

Centuries of vital town records get a new life in Falmouth

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FALMOUTH — If you listen carefully, you can hear the gentle whir of the air conditioning pumping through the stacks of the clerk's vault in town hall.

It's just the right environment — under 70 degrees, 45 percent humidity — to suit the volumes of Falmouth history.

It's all there — hundred of years' worth of births, deaths, marriages, town meeting minutes, voter registries — neatly tucked at one end of Town Clerk Michael Palmer's office.

Thanks to a \$150,000 records restoration and new climate-control system, funded with Community Preservation Act money, the pages of Falmouth history will be safely tucked away for a few hundred years more.

Last week, Palmer received dozens of the town's historic vital records, wrapped in brown paper wrappers and packed in boxes with foam peanuts. Each book was carefully restored by Brown's River Records Preservation Services of Vermont.

Paper can be notoriously brittle. Even high-quality document paper — sometimes made with linen — can tear or deteriorate after years of handling or unfriendly storage.

Previous town clerks organized the once-cluttered town vaults and started the restoration process, Palmer said. But it was too easy for the town to forgo the expense of preservation, which can cost \$800 to \$1,000 per volume, in the face of more pressing needs.

The community preservation funds allowed Palmer to restore hundreds of years' worth of documents at once, from birth records to assessors' documents.

The books were dismantled at Brown's River. Each page was sprayed with a solution that neutralizes the acid in the paper and helps create a buffer to protect it, said Brown's River owner Janet Remmey.

"The process is designed to basically give life back to the book," she said.

From there, the most delicate pages were placed in special clear coverings, so they can be viewed without being exposed to further damage. The process took months to complete.

Genealogists will soon be able to review the most recently restored records on microfilm and on CDs at the public library, Palmer said. Some of the town's vital records are already on file there, said Jill Erickson, head of the reference department at the Falmouth Public Library.

"Just the fact that they thought to keep these is an amazing thing," Erickson said of the town's early settlers.

You never know what you might find in the stacks.

"I found my mother's name when she registered to vote," Palmer said last week. Right underneath was his aunt's name. "That is exciting to me. What was going on in town? What were they doing that day?"

In another volume, in tiny, neat letters, is the birth record of one of the town's most famous residents, Katharine Lee Bates, who penned "America the Beautiful."

Only she's listed as Catharine L. Bates, born Aug. 11, 1859 — one letter off the traditional spelling and a day shy of what is commonly believed to be her birthday.

Palmer intends to push the town to restore the past 50 years of records, which were not included in this preservation project. He'd like to see money set aside yearly to make sure the work continues.

"Things we do today are history tomorrow."

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