

A Plea To Preserve Vital Penn (and other) Documents: The Penn Land Survey Preservation Project

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In June of 1995, The Pennsylvania Heritage Society (formerly The Friends of the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission) was awarded a grant of \$171,000 from The Pew Charitable Trusts for a three year project to preserve some of the Commonwealth's earliest land records, many signed by William Penn during his two visits to Pennsylvania, or his agents Thomas Holme, Benjamin Eastburn, John Logan, and others. The documents part of the record series is known as the "Old Rights," and is included among the Bureau of Land Records holdings (Record Group 17) at the State Archives in Harrisburg. The Land Records Office was one of the first units of government established by Penn upon receiving his 1681 Charter in order to sell his new lands. The documents are crucial to the study of Pennsylvania's geography and land disbursement: who bought land, how many acres, choice locations, etc. Some documents bear a survey map, which often describes the kind of trees from which datum points were taken, occasionally pinpointing Indian villages or other geographic features. Collectively, these documents provide a picture of what the Commonwealth looked like before settlement, farming, and industry changed the landscape forever. The records are used by genealogists, archeologists, geographic historians, and the like.

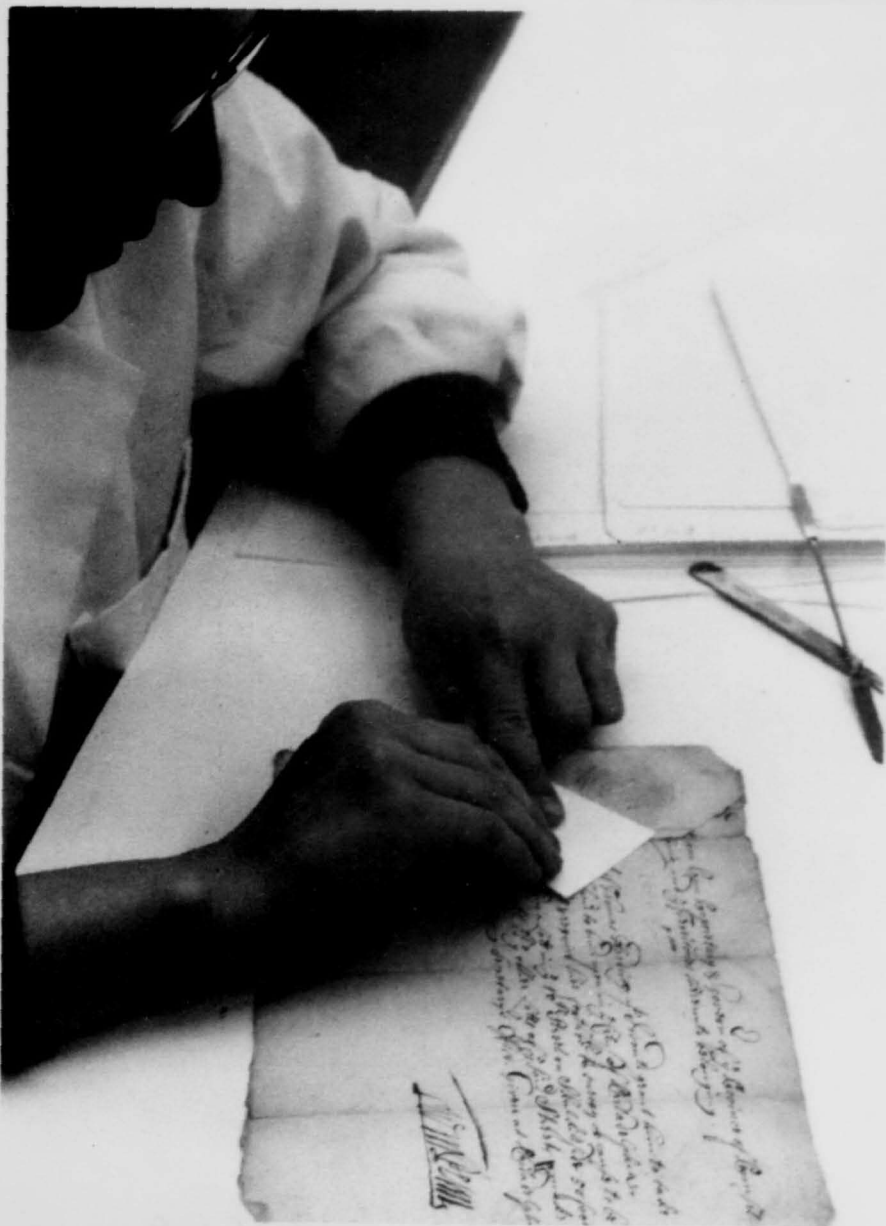
The documents are in dire need of conservation treatment. Due to their great age, the documents were yellowed, torn, brittle, and had a very acidic pH (3.5 or lower). They were also laminated during the 1960s by the Land Office. Though in vogue during the decades following the Second World War, lamination is now not recommended for historic documents, as it is a system involving heat and pressure which fuses acetate film to paper. It is difficult to undo if the document needs further treatment. The land records documents had to be placed in a solvent bath, usually acetone, to dissolve the film, before any other treatments could take place.

Jane Thompson Smith, a professional paper conservator, was hired for the project and began treatments in September 1995. As of this writing (April 1997), she has delaminated, mended, deacidified and encapsulated over 1600 documents. When Pew funds are exhausted in June 1998, she will have treated over 3000 land records. This is, unfortunately, a triage situation. The entire series of land surveys covering the whole state, including the "Old Rights," total over 144,000 laminated pieces. The 3000 chosen for care were those considered the most intrinsically valuable, i.e., those with Penn's signature, or the very earliest dated items. The others must wait until additional funds can

be sought. The Heritage Society has been accepting donations to augment the Pew funds.

To donate funds, or for more information about the project, contact Linda Ries, Project Director, Pennsylvania State Archives, Box 1026 Harrisburg, PA 17108-1026 (717) 787-3023.

Courtesy of Linda A. Ries



Conservator Jane Smith treats a document bearing William Penn's signature.

