

# Documents - some from 1791 - now online

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What do former U.S. President William Henry Harrison and Nicholas Longworth have in common besides being early local settlers and politicians?

They were involved in an estate settlement here in 1815.

The proof of that is one of more than 1 million Hamilton County documents - some dating to 1791 - now [available online](#) from the Probate Court that will be a boon to genealogy buffs, history researchers and anyone trying to see what happened to great grandpa's belongings when he died.

- [Spencer Tracy's marriage certificate](#) (pdf format)
- [Real estate deal from 1815](#) (pdf format)

"These are probably some of the oldest records in the state," Probate Court Judge James Cissell said. "These records are part of history."

The newly available documents, some 219 years old, include birth, death, marriage,



The Enquirer/Malinda Hartong

Hamilton County Probate Court Judge James Cissell, left, and IT Director Christian Moeller found a copy of actor Spencer Tracy's marriage license from Sept. 12, 1923.

## ONLINE

To see 1.1 million Hamilton County court documents such as birth, death, marriage, estate, naturalization and other records - some dating to 1791 - go online to [www.probatect.org](http://www.probatect.org), and click on Records Search, then Archive Search

estate, naturalization and other records.

"There are many, many folks who wish to trace their genealogy. By doing this, people will not have to come to our office in Cincinnati," Cissell said.

The project started after Cissell took office in 2003 and decided to preserve 1,600 books, each weighing 30 pounds, and their 1.1 million pages by digitizing them and putting them online. Before this, only documents after 1983 were available online.

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The documents are as mundane as guardianship records from the late 18th century to tidbits that mark personal moments of Hollywood stars.

One of the interesting documents rediscovered during the digitization was the marriage license - much of it handwritten - of Spencer Tracy.

The noted actor was 23 when he was married Sept. 12, 1923, in Cincinnati. The Milwaukee resident listed his occupation, his parents' names and that this was his first marriage. In a Catholic ceremony, Tracey married Louise Treadwell, 24, an actress from New Castle, Pa., who listed her home as the Sinton Hotel in downtown Cincinnati.

The Probate Court is teaming with the University of Cincinnati, which stored some of the old Probate Court records after courthouse fires, to complete the project.

All of the work to place the 1.1 million documents online was done by Probate Court workers except for the \$95,000 cost of a private contractor to digitize each page.

Ironically, once the old documents are digitized, they also will have to be stored on microfilm because, Cissell said, that is the official way such records are to be kept.

"It's going both directions. By the time we're done with this, we may be the only court in the country that has all of the records in both formats, which, I think, is a hell of an accomplishment," Cissell said.

That will take some time because there are more than 10 million pages that need to be made available in both formats.

The new digitized documents also serve a more practical purpose.

Many documents are stored in ways that physically won't last.

"If we don't do it shortly we may lose it because all that microfilm is wasting away," Cissell said. "We have 4,000 rolls of microfilm of records which are quickly disintegrating.

"Once that's done, everything we have here will be available on the Internet."

The exception are documents destroyed in the three courthouse fires over the generations.

Cissell is keeping the 1,600 books that contain the original documents. Each currently is bound by a rubber band in a Probate Court office.

Using technology to preserve - and make available - public records isn't new to Cissell.

He was the Clerk of Courts in the 1990s when that court created a Web site - [www.courtclerk.org](http://www.courtclerk.org) - that won national awards because it made available online millions of pages of criminal and civil court cases. Today, that Web site has evolved so that, while allowing access at any time to court documents, also allows attorneys to electronically file suits and other documents at any time.