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The Practice of Genealogy at the State Library of Pennsylvania and at the Pennsylvania State Archives from the late 19th Century until Today

During my six weeks in residency at the Pennsylvania State Archives in the summer of 2007, I researched the history of the practice of genealogy at the Pennsylvania State Archives and the State Library of Pennsylvania in the time period between the late 19th century and today, with a particular focus on the period up to the 1960s. I was particularly interested in researching how the State Library of Pennsylvania and the Pennsylvania State Archives have facilitated and promoted research on Pennsylvania German family history. The research was a critical component of my dissertation-in-progress, in which I analyze the history of genealogical research among people who have identified themselves as descending from Pennsylvania German or Pennsylvania Dutch ancestors from the late 19th century until today. I hope to contribute with my work to a better historical understanding of the development of family history as a public and popular historical practice in the United States. I also hope to highlight the important role of librarians and archivists as public historians and educators who have facilitated this development. The main questions guiding my research were: In what ways have the State Library of Pennsylvania and the State Archives contributed to shaping and defining the public nature of genealogy over time? How have librarians and archivists defined the public over time? What were the personal, what were the institutional connections between the State Library and Archives and Pennsylvania State Archives and private historical and genealogical institutions in the state?

I worked mostly with Record Group 13, Records of the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, MG 171, Samuel W. Pennypacker papers, and MG 44, William H. Egle collection. RG 13 contains the institutional records of the State Library until 1945 and the surviving records of the Pennsylvania State Archives, which began as the Division of Public Records in 1903 as an administrative unit of the State Library. RG 13

reflects the institutional changes and developments of the State Archives and the State Library: After the establishment of the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission in 1945 to consolidate the functions of the Pennsylvania Historical Commission, the State Museum and the State Archives, the State Archives became separated from the State Library. While the State Archives became part of the PHMC, the State Library continued to operate under the administrative umbrella of the Department of Public Instruction, which had administered the Library since 1923. The Department of Public Instruction became the Department of Education in 1969, which serves as the institutional umbrella of the State Library until today. Due to these institutional changes, RG 13 does not contain any records documenting the work of the State Library after 1945. In addition to my research in the Archives, I visited the State library, and also used the wonderful local history collection in the PHMC library.

Annual, biennial, and monthly reports of the State Library and the Division of Public Records in RG 13 helped me to get an overview of the development of the Library and the Division of Public Records until 1945 in general, and of the development of genealogy at the Library and Archives in particular. In addition, correspondence from the Custodian of Public Records and later Archivist (which is preserved very sparsely from the late 19th century until the early 1920s, but somewhat more completely from the 1920s on), gave me insights into the activities, interests, and connections of the archivists Luther Kelker (1903-1916), Hiram Shenk (1916-1933), Curtis Garrison (1933-1936), and Henry Shoemaker (1936-1945). Unfortunately, though, almost no reference correspondence between librarians and archivists at the State Library and State Archives, and genealogists and local historians has survived, so that the picture of the public contacts between the State Library and Archives that I was able to reconstruct remains limited. The records of the Pennsylvania Federation of Historical Societies, which are preserved for the time period from 1930-1974, and which are part of RG 13, offer an extraordinarily rich resource to study the network of public and private historical and genealogical societies in Pennsylvania, and the development of public history in the State. In addition, hundreds of letters of correspondence in the Pennypacker papers (MG 171) offer insights into Pennypacker's wide ranging activities and interests as a local historian and genealogist. The correspondence give an idea of the public interest in genealogy in Pennsylvania during the Progressive era, since many correspondents addressed Pennypacker directly asking for his assistance in researching their family

histories. Beyond my immediate research interests, I found that Pennypacker's vast and wide-ranging correspondence, which seems to be preserved almost completely (Pennypacker, after all, was an avid collector!), offers a fascinating glimpse of public life, concerns, and interests in the Progressive period in Pennsylvania.

Based on the records, I found that, in the public setting of the Pennsylvania State Library and Archives, the support of the practice of genealogy became an important and popular part of the work of the Library from the late 19th century onwards. Genealogy was supported and facilitated by the public, state and tax supported infrastructure of the library and by the Division of Public Records after its establishment in 1903.¹ Several librarians and archivists, particularly in the time period from the late 19th century until the mid 1940s, were affiliated with historical, genealogical and patriotic societies, and merged their private interest in genealogy, local history, and biography with their work for the library. State Librarian William H. Egle, M.D., a local historian and promoter of genealogy and the preservation of family records, expanded the library's local history and genealogy collections during his tenure from 1887-1899. Unfortunately, the William H. Egle Collection (MG 44) does not contain any records that document his work as State Librarian.² Luther Kelker, who was, like Egle, a member of the Pennsylvania German-Society, and also active as a genealogist and local historian, was hired as the first Custodian of Public Records because of his "interest in Pennsylvania History and his familiarity with the muster rolls and marriage records."³ Genealogical work was an important part of the work of the Division of Public Records from the beginning. In reports to the Librarian during the first years of his tenure, Kelker mentioned that he burned "midnight-oil" to fulfill his duties answering letters, many of them genealogical inquiries.⁴ The pressures on the Division of Public Records continued under Luther

¹ On the history of the Pennsylvania State Archives from 1903-2003, see: Willis Shirk Jr. (ed.), *Documenting Pennsylvania's Past: the First Century of the Pennsylvania State Archive* (Harrisburg: PHMC, 2003). A detailed analysis of the establishment of the Division of Public Records offers Louis Waddell, "The Emergences of an Archives in Pennsylvania," *Pennsylvania History* 73 (Spring 2006): 198-235.

² A small collection of papers from William H. Egle that might contain some more materials seems to be at SC&A of the San Diego State University library. Unfortunately, the research trip to San Diego that I keep dreaming about has not materialized yet.

³ Thomas Montgomery reporting the death of Luther Kelker, in: *Report of the State Librarian*, 1915 (Harrisburg.: Aughinbaugh, Printer to the State of Pennsylvania, 1916), pp. 11-12.

⁴ Report by Luther Kelker, Custodian of the Public Records, Pennsylvania State Library to Thomas L. Montgomery, Nov. 16, 1904, PA State Archives, RG 13, Series: 1-5134, Reports;

Kelker's successor, Hiram Shenk, who was appointed after Kelker's death in 1916. Shenk was also a local historian and genealogist, and, like Egle and Kelker, he was a member of the Pennsylvania German Society. In the report from 1921/22, the State librarian George P. Donehoo wrote:

"Much of the time of Dr. Shenk is taken up with genealogical research work. Inquiries come to the Library from every State asking for information as to the Revolutionary service of the ancestors of those who are seeking admission to the Daughters of the American Revolution and similar patriotic organizations. These inquiries will average about 5,000 a year."⁵

In 1924, all the Pennsylvania historical and reference correspondence was transferred to the Division of Archives and History (as the Division of Public Records was renamed), and a genealogist, Jessica Ferguson, was appointed to be in "charge of all the genealogical work. Under the undivided attention of a trained genealogist, the work has more than doubled," reported Hiram Shenk, the archivist, in the Biennial Report.⁶ Another assistant was appointed two years later. By 1928, the Archives Division, according to the annual report, answered to over 1700 "personal interviews" on genealogy, and answered about 3800 letters.⁷ Neither Shenk nor Ferguson did confine their work to the library. Shenk reported in 1926 that he gave addresses before "historical, patriotic, religious, and educational bodies," and that he represented the Department at a variety of State and national meetings. He also reported that Miss Ferguson represented the Department at the D.A.R meetings in Washington, D.C. in 1925 and 1926, as well as meetings of other organizations.⁸ While the Division of Archives and History expanded its reference service and reached out to hereditary, historical and patriotic societies, the library continued to add hundreds of books annually to its Pennsylvania history and genealogy collection.⁹ When the library moved to its new building in the Education Department in 1931 (where it is still located today), it created a Genealogy Section.

Report by Luther Kelker to Thomas Montgomery, Feb 2nd, 1906 and report to Thomas L. Montgomery, October 31st, 1907, *ibid*.

⁵ *Report of the State Librarian, 1921-1922* (Harrisburg, Penna: J.L.L. Kuhn, Printer to the Commonwealth, 1923), p. 12.

⁶ Hiram Shenk, Division of Archives and History, *Biennial Report of the State Library and Museum from June 1st, 1924-May 31st, 1926*, p. 108.

⁷ It is unclear from the report how many of these letters were responses to genealogical inquiries.

⁸ Hiram Shenk, Division of Archives and History, *Biennial Report of the State Library and Museum from June 1st, 1924-May 31st, 1926*, p. 110.

⁹ Margaret L. Waller, Librarian, *Biennial Report of the State Library and Museum from June 1st, 1924-May 31st, 1926*, p. 100.

In addition to expanding and organizing the genealogical collections, to responding to reference requests, and to providing certificates of military service, Hiram Shenk, in his position as archivist, provided critical support for the publication of the original lists of arrivals in the port of Philadelphia from 1727 to 1808, the originals of which were deposited in the Pennsylvania State Library (and subsequently in the Division of Public Records). Some of the correspondence between Shenk and William Hinke, who, together with Ralph Beaver Strassburger, edited the publication of the ship lists, is preserved in the correspondence files of Shenk.¹⁰ The publication of these lists was sponsored by the Pennsylvania-German Society. The lists were an instrumental resource for genealogists who traced their ancestors, whom 19th and 20th century genealogists classified as “Pennsylvania-German,”¹¹ but who were classified as “Palatines” by colonial authorities. Many persons seeking membership in the Pennsylvania German Society documented their “Pennsylvania German” ancestry based on these lists. The reproduction of the lists as photostats was discussed since the first meetings in the Advisory Commission of Public Records, and as part of its work, the Division of Public Records provided certified “tracings” of the signatures of arriving passengers on these lists.¹²

Curtis Garrison, Shenk’s successor, who was appointed in 1933 and who resigned in 1936, did not seem to have been that interested in facilitating genealogy. At the same time, he tried to find pragmatic ways to deal with the volume of incoming genealogical requests. At one point he contacted the D.A.R. to see if he could get help indexing the Pennsylvania Archives to make it easier to answer reference requests.¹³ Garrison was mostly focused on his work as Assistant State Supervisor of the WPA, conducting the CWA (Civil Works Administration) Survey of Source Material. His correspondence documents his tremendous workload and also his frustration with the bureaucracy of the administration of the Historical Records Survey. After Garrison resigned, Henry W.

¹⁰ PA State Archives, 13-0635, General correspondence, folder Hinke.

¹¹ Pennsylvania-German only seems to have evolved as a racial or ethnic category in the late 19th century. In the early 19th century, Pennsylvania-German described a language, but was rarely used as an ethnic or racial category to describe a group of people.

¹² See for example report by Kelker to Montgomery, October 31st, 1907, PA State Archives, RG 13-15134, reports.

¹³ Letter Garrison to Jean Stephenson from the D.A.R., Nov. 27, 1935 and subsequent correspondence. RG 13-0636.

Shoemaker was hired as archivist.¹⁴ Like Kelker and Shenk, Shoemaker was interested in genealogy, local history, and particularly in folklore, but his work seems to have been constrained by budget cuts during the Depression and World War II. Unfortunately, only a small amount of correspondence that documents Shoemaker's work as archivist has been preserved in RG 13.¹⁵

While budget cuts and personnel shortages during the Depression and World War II, and state budget constraints after the war, have impacted the Library during different periods, the genealogy and local history section seems to have remained a popular section of the Library after the war. Unfortunately, besides a few printed reports that are available in the State Library, no records that document the work of the State Library under the umbrella of the Department of Public Instruction after 1945 seem to have been preserved in RG 22, so that I have not been able to document the development of the Library's genealogy division in the post-war period. Several pamphlets and fliers that document the impact of the genealogy boom on the Library during the 1970s are available in the library of the PHMC, though. While the State Archives have preserved many materials documenting its activities after it became part of the PHMC in 1945, I have also found it unexpectedly difficult to find materials on the development of genealogy at the State Archives for the period from 1945 until the late 1970s. From the 1980s on, there is better documentation, and, of course, there is also Jonathan Stayer, who can provide first-hand accounts of his experiences with the development and popularity of genealogy at the State Archives.

The history of genealogy at the State Library and archives is particularly interesting, since it reflects the changing definition of the public that the library and archives served. While the first generation of archivists and librarians who promoted genealogy, particularly Egle, Kelker and Shenk, seemed to have been committed to promoting public education, they only facilitated genealogical research among those groups of the public who were white and who had arrived in the United States during the Colonial period, such as self-defined Pennsylvania-German, Scotch-Irish, English, and Huguenot

¹⁴ On Shoemaker, see: Simon Bronner, *Popularizing Pennsylvania: Henry W. Shoemaker and the Progressive Uses of Folklore and History* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996).

¹⁵ It is possible that more of Shoemaker's correspondence as archivist is preserved in his papers, which are at Pennsylvania State University in State College.

settlers. While my documentation for the post war period is limited, it looks as if from the 1970s onwards, librarians and archivists who were working at the State Library and Archives have actively participated in re-shaping and broadening the public whom they served, and have expanded their resources and collections to serve those groups of the public who were previously excluded from genealogical research, such as African Americans and descendants of immigrants who had arrived in the United States during the 19th century and later. Thus, the history of genealogy at the State Library and Archives of Pennsylvania not only reflects its development as a popular, public practice, but also an increasingly pluralistic definition of the public whom the institutions served.

I have greatly benefited from the fellowship, and have had a wonderful time researching at the Pennsylvania State Archives. I have found the program to be administered very well. The staff at the Archives was tremendously helpful, knowledgeable, and friendly. Linda Shopes helped me to feel welcome in Harrisburg, and administered the program wonderfully. I was grateful for tour of the Archives that she gave me when I started, and for the information package that we received on the PHMC. I could count on Linda Shopes' help and appreciated her realistic advice when trying to navigate the bureaucratic hurdles associated with applying for state funding. I would not have been able to do any of my research without the tremendous help from Jonathan Stayer, who introduced me to RG 13 before I applied for the fellowship, who generously shared his vast knowledge about the collections, genealogy and history in Pennsylvania, and on the development of genealogy at the library. Willis Shirk shared his knowledge about the collections, the history of the archives, about Harrisburg, and his fascination for space travel; I enjoyed talking with Brett Reigh about the archives, Pennsylvania labor history, Harrisburg local history, and the Susquehanna river, and also enjoyed my conversations with Louis Waddell, whose own research on the history of the archives greatly helped me to situate my research. I also thank Mike Sherbon, Bill Gordon, Richard Sayer, Cindy Margolis, Judy Marcus, and Jason Amico for their help and suggestions. Paula Heiman helped me to find materials in the PHMC library and accommodated my stays in the office in the back of the library. Harry Parker gave me a terrific tour of the archives tower, which I wished I had taken earlier during my stay. I enjoyed my meeting and the interesting conversation with David Haurly and with Barbara Franco. I regretted that I did not have the chance to talk more with Linda Ries, and that I only started talking with Eric Ledell Smith about RG 13 toward the end of my stay. The discussion of my research-in-

progress that was scheduled at the end of my research was extremely helpful, and I appreciated the interesting discussion and the comments and questions from the Archives staff members who were able to attend. I also enjoyed attending the presentation of the research-in-progress of Jeffrey Kaja, who was the other research fellow working in the Archives last summer.

My only suggestion for the program would be to expand the cooperation between the Archives with the State Library. While the different institutional umbrellas of the State Library and Archives might make a formal cooperation between Archives and Library difficult, the fellows in the program might benefit from an increased informal cooperation in whatever form. Possibilities might be to arrange a tour of the Library for the fellows (if they are interested), organize talks in cooperation with the Library, or find an agreement that fellows can use some time during their fellowship to do research at the Library. I am planning to share my research-in-progress with the Archives, am always be grateful for criticisms and suggestions, and will send the PHMC a copy of my dissertation, which still is very much in progress. Finally, I give permission to the PHMC to post the report on the website.

Sincerely,

Katharina Hering