



The Historical
Society of
Pennsylvania

Collection 1999

**Public Baths Association of Philadelphia
Records**

1890-1950

1 box, 4 vols, 1.2 lin. feet

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Processing Completed: August 2003

Sponsor: Processing made possible by a grant from the
National Endowment for the Humanities.

**Related Collections at
HSP:** Northern Soup Society Records, Am. 3355

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Abstract

The Public Baths Association of Philadelphia (PBA) was a private charitable organization founded in 1895 to provide inexpensive bathing and laundry facilities to “the self-respecting poor” in working-class neighborhoods of Philadelphia. The association opened the first of its six bathhouses in 1898 and its last in 1928. PBA disbanded in 1950.

Records of the Public Baths Association of Philadelphia consist of a trustees’ minute book, 1902 to 1950; three scrapbooks, 1898 to 1944, which contain posters, advertisements, and postcards; annual reports; records of the association’s real property, 1890 to 1944; and three photographs.

Background note

The Public Baths Association of Philadelphia (PBA) was a private charitable organization founded in 1895 to provide bathing and laundry facilities for the city’s working poor. The baths offered an alternative to city pools, which were strictly for recreation and open only during the summer months. The PBA erected six bathhouses in densely populated areas where fewer than one in twenty poor working class families could bathe at home.

Sarah Dickson Lowrie proposed the idea of the Public Baths Association at a dinner party hosted by John Wanamaker. Lowrie was one of a group of wealthy social reformers seeking to improve the sanitary conditions of the working poor. The group researched the idea of a public bathhouse by visiting successful operations in New York City and London and concluded that the enterprise could succeed in Philadelphia. They submitted a certificate of incorporation to the Court of Common Pleas and gained approval on March 18, 1895. The Public Baths Association of Philadelphia, governed by a board of twelve trustees, came into being. The first house opened in 1898, to public acclaim. Between 1898 and 1928, five additional bathhouses arose in other densely populated sections of the city.

According to its charter, the association was formed “for the purpose of establishing and maintaining public baths and affording to the poor facilities for bathing and the promotion of health and cleanliness.” The corporation had no capital stock and was

largely funded by donations and subscriptions. In 1895, the Board of Trustees included Eugene Delano, president; Charles Brinley, vice president; Sarah D. Lowrie, secretary; and Franklin B. Kirkbride, treasurer. In 1905, Kirkbride would be awarded a silver medal at the International Exposition in Liege, Belgium, for his personal interest and efficient promotion of the baths. In addition to Kirkbride's medal for personal achievements, the association itself also received a gold medal.

The first bathhouse opened in April of 1898, on property at 410-412 Gaskill Street, which the association purchased from Elizabeth W. Ridgway. A *Public Improvements* article commented, "On April 21st, 1898, Congress declared war against Spain, and the Public Baths Association of Philadelphia declared war against uncleanness by opening the doors of the Gaskill Street baths." The *Philadelphia Medical Journal* observed that "it was Pliny who said that Rome needed no medicine but the public baths."

The bathhouse provided separate facilities for men and women. Ladies showered or bathed on the second floor and washed and dried their clothes in the basement laundry. Gentlemen entered their bath on the first floor and had access to the laundry only on weekends. A five-cent admission fee entitled the patron to use a private shower for half an hour.

In 1902, the next bathhouse was opened at 413-415 Gaskill Street, across from the first operation. This new bathhouse was exclusively for women. Donors gave della Robbia plasters and reproductions of famous artwork to decorate the walls. The association's first annual report listed boxes of soap from Fels and Company, as well as brooms, washboards and mirrors from Lit Brothers, among its donations.

The success of the Gaskill Street bathhouses prompted the PBA to choose a third location at 718 Wood Street. Press clippings from February 15, 1902, advertised a performance of "The Paper Chase," a comedy in three acts, for the benefit of the Wood Street site. The cast included several prominent Philadelphians described in the social pages as "competent amateurs." The playbill listed such sponsors as Schreiber & Kerr Tailors; J. E. Caldwell; and Wm. Bryant Coal, Wood & Coke.

In 1910, another facility opened at 1203-1205 Germantown Avenue. The cost of the building was \$7,000 and the lot \$4,800. The fifth bathhouse was built in South Philadelphia at Passyunk Avenue and Wharton Street and opened in March, 1922. In 1928, the sixth bathhouse was erected in Kensington, at 1808-1814 Hazzard Street.

In 1932, the PBA's 35th Annual Report advocated the needs of the poor during the Depression. Donor letters solicited funds to cover rising costs caused by the slump and increased unemployment. For the next several years, the association recorded a continuing deficit while their conservative spending during this period created a backlog of repairs and renovations of the facilities.

During the Second World War, the city saw a dramatic leap in jobs. While there was a greater need for the baths, rising costs and mounting repairs forced the board to sell the

Gaskill bathhouse. On July 16, 1945, plans went ahead to sell the Hazzard property as well.

At a special meeting of the board on October 10, 1946, a number of issues were addressed. The board authorized the sale of the Wood Street site. An audit disclosed a discrepancy in collecting and depositing bathhouse receipts and the superintendent was relieved of his duties. He was later reinstated in another capacity after he made full reparations and it was determined that he had made poor decisions rather than a calculated act to embezzle funds. At that same meeting, the board determined that it would be appropriate to have the PBA cease operation as a charity if satisfactory arrangements could be made to dispose of the remaining properties. A committee of three members consulted with the Council on Social Agencies of the Community Fund of Philadelphia. The council surveyed the Public Baths Association to determine its place in the needs of the community and concluded that there was no longer a charitable need for the bathhouses.

In April 1948 the Germantown and Passyunk properties were condemned by the city of Philadelphia, and there were no satisfactory offers made to purchase them. On October 30 of that year, the remaining bathhouses were shuttered and all active operations ceased. A final determination was made for disposing of the association's assets to the Philadelphia Foundation. The last recorded meeting of the Public Baths Association of Philadelphia was held on January 11, 1950.

Scope & content

Records of the Public Baths Association span almost the entire history of the organization. The minute book begins in 1902, several years after the association was formed. While not a complete run of the association's minutes, the minute book does include information on the organization's founding, as well as decision-making and fund-raising efforts of the trustees. Yearly and special meetings offer insight into the board's philosophy, motivations and decisions. It does not include records of subscribers or patrons.

The real estate records include documents regarding contract negotiations, property evaluation, bathhouse management, and personnel issues, which grew more complex as rising costs, inflation and labor disputes became more prevalent in the mid-1900s.

Scrapbooks chronicle the association's public outreach, and reflect the philosophy that all citizens should be woven into the social fabric, from the highest to the lowest classes of society. The three books contain a liberal amount of association advertisements including colorful and interesting brochures, leaflets, and advertising cards. Numerous press clippings and several letters from trustees reflect the unceasing effort to promote the bathhouses and make the public aware of good hygiene.

Overview of arrangement

Series I	Administrative, 1890-1950	1 box + 1 vol.
	a. Trustees' minutes, 1902-1950	1 vol.
	b. Real estate, 1890-1944	7 folders
	c. Miscellaneous, 1920-1950	2 folders
Series II	Scrapbooks, 1895-1944	3 vols.
Series III	Photographs, n.d.	1 folder

Series description

Series 1. Administrative, 1890-1950 (Box 1, vol. 1)

a. Trustees' minutes, 1902-1950.

This volume contains the typed minutes of regularly scheduled and special meetings of the twelve members of the Board of Trustees from October 3, 1902, to January 11, 1950. These meetings were the starting point of all of the organization's projects. The minute book is not a complete run of meetings but does give a comprehensive view of business discussions and decisions made concerning the selection of sites, acquisition of properties, contractors hired, price negotiations, fund-raising strategies, board members elected, and resignations accepted. Also recorded in the minutes are reports of the superintendent on the physical status and needs of the facilities. A lengthy March 10, 1905, example details discussions concerning the purchase of two 50-horse power horizontal tubular boilers for the Gaskill Street bathhouse at a cost of over \$2,000.

b. Real estate, 1890-1944.

Papers in this subseries document actions taken in response to decisions made at the trustees' meetings. Materials include mortgages, deeds, title insurance policies, contractor's bonds, legal opinions, miscellaneous letters, and receipts.

c. Miscellaneous, 1920-1950.

This subseries includes a 1932 copy of PBA's charter, letters to and from the Public Baths Association and the Internal Revenue Service concerning tax-exempt status a typed history of the PBA, and a certified copy of the last will and testament of Elizabeth B. Pickering, who bequeathed one thousand dollars to the PBA. Other materials include an undated, hand-colored pamphlet issued by the Playground and Recreation Association. The pamphlet discusses the limited opportunities available to poor children and the importance of getting funding for playgrounds and clubs where they could play safely. There is also a 1938 list of charities endorsed by the Philadelphia Chamber of Commerce.

Series 2. Scrapbooks, 1895-1944 (vols. 2-4)

The series contains three scrapbooks, which are quite similar in content and layout. There is a large quantity of news clippings on a variety of subjects such as bathhouse openings, and a comparison between Philadelphia and London baths. There are

postcards, cardboard signs, brochures, and leaflets of various sizes promoting the baths. Some of the material is in color. Annual reports (1898-1902 and 1928-1944) document the association's early financial stability, as well as their eventual downturn in the 1930s and 40s. There is also a playbill for a fund-raiser, "The Paper Chase," and several letters to and from officers of the association requesting donations.

Series 3. Photographs, n.d.

This series includes three undated photographs: one of the exterior of the Wood Street bathhouse, another of several women doing laundry, and a third showing bystanders at the corner of Gaskill and Leithgow Streets.

Separation report

None.

Related materials

Northern Soup Society Records (call number Am .3355). The Northern Soup Society also operated a bathhouse in Philadelphia.

Subjects

Charities – Pennsylvania – Philadelphia – 19th century
Charities – Pennsylvania – Philadelphia – 20th century
Depressions – 1929 – Pennsylvania – Philadelphia
Hygiene – Pennsylvania – Philadelphia – 20th century
Laundry – Pennsylvania – Philadelphia – 20th century
Philadelphia (Pa.) – Economic conditions – 20th century
Public baths – Pennsylvania – Philadelphia – 19th century
Public baths – Pennsylvania – Philadelphia – 20th century
Working poor – Health and hygiene – 20th century
World War, 1939-1945 – Economic aspects

Kirkbride, Franklin Butler, 1867-1955

Lowrie, Sarah Dickson, 1870-1957

Community Fund of Philadelphia

Playground and Recreation Association (Philadelphia, Pa.)

Public Baths Association of Philadelphia

Administrative Information

Restrictions

The collection is open for research.

Acquisition information

Gift of Stephen R. Newman, 1972.
Accession 72:49

Alternative format

None.

Preferred citation

Cite as: [Indicate cited item or series here], Public Baths Association of Philadelphia Records (Collection 1999), The Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

Processing note

Processing made possible by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. Any views, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this finding aid do not necessarily reflect those of the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Box and folder listing

Series 1. Administrative a. Trustees' minutes

Folder title	Date	Vol./Box	Folder
Trustees' minutes	1902-1950	vol. 1	
Trustees' minutes	1950	1	1

Series 1 Administrative b. Real estate

Folder title	Date	Box	Folder
Real estate records	1890-1903	Flat file	
Real estate records	1895-1898	1	2
Real estate records	1901-1905	1	3
Real estate records	1904-1923, 1942	Flat file	
Real estate records	1910-1911	1	4
Real estate records	1915-1916, 1923-1934	1	5
Real estate records	1930-1946	1	6
Plan of property	1942	Flat file	
Bonds	1902-1933	1	7
Bonds	1905, 1942	Flat file	

Series 1. Administrative c. Miscellaneous

Folder title	Date	Box	Folder
Copy of charter	1932	1	8
Internal Revenue Service correspondence	1920	1	9
History of the PBA	n.d.	1	10
Will of Elizabeth Pickering	1931	1	11
Miscellaneous	1938, n.d.	1	12

Series 2. Scrapbooks

Title	Date	Vol./Box	Folder
Scrapbook	1895-1902	vol. 2	
Scrapbook	1902-1929	vol. 3	
Scrapbook	1916-1944	vol. 4	
Posters	n.d.	Flat file	

Series 3. Photographs

Title	Date	Box	Folder
Photographs	n.d.	1	13