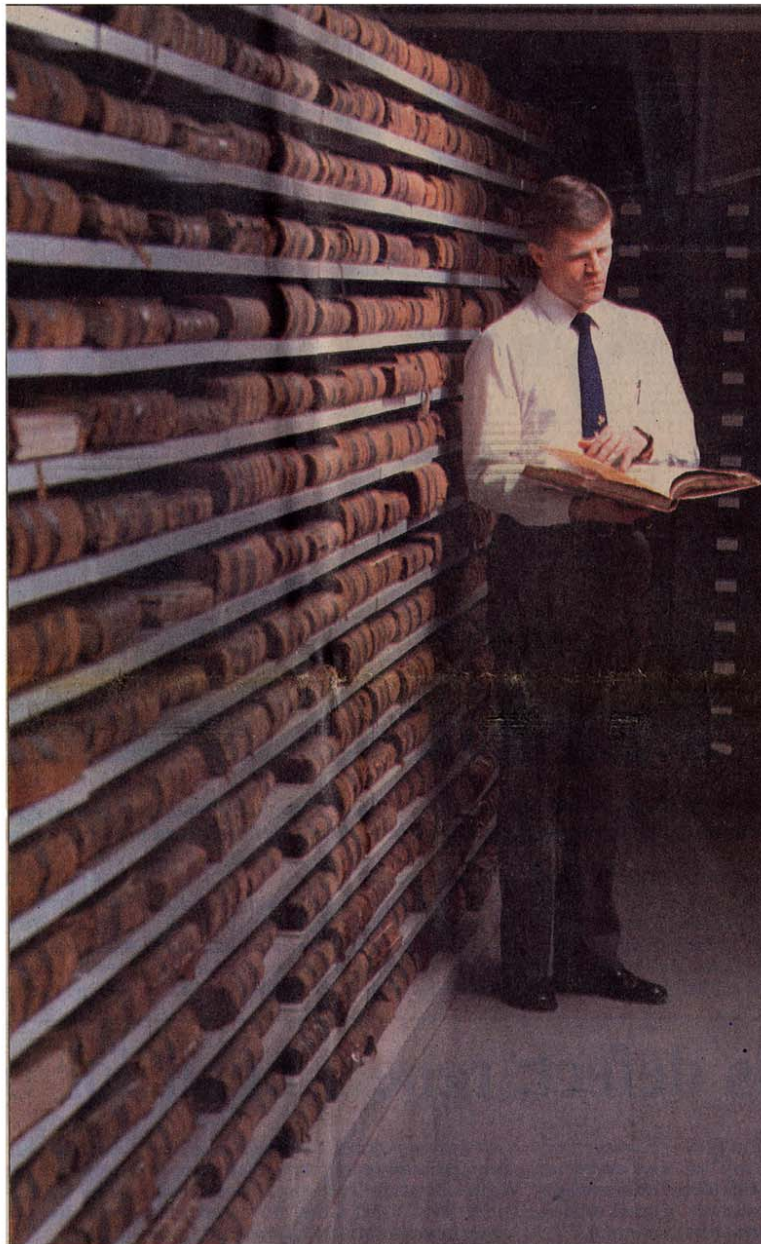
Construction in the New Jersey State Library in Trenton also has meant a temporary loss of some of the 12,000 cubic feet that the archives occupies in the basement.

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 Caesar Iacovone, 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. The rest are unceremoniously stored in state buildings, basements and attics, and in rented warehouses.

"I personally have gone into a warehouse and seen an 18th century geological study on the floor," Iacovone said. "That



CHRIS PEDOTA / Daily Record

State archives chief Karl J. Niederer holds a book of colonial court records.



Colonial deed books; top one is restored.

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.

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belongs in an archives."

So he keeps dreaming of a \$21 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, those 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," Iacovone said, showing pictures of a bright, spacious building. "Maryland does not have its copy of the Bill of Rights."

New Jersey has 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," Iacovone 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 — luckily wound up at Rutgers University and Glassboro State College, respectively. The archives has retrieved them.

Building plans

For the last five years, Iacovone has gone annually before the Commission on Capital Budgeting and Planning with building plans. Prisons, schools and other projects have been priorities, and Iacovone understands that, but he is concerned 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.

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

He opened one thick imposing book to a scripted, cracked page, a marriage certificate from the mid-1740s. White flakes floated 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.

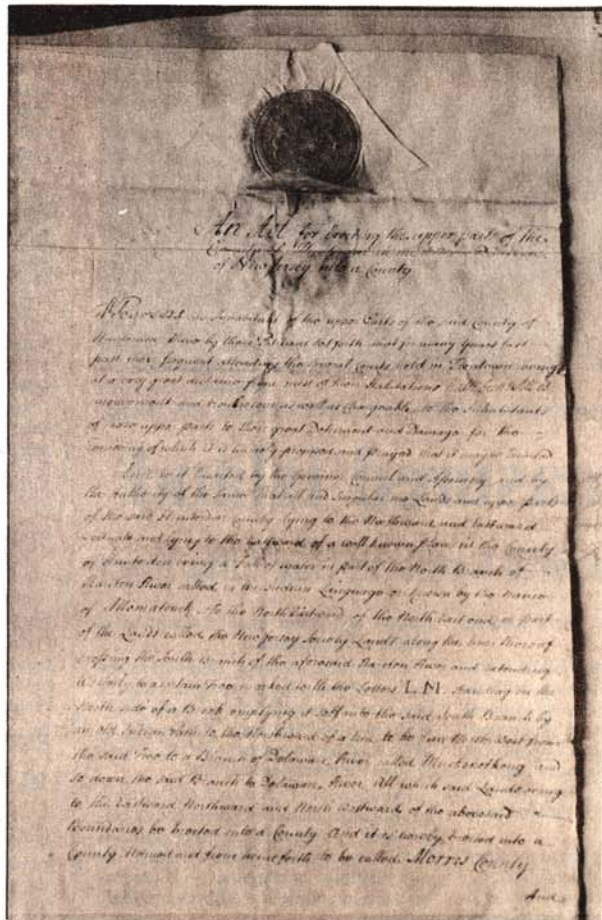
Most of those old documents are on microfilm so the original books would not be handled, but the archives has been slowly restoring its oldest and most deteriorated holdings.

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



CHRIS PEDOTA / Daily Record

Karl J. Niederer, chief of the Bureau of Archives and Records Preservation, retrieves New Jersey's copy of the Bill of Rights from the vault where it is kept in the basement of the state library.



The colonial law carving Morris County from a portion of Hunterdon County on March 15, 1739 has the royal seal on top. The colonial laws are among the state's most precious documents.

1792."

"The most severe tears 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, 1861, 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 governors' papers.

Filed back to 1947, these detail not only the growth and complexity of New Jersey government, but the increasing power of the governors.

The first papers kept, comprising 65 boxes, were those of Gov. Alfred E. Driscoll. By contrast, it took the archives' staff of seven a full year to catalog Gov. Thomas H. Kean'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 where. 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

Daily Record

Attorneys searching land titles, lobbyists researching laws and citizens tracing their roots made up the majority of the 5,000 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 325-year-old land deeds to the last memos Gov. Thomas H. Kean 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 get individual help from seven archive staffers.

To protect the valuable holdings, the archives keeps records of all people who examine documents. 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., CN 307, Trenton 08625.