

Plainfield library housekeeping turns up treasure trove of historic documents

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Abstract (Summary)

Other items found in the container included a 1789 English indenture (a legal contract reflecting a debt or purchase obligation) with its original bright-red wax seals still intact, a Civil War-era military subscribers' list reflecting donors to the Union war cause, and an 1806 handwritten store ledger for a long-gone city business.

Full Text (570 words)

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STAFF WRITER

As treasure chests go, this one certainly didn't look the part.

The nondescript pale blue container, about the size of two large shoeboxes, recently was found in the Plainfield Public Library's historical archives while lead archivist Sarah Hull was performing a bit of housekeeping. A small stamped message on the side read simply "MANUSCRIPTS," but no one in the library seemed to know what was inside or for how long it had gone unopened and unnoticed.

Those factors made cataloging its contents all the more exciting, a process Hull described with just one word.

"Jackpot," she said.

The container held a total of 17 original historic documents, most of them dating back to the 18th or 19th centuries, representing items all but guaranteed to spark the interest of the city's many local history buffs. Library director Joe Da Rold said preservation efforts and a public exhibit are being planned to showcase all of the items, including what he called the "most important piece" -- a handwritten 1869 rough draft of the City Charter under which the city continues to operate today.

"It's really a fantastic bunch of stuff," Da Rold said.

Other items found in the container included a 1789 English indenture (a legal contract reflecting a debt or purchase obligation) with its original bright-red wax seals still intact, a Civil War-era military subscribers' list reflecting donors to the Union war cause, and an 1806 handwritten store ledger for a long-gone city business. The ledger doesn't indicate who the store's proprietor was nor where it was located, but it does reflect an 1819 purchase of bushels of corn and other items by Nathaniel Drake -- the Drake House, today a museum that represents one of the city's oldest surviving structures, was constructed in 1746, built by Drake's father, Isaac, as a gift to his son.

"These are the kinds of records historians love, because you really get some insight into what daily life was like back then," Hull explained, also noting that the military subscribers' list features another well-known local historic figure: donor Dr. Charles Stillman, after whom the city's Stillman Elementary School is named.

The oldest item in the collection dates back to 1749, a document indicating the sale of an Elizabeth property by a Joseph Allen, but Hull agreed with Da Rold's take that the charter draft is something special. Rife with portions that were crossed out or otherwise amended, it was scribbled in ornate cursive on the back of legal forms from the Security Insurance Company in New York City -- the historic equivalent of notes on a cocktail napkin.

"It's in wonderful condition, too," Hull said.

Even one of the relatively newer documents in the collection still tells an interesting story. The container included a March 2, 1914 copy of the *Courier News*, printed the day after a blizzard paralyzed the entire Northeast.

"In the 22 years that the *Courier News* has been in existence, its equipment was never so crippled by a storm as it has been

by this one," an article stated -- but a local resident, Jack Horner, reportedly managed to save the day. The newspaper's disabled linotype machines were "run by motorcycles," the article stated, with the Courier News staff thanking Horner "for the motorcycles used in getting out this issue."

"It's all little pieces of the town's history, of U.S. history," Hull said of the collection. "It's really amazing."

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