

Report on Historical Materials Housed at the Southborough Public Library and the Southborough Historical Society

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Ryan Donovan, Library Director of the Southborough Public Library, and members of the Library Board of Trustees asked me to evaluate a collection of books and records at the Southborough Public Library and to identify items that could constitute a core Local History Collection. They also asked me to look at the collections at the Southborough Historical Society and to give an estimate of the costs to begin processing that collection for preservation and access.

Southborough Public Library Local History Collection

The goal for working with this collection was to assess whether or not the gathered books and records could be used to create a Local History Collection at the Library and then to identify the items that could be used to form such a collection.

Among the gathered books and records were standard titles relating to local history in Southborough and its immediate surrounding areas. I went through each individual title and box and—using the draft copy of the Library’s Collection Development Policy for a Local History Collection as a guide—weeded out all of the items that did not directly pertain to Southborough’s local history. What is left is a group of materials that can form the core of a Local History Collection for the Library.

Immediate Actions:

- All of the books remaining on the shelves can be cataloged and entered into the C/W MARS system under a new “Local History Collection” shelving location (or whatever designation the Library decides to use). Most of the books already have records in the C/W MARS system. My recommendation is to enter all of the books that have available records into the catalog.
- Books that do not have records in the C/W MARS system either will need original cataloging, can be grouped together to create a “browse-able” section of the collection (although this step will limit access), or can possibly be incorporated into an **archival collection**, if the books are associated with other archival materials. Archival collections generally deal with unpublished and/or unique materials that usually are issued in series. The singularity of these items mean that they must be organized differently from published books. The guiding principal behind this organization is *provenance*, a fancy word that refers to the organization or individual who created the collection, e.g., the Rotary Club; an

individual author who has manuscripts, letters, and papers; the Algonquin Regional High School. Such entities create and collect papers and records, which can then be classified under this “parent” organization or individual and then be organized by groups of Series (e.g., Meeting Minutes, Correspondence, Collected Pamphlets). The main access point into such a collection is a Finding Aid, so if a book, say, is not in C/W MARS, you may be able to fold it into an archival collection if it relates to one. If there is no identifiable “parent” organization, you can create an “artificial collection” (i.e., a collection that does not have an identifiable provenance) of, say, *Miscellaneous Records Relating to the History of Southborough*. Another alternative is to create a vertical file of topics relating to Southborough history for these materials (kept in, say, a filing cabinet), especially if these published items are more like pamphlets than books.

- The materials in boxes mostly constitute archival collections, and they will need to be organized as such. Here are some of the potential collections that I identified as I was going through them (mind you, this list is not exhaustive, and it will take a processing archivist to truly identify the various collections in these boxes):
 - Southborough Public Library – You have a nice little collection of materials documenting the library’s history. There are one or two boxes relating to the Library’s “Genealogy Club,” which can constitute its own Series in this collection.
 - Friends of the Southborough Public Library
 - Town of Southborough
 - Southborough Historical Society - You may want to offer these materials to the originating organization or start your own collection at the Library.
 - Southborough Historical Commission – Again, you may want to offer these materials to the originating organization or start your own collection at the Library.
 - Miscellaneous photographs can become an “artificial collection” as its own *Photograph Collection*.
 - High School Yearbooks – Either treat as separate collections for each school (especially if you have materials other than yearbooks), treat as an artificial *Local High School Yearbooks Collection*, or simply catalog each yearbook title in C/W MARS as a series.
- There is a row of books all relating to the Southborough Public Library on the shelves. These should be included as part of a *Records of the Southborough Public Library* collection. You should still catalog any of these books that may happen to be in C/W MARS, though. Cataloged books can still be part of an archival collection by simply being listed along with the call number in the Finding Aid for that collection.
- The archival collections will need to be boxed up in archival quality containers and folders. Scrapbooks on non-archival quality materials should be transferred to appropriate archival-quality scrapbook materials if the contents and general order

of a scrapbook can be preserved. The processing archivist will determine what is needed, but these supplies will be an additional expense.

- In creating a Local History Collection, you need to develop standard policies and procedures. You should start an Accession List for archival collections, along with accession numbers to identify the various collections. Your first collection (assuming it is added to the list before the end of the year) will be 2015.01 (if it is added next year, it would be 2016.01). If you anticipate more than 100 collections added within any given year (which is highly doubtful in this case, but not necessarily for the Historical Society), then make the number 2015.001. You should also create a donation policy and a Deed of Gift form for donors to sign and then maintain records of all donations, because once you create this collection, you will get donation offers. I advise against taking any donations that come with strings attached: you want to maximize the Library's ability to use the item(s) to their full extent. Finally, you have already taken steps to create a Collection Development Policy, which is good. I can give you a copy of the Deed of Gift and similar documents from the Westborough Public Library as examples. Any archivist you hire to work on the collection should be able to help you put together such policies and procedures as well.

I have two suggestions for finding an archivist to work on this collection. BiblioTemps (<http://www.bibliotemps.com>) is a short-term staffing service for library-related projects, and they will be able to help you vet potential candidates for this project. The listserv for New England Archivists (<http://www.newenglandarchivists.org/listserv>) often has e-mails advertising the need for archivists to work on short-term projects, so you can try posting your need here. If you run into a problem with posting to the listserv, I am a member, so I can help with the process.

Southborough Historical Society

Ryan Donovan and the Board of Trustees also asked me to assess and come up with an estimate of costs to process the collections housed in the basement of the Southborough Historical Society.

The basement of the Historical Society holds an array of materials, including photographs, documents, clothes, dolls, bottles, town records, newspapers, books, framed pictures, previous displays, and other museum objects. These items are variously housed in metal cabinets, metal shelving, metal filing cabinets, and metal map drawers. Some items are stored in archival quality boxes, although an archivist should determine if the folders and other packing materials are likewise archival quality. Some of the archival boxes on the shelves are empty and waiting to be filled.

The museum appears to have some documentation of at least some of the collections it owns. This information will be useful in identifying what collections are housed at the Historical Society.

Immediate Actions:

- An archivist and/or museum professional will need to do a complete inventory of the items held in the basement, try to identify all of the individual collections, and group the items in these collections together. Any documentation the Historical Society has about any of the collections or past donations will be useful to this process.
- Once the collections have been identified and a complete inventory has been made, the archivist/museum professional can consult with the leaders of the organization to develop priorities for processing and preserving the collections. Some collections can exist with simply a title and accession record. Some collections may demand more in-depth analysis in the form of a Finding Aid, especially if they have lots of items and will receive lots of use.
- As the collections are processed, they should be transferred into archival quality containers (if they are not already housed in such containers) in order to preserve them for future use. While the Historical Society has some empty archival boxes, more supplies will certainly need to be purchased.
- Just like the Local History Collection for the Library, similar policies and procedures will need to be created and implemented (see above).

Costs

Ryan Donovan and the Board of Trustees asked me to estimate the costs to assess and organize the Historical Society collection. They have applied for a Community Preservation Committee (CPC) Grant for \$12,000 to be put towards the project, and the question is whether or not this amount is enough for the goal of organizing and providing access to the collection.

Processing collections is iterative. There are many levels of processing that can be applied to collections, and an organization will never reach an “end point” of what can be done with its collections. Access can almost always be improved. Technologies change. New preservation techniques are constantly developed. The most important goal should always be to improve the state of the collection to the greatest degree possible, keeping in mind its value, potential use, and the resources available to carry it out.

Identifying collections and creating a complete inventory of the Historical Society collection will be a slow and painstaking process. Items appear to be hidden away all over the basement, and questions of what belongs together will be difficult to sort out. I estimate that this process could take 150 hours. Whether or not this estimate is high or low depends on the depth of the documentation available for the collections, the ability of the archivist/museum professional to connect this documentation to the actual items, and the variety and state of the collections that do not have documentation.

Once there is a complete inventory, the items can be placed in archival containers and decisions can then be made about which collections deserve deeper analysis in the form of a Finding Aid. Any hours “saved” at the beginning of the project can then be applied to this process. Supplies will need to be purchased to support this stage of the project.

Here is a potential breakdown of costs:

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| 150 hours for Complete Inventory x \$40.00/hour | = \$6,000.00 |
| 100 hours for Storage Preservation and Finding Aid creation x \$40.00/hour | = \$4,000.00 |
| Supplies for Storage Preservation | = <u>\$2,000.00</u> |
| Total | = \$12,000.00 |

This phase of the project will give you rudimentary organization of the historical collections and some in-depth access to a few key collections. The next phase of the project will be to continue improving access in the form of basic Finding Aids to all the collections that demand them.

Ideally, the same archives/museum professional should work on the project from beginning to end. The organization of collections is an intellectual activity, and if individual archivists were put to work on the same collection, each one may organize that collection differently. The person who performs the inventory will possess a depth of knowledge about the collections that will be difficult for another archivist to learn without spending additional time with the collections. My suggestions above for finding someone to work on the Library’s Local History Collection can be used to find someone to work on the Historical Society’s collections. Perhaps, it could be the same person.

Going Into the Future

As I said before, processing collections is iterative. Keeping this principle in mind, here are some observations and thoughts as you move into the future.

- In going down into the basement of the Historical Society, the dampness and mustiness of the storage conditions is immediately apparent. These are conditions where mold can break out, if it has not already, which can be harmful both to the collections and to people. Flooding is also a potential hazard for basements. The ideal is to store valuable collections in a climate controlled environment for both temperature and humidity. I am fully aware of limitations when it comes to facilities, but if there is a better alternative available for storing the items in this collection, I highly advise moving them there.
- Expectations heighten once you organize and provide access to collections. People will want to see the collections, use them for research, and donate items to them. Collections are like living things: they require constant attention. Without oversight, the organization of a collection can quickly fall into disarray. If you do not have someone with proper training designated with the responsibility of

maintaining these collections, you could find yourself right back where you started when this project commenced. For the long-term health of these collections, I advise hiring someone to oversee these collections (or possibly, in the case of the library, designating someone as responsible for the Local History Collection).

- If you do not have someone dedicated to overseeing these collections, I highly advise against pursuing any digitization project relating to these collections. A pre-requisite to the digitalization of any part of a collection is organization. This step should be your first and main concern. But beyond organization, digital collections require even more constant oversight than physical collections. While I encourage you to have this goal in your sights, I advise against pursuing it until you have the proper resources and personnel in place.
- Finally, an important resource for Massachusetts historical organizations is the State Historic Records Advisory Board (SHRAB - <http://www.sec.state.ma.us/arc/arcshrab/shrabidx.htm>). It offers training, grants, and other resources to help cultural organizations across the state manage their historic records. Explore what they have to offer and try to take advantage of their services. My impression is that they will not turn down an organization in need and will do everything they can to help.