

# Historical Society of Philadelphia: A Place where Seeing Things in Person Still Matters

By Sam Donnellon

The real joy of research, says Dr. Lee Arnold, senior director of Library & Collections and chief operating officer at The Historical Society of Pennsylvania, is when one or more of the 21 million documents housed in the five-story building on Locust Street comes to life before his very eyes.

Watching retired basketball star and activist Valerie Still become emotional as she held and read the diary of her great grand uncle William Still, the father of the Underground Railroad. Listening to academics and researchers discuss and debate who wrote what into the margins of a handful of rough drafts of The Constitution, sounding at times as if they themselves had been transported back to that old statehouse we now know as Independence Hall.

Watching a student morph from disinterested teenager to wide-eyed time traveler as the project he or she has been assigned comes to life through the writings of their subjects.

“I say we collect real things,” says Arnold, who has been with HSP since 1992. “Digital items are not real things, and real things do matter. If they don’t, what are all those ‘nutcases’ doing in front of the Mona Lisa in the Louvre? You can just see her picture on Google. Why in the world?”

“Because seeing something in person matters.”

Founded in 1824, HSP is one of the nation’s largest archives of historical documents, showcasing collections on regional and national history, and offering a manuscript collection renowned for holdings that span from the 16th to 21st centuries. There are over 21 million manuscripts, books, and graphic images encompassing centuries of United States history. HSP also contains one of the largest family history collections on the east coast, containing genealogical material from every state east of the Mississippi River. The collection consists of some 600,000 books, pamphlets, serials, and microfilm reels; 20 million manuscripts; and over 300,000 graphics items, making it one of the nation’s largest non-governmental repositories of documentary materials.

Among the Society’s most prized: One of the original 13 surviving copies of the Official Edition of the Constitution, forged from the Constitutional Convention in 1787, as well as other handwritten drafts, marked with edits and objections from several participants.

This edition of the Constitution recently got when Sotheby’s auctioned off another one of the 13 copies for \$42.3 million, a record for a historical document. When it was last put up for sale in 1988, this same copy sold for \$165,000.

Would HSP ever sell its copy? Not a chance. It doesn't fit with its mission to be Philadelphia's Library for America.

HSP serves more than 4,000 on-site researchers annually and millions more around the globe who use its online resources. It is also a leading center for the documentation and study of ethnic communities and immigrant experiences in the 20th century, and one of the largest family history libraries in the country. Through educator workshops, research opportunities, public programs and lectures throughout the year, history is brought to life in a personal experiential way.

“We're not simply an antiquarian collector,” Arnold says. “We want to be relevant to the things that are happening now so that in 50 years people would say, ‘Well, how did Philadelphia react to Black Lives Matter?’”

“We have a fellow who's working on the reception of the Vietnamese community in Philadelphia. After the fall of Saigon there were issues between neighborhoods. And so now that's a topic of historical study.”

The Constitution is a more traditional example. Holding the oversized document, reading it, brings both the period and the perspectives of its influencers to life. It offers glimpses into the meanings and intent of those whose signatures are on it and an appreciation of how they got there. The original and early drafts of the Constitution show the evolution of the document as it was being debated and written in the summer of 1787, an active document taking shape in real time and still evolving today.

When Valerie Still read her great grand-uncle's logbook that era became real in a way it had not before. It contains detailed descriptions of the enslaved peoples he assisted in escaping and making their way north, tracing from farm to freedom, and the reason for and means of escape.

“Going to the Grand Canyon is different than looking at a picture of the Grand Canyon,” Arnold says. “You go to Wyoming and you see a Buffalo grazing in Yellowstone, and you're not going to just think, ‘Oh well.’ And when you look at our original documents or, depending on the condition of them, actually hold one of them -- it changes you, it really does.”

For Arnold, a married gay man, the actual written-down words that Dr. John Fryer gave to the American Psychiatric Association in 1972 – he wore a mask and disguised his voice to avoid losing his non-tenured teaching job at Temple because he was gay – continue to evoke the strongest of emotions. At the time of his speech, the APA categorized homosexuality as a mental illness. One year later that designation was removed, paving the way for the rights advances that followed.

“Those words are so momentous to me,” says Arnold, who is married to a psychiatrist. “There was no longer a reason to not take you in the military, to fire you from your job, to deny you

marriage. All these bans have fallen because John Fryer, a Philadelphian like me, was brave enough to say those words. It's hard not to be moved by that."

Fryer's speech began, "I am a homosexual. I am a psychiatrist". It is part of a collection of his papers housed in over 200 boxes at The Historical Society, and to say Arnold takes very good care of them would be an understatement.

Then again, there is nothing there that also doesn't fit that description. It's a lofty job, looking after living history. But the good doctor wouldn't have it any other way.

"We see people who when we showed them things, literally just started weeping uncontrollably," he says. "I'm no longer surprised when that happens. But it reinforces why these things are important to maintain."