RARELY DOES A NEW ARCHIVAL COLLECTION ELICIT SUCH A RESPONSE FROM VISITORS AND STAFF ALIKE AS THE HISTORICAL SOCIETY’S RECENT ACQUISITION OF MID-19TH CENTURY MAPS FROM THE ALLEGHENY COUNTY PROTHONOTARY.

The 13 maps feature hand-drawn depictions of the high- and low-water marks on the banks of the Allegheny, Monongehela, and Ohio rivers and two cross-sections of bridges and viaducts based on a survey commissioned in 1859 and completed in 1861. Each map measures 61-by-35 inches and is framed in oak panels.

The maps contain precise measurements of the river levels, distances between measuring points, and the location of surveyor marks using longitude and latitude coordinates as recorded by commission secretary, James McClelland, Sr. They also show the location of the Pennsylvania Canal, bridges that aren’t there anymore, and islands now gone such as Killbuck Island on the north side of the Allegheny and Ohio rivers where Three Rivers Stadium sits. At fixed points along the river banks, stones were supposedly placed as visual markers for the surveyors. Each of the 250 stones was numbered. In addition, further inland spikes were placed to identify the surveyor’s tangent and arc lines.
At some point after their completion, the maps were framed and placed in a large cabinet built into the floor and walls of the City-County Building. There they hung, undisturbed, until an inquisitive prothonotary employee pried open the cabinet in July 1999. All other methods for determining the contents of the cabinet were exhausted until, upon approval of the county administration, the cabinet was forced open.

Besides the serendipitous manner in which they were found and subsequently donated to the Historical Society, the fact that the Historical Society had the papers of John McClelland, Sr., made it a rather exciting find from an archivist's point of view. Whereas often the manuscript archivist and subsequently the researcher must build the story of a document or record from little or no contextual clues, here is a case where all the pieces fit together—139 years later, but together nonetheless.

In the record book, which McClelland called "rough minutes," the reader can see the details of how the survey was conducted and the problems the commissioners encountered, such as political stalemates at the county and state government levels, landowners displeased by the survey results, and the continual battle with the natural elements of rain, snow, and ice.

While conducting the survey, McClelland kept detailed notes of the commission’s activity, recorded expenses, and retained correspondence received and sent during the two years. He was so meticulous he even recorded the 25 cents allocated for a waterproof bag to keep the record book dry while conducting business on site.

McClelland’s position on the commission evolved from a vacancy created by the resignation of Pittsburgh City Councilman William Wade. The other commissioners included Mayor of Allegheny John Morrison, and William Dilworth, a lumber dealer. Along with surveyor R. E. McGowen, the commission began its work in January 1859 and completed the project in April 1861.

Due to preservation conditions and the size of the maps, the History Center can display only two maps at any one time in the Library and Archives Reading Room. Each month a new set will be displayed. A conservation project to protect the maps and make them more accessible is set to begin soon.

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