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Historical deeds and documents enjoy new life online
Delaware County Archives Center Expands Access Through Web Site

Delaware County residents curious to learn more about their family history, or the history of their town or community, now have access to a plethora of genealogical information online through the Delaware County Archives.

The Delaware County Archives is located at the Records Center on the grounds of Fair Acres in Middletown. The Center opened in 2006 with the mission to preserve and make available the records of Delaware County, dating back to 1789, the year Delaware County was established out of the southeastern part of Chester County.

Interested residents now have the option of visiting the Archives or accessing certain documents from the privacy of their own home. The current list of archives available online include Administrations, Wills and Orphans Court Estate Case Files, as well as Birth, Death, Marriage and Naturalization Records. More documents will be available in the near future and most documents are available until the year 1906.

Resident's who wish to visit the Archives will be greeted by Delaware County's Archivist, Robert J. Plowman, Ph.D., of Haverford Township. Previously, Plowman served as the director of the National Archives branch in Philadelphia for 30 years before retiring in 2003. He now oversees the County Archives, which is open to the public 8 a.m.-3 p.m. Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays.

Residents are free to wander the Research Room, where Plowman will help them to locate records, which are stored in acid-free containers, in a temperature controlled room.

Several volunteers aid in the preservation of these important documents. Jack Grant, a retiree from Newtown Square, volunteers at the center and works with "Filmoplast," an archival tape that has proven essential in Grant's task of taping wills from the 1800s.

(more)

(Archives continued)

“By making records available online, our Archives Center is more helpful than ever for residents who want to brush up on their history or learn more about their family background,” said Council Chairman Jack Whelan. “Curious residents, or students working on history projects, are now free to access records or research their genealogical history whenever the need should arise.”

In addition to historical research and genealogy, the Archives houses pages of fascinating documents that will pique the interest of the most ardent history buff. Documents of note include a strikingly large deed for the property for John McIllwaine dating back to August 13, 1795. The paper itself, which is carefully hand-scribed, dwarfs a table and each signature is accompanied by a red wax seal. The document itself is a work of art. Another item of interest is Peter Thomas’ 1838 document declaring him a “freed man of color.”

County prison records, which date from 1873-1917, detail arrests for offenses such as “open lewdness,” “kindling fires,” “malicious mischief” and “common drunkenness.”

Residents interested in high society will recognize many prominent names featured in a majority of the records. Even the legendary racehorse Seabiscuit has a tie to Delaware County. Samuel D. Riddle, known locally for the hospital bearing his name in Middletown Township, owned several racehorses including War Admiral who lost to Seabiscuit in 1938.

Plowman offers people a taste of Archives treasures with an ever-changing, glass-enclosed display on the first floor of the Delaware County Government Center, just outside the County Council meeting. The current display features documents from the community of Rockdale in Aston Township.

During the 19th century, Rockdale was home to several cotton and wool mills. Two prominent mill owners were Samuel Riddle (1800-1888) and John Price Crozer (1793-1866.) It was Riddle’s son, Samuel D. Riddle, who owned Man O’ War and War Admiral.

Records for John Price Crozer indicate he was worth \$2 million at the time of his death, which was an enormous sum for 1866. He built the Normal School in Upland, which was used as a soldier’s hospital during the Civil War. After his death, his children converted the school into the Crozer Theological Seminary, once attended by the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.

Time periods for the Archives records are limited, with more recent records available at the Government Center or the State Department of Health’s Division of Vital Records.

Records can be requested by visiting the facility, through the U.S. Mail, or by e-mail request. Upon arrival at the Archives, researchers will be asked to complete a registration form.

Researchers will be required to provide name, address, phone number and a driver’s license. They will also be asked to abide by the Archives’ rules. There are fees for copies and mailing records. No records will be sent via fax or e-mail.

For information about the Delaware County Archives, contact Plowman at (610) 891-5620. Or visit the Web site at www.co.delaware.pa.us and go to Archives or email archives@co.delaware.pa.us.

Some of the items stored at the Delaware County Archives include:

- Administrations from 1790-1929. These are papers that were filed with the Register of Wills when no will was filed. These are largely handwritten and include details of the person's estate.
- Civil Court Cases from 1797-1929.
- Criminal Docket Books from 1806-1929. A past offense from 1915: Owning a dog was considered a crime if an individual was an alien.
- Death Records from 1893-1906. Information recorded includes name of deceased, race, sex, age, marital status, place of birth, occupation, date and place of death, place and date of interment.
- Marriage Records from 1885-1929. (Marriage Licenses after 1929 are available at the Register of Wills, Delaware County Government Center.)
- Naturalization records from 1795-1990.
- Orphans Court Docket Books from 1790-1925.
- Wills, from 1789 to 1929. (Wills after 1929 are available at the Register of Wills, Delaware County Government Center.)

Residents can visit the Archives Web site at www.co.delaware.pa.us/depts/archives.html