



Historical Society  
*of* Pennsylvania

Collection 3119

**Kensington Soup Society records**

**Creator: Kensington Soup Society**  
**1860-2009 (bulk 1870-1962)**  
**8 boxes, 13 volumes, 4.8 linear feet**

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**Sponsor:** Kensington Soup Society

**Restrictions:** None

**Related Collections at** Southwark Soup Society records (Collection

**HSP:** 3024)

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## Abstract

The Kensington Soup Society (KSS) served Philadelphia for over 100 years and was the last remaining neighborhood soup society in the city before closing in 2007. Their records are primarily administrative and financial: receipts, minutes, records of people served, records related to contractors and upkeep of their building, some ephemera, a little correspondence, and a few photographs and articles. While there are some gaps in content, as a whole, the collection significantly documents more than 100 years of the organization's work.

## Background note<sup>1</sup>

The Kensington Soup Society (KSS) was founded in 1844 as the East Kensington Soup Society. By 1853, the company had dropped "East" from its name and was incorporated as the Kensington Soup Society. In its early years, KSS maintained close relationships with several local organizations, such as the Kensington Methodist Episcopal Church, the Kensington Building Association, and the Kensington Fire and Marine Insurance Company. Among KSS's original founders were Richard S. Allen, William Cramp, Jacob K. Vaughan, Robert Pearce, and Joseph Lippincott. KSS was first located on Allen Street (Day Street) and moved to Crease Street in 1870. At 1036 Crease Street, the company built a permanent home. At the time, there were several other soup kitchens in Philadelphia, and KSS served residents living within the boundaries of Norris Street (East Norris Street), Front Street (North Front Street), Laurel Street (East Laurel Street), and the Delaware River.

When it first opened, KSS served as both a soup kitchen and a shelter. They welcomed poor and needy individuals with not only soup, but also baths, beds, and even work in the morning (for those who stayed the night). These latter practices, however, were abandoned after several years since the upkeep proved too costly. By the time KSS moved to Crease Street, it operated only as a soup kitchen between the months of December (later changed to November) and March. Throughout the 1870s, the number of people the kitchen served steadily grew into the thousands, and this increase in traffic led to concerns about the kinds of people being served. In response, in 1879, the

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<sup>1</sup> Much of the background information on KSS was culled from Kenneth W. Milano's *The History of the Kensington Soup Society* (2009). Copies of the book can be found in Box 9 of this collection, as well as in HSP's library.

society's board placed a "visitor position" on its employee roster. The person in this job helped keep out the "bummers" and ensured that each soup applicant was worthy of need and lived within KSS serving boundaries.

In 1909, KSS added coal distribution to its list of services. That year, the society established the John D. Williamson Coal Fund to provide coal to needy Kensington residents during the winter months. Its namesake, John D. Williamson, served as the society's president from 1909 until he died in 1919. Several of Williamson's family members also served with and assisted KSS over the course of its history. The coal fund was initially set up using yearly donations from Williamson, and received a finite amount of money from his estate after his death. KSS distributed coal until the funds ran out in 1963.

KSS continued served residents at a steady pace through the 1930s, which was a particularly difficult time for many aid societies in Philadelphia. KSS saw its financial donations all but end for a time, despite the much increased need from the neighborhood. The society briefly resorted to giving out free soup to the most destitute, and as the economic conditions eased, need decreased, and the society returned to a more balanced state and even expanded financially through increased investments during the 1940s—a period during which KSS especially helped injured servicemen and their families. Despite celebrating its 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 1944, KSS closed during the 1945-1946 season due to the death of its primary steward, Christian Scherz, and the sudden resignation of its superintendent, John Radcliffe.

As Philadelphia progressed into the later decades of the twentieth century, KSS's activities slowed but nonetheless persisted. During this time, in addition to ending the distribution of coal, the society switched from making its own soups to using canned soups. KSS ceased operations in 2007.

## Scope & content

The Kensington Soup Society records span eight boxes and thirteen volumes and date mostly from the 1860s to the 1960s, though there is a dearth of records from the 1910s, 1920s, and 1930s. A small portion of the material dates from the 1970s to the 2000s. Despite the gaps, the records significantly document KSS's general operations in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the 1940s (during its 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary), and the 1990s (during its 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary). Making up the bulk of the records are meeting minutes, financial records (primarily bills and receipts), and miscellaneous ephemera.

When the collection arrived, the records had been roughly arranged into three groups: administrative papers, financial papers, and miscellaneous papers. This order has been maintained and the groups have been placed into series. Most of the records were also foldered and labeled and some records remain in their original folders. Loose papers were placed into new folders and put in the appropriate series.

The first series (*Administrative*) is made up of two boxes and eight volumes. The first box contains meeting minutes dating from the 1860s to 1965 and from the 1982 and 1997;

the second box contains deeds and other legal documents, papers concerning bequests to the society, a few insurance papers; soup applications from 1961; KSS's constitution and by-laws from 1912; site plans of the society's once long-standing home at 1036 Crease Street; and other miscellaneous documents. Of particular interest are the society's early records of people served (Volumes 1-3); late nineteenth century minutes and reports (Box 1, Folders 1 and 5; Volume 4), which tend to be particularly detailed; and minutes and other papers kept by Harriet Jablonski, KSS secretary during the 1990s. Overall, these records shed light on the types and number of people KSS served, as well as the quantities of food that were given out over several decades. They also indirectly document the social and economic changes that took place in KSS's specific neighborhood. Jablonski's binders of papers (which have been disbound and placed in Box 1, Folders 9-11) include minutes, reports of the kitchen supervisor, financial papers, and correspondence, and provide an in-depth look into KSS's operations at a time when it was the only operating soup kitchen in Philadelphia.

The second series (*Financial*), at four boxes and five volumes, is the largest series and is made up almost entirely of bills and receipts from KSS's suppliers and contractors. In Boxes 3 and 4 are a mix of late nineteenth century receipts from grocers and food dealers (E. C. Eby & Co., Benjamin Saeltzer, Detwiler & Hartranft) and coal dealers (Lehigh Coal and Navigation, W. B. Kinsey). There are also utility bills from the Philadelphia Water Department and Philadelphia Gas Works; statements and cancelled checks from the Kensington National Bank and The Pennsylvania Company; groups of receipts from various local printers and stationers; as well as receipts from local newspapers for announcements placed by KSS. Box 4 also contains two folders of papers from the 1930s and 1940s from James R. Anderson, then KSS's treasurer, in account with the Theological Seminary of the Reformed Episcopal Church. Though these materials show no direct relation to KSS's finances, given the society's fraternization with several local churches, it is very likely that KSS maintained a relationship, possibly one that included fiscal ties, with this church; hence, Anderson's records remain in the series.

The bills and receipts pick up in the 1940s in Box 5, and are mainly from grocers and food dealers. However, there are some papers from contractors and building suppliers that document mid-century renovations to the society's Crease Street residence. Box 7 contains mostly unsorted, miscellaneous receipts grouped into "food" and "non-food" categories. Most of the volumes in this series also date from the mid-twentieth century and include a cash book (Volume 11), an order book (Volume 12), and an operations book that also contains guest's signatures from a March 2009 anniversary and book launch event (Volume 13).

Boxes 7 and 8 contain the final series of papers (*Miscellaneous*). These records consist of a wide assortment of items such as blank forms, society letterhead, and envelopes; copies of the society's annual report from 1874; appeals cards dating from 1918 to 1935; and news articles on the society, several of which date from the mid-1990s when KSS celebrated its 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary. There is also a folder of photographs showing the society and some of its workers and visitors during the 1990s, as well as a copy of and supplement to Kenneth W. Milano's *The History of the Kensington Soup Society* (2009).

## Overview of arrangement

Series I	Administrative, 1861-1997	2 boxes, 8 volumes
Series II	Financial, 1860-2009	4 boxes, 5 volumes
Series III	Miscellaneous, 1863-2009	2 boxes

## Separation report

None.

## Related materials

At the Historical Society of Pennsylvania:  
Southwark Soup Society records (Collection 3024)

## Bibliography

Milano, Kenneth W. *The History of the Kensington Soup Society*. Charleston, South Carolina: The History Press, 2009.

## Subjects

Charities – Pennsylvania – Philadelphia  
Food relief  
Kensington (Philadelphia, Pa.) – Economic conditions  
Philadelphia (Pa.) – Social conditions  
Poverty – Pennsylvania – Philadelphia  
Social problems – Pennsylvania – Philadelphia  
Social reformers – Pennsylvania – Philadelphia  
Social service – Pennsylvania – Philadelphia  
Soup kitchens – Pennsylvania – Philadelphia – History

Kensington Soup Society

## **Administrative Information**

### **Restrictions**

The collection is open for research.

### **Acquisition information**

Gift of the Kensington Soup Society, 2009.

Accession number: 2009.060.

### **Preferred citation**

Cite as: [Indicate cited item or series here], Kensington Soup Society records (Collection 3119), The Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

### **Processing note**

Processing made possible by a generous donation by the Kensington Soup Society.

## Box and folder listing

### Series 1. Administrative

Folder title	Date	Box/Volume	Folder(s)
Reports of the House Committee/Superintendent	1861-1877, 1916, 1940-1956	1	1
Mixed correspondence	1861-1960, 1986-1990	1	2-3
247 Allen Street	1868	1	4
Record of people served	1864-1920	Vols. 1-3	n/a
Minutes and manager's reports	1862-1845	1	5
Minute book	1875-1899	Vol. 4	n/a
Items removed from Volume 2	1875-1899	1	6
Minute book	1899-1951	Vol. 5	n/a
Meeting minutes and mixed papers	1952-1965	1	7
Meeting minutes	21 September 1982-8 September 1988	1	8
Papers kept by Harriet Jablonski, secretary [minutes, kitchen supervisor reports, financial papers, correspondence]	1990-1997	1	9-11
Deeds, mortgages, bonds, and agreements	1870[copy]-1944	2	1
Bequests – miscellaneous	30 September 1873	2	2
Bequests – Estate of Isaiah V. Williamson	1907, 1930-1942	2	3
Bequests – Estate of Annie E. Matthews	1915-1942	2	4
Bequests – Estate of Mary Ann Brown	1919 [copy], 1921, 1938	2	5
Record of people and food served	1900-1915	Vol. 6	n/a
Constitution and by-laws	1912	2	6
Roll book	1915-1949	Vol. 7	n/a
Items removed from Volume 7	1912-1949	2	7
Court papers	1932, 1935	2	8
Coal Fund – orders	1939-1945	2	9
100 <sup>th</sup> anniversary	1944	2	10
Brotherhood Mission referrals for coal	1958-1960	2	11

Applications for soup	1961	2	12
Site plans of 1036 Crease Street	1985	2	13
Soup and bread records	1985	Vol. 8	n/a
Items removed from Volume 8	1985	2	14

### Series 2. Financial

Folder title	Date	Box/Volume	Folder(s)
John G. Hopkins	1860-1862, 1889	3	1
Andrew Hetzell	1867, 1873	3	2
Water department	1868-1879	3	3
Miscellaneous coal dealers	1869-1873	3	4
Barker & Co.	1869-1879	3	5
Newspapers advertisements	circa 1870-1882	3	6
E. C. Eby & Co.	1870	3	7
Benjamin Saeltzer	1870-1871	3	8
Lehigh Coal and Navigation	1870-1872	3	9
Jos. Wilkins & Co.	1870-1877	3	10
Tener's Lehigh Coal Yard	1870-1879	3	11
Jane Roberts	1870, 1879, undated	3	12
Philadelphia Gas Works	1870-1879, 1940- 1956, 1963	3	13
W. J. Heiss & Bro.	1870-1882	3	14
Kensington National Bank	1870-1882, 1941	3	15
Fred Kramer	1871-1875	3	16
Detwiler & Hartrauft	1871-1876	3	17
Alexander McCoy	1871-1879	3	18
Robert Fraser	circa 1872-1882	3	19
Chas. P. Fisher	1872-1879	3	20
McFadden, Dickerson	circa 1872-1880	4	1
D. Dickerson	1872-1880	4	2
Hamburger & Merrihew/ Merrihew & Hults	1873, 1880, 1881	4	3
Printers, stationers	1873-1890, 1942, 1950	4	4
Richards & Culin	1874-1878	4	5
W. B. Kinsey – coal	1875-1880	4	6
Utilities – miscellaneous	1876, 1937, undated	4	7
Fling, Shrigley & Co.	1876-1879	4	8
Thomas Gould	1876-1882	4	9
Joseph H. Schiedt	1878-1880	4	10



R. B. Vaughan	1878-1882	4	11
Thomas H. Montgomery	1905-1906	4	12
Journal	1906-1939	Vol. 9	n/a
“Special report on recorded cash transactions”	2 April 1914-18 December 1939	4	13
“Emerald Hall” account book,	1915-1926	Vol. 10	n/a
Papers of James R. Anderson in account with the Theological Seminary of the Reformed Episcopal Church	1930-1941	4	14-15
The Pennsylvania Company: miscellaneous papers and cancelled checks	1931, 1939, 1943, 1954, 1956, 1957-1962	4	16-17
Robert Glendinning & Co.	1937, 1941, 1943	4	18
Building, contractors	1937-1944, 1953, 1958	4	19
Philadelphia Electric Company (PECO)	1937-1954	4	20
List of mortgages held	circa 1940	4	21
Edwin J. Malin	1940	5	1
Hare, Schenk & Company	1940-1941	5	2
Chris Scherz	1940-1942	5	3
John Radcliffe	1940-1942	5	4
Cash book	1940-1945	Vol. 11	n/a
B. Jacobson	1940-1956	5	5
Bell Telephone Company	1941, 1950-1955	5	6
Frank Merrihew & Co.	1942-1962	5	7-8
Accounts	1942-1967	5	9
Isaiah V. Williamson charitable trust	1944-1955	5	10
Statement of operations and treasurer’s reports	1945-1964	5	11
Order book	1947-1963	Vol. 12	n/a
Record book of operations/165 <sup>th</sup> anniversary and book launch guest list	1950-1959, 16 March 2009	Vol. 13	n/a
Virnelson’s Bakery (Mee’s Bakery)	1950-1978	5	12-13
Insurance	1952-1965	5	14
Bond Bread	1978-1979	6	1
Tender Touch Bakers	1979-1981	6	2
Miscellaneous food receipts	1970-1961	6	3-6
Miscellaneous non-food receipts	1870-1882, 1933-1962	6	7-8
Miscellaneous	1882-1954,	6	9

	undated		
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**Series 3. Miscellaneous**

Folder title	Date	Box/Volume	Folder(s)
Meeting notices	1863, circa 1920	7	1
Contributor's requests	circa 1870	7	2
Soup application form	circa 1870, 1910	7	3
Annual report	1873-1874	7	4
Columbia Oil Co. (blank receipts)	circa 1880	7	5
Map fragments	circa 1880	7	6
Appeals cards	1918-1935	7	7
Pennsylvania Railroad subscription warrants	1937	7	8
KSS letterhead	circa 1940	7	9
Guest lists and sample program 100 <sup>th</sup> anniversary	1944, 1994, undated	7	10
Non-KSS booklets, pamphlets, and postcards	1989, 1990, 1993, undated	7	11
Photographs	1992, 1994, undated	7	12
News articles including web print-outs of nineteenth century articles	1992, 1993, 2007, undated	7	13
<i>Fishtown Star</i>	24 February 1993	7	14
Compiled history on KSS	circa 1994	7	15
<i>The History of the Kensington Soup Kitchen</i> and supplement by Kenneth W. Milano	2009	7	16
John D. Williamson Coal Fund cards and notices	undated	8	1
Blank KSS member envelopes	undated	8	2
Miscellaneous genealogy notes	undated	8	3
Photocopies of letters and cards	undated	8	4