The Archives: Its Strengths and Its Silences
by Karen Bowden

The membership of the Historical Society supports a wide range of programs and services, some of which members utilize directly, and some of which are provided to the public at large. As one of its core services, the Society maintains an archives of invaluable historical papers. The collecting of these materials in the late nineteenth century was one of the interests driving the founders of the Society when they organized in 1879. The Archives, accumulated over the last 100 years, contains the stuff of history, evidence which grounds writing and thinking about the past in the past: laws as they were debated and made; legal decisions and judgments as they were rendered; events as they were noted and interpreted; ideas as they evolved; human joys and sorrows as they were experienced and set down.

With material dating from 1765, the Archives is a key repository of primary sources on the history of Western Pennsylvania. There are more than 2,000 linear feet of written materials: “fugitive” public records for Pittsburgh and Western Pennsylvania counties; papers and account books of local businesses and industries; letters, diaries, journals; literary and historical manuscripts. The collection also includes more than 100,000 photographs of people, places, and activities; there is a small but growing collection of films and tapes.

Within the Archives there are strong manuscript collections relating to the early history of the region and the founding of families, institutions, and communities — including some of the only surviving evidence of the earliest days of iron, coal, and glass. Another substantial core is material on middle class life and small businesses in Pittsburgh in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Through recent initiatives, the Society is adding materials which will illuminate the twentieth century: the experience of immigrant and ethnic groups; the history of representative corporations; developments in education, health, and welfare. The Society’s collection complements the strong labor collections of the Archives of Industrial Society at the University of Pittsburgh and the holdings of the Pennsylvania Room at the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh.

There are numerous, telling, and inevitable silences in this collection, as in all archives. Much of human experience has gone unrecorded, and it is only a few who possess or command sufficient literacy to leave records. A large proportion of the records that have been made have succumbed to age, accident, or to generational house-cleaning. Many materials which survive are terse or repetitive — unyielding witness to what historian M.I. Finley has called the pastness of the past.

The Society’s collection, like all collections, has been shaped by a sense of what history is or ought to be. It is clear that for many years after it was organized in 1879, the Society’s members sought materials relating to the early history of the region, gathering up what they could find in trunks and attics. Some, as we shall see, thought to document their own lives, but many seem to have excluded the present and themselves from their concept.
of history. For those interested in the history of women and the professions, the sketch which introduces the Elvira Bleadinghiser papers can only be tantalizing: she was one of the first female attorneys to practice in Pittsburgh, and during her career in international and constitutional law she argued before both the state and U.S. Supreme Court. Her papers, however, turn out to be the fruits of her genealogical research, and contain no material which sheds light on her life or work. Several additional factors may explain the particularly large silences we encounter in Pittsburgh repositories. The fire of 1845 undoubtedly destroyed many early records as it swept through the city, and successive transformations of the economy meant rapid and frequent movement of households and businesses. Much of Pittsburgh history, moreover, was made by industrialists whose enterprises were private, and the records of many remain private to this day. Finally there is pervading it all a sense of the seeming irrelevance of the past in a city continually poised by technology at the edge of history.

Regret for what was never recorded and for what has been lost should not obscure the very real interest of what is left. The strong early collection is typified and anchored by the papers of Ebenezer Denny, Pittsburgh's first mayor, and his father-in-law James O'Hara, a frontier entrepreneur who supplied western forts and founded the region's first glass works. Their lives in the region span critical years in which the city was transformed from an outpost into a fully commercial and fledgling industrial city. O'Hara's records provide monthly census figures for western forts and detailed accounts of their provisioning — from beef to candles to quills to wagons — from 1796 to 1804. Daybooks provide similar insight into the material life of Pittsburgh, where the simple frontier provisions of many were supplemented for a few by silk, chocolate, flowered mugs, and violin strings.

O'Hara's letterbooks from 1805 to 1820 document business dealings that extend from Pittsburgh to Washington, New Orleans, and Liverpool and provide insight into his establishment of the first glass works in Pittsburgh, the first in the nation fired by coal. Scattered in the letterbooks are discussions of the seasons of glassmaking; the pay and benefits of blowers, cutters, and laborers; numerous experiments to improve the process; labor unrest; and the physical layout of his plant, together with rueful reflections on the difficult first years: “Pittsburgh, June 24, 1805... My works you know stand at the Coalpit on the river bank. I was engaged one year before we made glass, the first bottle (a very ordinary one) cost me 10,000 dollars; this bottle was all the blast produced; [1] had the works pulled down & began in the new ... I have not been able to reduce the balance due me by this manufactory under 30,000 dollars....”

Although much of this material has yet to find its interpreter, a recent article by James Skelton (William and Mary Quarterly, October 1989) suggests how even such terse fragments reveal the past in the hands of a skilled historian. Using as his source the Regimental Book of the First Regiment kept by Ebenezer Denny between 1786 and 1789, Skelton provides a picture of America's first regulars. The information listed in the book — birthplace, occupation, age, date and place of enlistment, discharges, deaths, desertions, and courts-martial — allows Skelton to paint a picture of those who left no other record. By comparing that picture with what is known of colonial and revolutionary armies, and by placing it in the larger social and economic context of the troubled new nation, Skelton is able to suggest the ways in which poverty and opportunity, necessity and nationalism, peopled a remarkably stable and cohesive army.

A second strength of the collection is the substantial core of materials documenting the business, social, and private lives of middle class families in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Account books, correspondence, diaries, clippings, and memorabilia illuminate day-to-day business dealings, social networks, household expenses, gender roles, parent-child relationships, education, and responses to local and national events. Of particular interest are several large collections which document single families over several generations, providing insight into continuity and change across rapid and sometimes abrupt changes in the landscape, economy, and social fabric of the city and of the nation.

The McClelland collection typifies these family collections, but is distinguished by its extent and thoroughness and by the McClellands' keen awareness of the significance of events large and small. The papers of James McClelland include diaries, essays, the records of the Pittsburgh Anti-Slavery Society, and correspondence, including an eyewitness account of the fire of 1845. There is extensive correspondence from a son in the Union army, including descriptions of his service as a military guard over Lincoln's bier in the East Room and in the ensuing funeral procession. Another cluster of materials contains letters from a second son who went west to work in an Arizona silver mine to help support the family during the economic reversal brought on by the war. This son's death in a raid against the Apache in 1863 came to the family's attention through a newspa
per clipping, and repeated letters seeking confirmation and details distill anxiety and heartbreak. Subsequent records document the medical education and practice of yet a third son, James Jr., and the extensive volunteer and political activities of his daughter, Sarah Collins McClelland, from 1916 until her death in 1979.

Even spare and unprepossessing collections often yield treasure. The Albert Logan papers constitute a small and somewhat haphazard collection which contains documents relating to his membership in the National Better Bedding Alliance, in other business and civic organizations, and in the National Guard. Buried among these materials is a set of papers which records Logan’s command as a general in the National Guard, deployed to the Turtle Creek Valley during the “industrial disturbances” of 1916. These include maps of the area, the telegram calling the guard to duty in the presence of “tumult, riot and mob violence,” an overview of the conduct of the deployment and of the attitude of the guardsmen, and 10 fascinating pages of military espionage reports from Wilmerding, Swissvale, and Turtle Creek.

The Society is taking several steps to enhance its archival program. The Library and Archives Department is improving description of its manuscript and photograph collections and will in the next two years computerize its entire catalogue. The larger quarters of the Regional History Center — the Society’s new headquarters, by 1995, in Pittsburgh’s Strip District — will afford proper climate control for these often fragile materials, a spacious and fully automated reading room for researchers, and greatly expanded space for storage, conservation and processing. Working in the collection reminds us of the continual fascination of even the most ordinary remnants of the past. The History Center will ensure access to the existing collections, and it will enable this and future generations to leave an even richer record of the diversity of life and work in Western Pennsylvania.

Opposite page: Ebenezer Denny was Pittsburgh’s first mayor, as well as a veteran of the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812. The Ebenezer Denny Papers anchor the Historical Society’s collections of early Pittsburgh materials. Above: Recent additions to the Society’s Archives emphasize the everyday lives of twentieth century Western Pennsylvanians, such as this photograph from the Archives’ Homewood-Brushton Collection of Eileen Waddy and Michael Impagliazzo in Bessy Ford’s backyard. Below: Workers chip steel blooms at the Aliquippa Blooming Mill, c. 1940. Archival materials, such as photographs, correspondence, account books, and diaries illustrate the growth of industry, as well as social and political change.