



# Salvaging **HISTORY**

By **CHRISTOPHER T. BAER**

**EDITORS' NOTE**

In December 2003, the Hagley Museum and Library in Greenville, Del., sponsored a symposium to mark the 20th anniversary of a multi-faceted effort to acquire, sort, index, and make available to researchers the records of the Pennsylvania Railroad. Although the standing philosophy in museum and archival circles is to keep all surviving records of an organization together, the PRR was so large, and its paper trail so wide, that no single museum or agency could swallow them whole. As a result, nine archives and libraries, spread out from Boston to Michigan, agreed to divide the files among them. A major share went to the Hagley, situated 25 miles south of the former PRR headquarters city of Philadelphia. Chris Baer of the Hagley staff played the pivotal role in the process of sorting, appraising, and preserving the records. This article, adapted from Baer's address at the symposium, details of the challenges faced by museums in preserving the written record (as opposed to the rolling stock and physical structures) of railroads.

The Hagley Museum and Library was formed in 1961 as successor to the private library amassed by Pierre S. du Pont (1870-1954), one of the architects of the modern Du Pont Co. We were conceived as an independent research library dedicated to the study of American business and industry, and we modeled ourselves on the successful Baker Library of the Harvard Business School.

One aim was to provide a correction to the New England bias in the written history of American industrialization, something once exhibited by the early issues of this very journal. Our initial focus was to be the Philadelphia region down to about 1880, although we have since expanded our scope in both space and time. Consequently, the railroad-coal-steel complex was at the heart of our endeavors from the beginning, and although we are now much more up-to-date with computers and telecommunications, we remain a major repository for railroad history.

If one begins with railroads in the Philadelphia region, one company indisputably heads the list. PRR's significance to us, however, goes beyond the internal workings of a large railroad. Our quest for company records was part of our general strategy of preserving the records of leading organizations in various sectors of the economy.

Even acknowledging the importance of "history from the bottom up," there is something to be said for focusing on the records and history of big organizations. They cast big shadows, they are involved in wider networks of relationships, they exert an impact on more communities, they do more work, they have more employees, and so on. The growth to bigness usually stems from some kind of success, however transitory, even if it is only overreaching

**An archivist works in the bare-bulb aisle of the PRR records center at Merion Avenue, part of the 400,000 cubic feet of Pennsy historical documents examined by researchers.**

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ambition or rent gathering.

In addition, big organizations are associated with big innovations that transform society in multiple ways: the steam railroad, mass-produced steel, electric grids, petrochemicals, the automobile, television, the computer, the big-box store. Not the least of these ways is that big organizations create a greater need for internal communications and record keeping.

Bigness, however, can become an overwhelming liability in a rapidly changing environment. Big organizations are more likely to be enmeshed in the larger social movements and controversies of the time, more likely to become big targets, and more likely to confront the business-strategy alternatives of "adapt or die."

It is that "adapt or die" scenario that poses both the greatest challenge and the greatest opportunity to those of us who are interested in industrial history. Whenever a company dies, and even more so when it changes hands, merges, downsizes, or otherwise reinvents itself, the slogan is almost always "out with the old." That is when a well-organized salvage effort is most warranted. Hagley's major collections are in large measure the result of such endeavors, and none more so than the Pennsylvania Railroad archive.

Railroading in the Northeastern states experienced its adapt-or-die crisis after the recession of 1957, and by 1973, almost every company was in the hands of bankruptcy trustees. Standing out like a beached whale was the Penn Central Transportation Co., a dramatically failed merger of the Pennsylvania, its major rival, the New York Central Railroad, and the moribund New York, New Haven & Hartford Railroad. Penn Central had declared bankruptcy in June 1970, less than 2½ years after the PRR-NYC merger took place.

## **“PRR had never developed a modern records center.... The ‘PRR way’ was to wrap files in brown paper or to stuff them into packing boxes.”**

The predecessors of these companies went all the way back to the beginnings of railroading in the 1820s and 1830s, and the Pennsylvania by itself had accounted for about 10 percent of the U.S. railroad industry. The importance of these companies was obvious, and as almost no researchers had been granted access to their records, the loss to historical scholarship would have been equally significant.

By 1975, the details of a government bailout of Penn Central, Reading, Erie Lackawanna, Lehigh Valley, Jersey Central, and others had been hammered out. A government-controlled corporation, Consolidated Rail Corp., or Conrail, would buy the viable part of the rail network from the bankrupt companies and rehabilitate it with federal funds. During Conrail’s planning phase, historians Daniel W. Collins and James O. Morris, who had organized a project to preserve railroad labor union archives at Cornell University, expressed their concerns about the fate of records then in the hands of the bankrupt estates to officials of the Federal Railroad Administration. FRA then formed a committee on historical railroad records and arranged that Hagley should be the representative of the library community. Hagley supplied three members of the committee: Stephen Salsbury, author of a history of the Western of Massachusetts; Richmond D. Williams, then library director; and my predecessor, Hugh R. Gibb, a former PRR employee and historian for the National Railway Historical Society.

A preliminary foray by Gibb into the records of the Lehigh Valley and Jersey Central in the spring of 1976 proved that both the volume of records and the legal questions surrounding ownership of title to them would require a more organized effort. Accordingly, Hagley secured funding from the National Historical Publications and Records Commission for a seven-month records survey covering all the bankrupts, and suggested policies for the preservation of records inherited by Conrail. Gibb and Duane Swanson, who had handled the transfer of the Great Northern Railway records to the Minnesota Historical Society, completed the survey in July 1977, a month before I arrived at Hagley.<sup>1</sup>

Unfortunately, little follow-up took place. It was apparent that dealing with the entire mass of records was beyond the resources of any single library, and neither Conrail nor the bankruptcy trustees had a clear idea of whether any particular record would be needed by one, both, or neither. A few records were placed in repositories on a

case-by-case basis, but this was handled almost entirely on the whims of one of the companies. Some career railroad officers were concerned about preserving their companies’ heritage; others were not.

The survey had confirmed that the Pennsylvania Railroad records were the main prize. By the early 1980s, protocols for record ownership and destruction were in place between Conrail and the bankrupts, and records destruction began in earnest. Both Hagley and the Pennsylvania State Archives were already negotiating for PRR records through separate contacts. Since the amount of material was so large, it made sense to pool our efforts and try to arrange a logical, rather than first-come-first-served, scheme for dividing the records.

This would require a separate on-site staff, which was funded by a \$300,000 preservation grant from the NHRPC. In order to justify the cost and broaden support, the number of participating repositories was raised to nine, eight of which received records of the former PRR. The records were to be distributed on a combined geographic-subject basis.

The grant was submitted from, and managed at, Hagley by then-Chief Curator Michael Nash. Each institution appointed one member to a steering committee that met in Philadelphia twice a year.

Although the hiring was competitive, both Hagley and PHMC agreed that I should lead the appraisal team that would select the records to be retained. I had just completed two Hagley projects that demonstrated the necessary mix of knowledge and skills. For the cartographical and statistical study *Canals & Railroads of the Mid-Atlantic States: 1800-1860* (Hagley, 1981), I had read almost the entire antebellum pamphlet, report, and periodical railroad literature for six states. In appraising and processing the 350-linear-foot archive of the Westmoreland Coal Co., I had demonstrated an ability to ferret out the good stuff buried in back closets and dusty storage rooms.

I had also read most of the histories of the PRR then available, along with a lot of railroad history, both academic and popular, by such authors as Dick Overton, George W. Hilton, and Gerald M. Best. Strange to say, I had never considered myself a PRR fan, but in my part of the country, the PRR was a presence that could not be ignored. I certainly did not know as much about the PRR as I do now, but at least I knew the difference between an S1 and an



Loren Miller

Chris Baer, Michael Nash, and Craig Orr at their cramped quarters in Building Four, Merion Avenue. The workspace featured an air conditioner (the only one at the complex), an ancient manual typewriter, three desks, and a 1950s system map hanging on the wall, but the absence of heat made the building uninhabitable during winter.



Christopher T. Baer



PRR photo, Dan Copper Collection

**The 1923 fire that burned down the train shed of Broad Street Station also destroyed many pre-1910 records of PRR stored under the shed. Those that survived, along with records kept elsewhere in the system, were part of the unprecedented effort by the Hagley and eight other institutions to sort and save for the historical record.**

S2, Pitcairn and Pitman, and a host of similar distinctions, and that meant we could begin work directly.

As my assistant, we hired Craig Orr, who later went on to the Smithsonian Institution. Craig had just graduated from the University of Delaware and had done some good work for Hagley as a student intern. Craig knew little about railroads at that point but had a deep interest in military history. I think this enabled him to grasp quickly both the military-type structure of the PRR and the military-type strategies of railroad development and expansion. Craig further proved to be adept at logistics, assuming most of the responsibility for managing the physical flow of the records, and leaving me free to devote most of my time to planning and analysis.

We employed three successive student assistants who moved boxes and did routine clerical work. Because of the number of institutions and corporate players involved, fully a third of our time was consumed in handling correspondence and circulating copies of documents. Perhaps because we had invaded the Pennsylvania's inner sanctum,

the old PRR bureaucratic spirit possessed us like King Tut's curse.

Most researchers encounter archives that are neatly arranged in acid-free boxes in a relatively sedate reading room. Encountering them in the field does have an archaeological flavor, with broken and scattered treasures lying abandoned amidst dust and detritus. Like many older companies, PRR had never developed a modern records center. People familiar with PRR history generally are aware of the great fire that destroyed the huge arched train shed of Broad Street Station in 1923, but few know that the company used the space under the shed to store its old records, while the more current and valuable items were kept in vaults in the head-house offices. Most of what the fire did not consume was destroyed by the thousands of gallons of water poured into the burning building by firefighters. Consequently, many pre-1910 records were lost, and pre-1880 survivors are limited to those valuable books and papers from the vaults.

Two years after the fire, PRR purchased a former ball-

## **“Perhaps because we had invaded the Pennsylvania’s inner sanctum, the old PRR bureaucratic spirit possessed us like King Tut’s curse.”**

bearing factory on Merion Avenue in West Philadelphia. It consisted of a string of seven connected buildings of various heights stretching for several blocks along the main line just across the tracks from the 46th Street Yard and engine terminal. The company filled most of the space with cheaply built wooden shelving up to the ceilings, and on these they placed the surviving records from Broad Street and other old records collected from storage buildings in Chicago; Logansport, Ind.; Pittsburgh; and Sunbury, Pa.

To these were added records that had subsequently been retired from files rooms, mostly in Philadelphia. PRR adopted the use of modern record cartons relatively late. The “PRR way” was to wrap files in brown paper or to stuff them into packing boxes tied with heavy twine. In proper PRR fashion, there were also official forms, the G-56, which was filled in by the officer consigning the records, and the G-57, which was a corresponding box label. Copies of the G-56s were filed in the building’s office by department, classified as either permanent or temporary. The contents of the G-56s varied substantially, from fairly detailed subject descriptions to the frustratingly vague, like “R&E Files,” which we discovered meant “road and equipment.”

**M**erion Avenue became notorious among all who worked or visited there. The small office was a little island of air-conditioned civilization. The rest of the buildings were dark, with many boarded-up windows; narrow aisles; weak, bare-bulb incandescent lighting; and heat that grew more feeble the further one penetrated into the depths. The building had been bathed in locomotive smoke for 30 years, and many packages that probably had not been touched since 1925 resembled so many brown loaves of bread iced with soot.

In this uninviting environment, we were assigned three desks and a table in the back of Building Four, with an ancient manual typewriter and a large 1950s PRR system map hanging on one wall. Here we made our headquarters for the next 2½ years. It all looked rather chaotic, but there was a real order here, once you understood it. One might also think, as the 1976 team had, that it was all, or almost all, still here. Wrong again. Whole departments had never sent their records here at all, or had stopped doing so years earlier. We discovered that huge amounts of records of great potential value had been destroyed since 1969. Among such losses, the records of the General Manager,

the chief operating officer for Lines East, were among the most conspicuous, and the great bulk of the records of the Vice President in Charge of Operations were being destroyed in the months when we were organizing our project. Fortunately, the surviving remnant still contained many important files.

We later discovered that the inbound files of PRR Presidents J. Edgar Thomson, Thomas A. Scott, and George B. Roberts (1852-1897), described only as “a cartload,” were destroyed as long ago as 1910, presumably to frustrate government investigators, and the outbound letter books presumably perished in the 1923 fire.

There were many departments that did not send records



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**Corporate records related to the Penn Central bankruptcy were moved to 401 North Broad St., a former Reading Railroad freight warehouse. The building’s heating system and modern records space were appreciated by the archivists, who used it as their winter work base.**

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to Merion Avenue. The Eastern Region and the Mechanical Department used a large storeroom over the concourse of Philadelphia’s 30th Street Station, which had also been hit by fire in the early 1980s. The Pennsylvania State Archives had salvaged the equipment drawings and the Pennsylvania Railroad Technical & Historical Society (PRRT&HS) salvaged the office files of the Mechanical Department. Many items were taken by individuals, some of which we were later able to buy and others that I later noticed being offered for sale at railroad shows and flea markets.

Alas, the records of the Eastern Region, the heart of the railroad between Philadelphia and Altoona, are gone, so there is much more detailed information on infrastructure improvements and local conditions west of the mountain than east of it. Furthermore, Conrail’s record destruction program had all but wiped out the records stored at regional and divisional headquarters, as the company consolidated its operating units. Again, the PRRT&HS had managed to obtain many of the records from the Pittsburgh station before it was gutted.

Fortunately, the total volume of records was so large—and the railroad bureaucracy so heavy with overlapping interdepartmental correspondence—that more than enough gold remained. For example, much of the information that would have been in the files of the V.P.-Operations was still preserved in the files of his staff officers, such as the Chief Engineer, the Chief of Motive Power, the Chiefs of Transportation, and the Chief of Personnel. The large projects on the Eastern Region, including all of the major yards and stations, are documented in the files of the

Engineering Department.

The one drawback to the project was that we were never able to penetrate the multi-layered and turf-conscious Conrail bureaucracy and gain access to historically valuable records held in the company’s offices. Regrettably, much of this material was destroyed when Conrail moved all of its Philadelphia personnel into a new headquarters tower in the early 1990s.

While most of the departmental records had remained in Merion Avenue and passed into Conrail’s custody, Penn Central, which had been successfully reorganized as a conglomerate, had removed the corporate records, such as minute books, annual reports, account books, stock certificates, and also anything relating to matters connected with the bankruptcy to a separate, modern records center at 401 North Broad St., a huge former Reading Railroad freight warehouse situated across town. Since our workspace at Merion Avenue was unheated, we decamped to 401 late in the fall and returned in the spring.

For historians accustomed only to consulting records a few cartons at a time, the obvious question must be, how do you respond when faced with nearly 400,000 cubic feet of paper? The process was labor-intensive, but actually very simple. We reviewed the railroad’s record control sheets to determine what was actually there and what already had been destroyed. We also reviewed published materials to build a detailed understanding of the company’s history, and particularly the complicated

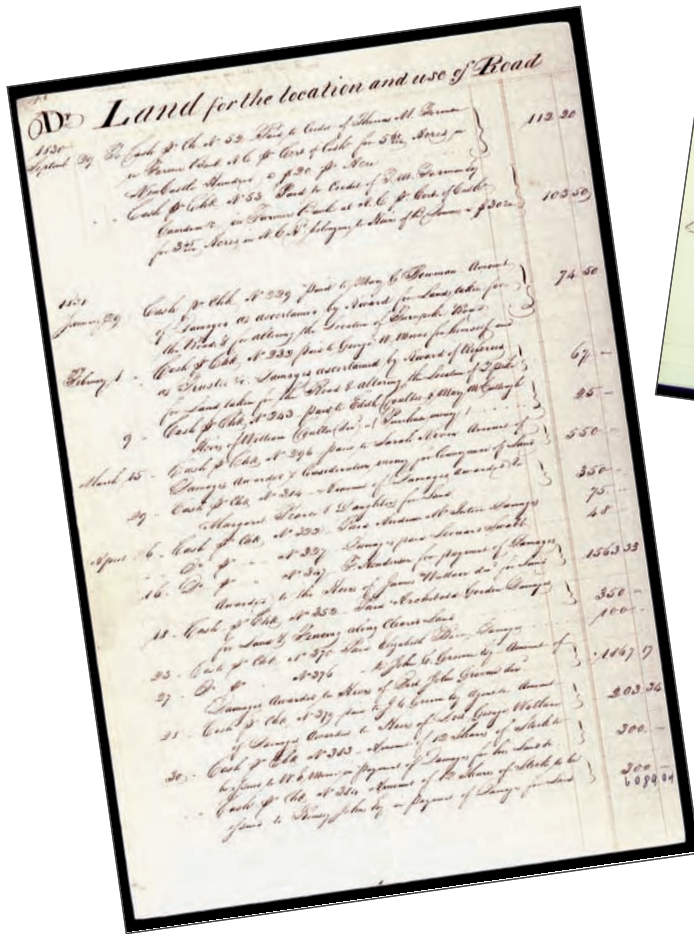
*Milwaukee Oh - M* DISCIPLINE RECORD

NATURE OF OFFENSE	DISCIPLINE	DATE OF OFFENSE	DATE IMPOSED	FILE
<i>Sleeping on duty - Halmesville</i>	<i>1 wk</i>	<i>5/24</i>	<i>5/26/11</i>	
<i>" " " Killbuck</i>	<i>1 "</i>	<i>7/13</i>	<i>7/14/11</i>	
<i>" " " Blensmont</i>	<i>1 "</i>	<i>7/14</i>	<i>7/18/11</i>	
<i>Delaying train 625 at Blensmont</i>	<i>1 "</i>	<i>4/7</i>	<i>4/12/11</i>	
<i>Stopping train 624</i>	<i>1 "</i>	<i>5/22</i>	<i>5/24/11</i>	
<i>Failure to deliver order ahead of 605</i>	<i>Rep.</i>	<i>7/20</i>	<i>7/24/11</i>	
<i>Sleeping on duty - Warwick</i>	<i>1 week</i>	<i>11/14</i>	<i>11/14/11</i>	

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CORNWELLS HILLS, PA. 19020

Hundreds of linear feet of employee case files were retained by PRR. Discipline records detailing punishments meted out to workers for sleeping on the job or delaying trains, give researchers a flavor of everyday life on the railroad.

Hagley Museum and Library



Handwritten notes of purchases of iron bars and land come from the pages of the New Castle & Frenchtown Railroad ledger of 1830-31, which was found at the Merion Avenue facility.

Hagley Museum and Library

“family tree” of corporate successions and relationships among the approximately 1,200 separate companies, using the valuation reports compiled by the Interstate Commerce Commission in the 1910s. From this, we worked out a preliminary scheme for dividing the records among the various repositories. This phase took about three months.

Hagley and the Pennsylvania State Archives agreed to divide the core records of the various departments by departmental function, usually expressed as horizontal columns on the organization chart. Fortunately, there were two sets of PRR Board minutes, one each for Hagley and the Pennsylvania State Archives, and multiple copies of annual reports and other internal publications. Many other corporate records had been microfilmed, also permitting the distribution of multiple copies.

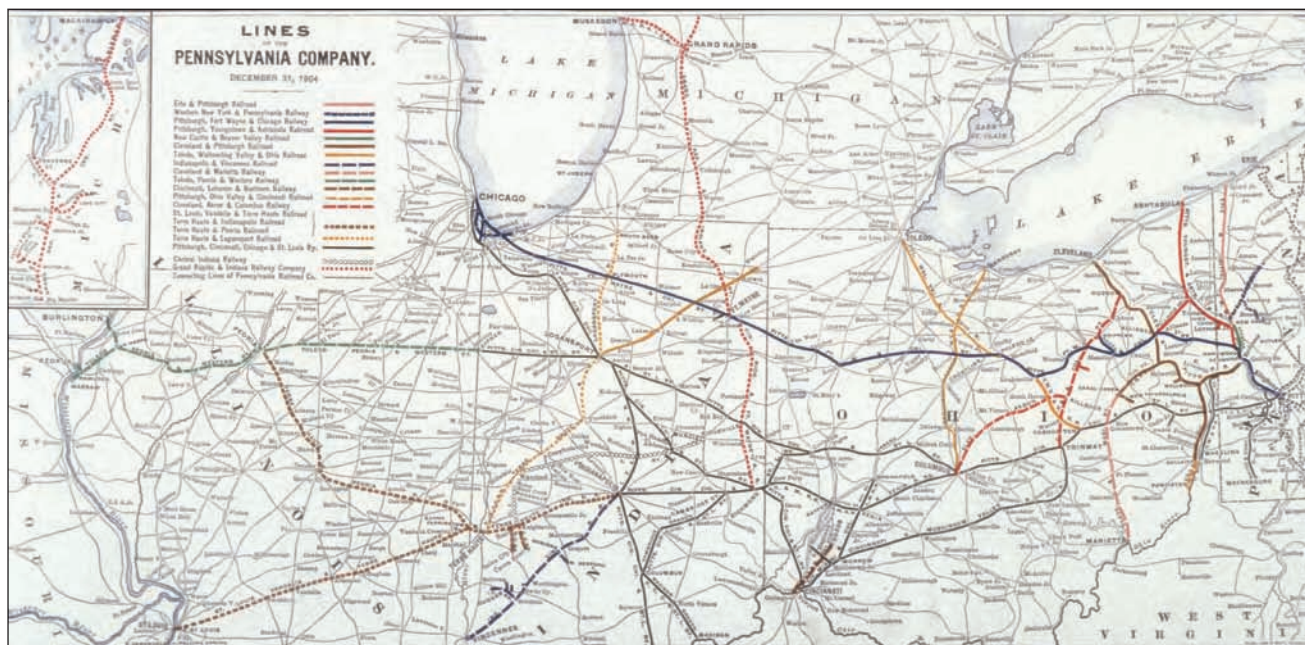
Temple University in Philadelphia received the records of the Voluntary Relief and Pension Departments, with their hundreds of linear feet of employee case files. Each repository received the corporate records of clusters of companies within its geographic scope. For example, the Camden & Amboy Railroad and West Jersey & Seashore Railroad groups went to the New Jersey State Archives in Trenton, N.J. An exception to this rule was that, in the absence of a willing Chicago-area repository, Hagley took the records of PRR’s Lines West (prior to 1920,

this was the separate operating organization for PRR service west of Pittsburgh) other than the Grand Rapids & Indiana Railroad group. GR&I records went to the Bentley Historical Library at the University of Michigan, which also received records of the Michigan Central, Lake Shore, and Ann Arbor Railroads. This put the vast bulk of PRR records within a two-hour travel radius of Philadelphia.

As part of this preliminary process, we generated a card index for each of the companies, departments, regions, and divisions in the Penn Central system. To these cards, we added any relevant data discovered as we examined the records themselves. Even in 1984, when computer technology for gathering and managing archival data was primitive, some people complained about our use of “archaic” card files. But they were cheap, easily carried to the shelves, and quite sensible in an environment where even the telephones were regularly stolen. The card file, now kept in my office, is still useful for answering research questions and identifying PRR officials from their initials on correspondence.

The corporate records were easily sorted according to this preliminary scheme. The bulk of the appraisal process consisted of applying what archivists call “special selection” to the records of the various functional departments. The vehicle for this was a standardized data sheet, which





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**This December 1904 map of Pennsylvania lines west of Pittsburgh includes the affiliates that the railroad helped finance or built over the years and is an excellent resource for researchers either intimidated or simply bewildered by the complex web of PRR's Midwest empire.**

combined information from the existing railroad-generated record control sheets with an analysis we conducted that was based on examining a sample of each record series. The data sheet was also used to recommend whether a particular series should be preserved in full or destroyed, or if sampled, on what basis. The data sheets were then circulated to all of the members of the steering committee and to representatives of both companies (Conrail and Penn Central). They were marked, stamped, and dated to track the subsequent movement of each record series through final delivery.

We devised separate appraisal strategies for each type of record and discussed them with the steering committee in advance. For example, we would keep all minute books and board papers for every company, but not account books for secondary companies after 1888, when annual financial reports to the ICC began. Account books for non-railroad companies, which did not report to the ICC, were kept. Generally, our intention was to retain documentation in volume approximately proportional to the importance of a particular phenomenon or event in the history of the company, then of railroad history, and then U.S. history generally.<sup>2</sup>

For example, we were certain to retain documentation in depth for the construction of major stations, yards, and bridges, but less for smaller ones. We used the same process to evaluate the records of lawsuits and regulatory proceedings. At the same time, we maintained at least minimal documentation of as many members as possible of

whole classes of physical objects: stations, yards, towers, shops, locomotives, and cars, but not, for example, bridges, where the great quantity of common highway overpasses and underpasses (PRR owned more than 10,000 bridges) made the number far too large.

Conceptually, we view archival appraisal as a three-cornered cost-benefit analysis. One element is the further cost of arrangement and storage. Another is anticipated use. We tried to examine and analyze the various ways in which the records might be used. This involved understanding historiographical interests and trends, but also the potential use of records for things like historic register nominations, restorations, building models, exhibits, public relations, or other business uses.

A final goal is our responsibility to the memory of the organization that created the records. That is, the final composition of the archive of preserved records should give an accurate, albeit warts-and-all, picture of their creators, their priorities, and interests. Creating the necessary knowledge base from which to make such judgments entailed reading a wide variety of things that had been written about the companies before starting, then gleaning additional information from the records as we examined them. To make the cut, a given file or series had to meet one of these last two criteria, and do so with a high ratio of information to bulk. Of course, we did not employ the process so mechanically that we would dis-

## “The most valuable records proved to be the correspondence or project files of middle managers who acted as a bridge and filter for top management.”

regard occasional nuggets of social or human interest or other unexpected finds. But this was the basic process. It was just a matter of analyze, evaluate, and repeat several thousand times.

In practice, close to 90 per cent of records are easily rejected as documenting day-to-day transactions of little significance. Another 3 to 5 per cent are of undisputed value and are often required by law to be retained. The rest is debatable, and their retention was a question of applying experience and skill.

For research purposes, the most valuable records were the correspondence or project files of middle managers who acted as both a bridge and filter for top management, always sifting and summarizing. Likewise, staff officers are important, because that is where specialized expertise is concentrated. Thus, we focused on the records of department heads, both at headquarters, and in the case of the operating departments, in the field. It is these records that form the core of Hagley’s holdings and that have supported the efforts of our many researchers.

All of these series were appraised at the file level, based on the importance of the particular subject. Because the contents of each package in the warehouse were typically heterogeneous, we worked out an assembly line for pulling the packages from the shelves, extracting the useful contents, and packing them for shipment. The rejects usually went to a dumpster for sale as scrap paper; with the keepers being accumulated until they could be shipped to the repositories.

The main appraisal project ended in October 1986. The companies had not been willing to release some records,

mostly dating from the 1960s, so there was some follow-up. Fortunately, the continuing help of Eileen E. Drelick, PC’s legal representative in Philadelphia and a former PRR employee interested in preserving history, enabled us to maintain some contact with both companies and continue to salvage some additional material. We removed the last records from Merion Avenue and 401 North Broad St. a few days before those locations closed in 1990 and 2001 respectively.

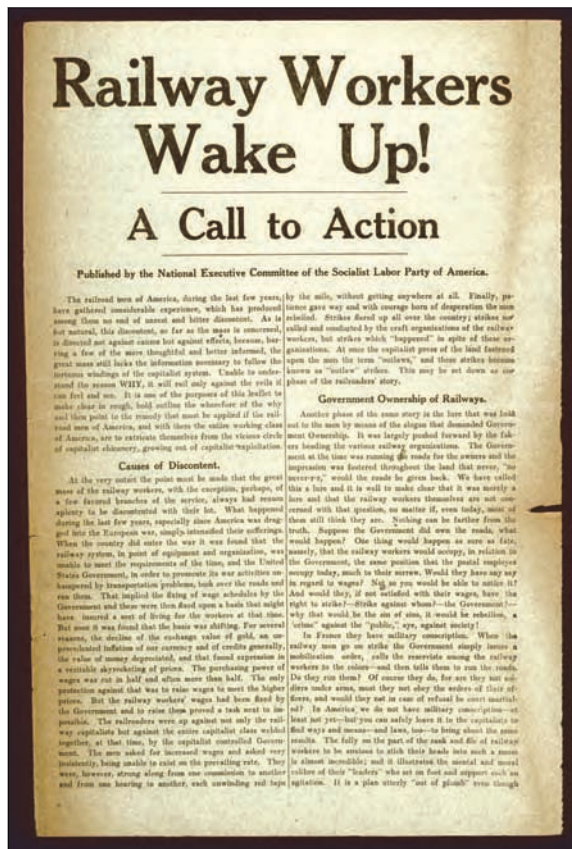
Processing the records took another two years. We had

hoped to create a cooperative project so that all the records would be processed to a uniform standard, but the price tag was too high. Instead, each repository assumed the burden of processing individually. Both the Pennsylvania State Archives and Hagley received funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities, but adopted radically different approaches.

During the processing phase, we also refined the appraisal procedure as we now could examine the files more minutely, ending up with about 2,000 linear feet of records. Record series were opened for public research use one by one as the finding aids were completed. The final phase of flattening and repairing some engineering drawings, held in abeyance for lack of sufficient conservation facilities, is just now being finished.

Although I’m not impartial, I like to think that your tax dollars were well spent.

We certainly made a few mistakes. Probably the records should not have been divided into quite so many pieces, but given the alternatives, I believe we did the best job possible. I hope that our theoretical goals that the archive should be cost-effective, useful, and true have been met.



Hagley Museum and Library

In the wake of the shop craft strikes of 1922, a leaflet by the Socialist Labor Party calls upon railway workers to extricate themselves from “the vicious circle of capitalist chicanery growing out of capitalist exploitation.”

## **“Increasing litigiousness and less historically minded corporate cultures ensure that most documents today are destroyed as soon as possible.”**

**A**fter the passage of 20 years, it is clear that we will probably never see a records project like this again. The PRR was one of the giants of the age of paper-based bureaucracies, spending, according to anecdote, more money annually for paper than for steel rails. Its typists routinely made 15 carbon copies. It was highly regulated in what documents it had to retain, and it had space for them to accumulate.

Today, the situation is quite different, and most people point to the digital revolution as the culprit. But in fact, increasing litigiousness, less regulation, and more fluid and less historically minded corporate cultures have combined to ensure that most documents, of whatever format, are destroyed as soon as possible. They can no longer ac-

cumulate quietly for 50 to 75 years until they lose their sensitivity and become the stuff of history. It is one thing to appraise documents when long-term trends and pivotal events are known by hindsight, and quite another to appraise them one-by-one on the spot, assuming one even gets the chance to do so.

To show that this is not merely a phenomenon of the computer and the Internet, we merely have to look at the fate of the records of the New York Central Railroad, the PRR's major rival and a company of equal size and complexity. In the 1950s, Robert Young and his protégé Alfred E. Perlman seized control of the company from the heirs of the Vanderbilts and Morgans, becoming chairman and president, respectively, of NYC. If anyone was

### **WHERE TO FIND THE PRR COLLECTIONS**

#### **PENNSYLVANIA STATE ARCHIVES**

Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission  
350 North St.  
Harrisburg, PA 17120  
717-783-3281  
Web page:  
[www.phmc.state.pa.us/bah/dam/overview.htm](http://www.phmc.state.pa.us/bah/dam/overview.htm)  
E-mail: via form at [www.phmc.state.pa.us/contactus/SiteFeedback.aspx?SecId=2](http://www.phmc.state.pa.us/contactus/SiteFeedback.aspx?SecId=2)

#### **HAGLEY MUSEUM AND LIBRARY**

P.O. Box 3630  
Greenville, DE 19807  
302-658-2400  
Web page: [www.hagley.lib.de.us/research.html](http://www.hagley.lib.de.us/research.html)  
E-mail: [cbaer@hagley.org](mailto:cbaer@hagley.org)

#### **NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY**

Manuscripts & Archives Division  
Fifth Avenue and 42nd St.  
New York, NY 10018  
212-930-0801  
Web page: [www.nypl.org/](http://www.nypl.org/)  
E-mail: via form at <http://nypl.org/research/eref/hssl/erefms.cfm>

#### **NEW JERSEY STATE ARCHIVES**

185 W. State St., CN 307  
Trenton, NJ 08625  
609-292-6960  
Web page: [www.state.nj.us/state/darm/links/archives.html](http://www.state.nj.us/state/darm/links/archives.html)  
E-mail: [archives.reference@sos.state.nj.us](mailto:archives.reference@sos.state.nj.us)

#### **TEMPLE UNIVERSITY URBAN ARCHIVES**

Paley Library  
13th and Berks Streets  
Philadelphia, PA 19122  
215-204-8257  
Web page: <http://library.temple.edu/collections/urbana/>  
E-mail: [urban@library.temple.edu](mailto:urban@library.temple.edu)

#### **PENN STATE UNIVERSITY**

Historical Collections and Labor Archives  
W-313 Pattee Library  
University Park, PA 16802  
814-863-2505  
Web page: [www.libraries.psu.edu/speccolls/hcla/](http://www.libraries.psu.edu/speccolls/hcla/)  
E-mail: [jpq1@psulias.psu.edu](mailto:jpq1@psulias.psu.edu)

#### **UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN**

Bentley Historical Library  
1150 Beal Ave.  
Ann Arbor, MI 48109  
313-764-3482  
Web page: [www.umich.edu/~bhl/bhl/uarphome/uarphome.htm](http://www.umich.edu/~bhl/bhl/uarphome/uarphome.htm)  
E-mail: [bentley.ref@umich.edu](mailto:bentley.ref@umich.edu)

#### **OHIO HISTORICAL SOCIETY**

Archives Library  
1982 Velma Ave.  
Columbus, OH 43211  
614-297-2510  
Web page: [www.ohiohistory.org/resource/archlib/index.html](http://www.ohiohistory.org/resource/archlib/index.html)  
E-mail: [ohsref@ohiohistory.org](mailto:ohsref@ohiohistory.org)

**Note:** The Baker Library at Harvard Business School was also a party to the 1984 records-distribution project, but received files only from the Boston & Albany and New Haven railroads. The Cincinnati Historical Society was not a party to the project, but received Little Miami Railroad minutes in a separate initiative. The Pennsylvania Railroad Technical & Historical Society's acquisition of PRR records also took place separately from the 1984 project. The latter's archives are located at the former PRR station in Lewistown, Pa.

an “out with the old” sort of guy, it was Al Perlman. Subsequently, the New York Central became the junior merger partner, and it was its headquarters that was closed and stripped. The archival heritage of NYC is thus reduced to minute books, financial statements, annual reports, employee magazines, publicity photographs, scattered material in private collections, and whatever has found its way into the public prints. The records of Presidents A. H. Smith and Frederick E. Williamson, mechanical wizards William Buchanan and Paul Kieffer, and a host of other NYC luminaries, have vanished. Although someone is struggling to write a history of the company in the 20th century, there will be no in-depth studies, and no conferences like the 2003 gathering at which I gave the talk on which this article is based.

This sketch of the Central’s past may be an accurate picture of the future, one in which corporate archives consist of such bare-bones legal documents as minutes, patents, and 10-K reports, and public relations and advertising materials. As in earlier times, historians may have to rely more and more on documents from lawsuits and government investigations, or new media such as individual documents salvaged out of context and made available by the amateurs and partisans of cyberspace. We may see less nuanced historical writing, whether in the mode of the Adams boys’ *Chapters of Erie* or in a publicist’s history like that of Edward Hungerford. Changing the nature of source materials changes the nature of “history” itself, along with the nature of historical agencies.

PRR diehards may enjoy a hearty last laugh over the fate of the New York Central records, but it does underline the precariousness of the historical record, the contingencies that affect what gets saved and what gets written. But if we view the future with some concern, we can also celebrate. Celebrate millions of words and images saved from the shredder. Celebrate the personalities who can still speak to us a century or more on. Celebrate information that is intact and available instead of scattered in a patchwork of private hoards; books written, buildings restored, the past open for interpretation.



Christopher T. Baer

**The Hagley Museum station wagon sometimes served as a boxcar for transporting records from the Merion Avenue site to the museum. Craig Orr and Loren Miller help Rob Chase load the wagon.**

The Pennsylvania Railroad project was by far the largest of such rescues in the private sector, but mercifully, it is not the only one. Among companies undergoing “restructuring,” Hagley has been fortunate to have preserved records from firms as diverse as the Sperry Companies (computers, office machines, and gyroscopes); RCA; the Strawbridge & Clothier department-store chain; the Philadelphia Saving Fund Society, one of the nation’s oldest savings banks; beverage giant Seagram, and telecommunications innovator MCI, as well as Philadelphia’s other railroad, the Reading.

Such work requires time and dedication, but then, so too, does that of collectors and writers. Let us then celebrate the work of the generations that built, operated, and traveled on the Pennsylvania Railroad, of those of us who care for its remains, and of those of you who turn the raw stuff of history into finished goods. ♦

## Notes

1. Duane P. Swanson and Hugh R. Gibb, *The Historical Records of the Components of Conrail: A Survey and Inventory* (Eleutherian Mills Hagley Foundation, 1978).
2. For a more developed account of the appraisal process from an archival standpoint, see my “Strategy, Structure, Detail, Function: Four Parameters for the Appraisal of Business Records” in *The Records of American Business* (Society of American Archivists, 1997), pp. 75-136.