

Preserving history one document at a time

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A few months ago, a woman from a Mystic farm called Louis Allyn about a box of old letters she found in the attic.

Allyn is president of the Mystic River Historical Society, so he drove to the farm and picked them up. They were brittle, bundled in rubber bands and from World War II. A soldier had written them to his mother.

"Well, believe it or not this is the first day that I feel as if I am not going to die," he wrote from a hospital in October 1943.

The letters are among thousands of documents the historical society has collected during its 40-year history, an anniversary it celebrated this month. Some of its finds - like a collection of more than 50 medical books from as early as 1753 - have been donated to prominent institutions so they may be read and displayed to a wider audience.

"We try in every way we can think of to make (works) available to the rest of the world," Allyn said.

The Mystic historic society has evolved from an organization where volunteers once used legal pads and typewriters to one where staff scans documents and oversees a website that draws inquiries from as far away as New Zealand.

"We've put a lot of effort in the last five years into putting, as thoroughly as we can, our entire collection on computer and putting that online," Allyn said.

Among the more well-known finds are the more than 50 medical books now kept at Yale Medical Library.

Dr. John O. Miner, of Center Groton, started the collection after the Revolutionary War. He was the only doctor in Groton for a time, and passed the books down to his son-in-law, who then passed them to someone else.

Eventually, they came to Dr. Louis Allyn, the grandfather of Historical Society President Allyn. The oldest book found in the collection was published in London in 1753. Historical society records also show William Cheseldon's "Anatomy" from 1795, which included copper-plate illustrations showing figures posed like Renaissance statuettes.

Dorrie Hanna, collections manager of the historical society said, "That is a really good example of something that came to us that was better somewhere else."

The society is chiefly about preserving the history of greater Mystic itself. Most of its collection is from the mid 1800s and into the 20th century.

It includes photos of Mystic homes and scenes, journals and letters related to families such as Allyn, Haley, Fish, Gales and Wilcox, and maps of Mystic from 1868, 1879 and 1911.

The society, which was founded in 1973, owns two buildings: An 1839 schoolhouse moved from its original location north of the Union Baptist Church to High Street, and the archive building next door to it on High Street which stores photos, letters and other documents in a climate-controlled, fireproof environment.

The archive building is made of cinder block.

In addition to safely storing collections, the historical society offers monthly lectures, walking tours, appraisal days and house tours. It does not keep vital records like birth certificates.

The historical society also has documents that are not "historic" yet. On a recent morning, Louis Allyn thumbed through a 1973 report from the Mystic Junior Women's Club that included information about a group home for foster girls.

Allyn said it may be relatively recent now, but someday could shed light onto activities in the 1970s.

"It's all in our lifetime," Allyn said. "But it won't be in awhile."

D.STRASZHEIM@THEDAY.COM