

# Region

Thursday, Sept. 15, 1988

The Home News

## New Jersey Archives — a crammed attic in a bare basement

The Home News/D. Clayton Hulshizer

TRENTON — The wallet-sized photos from the 1860s look like baseball cards, until you look closer and notice the handlebar mustaches; the proud, nearly regal, poses; the uniforms of the Union and Confederacy.

Located several shelves away are all the New Jersey records of the Penn Central Corp. — minutes of

### Passing By Peter Genovese

meetings, correspondence, stock ledgers and shareholder lists “of every little branch line that ran into the pines or down to the coast or up to Jersey City,” Karl Niederer said.

That oversized portfolio containing three parchment-like pages of elaborately embellished text? The royal appointment in 1762 of William Franklin (illegitimate son of Ben) as governor of New Jersey.

That slim green volume over there? The original minutes, from Dec. 11, 1787, of New Jersey’s constitutional ratification convention.

“If you come back here and want to look at that,” said Niederer, holding a 1749-52 state Supreme Court docket in its original vellum binding, “you will not look at it alone.”

Niederer is chief of archives for the New Jersey State Archives, the repository of official state records dating to the early 1700s. The archives are New Jersey’s attic, the place where valuable state documents, materials, photographs and manuscripts are kept.

This attic, however, is located in the basement —

the basement of the New Jersey State Library.

“If you walk down State Street, you can see the state library, the state museum, the statehouse, but you can’t see the state archives,” Niederer said.

“We’re one of the best-kept secrets in Trenton,” added Caesar Iacovone, director of the Division of Archives and Records Management.

One of the best-kept secrets, and worst-kept, period, according to the division director.

“From a standpoint of facilities, New Jersey is an embarrassment,” Iacovone said. “We are the only one of the original 13 colonies that does not have a permanent and distinct state archives.”

“We cannot accommodate groups,” Niederer said. “I have to turn schoolkids down. If you have a child, the only way he can get in is one-on-one.”

The reasons: cramped space, small staff. The archives take up 11,000 cubic feet of space, but 33,000 cubic feet of state documents, according to Niederer, need to be permanently stored. In 10 to 15 years, he added, there will be 65,000 cubic feet of archival material.

His more immediate headache will come in less than two years, when Gov. Thomas H. Kean will unload an estimated 2,500 cubic feet of official documents on the archives.

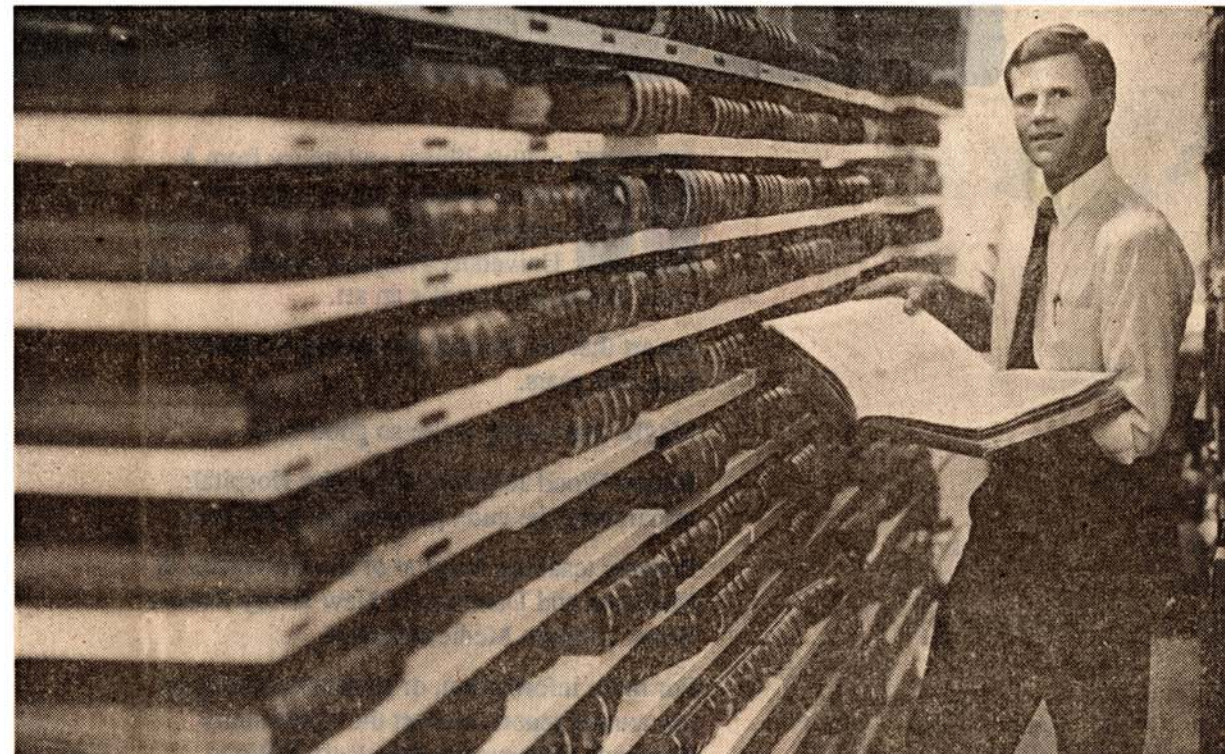
“I’ll have to jettison an equal amount of some other historical records,” Niederer said.

Staff? Iacovone calls it an “army,” but he is joking. Seven staffers, including Niederer and a secretary, assist several thousand walk-in visitors every year, plus fulfill archival requests from state agencies.

Niederer and Iacovone would like new archives built; Iacovone will make his first presentation on the proposal before the Capitol Planning Association today.

What exactly is down in the basement? New Jersey vital statistics (birth, marriage and death records) from 1848 to 1878 (state vital statistics were not kept before 1848). All chancery court records before 1850. Originals of all New Jersey wills and inventories filed before 1901. Federal census records of New Jersey from 1830 to 1910 (post-1910 federal censuses are confidential records, not available to the public). Municipal tax ratables from 1773 to 1822.

The archives, which are part of the Department of



Karl Niederer, chief of archives, amidst some old county and state records in the State Archives.

State, maintain all military records for New Jersey from the Revolutionary War up to World War I. There are several unindexed collections of military records, including those from the French and Indian War and the Pennsylvania Whiskey Rebellion.

Original county records from the 1700s and 1800s include tavern and peddler licenses, justice-of-the-peace dockets and slave births. There are naturalization records from the Colonial period, 5,000 microfilmed reels of New Jersey newspapers, and such miscellaneous holdings as Inquisitions on the Dead, 1688-1798 (records of individuals who died of unknown causes or violent deaths).

Only 2 percent of the “universe of records created by state government” is permanently saved, according

to Niederer.

“All the rest will have to be destroyed at some point,” he said. “There’s no reason to want to save everything.”

With the archives’ present cramped quarters, Niederer has trouble enough storing that 2 percent. He and Iacovone warn that in several years, some of the archives’ more valuable holdings will crumble, acquiring the consistency of what the division director calls “goldfish food.”

Iacovone pointed to pictures of the Maryland state archives, equipped with the latest in information-retrieval equipment.

“And New Jersey operates out of a basement,” he said. “Here we have Formica tables and a few chairs.”