



Lost & found

Portsmouth's original copy of the Declaration of Independence (above) was found behind a file cabinet in the town clerk's office 30 years ago. After extensive repair and restoration in the nation's capital, the historic document was returned to the town in 1988.



Dave Hansen | Staff photographer
Former Portsmouth Town Clerk Carol Zinno, left, talks to current Town Clerk Joanne Mower about how the town's misplaced copy of the Declaration of Independence was discovered and restored 30 years ago.

By Joe Baker
Staff writer

PORTSMOUTH

John Pierce, the town's police chief from 1969-1981, was a persistent man. When Carol Zinno took over as town clerk in 1984, Pierce visited Town Hall periodically to dabble in his hobby — compiling historical facts about the town. He published “Historical Tracts of the Town of Portsmouth” in 1991.

One day in November 1986, Pierce mentioned that a copy of the Declaration of Independence used to hang on the wall of the

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JOANNE MOWER
Portsmouth town clerk

records research room, but had been missing for years, Zinno said.

“If you have a chance,” Pierce asked Zinno, “do you think you could look for it? I think it’s the real thing.”

Zinno, whose life was records, was intrigued. But she let the request sit on the

back burner until a few weeks later, when workers from the town’s Public Works Department came to paint the clerk’s office. The men moved a file cabinet to paint a wall, Zinno said, and there — in a black frame — was the copy of the document Pierce was seeking.

“The first thing I did was call John and ask him to come in and take a look. ‘Yep, that’s it,’ he said,” Zinno recently recalled. “He was so thrilled.”

Those events of 30 years ago recently were brought to mind, she said, when the Portsmouth Historical Society brought out the copy of the Declaration of Independence for display at Town Hall. A crowd of more than 150 people

packed into the Town Council chambers for a chance to see the tract that was an act of rebellion by British colonists at the time, but turned into the founding document of America.

The first thing Zinno and Pierce had to do with the newly found document was have it authenticated as an original. They brought it to Robert Mathieson, a Brown University professor who specialized in authentication of historic documents. Mathieson removed the frame and decided the document probably was an authentic copy from 1776. Written on the back, in neat cursive popular in that era, is

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Lost

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“For the Town Clerk Portsmouth.”

In 1776, the Continental Congress sent a copy of the original declaration to each of the 13 colonies. Rhode Island’s copy was taken to Newport, then the state capital, and was signed on the bottom by Henry Ward, secretary of the General Assembly at the time.

State officials then hired Newport printer Solomon Southwick to make copies — on July 12, 1776 — for each Rhode Island municipality, inscribing on the back the name of the town. After comparing the printing, Ward’s signature, the kind of paper used — British rag paper — and the handwriting on the back of the document, Mathieson deemed it an authentic 1776 copy of the Declaration of Independence.

“It was a really goose bumpy moment,” Zinno recalled.

The town then had a dilemma — how best to preserve the priceless piece of history. The copy had been folded for years, and the creases left some of the print illegible. Zinno contacted then-U.S. Sen. John Chafee, who sought the restoration skills available at the Library of Congress, which agreed to examine the document.

Zinno flew to Washington, D.C., with then-Canvassing Clerk Beverly Hall, and dropped off the document, now insured, with Eleanor S. Quandt, the assistant to the conservation officer at the Library of Congress on July 12, 1987. Four months later, after a detailed examination, restoration specialists at the library issued a report on the document’s condition and how they planned to restore it.

The copy was “overall discolored brown,” mottled and marked with five horizontal and two vertical creases that had caused some tearing. It bore some spots and some suspected mold stains.

The restoration process included float washing and blow drying the document to neutralize the acidity of the paper, subjecting it to further de-acidification. It was coated with a gelatin to protect the printing and starch paste to mend the tears. A humidifier was used to flatten the document, which was floated in a four-ply buffer rag mat with a backboard cutout so the writing on the back could be viewed.

The matted document was sandwiched between two sheets of ¼-inch-thick ultraviolet filtering Plexiglas sealed along the edges with clear, pressure-sensitive tape. The Library of Congress made a special “fabric-covered, clam shell box” in which to store the document.

On April 12, 1988, Zinno and Hall returned to Washington to pick up the document, just in time to display it during the town’s 350th anniversary celebration that year. Taking no chances on anything happening to the Southwick broadside, Zinno made the trip back to Rhode Island by train in a sleeping car.

“I got in that car and locked the door,” she said, laughing.

A town clerk's job is all about records, and finding a copy of the country's original record was the pinnacle of her career, Zinno said. She recalls a young boy looking at the document during the 350th celebration and asking, "Weren't they afraid they would be killed for signing this?"

"I said, 'He gets it,'" Zinno said.

Town Clerk Joanne Mower, who took over the job in 2013, was not present when the historic document emerged from the cobwebs, but she is proud to be its current protector.

"It's so incredible to have something that's so much a part of history," Mower said as she looked at the document, lying in its open box on her desk in Town Hall.

"And to see kids come up and have their grandparents show it to them — that's something they'll probably never get to see again."

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