

Suzanne,

You are probably wondering what the document food fight was about and why would you want to be Town Clerk.

Eleanor found a bag of early documents that somehow appeared in the Assessor's cabinet. They date from about 1790 to 1885. Marge asked me to look at them. The documents were thrown into a shopping bag. They had to come out of the bag as some were being destroyed from the weight. I isolated a few documents that needed conservation. The rest were in excellent condition as the linen paper was very pliable with no paper shreds in the bottom of the bag.

Many of the documents were in folded bundles tied with string which is the way filing was done before filing cabinets. The documents are identified on the exterior fold so bundles do not have to be broken. I cut a few that were tied with sewing thread that had sawed into the paper. There were many loose documents some of which had been grouped by rubber bands that had long ago dried up and disappeared. I pulled off a few rusted paper clips.

I let the document committee know as I thought we would get together and formulate a plan. A mission statement:

"The mission of the Middlefield Town Records Committee is to help identify, secure, preserve and provide access to the historical records of the Town of Middlefield, MA. By "historical records," the Committees broadly includes all official town records in their various formats, and those of organizations that have played a significant role in the town's history should those organizations choose to transfer ownership or custody to the Town of Middlefield, or permit the Town to reproduce those records for the purpose of public access. "

Instead Michael and Sherri insisted that I cease and desist. This is without consulting the Document Committee, Historical Commission or Marge and without any knowledge of what was contained in or the condition of the hoard.

I cannot fathom why we would have a document committee if not for exactly this circumstance. Marge who is a member did not ask for state assistance. I would have been very comfortable sorting and inventorying this pile – and scanning the documents the committee deemed important. The paper will be in good shape 50 or 100 years from now if stored properly.

The museum is a fire trap and town hall is masonry so a little better. The "records Vault" is a janitor's closet. If we had a roof fire and the roof were vented it would be a swimming pool. There is no reinforced ceiling only ceiling tiles, any 8th grader could break in by taping an exterior door latch and pulling two ceiling tiles to gain entry.

Email Exchanges:

April 27 Howard

Eleanor gave me a large shopping bag of early town documents that apparently had been left at some point. She found it in a cabinet in the office. Many packets with string holding them together. Most everything is on small scraps of paper and highly folded. Linen paper is still good after 200 years.

A very quick look gave me the complete 1832 valuation and about 25 deeds dating from the early 1790s. I've found highway petitions, welfare receipts and bills to the town from the early general stores. Really interesting and probably quite important as original source documentation. There are a few early burial permits and one receipt for making a pauper's casket.

April 28 Sherri

WOW! I wasn't expecting anything that important. Can we get the material into sleeves immediately so it's only handled once?

April 28 Sherri

By statute, everything related to the town or the town common from 1870 and prior must be retained.

From the sound of it, most of that material falls under the purview of the town clerk, she is responsible for it and is mandated to properly preserve it. It is not the purview of the museum or the documents committee unless the town clerk asks for our assistance.

Now that we know there are important documents in that parcel I strongly suggest we not do anything with them without expert consultation... No unrolling, no inventory, no scanning, nothing. Leave them exactly as they are, preferably in archival boxes Marge's fireproof safe, until we have professional guidance on how to proceed and authorization from the town clerk to do so.

I know the curiosity and awe factors are high, but we only get one shot at doing this right and we owe it to the town and future generations to go slow.

April 28 Michael

Sherry is absolutely right. Howard, please don't do any more unwrapping or untying.

This is wonderful, but let's get help.

May 9 Sherri

The archivists I spoke with made it clear this is an ongoing debate in professional circles; some favor digital, others paper. In any event, the town is legally mandated to retain all of the documents you

mentioned. I would not be at all comfortable relying on digital copies, especially given the long term need for being routinely updated.

I am extremely concerned about records being tossed wherever in an effort to "tidy up" before the changing of the guard. Also concerned if our new TC is getting the impression that there's no reason to keep old records and not getting the message that the town is mandated to keep them and that it's the responsibility of the TC to do so.

I agree with Michael's previous post, I would like to see these materials put in as safe a place as possible until we have professional guidance and we have a systematic regimen in place so we're handling them as little as possible.

May 8 Michael

Dear All,

As committee chair, I am making an executive decision that nothing is to be done with the materials until we meet and look at them together. Howard, I understand your impatience and respect your judgment, but we have a fiduciary responsibility to handle these records properly.

Generally speaking, I don't see a conflict between scanning and physical preservation. I've never seen a scan exhibited in a museum. If we can save originals we should. Increasingly, paper documents will become rare artifacts in the age of digital communication. Who knows but that our e-mails will someday be archived by the next generation of Middlefielders.

But enough ruminations. I think we should meet at Town Hall on Saturday, May 23 to look at the materials Howard is describing and plan out next steps from there. How does 10:30 AM sound?

Michael

5/9 Steve

This is getting way overblown. A committee chair cannot make an executive decision & Howard is simply recommending that we achieve digital copies of documents of historical interest before they totally deteriorate or get dumped in a landfill or fire-prone "storage".

Our town clerk is a member of our committee. Our new town clerk can be invited to our meeting. 10:30 is fine.

May 9 Howard

Michael,

As chair you get to call meetings, set the agenda and call yourself chair. Your authority doesn't go beyond that. Everything is decided by a motion by a member, second and approval by majority vote of the board present.

To answer some of the rhetoric. I am not impatient. I did not say anything about not saving or conserving the paper documents. I mentioned one 1832 roster that might be beyond saving but the information was important. The document was further damaged in the shopping bag. That was the only item I commented on. Before you know it I will be accused of destroying documents so I can scan them.

I have done nothing to the documents except get them out of a Kraft paper shopping bag where many were being distorted and crushed to death. I haven't looked at them in weeks except to give a quick sort into half a dozen piles as they came out of the bag. I've been busy with ATRs, WiredWest and the ATM with no time for this. I scanned a few interesting pieces out of the thousands to give you a sense of the material. I tried to involve you but I can see that was a mistake.

Suzanne knew nothing about this as I don't think she is sworn yet. Nothing is or was being "tossed". You guys are just making stuff up and spinning this into some kind of conspiracy. Your imaginations are running wild. Either of you could have come over here for an evaluation at any time to see what is involved or so we could decide on a plan. We didn't have to wait 6 or 8 weeks. You would have had some sense of what is involved, the quantity and the condition of the material.

My answer to Steve today was general. This is not museum quality material so no decisions need be made on presentation. My feeling is it is best to both conserve the paper as well as digitizing it so it is available to the general public and can be archived in multiple locations. I thought that was the mission of this committee?

I had access to the special collections at both the CT State Library and CT Historical Society for many years. There is no one more respectful of old paper than me. I purchase Middlefield material to save it. Stuff at risk had to be removed from the piles and steel boxes. I couldn't wait a year or three for an archivist. I apologize for getting excited and maybe even hyperventilating over this stuff. Don't infer recklessness from my love of this material. The paper will be at the Clerk's office awaiting whatever it is you are going to do. Good luck with your committee. - Howard

May 10 Michael

Dear Selectboard Members,

Thank you for the opportunity to serve on the town's Historical Records Committee. However, I regret that I cannot continue to serve. Please accept this notice of my resignation from the position.

Sincerely,

Michael Feldberg

May 11 Sherri

Gentlemen,

We are a committee bringing together people of diverse talents and expertise to work for the benefit of the town. Unfortunately instead of working together as a group we've gone flying off the rails onto a destructive path. I believe we can still 'do some good' if we take a deep breath, agree to work things through in called meetings, and not take actions outside of those agreed upon in meetings.

May 11 Sherri

Howard,

My concern about documents being "tossed" about related to the apparent "housecleaning" taking place in the office of the town clerk, it had nothing to do with your handling of the material. All of the material you've received should have been in archival boxes and stored in a fire proof safe at town hall, not handed off to you, the museum, or up for disposal. I'm glad you have saved it from an uncertain fate and I certainly don't want to see the documents returned to the office and stuffed in a closet.

If there isn't enough room in the clerk's fireproof file for this material then the town needs to take a few thousand dollars from free cash or budget excess and buy another one. Ditto for enough archival boxes to store the documents as they currently exist. I cannot believe that we can find funds for a variety of "nice to haves" but not "needs"...and given the state mandate to preserve all pre 1870 public records (and the state's broad definition of such), as well as all tax lists, et al, this is a "need". Since the town doesn't have an appointed person responsible for Records Maintenance, I believe at this point the Selectboard should be involved in seeing to the proper storage of this amazing cache of documents.