



Historical Society
of Pennsylvania

NEWS RELEASE

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The Historical Society of Pennsylvania Announces a New 'Digital Center for Americana'

Thousands of Documents will be Available Online, Starting with the Civil War Collection

Philadelphia, PA (May 28, 2009) — The Historical Society of Pennsylvania is pleased to announce the establishment of the “Digital Center for Americana,” a new branch of the archives department that will use innovative methods to process collections and make them available online. Over half a million dollars of funding has been secured with generous support from The Barra Foundation, Robert L. McNeil Jr., Collin Farquhar McNeil, The McLean Contributionship, and The Raab Collection.

The pilot project will focus on cataloguing 51 of the Historical Society’s significant 19th-century collections and digitizing thousands of letters, photographs, artwork, and other documents in time to commemorate the Civil War’s sesquicentennial in 2011-2015. The Historical Society will purchase an overhead camera, a flatbed scanner, and other digitization equipment, as well as hire several project staff to make these collections—and many others in the future—easily accessible to the public for the first time.

“We are thankful to our generous donors who made this project possible,” said Kim Sajet, president of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania. “The establishment of the Digital Center will open up enormous possibilities for people to gain greater access and a deeper understanding of our nation’s history, starting with the Civil War era.”

The Historical Society of Pennsylvania plans to begin the 16-month project this summer, and images will be added to the society’s searchable online database as they are digitized. Among the items to be digitized are about 3,000 Civil War-related graphics and manuscripts including the papers of President James Buchanan, Chief Justice Salmon P. Chase, General George Meade, General A. A. Humphreys, financier Jay Cooke, and 2,000 watercolors and related works by the self-taught artist David Kennedy. The Historical Society holds many nationally significant documents from the Civil War, including information about the 1864 Sanitary Fair, Union Army muster rolls, enlistment certificates, diaries, maps, cartoons, and photographs.

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The Historical Society will create a digital asset management system to store digital copies and descriptive information about the collection materials. The society will also improve the description and preservation of Civil War-related material, post an additional 17,400 graphic records to its online public access catalog, bolster the online catalog's search capabilities, and create a new online guide to all of its archival holdings.

“The Historical Society of Pennsylvania is such a treasure trove of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and American history that just a minute portion of its holdings has been accessible to the user public,” said Collin McNeil, donor and member of the Historical Society's board of councilors. “The digital age has dawned, offering many more opportunities for the dissemination of images and information.”

“The society has long played an elemental role in the preservation of our nation's history,” said Nathan Raab, vice president of the Raab Collection and member of the Historical Society's board of councilors. “This crucial Digital Center is yet one more step toward opening the doors of history to scholars and the historically passionate not only at 13th and Locust but around the world.”

The Digital Center for Americana will use a relatively new approach to processing archival collections. Similar institutions traditionally process select collections in depth, which is often time-consuming and expensive. This project aims to offer a basic level of description for a larger number of items, rather than a high level of description for just a few. In other words, the collections will be processed in breadth, not depth in order to more quickly make them available to people doing research. The Historical Society will integrate digitization with the processing, and in many cases will digitize selected items to enhance the collection description and act as “signposts” within the collection.

“The Digital Center for Americana will allow the Historical Society of Pennsylvania to post Web-searchable descriptions for all of our archival collections for the first time ever,” said Matthew Lyons, director of archives. “The project's innovative approach also lets us get information to researchers much more quickly than we could do with traditional archival methods.”

The Civil War material will mark the first phase of the Digital Center of Americana. In future years, the society plans to expand the Digital Center by digitizing additional documents. The Civil War collection was selected as the pilot project in part because of the upcoming commemoration of the Civil War sesquicentennial in 2011-2015. The Historical Society is the coordinating office for the Civil War History Consortium, a group of 60-plus institutions in southeastern Pennsylvania that seek to preserve and promote the stories, collections, and sites that reveal the Philadelphia region's crucial role during the Civil War era.

Interviews can be arranged with Matthew Lyons, the society's director of archives and collections management. Attached photographs should be credited: Courtesy of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

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About the Historical Society of Pennsylvania

Founded in 1824 in Philadelphia, the Historical Society of Pennsylvania collects and shares the stories of Pennsylvania. It is home to some 600,000 printed items and more than 21 million manuscript and graphic items. Its unparalleled collections encompass more than 300 years of America's history—from its 17th-century origins to the contributions of its most recent immigrants. The society's remarkable holdings together with its educational programming make it one of the nation's most important special collections libraries: a center of historical documentation and study, education, and engagement.

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