

Yarmouth collection adds to Barnstable archives



Conor Powers-Smith
@csmithRegister

Posted Jul. 21, 2014 @ 12:00 am

BARNSTABLE - A donation by the Cape Cod Association, the Yarmouth Port-based organization that has been providing scholarships to local students for more than 130 years, has added a wealth of historically significant documents to the William B. Nickerson Cape Cod Archives, a repository of regional artifacts housed at Cape Cod Community College.

Included in the collection are meeting minutes, photographs and correspondence dating to the CCA's founding in 1851, all meticulously cared for.

"It was very well taken care of," said Mary LaBombard, archivist and reference librarian at the college. "You could tell it had been treasured before they came to us."

For decades, the records were passed from one board president to the next, before being professionally archived in 2005, with the intent of sharing them with the community. "It was important to make sure that history lived on,

and the information was made available to the general public," said Kristin O'Malley, executive director of the Cape Cod Foundation, the community trust that manages the CCA's scholarship program.

The documents were a natural fit for the Nickerson Archive, LaBombard said, where the records of several other education-related institutions are already housed, including those of the college itself. However, completing the donation required patience.

"The Cape Cod Association reached out to me close to two years ago," LaBombard said. "It's actually been a long process." The archives were undergoing an extensive renovation project at the time, installing professional amenities such as climate and humidity control and mobile shelving units designed to maximize space.

"We were kind of in a period of transition at the time," LaBombard said. "Now we have plenty of space." Completed in October, the new archives have attracted donations from other organizations looking to ensure that their records are kept safe and accessible. "I think people are starting to get wind that we have the room, and coming forward with other things."

O'Malley said the archives' new facility was a key consideration in the decision to house the CCA's collection there, as was the large number of people who use the resource, both in person and via the Internet. "We hope that people are able to access the collection," she said.

CCA Treasurer Sally Walker Helwig, whose father Rufus F. Walker preserved the records for 25 years, agreed. "The Nickerson Archives is the ideal place to permanently house this important collection, given its newly developed state-of-the-art storage vault, and its significant collection of Cape Cod historical records."

LaBombard highlights some of the most interesting collections she receives, including a number of pieces of scrimshaw and other maritime artifacts, by organizing small displays in the library. The newest, comprised of documents from the CCA collection, reveals not just the history of the organization, but the life stories of several of the students whose educations it helped fund through the years.

- George Lyman Kittredge, for example, received the first CCA scholarship, a \$350 award bestowed in 1877. Kittredge put the money toward his dream of studying literature at Harvard. Thanks in part to the CCA's help, Kittredge

became a respected scholar; the college's library houses around 30 books he wrote or edited during a successful career in letters.

Cyrus P. Howes used a \$500 scholarship from the CCA to attend MIT. After graduating and becoming successful, Howes donated exactly that sum back to the association.

From those humble beginnings, the CCA's generosity has grown enormously over the years. "This year the association awarded \$450,000 to almost 300 students," said O'Malley. "That's all to students that were born on, or currently reside on, Cape Cod or the islands."

A trip through the documents accumulated over the course of more than a century reveals many connections. "It's neat to look back, too, at other generations," said O'Malley. "Kids are getting scholarships now whose parents got scholarships."

"It's fascinating to find some of these student records, and then see how those students ended up," said LaBombard. Discovering such stories is one of her favorite parts of her work. In charge of the archives for less than a year, she still has much to discover.

"We have everything from very small family collections to very large association records," LaBombard said. "I'm finding something new all the time, and I love that about the job."

That is one of the reasons LaBombard greets requests for information and research help with enthusiasm. The more difficult the request, she said, the better. "I actually love it when people come in with a really obscure, tricky research question." Some of her favorite discoveries have come as the result of such searches.

The archives also digitize much of their documents, making them available to curious people around the world. Providing physical access to residents and visitors is also important. "We're definitely a Cape Cod history archive, so we want to serve the local population," LaBombard said. "We have a lot of things that they might enjoy seeing, and they're all welcome. You don't have to come in with a specific scholarly research question. If you're not an academic researcher, that's OK."

As word of the archives' renovation has spread, more people, scholars and laymen alike, have begun to take advantage of the resource. LaBombard said

sharing local history is every bit as important as preserving it. That often involves altering people's preconceived notions.

"Archives sometimes have a bad reputation as sort of a secret dungeon full of cobwebs and dust," LaBombard said. "I try to discourage that as much as possible." Anyone with an interest in local history is welcome to examine the archives' growing collection, with a minimum of precautions. "I probably won't make you wear gloves."