

## Behind-the-Scenes at the Philadelphia Stewardship Resource Center

The work of collections stewardship is rarely flashy. It occurs when a museum's collections manager monitors environmental conditions like light and humidity in storage areas; when an archivist inventories a newly accessioned box loaded with folders of miscellaneous papers; and when a curator makes the rounds with a pest management specialist, looking for signs of unwanted guests. This is the detail work of collections care—far removed from the blockbuster exhibitions that draw the crowds and press coverage.

During the past 10 years, CCAHA's Philadelphia Stewardship Resource Center has evolved into a national model for championing the daily work of collections care. Thanks to the generous support of the William Penn Foundation, the Philadelphia Stewardship Resource Center has worked behind-the-scenes with more than 70 Philadelphia-area organizations, assisting them with preservation planning, disaster planning, and the development of collections management policies.

At organization after organization, attitudes regarding the work of stewardship have shifted. New collections care positions have been created. Disaster plans for collections have been written, approved, and disseminated. Environmental monitoring programs have been established. Boards have approved operating budgets with first-time allocations targeted for collections care. And exciting stewardship initiatives and projects continue to come to fruition.

At CCAHA, we saw the long-term impact of this work in 2010 when an independent analyst conducted a statewide survey of collecting institutions in Pennsylvania. Cross-tabulations revealed that the organizations that participated in CCAHA's Stewardship programs were the across-the-board leaders in caring for their collections. They were not only doing the work of collections care—they were excelling at it!

The Philadelphia Stewardship Resource Center employs a two-phase model, recommended by the American Alliance of Museums. First, organizations apply to receive Preservation Needs Assessments—thorough examinations of each organization's policies, practices, and conditions that affect collections, along with recommendations for moving ahead. Next, CCAHA works with each organization to develop a Preservation Plan, a strategic plan that prioritizes the recommendations of the Preservation Needs Assessment, placing them into an achievable timetable with benchmarks and assignment of responsibilities. In addition to these two services, the Resource Center offers assistance in disaster planning for collections, and development of collections management policies.

Laura Hartz Stanton, CCAHA's Director of Preservation Services, and Dyani Feige, Preservation Specialist, often work on-site at the Stewardship organizations, examining storage and exhibition areas and discussing collections care needs with staff. Since no two sites or collections are alike, every plan is different.

After Stanton and Feige deliver the written plans, the organizations move into action:

### **THE AFRICAN EPISCOPAL CHURCH OF ST. THOMAS:**

The collections at St. Thomas are especially significant because they document both its role as the first African American Episcopal Church in the United States and the life and ministry of the Reverend Absalom Jones, the country's first Episcopal priest of African descent and St. Thomas' first rector. St. Thomas archivist Mary Sewell Smith used CCAHA's recommendations to guide the process of building a new archival facility: "We were able to give the architects and construction planners the information we had from CCAHA and say, 'This is what we need!'"

**BETSY ROSS HOUSE:** One of the most popular of Philadelphia's historic sites, the Betsy Ross House requested guidance in moving forward with their preservation goals. With CCAHA's help, they have retrofitted a room for environmentally sound archival storage and implemented a new records management program. Their director, Lisa Acker Moulder, reported that "for the first time in the 100-plus year history of this historic house museum, we now have the ability to allow scholars and students to use our archival collections for research purposes."

**WESTTOWN SCHOOL:** Westtown School's Esther Duke Archives contains the records, books, and artifacts that tell the history of the school, which was founded by the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends in 1799. After receiving a Preservation Needs Assessment and developing a Preservation Plan, the Archives established an environmental monitoring program and started using dataloggers to monitor storage conditions in its collection spaces. "Participation in the Resource Center reinforced for us the importance of understanding the overall environment in caring for the collection," said Westtown School archivist Mary Brooks.

While some planning recommendations are relatively easy to implement, others require larger investments of time and resources. The Stewardship organizations have responded with enthusiasm, generating successful requests to national funding sources, private foundations, corporations, and individuals. To date, the programs of the Philadelphia Stewardship Resource Center have leveraged more than \$3 million in outside funding for new stewardship initiatives.

The work of caring for our country's great collections is a privilege, but it is also filled with daunting responsibilities. Through the programs of the Philadelphia Stewardship Resource Center, CCAHA offers expertise and encouragement, acknowledging that stewardship tasks are of singular importance. Through this behind-the-scenes work, our cultural heritage is being preserved.

—LEE PRICE



1 / The historic Betsy Ross House  
2 / A small room in the attic of the historic house was turned into an environmentally sound archival storage space as a result of Betsy Ross House's implementation of their Preservation Plan (images courtesy of the Betsy Ross House)