



**DAN ONORATO**  
COUNTY EXECUTIVE

# Allegheny County Department of Real Estate



From left to right; Deb Beiber, Jim Uziel, Valerie McDonald Roberts, Judy Konitsney

Effective January 1, 2008, the Allegheny County Recorder of Deeds Office consolidated from an independently elected office to the administrative Department of Real Estate. **County Executive Dan Onorato** appointed **Valerie McDonald Roberts** as Manager of this department. **Jim Uziel** and **Judy Konitsney** remain Deputy Recorder and Operations Manager respectively. The Department of Real Estate expanded to include Deed Registry and Mapping/GIS, formerly responsibilities of the Office of Property Assessment. The Deputy Manager for these functions is **Deb Beiber**. The transition has been very smooth, with the team focusing on coordinated efforts with other departments and offices, to increase efficiency and problem solving, to reduce cost in administering county services, and to make access to our public records even more user friendly through increased technology. This newsletter highlights our accomplishments and goals.

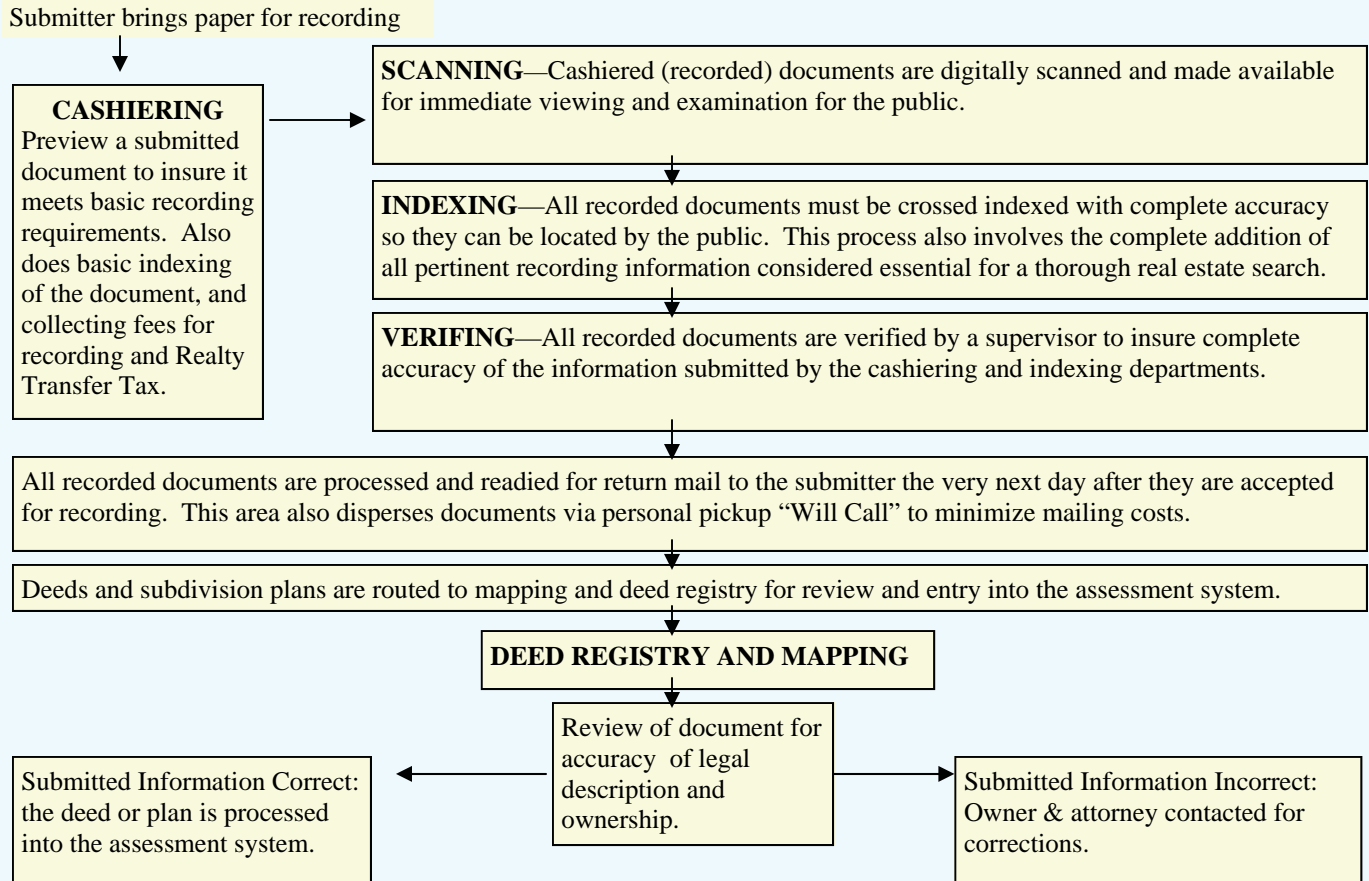
## DEPARTMENT OF REAL ESTATE HISTORY

The Office of the Recorder of Deeds, now known as the Department of Real Estate (DRE), was provided for in the state Constitution of 1776. It is an essential County office because it guarantees ownership of all real property. The records of property for this County were first recorded in Chester County, of which Allegheny County originally was a part. Later, Allegheny became a part of Lancaster County; then by Act of 1771, Allegheny County became part of Bedford County. In 1788, Allegheny County itself was incorporated out of Westmoreland and Washington Counties. Lastly, Beaver, Butler, Mercer, Crawford, Erie, Warren, Venango, Lawrence and Armstrong counties were formed from the original Allegheny County. From the time of William Penn, the laws of Pennsylvania have given great protection to the title of real estate. Pennsylvania was one of the earliest leaders in this recording movement. The first deed recorded in Allegheny County was dated April 4, 1787

and recorded November 13, 1788. The amount paid for the property was eight pounds, eight shillings and ten pence. Prior to 1788, the transfer of property was done in front of witnesses standing on the particular piece of property to be transferred. However, no record of such transfer was recorded in any government office. Since the first deed was recorded in 1788, the Recorder of Deeds Office has recorded deeds, mortgages, and miscellaneous documents to fill 17,790 bound book volumes. There is an average of 400 documents per bound volume. These volumes are found in numerical order throughout the office and can easily be located for viewing. The Recorder of Deeds employed scribes from 1786 - 1912, prior to the use of typewriters, to rewrite documents after they were recorded onto archival paper. The office would retain the papers for one or more months until scribing was completed. Over the years, thousands of volumes of official documents were recorded on paper and housed in the office on the first, mezza-

nine, and second floors of the County Office Building. Due to space constraints, in 1994, the Dept. of Engineering and Construction was consulted to determine if the mezzanine floor could accommodate additional volumes. It was determined that the mezzanine could not structurally support additional weight. At that time, the volumes were redistributed throughout the office. By 1995, space was at a premium and the office implemented microfilm technology. Beginning in 1997, deeds, mortgages and mortgage related documents were no longer available in paper form. A Micrographics Library was established to accommodate the microfilm. But as the mortgage boom hit, the office started running out of space in the Micrographics Library. The office again looked to new technology to accommodate space needs. In October of 2001, the office began imaging/digitizing all recorded documents. This ultimately led to the installation of a totally integrated recording system in 2003.

## JOURNEY THROUGH THE RECORDING PROCESS



## Department of Real Estate

### GOALS 2009

Certify property identification numbers (Parcel ID numbers) on deeds **prior** to recording the deed.

Pre-approve subdivision plans for verification of ownership and County tax lien clearance prior to recording plan.

Integrate property maps and property history cards into the ACS System. This information will be available in the Department of Real Estate and on the internet. This integration will bring additional revenue to the County.

Correct and update owner mailing addresses in the IAS (Integrated Assessment System) database.

Finalize review and update of property locations for all properties in database.

Begin Phase II and Phase III of continued back scanning of the Russell Index and re-create index to a clearly legible imaged document for :

Deed Grantee Index 1953-1963, Deed Grantor Index 1953-1963  
Deed Grantee Index 1964-1973, Deed Grantor Index 1964-1963  
Mortgage Index 1967-1985.

Continue to back scan permanent documents, including Deeds and Mortgages for 1995, State Highway Plans, and deed books that are in deteriorating condition.

Provide better GIS parcel information and GIS tools to the public.

Complete review of IAS base data for updates to GIS layers.

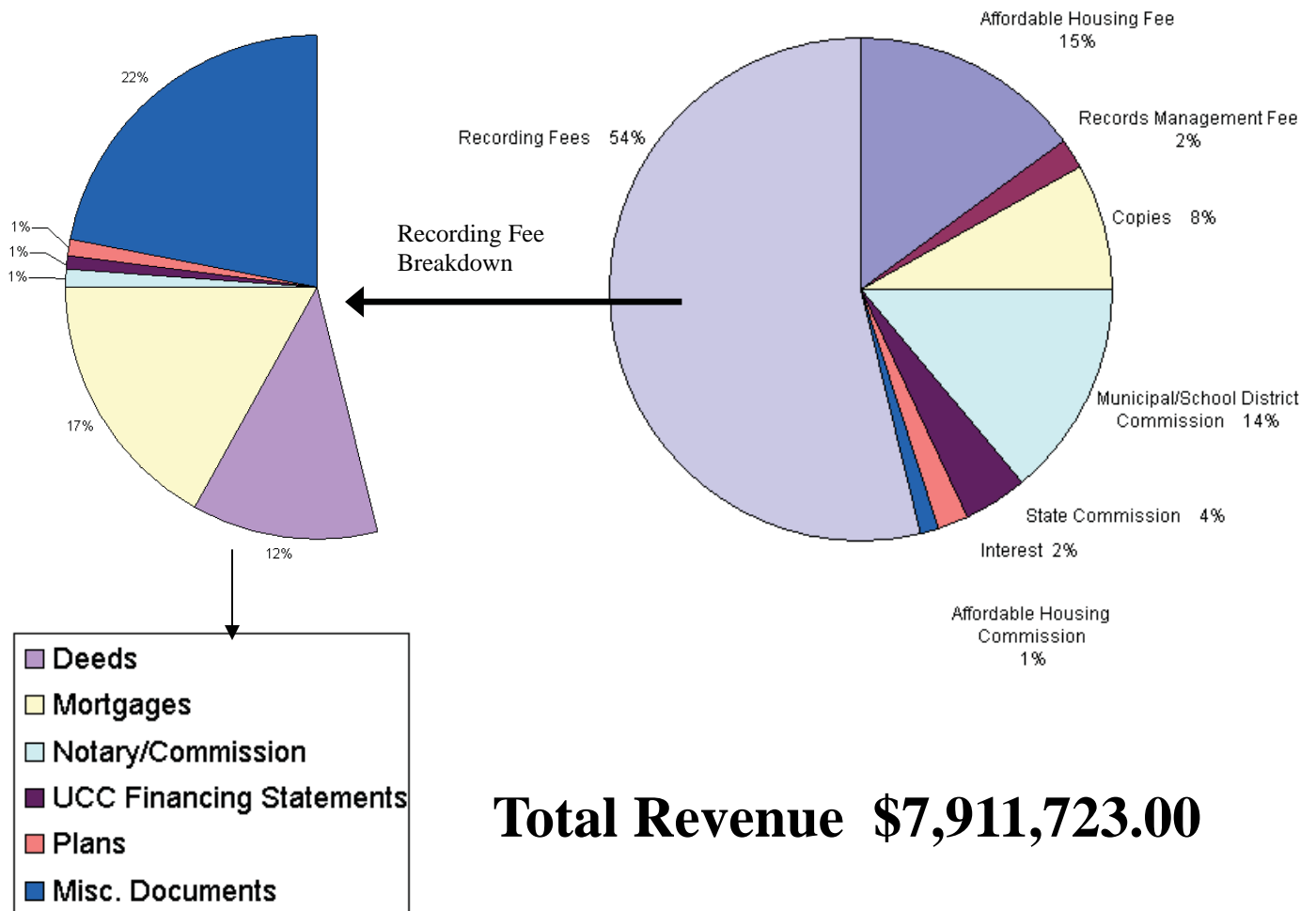
Continue to rescan and clean up digitized images of all the older subdivision plans.

Partner with Emergency Services to create countywide property/location address database.

## ACCOMPLISHMENTS

- Back-scanned more than 2 million documents, an estimated 12 million images.
- Saved the County more than \$564,000 by aggressively back scanning in-house.
- Rescanned, de-speckled, clean-up of 15,000 sub-division plans (20,000 images) printed from microfilm.
- Reopened restoration room to repair books, restoring approximately 3500 canvas books in-house.
- Assisted other County departments in the complete restoration of their books, saving the County more than \$500 per book.
- Collaborated with Allegheny County Department of Veteran Affairs to return thousands of original soldier discharges that were never claimed by the discharged veteran.
- Installed a security camera system to combat theft and vandalism of public documents.
- Reviewed deed registry procedures to meet solicitor requirements.
- Introduced and implemented GIS problem tracking system.
- Deputy Manager Jim Uziel instructed various classes at Duquesne University, CCAC, and trade schools on the functions of the office.
- Successfully e-recorded deeds and mortgages at Level II and III.
- Completed Phase I of the Russell Index back scanning project, which includes 1974-1985 Deed Adsectum and 1974-1985 Deed Direct. The purpose of this project was to restore the Russell Index books, which are in various stages of deterioration.
- Presented before the Real Estate Section of the Allegheny County Bar Association (ABA), American Congress of Real Estate (ACRE), and the Pennsylvania Land Title Institute (PLTI).
- Reviewed and certified record ability of more than 2,000 sheriff deeds prior to sale.

# 2008 Department of Real Estate Revenue Analysis



**Total Revenue \$7,911,723.00**

## DID YOU KNOW THE DRE.....

- Recorded the second largest number of documents throughout the state of Pennsylvania, only behind Philadelphia.
- Saved Allegheny County approximately \$500 each month by emailing Realty Transfer Tax Reports to Municipalities.
- Saved Allegheny County approximately \$10,000 in mailing costs by implementing e-Recording system.
- Is the collection agent for the Realty Transfer Tax (RTT) for the state, municipalities, and school districts. In 2008, the Department collected \$108 million.

## Green Initiatives

Allegheny County Executive Dan Onorato announced the launch of "Allegheny Green" on September 16, 2008. Allegheny Green is a comprehensive initiative to promote sustainable practices within County government and through county-wide policies and programs. Jeannette Hickman is the designated Green Action Team member for the Department of Real Estate and attends meetings with the County Sustainability Manager. The DRE recycles cans, re-uses copy paper, shuts off lights, monitors and other non-essential electronics, and emails RTT reports to more than 170 municipalities and school districts. The Department of Real Estate is off to a good start in implementing sustainable practices.

## Right To Know

Act 3 of 2008 took effect on January 1, 2009. Essentially, the Act provides greater transparency of government agencies by allowing more public access to records.

Administrative Services Director Tim Johnson is the designated Open Records Officer for Allegheny County. Jeannette Hickman is the Assistant Open Records Officer for our department.

## Electronic transfer Realty Transfer Tax Reports

Beginning October 2008, the Department of Real Estate started transmitting Realty Transfer Tax Reports to all municipalities, school districts and local tax collectors via e-mail. This new procedure promotes greater efficiency, insuring timely receipt of the reports. It also provides significant cost saving measures to Allegheny County taxpayers by eliminating lengthy paper reports, envelopes and the ever increasing mailing costs in expediting a combined total of 302 transfer tax reports per month.

**DID YOU KNOW** ..... Many people who build their own home think they should get a second deed for the actual building. Not so. A deed indicates ownership of land. A newly constructed home or addition must be constructed within the property lines of a person's deeded lot. Assessment records are updated to include newly constructed dwellings via Municipal Building permits forwarded to the Office of Property Assessment.

## Block and Lot Sheets, Property History Cards

Block and Lot sheets and Property History Cards are primary tools in locating properties and researching the ownership history of the properties in the County. These are reference tools that have now become an integral part of the Department of Real Estate with the move of the Mapping and Deed Registry staff as part of Row office consolidation. These materials will be added features to the DRE document search site, both in-house and on the internet starting in the spring of 2009. These two valuable property reference materials were formerly available only through a personal visit to the Office of Property Assessment. The fee for viewing and printing a historical property card will continue to be \$1.00. A block & lot map will continue to be \$1.50. The computerized GIS mapping is now exported into images that reflect the existing property mapping for the County.

The block sheets are now historical, as they have not been updated since 2003, so the addition of the GIS block images is very important. This represents another upgrade in service to the public.

## E-RECORDING

The Department of Real Estate began recording digitally transmitted documents in May 2006. These digitally transmitted documents were submitted as Level II (imaged) and Level III (paperless). eRecorded documents are processed and returned to the submitter the same day. To date, the office has eRecorded 16,400 documents, has generated more than \$996,309 in fees, and saved approximately \$10,000 in mailing costs. In October 2008, we successfully began eRecording deeds. There is absolutely no cost incurred to the residents of Allegheny County by adding this recording feature.

## Soldier Discharge (DD-214)

Valerie McDonald Roberts, Manager of the Department of Real Estate, in conjunction with Ron Gancas, Executive Vice President of Soldiers & Sailors Museum Memorial, established a partnership between their two offices in returning unclaimed original soldier discharges (DD-214) to their rightful owner or immediate family member. These original Historic documents, some dating back to the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, were recorded in the former Recorder of Deeds Office but were never retrieved by the veteran who submitted the document. The Department of Real Estate has categorized these records by the veterans' names and dates of service. These discharges will be filed with the Soldiers and Sailors Memorial Hall and dispersed to immediate family members by this organization.

Interested parties should contact them at (412) 621-4253.

## SLAVE DEEDS

Imagine flipping open an 1816 Deed Book and seeing the word “Negro” in the index. This was precisely what happened to Department of Real Estate supervisor, Jeff Liebert, in September of 2007. In turning to the referenced page, he discovered a recorded document that owner Hanson Catlett “hereby do manumit and set free from slavery my Negro Girl Lucy, aged fourteen years, on conditions however that she do faithfully bind herself by Indenture to serve me, my executors, Administrators or assigns until she shall attain the age of twenty eight years.” Jeff and Lead Supervisor Will Steele brought this to the attention of Department Manager, Valerie McDonald Roberts, who was then Recorder of Deeds.



Because of the historical significance of this finding, Ms. Roberts assigned Mr. Steele the project of reviewing all deed books from 1788 through 1865. In all, he discovered 56 original recorded Freedom Papers and Indenture for African American slaves in Pittsburgh and Allegheny County. Ms. Roberts brought this finding to the attention of Samuel W. Black, Curator, African American Collection of the Heinz History Center. He states, “These

documents, ‘freedom papers’, manumission papers’, and ‘certificates of freedom’, not only help to clarify the legalities imposed on Americans of African descent but also the fragility of the status of free men and women in this country and Western Pennsylvania.” University of Pittsburgh Vice Chancellor Robert Hill reviewed these deeds and performed extensive research as he recognized some of the names of the slave owners as major street names throughout Allegheny County. Mr. Hill collaborated with this office and Art Louderback at the Heinz History Center to produce an exhibit. The research and all original documents have been collected and are on display at the History Center at the “FREE AT LAST? SLAVERY IN PITTSBURGH” exhibit, on display until April 5, 2009.

*Know all men by these presents that O. Dennis <sup>deed.</sup> Catlett of the City of Pittsburgh in the County of Allegheny and Commonwealth of Pennsylvania from motives of benevolence and humanity have manumitted, and hereby do, manumit and set free from slavery my Negro Girl Lucy, aged fourteen years, on conditions however that she do faithfully bind herself by an Indenture to serve me, my executors, Administrators or assigns until she shall attain, the age of twenty eight years, and I do hereby give grant and release unto the said Lucy all my, right title and claim of in and to her person labor and services, &...*

Excerpts from “Lucy” deed, recorded on November 5, 1816 in Deed Book Volume 22, Page 332.

## MAPPING AND DEED REGISTRY

As part of the consolidation in January 2008, these functions were moved from Property Assessments to the DRE. There are two main functions of the new section: maintaining the mapping of properties, and maintaining the ownership of properties related to assessments and taxes. The mapping functions include the maintenance of all properties in regard to physical mapping, property location, acreage and legal descriptions. The mapping has been converted to a digital mapping system, GIS (Geographic Information Systems), in which all new subdivision plans are now drawn upon receipt from recording. Updates to the mapping continue to be made to overlay aerial photo-

graphs more accurately and to continue to update locations of properties. There is now a new project underway to apply property dimensions to all properties. This GIS mapping is now available to the public on the Real Estate web site map tab. All property locations, approximately 580,000, have been reviewed for standardization and are in a second phase review for accuracy and completeness in coordination with the municipal and 911 records. The ownership and deed registry functions include processing all recorded deeds into the assessment system and maintenance of all owner information, including mailing addresses in the assessment system. All deeds are recorded and then reviewed by

the registry section and entered into the assessment system. The deed registry section is responsible for the tracking and notification of owners and attorneys of deeds that can not be processed into the assessment system. Owner and tax bill addresses are updated based on information provided in recorded deeds. This information is then validated for accuracy. The entire file is reviewed for accuracy and completeness with the US Postal Service. The section focuses on increasing efficiency through technical upgrades and coordinated efforts with other offices and agencies and on providing better information to the public via computerized tools and imaging.

## Warrantee Atlas

The Warrantee Atlas is a historic visual record of the very first settlers of present day Allegheny County beginning soon after the Colonial victory of the American Revolutionary War. On or after 1785, large parcels of land were patented by the state government to members of the American Army as payment for service in defense of their country against British repression. These early settlers established Allegheny County and Southwestern Pennsylvania as the hub of the Industrial Revolution of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century in America. In 2003, the Department of Real Estate collaborated with the Digital Research Library, University Library System of the University of Pittsburgh to digitize the Warrantee Atlas of Allegheny County which is posted on the Historic Pittsburgh website at <http://digital.library.pitt.edu/maps/warrantee/>

## Notary Public

In September 2008, Allegheny County centralized the notary process to the Department of Real Estate. The new notary no longer has to go to the Courthouse to register their signature. The Department of Real Estate now collects the Notary Register card at the same time the notary is sworn in. The Notary Register card is imaged as part of the recording process. After the recording process is complete, the Notary Register card is sent to the Department of Court Records, Civil Division. Thanks to Department Director Kate Barkman for working with the DRE.

## E-Notary Verification Site

In 2007, the Department of Real Estate became a Pennsylvania Electronic Notarization Identity Verification Site. As an Identity Verification Site, we are authorized to enter the identification information for the notary into a state-shared database so that the notary may continue the process of receiving an Electronic Notary Seal. There is no fee to the notary for this service.

## Social Security Fraud

In order to protect the citizens of Allegheny County from identity theft, Ms. Roberts implemented a policy in 2002 of rejecting any document containing a social security number. Ms. Roberts also initiated efforts to ensure that any existing imaged deed, mortgage, or other public document containing a social security number be kept in a secure location in the computer data base system. The public cannot access these secured documents, but must enlist the aid of a Department of Real Estate clerk to access these records. The copy of the document will have the social security number blackened out. This gives the public access to any pertinent information on these documents while at the same time protecting the privacy of the citizens of Allegheny County.

## How to Use the Russell Index

The Russell Index was created by John Russell as a way to precisely locate information in the Department of Real Estate, just as the Dewey Decimal System was used in libraries. Generally, Deed and Mortgage Index Books are categorized in 10 year increments. To locate a specific buyer, you must know the approximate year of purchase of property to select the correct index series.

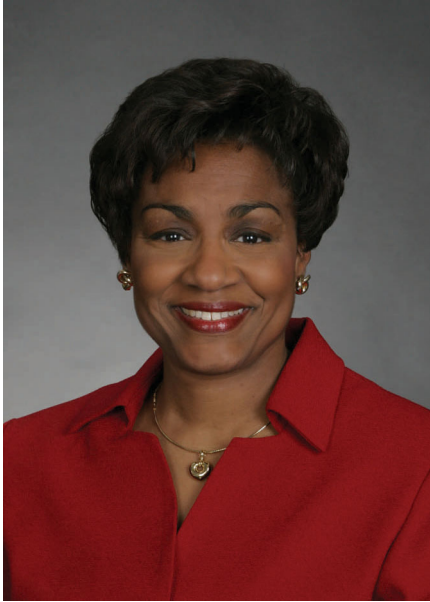
**Example:Samuel Butterman** purchased property around 1967. You will access the Deed Grantee Series 1964-1973. Select the book that contains the last name "B" and the 'Given Name' (first name) "S". Open the front cover, or double click the image to access the Key Letter Chart if available on-line. Now disregard the first letter of the last name (B) and examine the

remaining letters in the last name (utterman), noting if any of these letters match the five (5) key letters, L M N R T. Select the first two key letters in order, (double letters only count as one). The key letters for "Butterman" are "TR". Note the key letters "TR" in the left hand column on the Key Letter Chart. Note the "Given Name Initial" "S" on the top horizontal column. Intersect the two columns to arrive at the designated Group Page where you will locate the "Butterman" listing.

The group page will direct you to the specific Group Sub-Page where you will find your specific deed reference. The index line will include: Grantee Name, Grantor Name, Deed Book Volume and Page Reference, Recording Date, and Municipality.

Some last names such as "Jones" have only one key letter "N". A few last names, one example being "Lee" has no key letters. All last names without a key letter will be listed under "Misc.". A separate column is provided for Corporations, (Corps. Etc.). Always index the first word of the corporation. But if a corporation is listed as an individual's name, such as John Smith Company, it will be listed as 'Smith, John Company'. Beginning article words, "A" and "The" are disregarded. Abbreviated first words, such as "St." must be searched as "Saint".

Follow these same procedures when using the Deed Direct, (Grantor/Seller), Mortgage Direct, (Mortgagor/Borrower), and the Mortgage Abstractum, (Mortgage/Lender).



Thanks to County Executive Dan Onorato, I am able to continue with Allegheny County in an appointed capacity with a professional, expanded staff in delivering high quality, cost efficient government service that the public deserves. I also work with 66 other county Recorders of Deeds and Recording Officers as President of the Pennsylvania Recorders of Deeds Association (PRODA). I have served as Executive Committee member of PRODA since 2004, hosted/organized the state conference in Pittsburgh in 2005, and was elected President in 2008. I have focused our state discussion on uniformity of procedures, implementing a PRODA web site for broad information dissemination, fraud preventive measures, proposed Uniform Real Property Electronic Recording Act (House Bill No. 2618), and other state laws and state legislation impacting recording offices.

Row office consolidation has resolved several inefficiencies, including the long standing disconnect between the recording office and Deed Registry/Mapping. Now that these functions are combined in one department, the work flows seamlessly and synergistically. Thanks to Deb Beiber for being a very valuable and added asset to this department, in managing Deed Registry and Mapping/ GIS.

We'll continue to work collaboratively with other departments and offices under the direction of County Manager Jim Flynn, to make Allegheny County government a role model of public service. It is an honor to serve in this administration, and a blessing to have excellent employees and exceptional administrators of which I am proud.

*Valerie McDonald Roberts*



**DAN ONORATO**  
COUNTY EXECUTIVE

## **Allegheny County Department of Real Estate** **Valerie McDonald Roberts, Manager**

**101 County Office Building**  
**542 Forbes Avenue**  
**Pittsburgh, PA 15219**  
**(412) 350-4226**

**[www.alleghenycounty.us/re/](http://www.alleghenycounty.us/re/) (general website)**  
**[www.recorder.county.allegheny.pa.us](http://www.recorder.county.allegheny.pa.us) (online record search)**