

Pennsylvania Libraries: *Research & Practice*

Interview

In the PaLRaP Spotlight: Lee Arnold

*Senior Director of the Library & Collections and Chief Operating Officer
Historical Society of Pennsylvania (HSP)*



Interview by Stephanie Campbell

Stephanie Campbell is a Collection Development Project Librarian at Brodart, scamp1009@yahoo.com

Tell us a little about yourself, specifically, your career trajectory and what led you to special librarianship?

I used to manage a parking lot in Wisconsin. Nothing, and I repeat nothing, will send you off to library school like plowing snow in Milwaukee. I graduated from the University of Wisconsin–Madison in December 1987 and landed my first real library job at Princeton University in June 1988. I stayed there for four years, ending up as the Assistant University Librarian for Administrative Services. In late spring of 1992, I saw an ad for a library director of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania. I applied, interviewed in June, and moved to Philadelphia in August. I've been here ever since.

Can you briefly describe HSP's services for scholars, genealogists & community historians, teachers, and historical and heritage organizations? Which of these groups represents your most frequent customers?

We run a reading room for our researchers. Our largest single user-group is genealogists. However, what is wonderful about HSP is that our staff might be helping a post-doctorate fellow, and then a high school student with a history project due the next day, and then a genealogist who may not have been in a library for decades—all within minutes of each other. Besides a reading room we also offer a Research by Mail service for folks who can't make it here (plus we maintain a digital library and run a rights and reproductions service). Besides a library/archive we have a full schedule of public programming, including workshops, lectures and activities.

Here are some statistics from 2016:

- 3,676 researchers visited the reading room, 46% were HSP members, 24% Middle School, High School and College Students, 30% Non-Members
- 3,201 remote research requests, 2,922 were ready reference inquiries answered gratis. Of those, 63% were historical in nature and 37% genealogical. Research-by-Mail requests answered for a fee numbered 279 (32% Historical; 68% Genealogical.)
- 279 Research-by-Mail requests, 6% were from the Philadelphia Metropolitan area, 6% from elsewhere in Pennsylvania, 83% from other states; and 5% from other countries.
- 816 Rights and Reproductions requests
- 61 ILL requests
- 19 exhibition/loan inquiries
- 8,889 events/program attendees
- 245 display visitors
- Average number of researchers in the reading room: 14 on Tuesdays; 26 on Wednesdays; 14 on Thursdays; 20 on Fridays
- Front Desk staff registered 977 new researchers
- Reference Desk staff gave 244 library orientations and 8 research strategy interviews
- Reference Desk staff answered 11,329 on-site reference questions and reshelved 1,125 reels of microfilm [who says film is dead!]
- 416 (42%) original items catalogued; 576 (58%) items copy-catalogued

What are the challenges of running a special library with mostly closed stacks?

Anyone can use HSP. We only have three requirements for use: a valid photo ID, a daily fee of \$8 (HSP members and students get in for free), and you have to behave yourself. Sometimes when we are really busy, it may take 45 minutes or more to page something. Also, with a reduced staff, we are only open 25.5 hours a week for research. Preservation is a challenge. We have one conservator (30 hours a week). Her job really is to treat the worst items and to see that the collection areas are conducive to maintaining the collections for as long as possible (cool, dry, dark).

How has the digital age changed what you do at HSP?

Our paper collections exceed 21 million items. Our [Digital Library](http://digitallibrary.hsp.org) (digitallibrary.hsp.org) has almost 100,000 images. While our on-site users have declined somewhat over the last 20 years, our online users have increased. Three of our eight card catalogues are now part of our online catalogue called [Discover](http://discover.hsp.org) (discover.hsp.org). We are in the process of having our remaining card catalogues entered in as well. We have also created a database of names, gleaned from unique items in our collections, like the Oliver H. Bair Funeral Home, Home Missionary Society and Philadelphia Tavern Licenses Applications. We also offer commercial online resources for our users (JSTOR, Heritage Quest, Ancestry, FindMyPast, Historic Newspapers, etc.).

Describe a day-in-the-life at the HSP Library.

Every day is different. Besides being the library director, I am also the chief operating officer (running both facilities and human resources). So there is never a dull day. At any given time, I'm helping out in the reading room, running department meetings, speaking to outside groups about HSP, conducting workshops on-site about our resources, replacing tissue and towels in the restrooms, helping an employee navigate our pension and health insurance plans; you name it and I've done it. Our library has been featured on TLC's "Who Do You Think You Are" and PBS' "Genealogy Roadshow." We recently did background research for a [Pedigree dog food commercial](http://adage.com/article/advertising/a-dog-brings-revolutionary-war-fighters-pedigree-s-moving-film/308763) (adage.com/article/advertising/a-dog-brings-revolutionary-war-fighters-pedigree-s-moving-film/308763).

Can you tell us why you became a librarian/why you do what you do?

I always liked helping people. And particularly in linking people with information. I've always loved libraries. Growing up in rural Wisconsin in the 1970s, my local public library was my sanctuary. It was safe and filled with information to explore. In college, my work-study job was in the library and I befriended the head librarian, an older nun. She was old school—lots of shushing and stern looks. But for some reason we hit it off. I don't think the kind of librarian I am and the kind she was have much in common (I'm not a shusher). But perhaps if it weren't for her, I wouldn't be where I am today. And it still beats plowing snow in Milwaukee.