



Fall 2022

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Recommended Citation

Ramsay, Victoria N., "Unlocking Rosenberger's Research" (2022). *Student Publications*. 1028.
https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/student_scholarship/1028

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Unlocking Rosenberger's Research

Abstract

Homer Rosenberger's unprocessed collection lies in Musselman Library's Special Collections—a multitude of boxes filled with Pennsylvania research and memorabilia. By examining the first box in the collection, it becomes clear that Rosenberger was more than just an avid researcher, but also a man with his own history and reasons for collecting these documents in the first place.

Keywords

Rosenberger, archives, Special Collections, Pennsylvania, Pennsylvania German Society

Disciplines

Archival Science | Intellectual History

Comments

Written for HIST 300: Historical Methods.

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Unlocking Rosenberger's Research

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HIST 300: Historical Methods

Professor Michael Birkner

October 4, 2022

Box 1

As someone who wants to be an archivist, I always jump at the chance to look through old files in which anything could be hidden. I worked as the Pohanka intern at Special Collections during the summer of 2021 and was fascinated every time I got my hands on an unprocessed collection like Homer Rosenberger's multitude of boxes with mismatched labels and disorderly documents. There was so much to unpack within the one box I was given—both figuratively and literally—that it was easy to get lost in the papers and find myself in Rosenberger's world during those hours I spent in Special Collections examining and jotting down my findings. As an English major, this box was interesting on another level, specifically in how it depicted Rosenberger's process of researching for and publishing books. Reading the letters back and forth from Rosenberg and his publisher Paul Ramer allowed me to see how arduous the process was and how careful all those involved had to be in getting the exact product Rosenberger hoped for. These letters, as well as the many others contained within the box, were the most enjoyable to read, however, as they made Rosenberger appear as human and not just the figure discussed in class; he has clear goals and emotions conveyed every time he writes to his friends, family, and employees, which translates well to his scholarly work too. Overall, the project of playing historian to his many miscellaneous scraps of paper helped me view Rosenberger as someone who should be studied as both a man notable for his obsessive research of Pennsylvania as a state, and also as a man with his own history and reasons for collecting these documents in the first place.

As a still unprocessed collection, the easiest and simplest way to describe Box 1 of the Rosenberger Papers is "massive and overwhelming," -- coincidentally also the first thought I had upon opening it. The research guide shows that even the archivists did not quite know what

everything in the box was meant to be or why Rosenberger had kept it, with multiple folders being labeled "Miscellaneous" or "Untitled," or even "Illegible" since some folder names were written in the handwriting of Homer Rosenberger himself.¹ However, to be a good historian means to dig into the evidence, and after getting my bearings and examining the guide more closely, I was able to keep better track of how the box was organized. Along with photos, articles, and mementos of Pennsylvania for Rosenberger's collection on all things related to the state, much of this box was dedicated to two of Rosenberger's books—his autobiography, *Adventures and Philosophy of a Pennsylvania Dutchman*, and *Man and Modern Society*, comprised of a series of essays on how philosophy and history shape progress in society today. In Folder 16, titled "Ramer," is a drafted table of contents of Rosenberger's biography and communication with Paul B. Ramer, superintendent of Times and News Publishing Company in Gettysburg. Along with discussing the details of this book, Rosenberger gets personal with Ramer in their correspondence, telling the publisher that he was "distressed to learn about the passing of Mrs. Ramer" and that he trusts Ramer is "finding ways to overcome [his] loss as easily as one could hope."² He manages to strike a balance between professionalism and genuine care for a friend and coworker, which made me feel more empathy and respect for him. Letters like these show that the lives retained in these boxes were human, not just a name on a piece of paper, which we can sometimes forget when just reading the history in class or as a project. The multitude of letters—18 in total—about ongoing edits and rewrites also made me sympathetic to the job of a writer as it made me realize how difficult the process of writing and publishing a book is. Even Rosenberger seems apologetic for how long and frustrating it is to go back and fix

¹ Justin Shapiro, Rosenberger Box 1 Research Guide, Fall 2013, Rosenberger Papers, Box 1, Gettysburg College Archives (hereafter GCA).

² Homer Rosenberger to Paul Ramer, April 5, 1971, Rosenberger Papers, Box 1, GCA.

details, as some kind of apology for not catching an error earlier or even having an error to begin with is in almost every single letter from him to Ramer. Twice he writes, "Sorry to bother you with these little things,"³⁴ but these small details are what is important to him and in his mind, crucial to change for the final project. In a way, it reminds me of the archaeology class I took a few semesters ago; we were taught that "small things forgotten," like broken shards of plates or tiny beads, often show the most about a culture because they are deemed unimportant in the moment and thus left behind for archaeologists to find and put the pieces of the artifact and the culture together like a puzzle. Historians have a similar job of putting pieces together from sometimes small scraps of information. Though I had a lot of information about and from Rosenberger to go off, the small revelations were just as important.

Hundreds more letters can be found throughout the box, but notably in Folder 17, "Untitled," in which Rosenberger writes to "other academics, librarians, bureaucrats, friends, and relatives discussing a range of topics both scholarly and mundane."⁵ It is in this folder that one can best see the amount of work Rosenberger did in researching for his books by way of asking others for help. Regarding his biography, Rosenberger writes to his Aunt Mae and cousins Ruth and Lester in an attempt to remember the stories of his parents and grandparents in Pennsylvanian Dutch area, as well as asking about what the state was like before his birth. He asks others about their specialties and people in higher up positions to help him get information he could not otherwise access, such as in 1969 when he asks the president of Perkiomen School

³ Homer Rosenberger to Paul Ramer, April 15, 1971, Rosenberger Papers, Box 1, GCA, 1.

⁴ Homer Rosenberger to Paul Ramer, April 30, 1971, Rosenberger Papers, Box 1, GCA, 1.

⁵ Justin Shapiro, Rosenberger Box 1 Research Guide, Fall 2013, Rosenberger Papers, Box 1, GCA, 14.

what the name of the school was before 1923,⁶ or when he asks the Executive Assistant of the Institute of Heraldry in the US Army about a man who formerly held that position.⁷ The lesson that it is easier to ask for help than work alone is one that good historians should learn when conducting research, and it seems that Rosenberger learned it early on, as many years pass throughout this one folder. In a way, some of his letters—especially the ones with his Aunt Mae—act as an oral history; when asking about family history, he types out the questions he wants to ask, then sends the sheet of paper by way of his relatives. From the looks of it, his cousin Ruth asked Mae the questions written, she responded with her answers, and Ruth wrote them out longhand on the same sheet of paper before sending it back to Rosenberger. I found it an incredibly smart way to get answers, as well as helpful to anyone studying Rosenberger that the copies of both Rosenberger's letters as well as their reply were kept, as so often archives are only able to salvage letters to or from one person, only getting one side of the story. Also fascinating about this folder was watching Rosenberger learn from the responses he received, as he clearly set out with a clear desire for answers and there does not seem to be a case documented here in which he is disappointed by what he finds, as he learns something from each experience, even if it is not what he originally hoped for. Within the folder is a copy of his birth certificate, voided by the Clerk of the Orphans Court of Montgomery County because it had the wrong birthdate written on it. I was initially confused as to why Rosenberger decided to house this here, but this decision made more sense once I read that the process of getting the certificate "helped [Rosenberger] understand the magnitude of recording births, maintaining these records,

⁶ Homer Rosenberger to President of Perkiomen School, July 30, 1969, Rosenberger Papers, Box 1, GCA, 1.

⁷ Homer Rosenberger to Institute of Heraldry, June 8, 1969, Rosenberger Papers, Box 1, GCA.

and making them available."⁸ It came from something he learned while researching his background and thus could fit into a folder with similar research.

Along with all the research Rosenberger did on his scholarly work, the many folders and their contents also allude to him looking into his own interests as well, allowing anyone who looks through the box to get a better idea of his personality. Folder 17 also sees Rosenberger questioning his aunt about railroad collisions of the early 1900s in the Pennsylvania German area and has him reminiscing about the "Black Diamond" train he remembers hearing going from Philadelphia to Buffalo every day.⁹ Through this research he was able to put together that it might have been the Black Diamond which crashed and killed a girl named Ada Allebach in 1906, an event his mother had talked about and he had wanted confirmation on before he wrote about it. Rosenberger displays an interest in motorized vehicles here, but also in Folder 3, "PA's Contribution to the Development of the Locomotive," where he collected newspaper articles and photos of early transport through and by Pennsylvania.¹⁰ For instance, in his letter to the curator of the Fire Museum, he asked about how early firetrucks functioned and about the speed limits of "25 Dollars Fine For Driving Faster Than a Walk When Crossing this Bridge" in the Tidioute area in the early 1930s.¹¹ The photos collected in Folder 10, "Pictures" also allude to Rosenberger's interest in the effect of Pennsylvania's car manufacturing, as there are many seemingly random photos of cars on the street and interstate¹². For years, Rosenberger served as

⁸ Homer Rosenberger to Montgomery Orphans Court, July 31, 1969, Rosenberger Papers, Box 1, GCA, 1.

⁹ Homer Rosenberger to Mae Rosenberger, 1969, Rosenberger Papers, Box 1, GCA, 1.

¹⁰ Justin Shapiro, Rosenberger Box 1 Research Guide, Fall 2013, Rosenberger Papers, Box 1, GCA, 12.

¹¹ Homer Rosenberger to Henry J. Fitzgibbon, August 28, 1969, Rosenberger Papers, Box 1, GCA, 1.

¹² Unnamed and Undated Photos, Rosenberger Papers, Box 1, GCA.

Chief of Training for the Bureau of Public Roads, so it is likely he wanted to examine how Pennsylvania's roads differed from those in the rest of the United States. This folder includes many odd photos which do not seem to fit with Rosenberger's Pennsylvania research but make more sense upon looking into his interests and background. One example of this are the photos of the "Chiefs of Northern Nigeria and their Arabian horses," a "Chief of a Nigerian Village," and a "Typical Market Scene at the Edge of a Nigerian Village."¹³ I did not initially understand why these would be in Rosenberger's collection of Pennsylvania memorabilia, but after looking at Folder 9, "PA Mms," and seeing the folder on "Pennsylvania's Influence Around the World," which contained bulletins about the state's influence in African countries like Ghana¹⁴ I understand better. Rosenberger intended to use in a book on Pennsylvanian society compared to that of others, these photos suddenly made sense as a study by Rosenberger of Pennsylvania's effects of society across continents. Rosenberger also collected pictures related to prisons across the United States, including a "large cell house" in Kansas, a photo of "The Yard" at Alcatraz, and "Shaw Residence Number 1, a Halfway House operated by the Bureau of Rehabilitation of the National Capital Area."¹⁵ These pictures do not have any application to Pennsylvania, but they could be of special interest to Rosenberg through his past career in prison work. He also had to reach out to the Bureau of Prisons in the United States Department of Justice, so he clearly wanted these pictures for a reason and did not just stumble upon them. The halfway house in particular calls attention to this, as the photo was taken in the capital and Rosenberger's training was based in Washington DC. Rosenberger ties his interest in the prison system back to

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Justin Shapiro, Rosenberger Box 1 Research Guide, Fall 2013, Rosenberger Papers, Box 1, GCA, 13.

¹⁵ Envelope of photographs from Bureau of Prisons to Homer Rosenberger, Rosenberger Papers, Box 1, GCA.

Pennsylvania history in two folders contained in Folder 9, "PA Mms," in which he took notes on the descriptions of prisons given by two founding fathers based in Pennsylvania--Benjamin Franklin and Benjamin Rush, as well as four pages of notes on Pennsylvania's prison systems, where Rosenberger outlines anomalies of the system and questions it.¹⁶ These notes would have been on his mind while writing *Man and Modern Society*, in which he discusses freedom and problems within the court system using the Anthony Cramer case, as well as how humans have "a taste of [freedom and]...are not likely to give up freedom easily."¹⁷ Seeing him taking notes on the pages he reads also reminds me of taking notes for a history course, ensuring active reading by asking questions of the material, even if that is simply "When did I get this?" as Rosenberger does of a copy of a state song written for Pennsylvania, unsure if it was "in the mid or late 1930s or early 1940s."¹⁸

With all the fun I had reading letters, it might be surprising that I found the most insightful and important piece of this box to be a pamphlet from the Pennsylvania German Society instead. Rosenberger came from a Pennsylvania German background, "living among Pennsylvania Germans from [his] earliest years and seeing them "in the flesh" and in both researching for a book about the lifestyle and history, as well as wanting to know more about his own genealogy. He spoke to "and gathered facts and impression from a countless number of them who could no more be listed individually than the stars in a galaxy."¹⁹ Much of this research is contained in Folder 6, "PA German Society," including a large number of pamphlets

¹⁶ Homer Rosenberger notes, Rosenberger Papers, Box 1, GCA, 1-4.

¹⁷ Homer Tope Rosenberger, *Man and Modern Society; Philosophical Essays* (Bellefonte, PA: Pennsylvania Heritage, 1972), 128-137.

¹⁸ Homer Rosenberger notes, Rosenberger Papers, Box 1, GCA, 1.

¹⁹ Homer Tope Rosenberger, *The Pennsylvania Germans: 1891-1965, Frequently Known as the "Pennsylvania Dutch"; Seventy-Fifth Anniversary Volume of the Pennsylvania German Society* (Lancaster, PA: Pennsylvania German Society, 1966), 11.

and booklets from meetings of the society. The society met annually and there were booklets from 1896—one year after the Pennsylvania German Society's founding²⁰—up to the late 1960s. Each pamphlet contains the convention schedule of addresses on topics like religion and history, as well as the number of toasts made at the following banquet for farmers, authors, Pennsylvania counties, and the society itself, most spoken in either German or Dutch. I found the 1902 pamphlet for the twelfth annual meeting of the society the most interesting, however, because it was most reminiscent of Rosenberger's background and interests. It included a crucial quote about the way in which history should be viewed, which I believe reflects both Rosenberger's interpretation of history and the historical methods class's as well. The historical papers addressed in the meeting are "Decorated Stove Plates of the Pennsylvania-German" and "Early Educational Problems Affecting the Pennsylvania-German,"²¹ neither of which immediately jump out as being particularly Rosenberger-esque. However, Rosenberger was fascinated by architecture; in many of the notes he made about the photos he compiled, he would compliment the structure of a building, monument, or site. I cannot help but feel he would have appreciated the smallest design, especially if it was one of historical significance to his ancestors. This again relates to the "small pieces forgotten" as well, in that the stove plates may appear insignificant but can tell one a vast amount about a culture, which Rosenberger would not have overlooked. The speech on education problems also would have been significant to Rosenberger, who was constantly working with educators and librarians for his own learning purposes. He wrote an entire essay in *Man and Modern Society* entitled "Education—For What Purpose?" about the

²⁰ Ibid 91.

²¹ Pennsylvania German Society pamphlet, October 3, 1902, Rosenberger Papers, Box 1, GCA, 3.

importance, goals, and potential of teaching and learning.²² The pamphlet itself is obviously a staple of both Pennsylvania state history and the Pennsylvania German community history, so Rosenberger would find value in it for both his Pennsylvania research collection and for his collection on his own family history. Whoever owned this pamphlet before Rosenberger was also an official member of the society with a membership card contained within the booklet, listing the requirements for membership, including "Two Dollars, the amount of the first year's annual dues,"²³ relating to Rosenberger's interests in monetary matters and freedoms which he also comments on in *Man and Modern Society*, as well as the social interactions between members in the Pennsylvania German community. Lastly, a quote rests on the final page and captures what I think is the main idea of history and keeping it alive: "To be ignorant of what happened before one was born is to be forever a child."²⁴ This quote relates to the first article we read in class about being active in history and remembering what came before through books and movies, but also through stories from our family. The quote is so relevant to this class and what it means to keep history alive for yourself and others that for me, there was no other choice but this pamphlet as the most important piece in this Rosenberger box.

Overall, I found this project to be enriching as I got to know another historian by looking through his uncurated life's work before reading through his scholarly works. I learned how others interpret—or leave people to interpret what they attempted to interpret—history and how gratifying it feels when you finally figure something out. I love acting as an archivist and hope to

²² Homer Tope Rosenberger, "Man and Modern Society; Philosophical Essays," in *Man and Modern Society; Philosophical Essays* (Bellefonte, PA: Pennsylvania Heritage, 1972), 77.

²³ *Ibid* 6.

²⁴ *Ibid* 7.

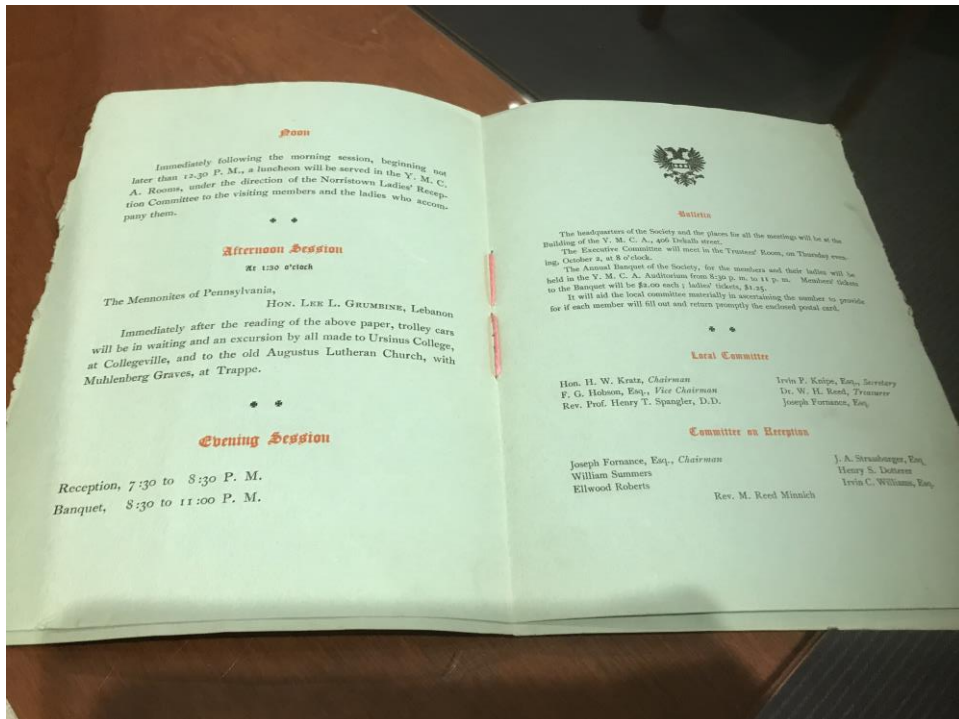
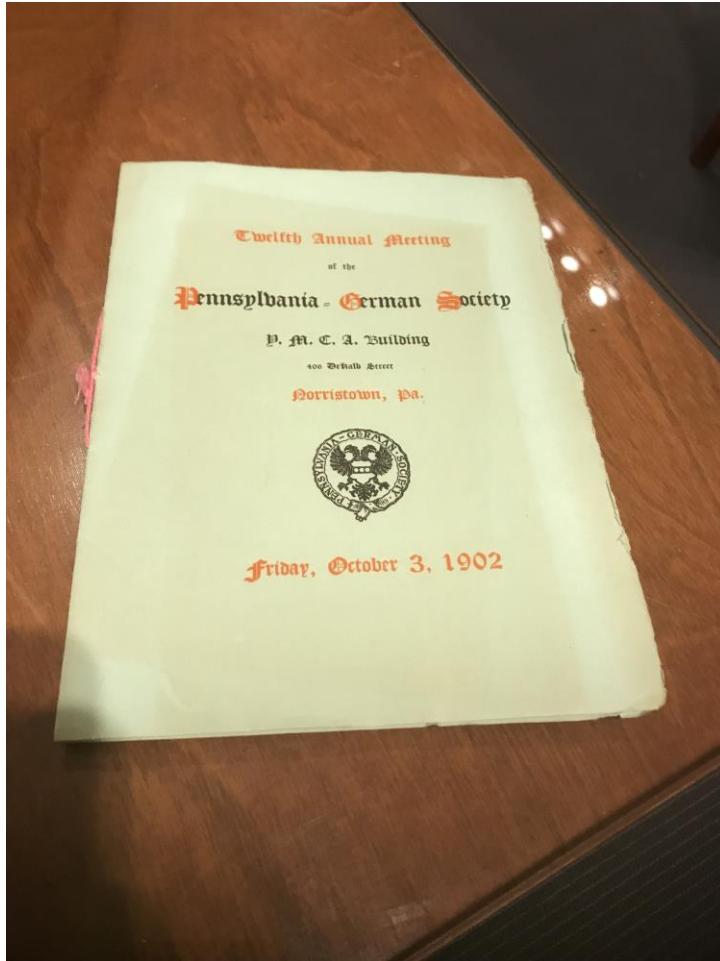
do it more in the future, but even if I do not get there, I can say that this was an enjoyable experience and one I am pleased to have done.

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"To be ignorant of what happened
before one was born is to be forever
a child."



Lancaster, April 28th, 1891.

Dear Sir:

Having been present at the organization of the Pennsylvania-German Society, on April 15th, 1891, you are entitled to membership in said Society, and will be enrolled as such upon the payment of Two Dollars, the amount of the first year's annual dues. Please send with the money, your full name, place and date of birth, and descent.

Very respectfully,

F. R. DIFFENDERFFER,
Secretary.