

UNLOCKING A MYSTERY AND SOME HISTORY AT CITY HALL

by Marie Coady

Until very recently, a mystery had been brewing in Woburn City Hall. Lurking behind a cabinet in a vaulted room in City Clerk William Campbell's office, lay a hidden treasure waiting to be discovered. The treasure was in the form of three ancient record books, one more than 300 years old.

The search began three years ago, when Campbell was appointed City Clerk. While taking inventory of what had come into his charge, he climbed atop some ancient file cabinets that were stacked almost to the ceiling, and when he glanced to his right, he noticed something lodged behind a file cabinet in a corner of the vault.

"I knew something was in there," Bill Campbell explained. "The shelf was crooked and I could see something in the space where the cabinets hit the corner. This past summer, I was finally able to get my fingers in and pull out an uninteresting book on tax records.

"But the search wasn't over. Although he couldn't be certain, Campbell's instincts told him there was more treasure hidden there. "I thought there was something else," he added, "but I wasn't positive. I started trying to reach for it, then decided it wasn't a good idea as I may damage whatever it is. So I stopped, and it's been there teasing me ever since."

In the meantime, Campbell has been working to reorganize the vault and bring it up to date. For example, many files were stored in 1860s "state of the art" McDuff folders that were detrimental to the documents they contained as they were folded and beginning to tear at the crease. Little by little, as part of Campbell's modernization, he's been carefully removing volumes of records and replacing ancient file cabinets with more modern shelving that will conserve space and allow him to have all the city's records in one place.

Since the old shelving in the vault were tied to each other in sequence, Campbell had to wait until the last of the shelves were to be removed. Finally, this past Columbus Day, the day before workmen were scheduled to arrive to refinish the walls, Campbell put in some overtime. Along with the aid of historians Tom Smith and John McElhiney and his wife Joanne, the small group managed to wrest the cabinet far enough away from the wall so Campbell's children, Elizabeth, 8 and John, 7, could wiggle their tiny bodies behind the cabinet and retrieve history.

There, hidden away, probably since City Hall was dedicated in 1935, were two volumes of handwritten vital records recorded and maintained by fellow, then Town Clerk, James Convers, Jr. circa 1688.

Like Bill Campbell, it appears James Convers Jr., was a “neat freak”. Soon after he took office in 1688, he noticed that his predecessor had been keeping records of births, death and marriages on separate sheets of paper which, by the time he took charge, were falling apart. At his own expense, Convers purchased a “blank folio volume, well bound” and began recording the information from those tattered sheets of paper into his “well-bound” volume.

But also, like his successor Bill Campbell, he wanted to be innovative, and added a little something that revolutionized Woburn’s vital record keeping. He began recording the names of both parents, when for years, as custom had dictated, only the father was recognized.

In trying to affix an exact time frame as to when Convers took on the tedious task of recopying those records into his “well bound” volume, one must take into account that Convers was otherwise occupied from 1689 to 1692 defending his country against native terrorists and foreign invaders.

When you look into Convers’ record as Town Clerk, as recorded in Sewall’s “History of Woburn”, you will see there appears to be a gap in his service between the year he was appointed in 1688 and when he resumed his duties in 1693. As it turns out, Convers was busy compiling a stellar military record which included a prominent role in the English victory over the French and Eastern Indian Tribes during The Ten Years War (1688-1698).

It all began in 1688 when 6 Indian sachems aligned themselves with Captain John Alden, of Priscilla fame, and made a promise to deliver all their English captives. The location selected was to be Storer’s garrison in Wells, Maine where the then Capt. Convers was sent to take command.

The date set for the exchange came and went, so Capt. Convers set out into the woods to find the Indians and retrieve the hostages himself. But all he found was a small party of negotiators and 6 hostages, but he was able to elicit a promise from them to bring the rest of the hostages within 20 days.

Capt. Convers waited, along with Deputy Governor Danforth of Boston, many more days than the 20 days before Danforth became discouraged and returned to Boston with his troops, leaving Convers in command of only a few men. Before Danforth left, Convers asked him to send reinforcements, but only 30 men were sent from Essex County.

Shortly after that on June 10, 1691, the garrison was attacked by 200 Indians, but through Convers’ able leadership, they were repulsed. But only temporarily, as “a year and a day later” they returned with a combined force of Indian and French numbering almost 500.

What ensued was more of a shouting match than a battle as Sachems Maxus, Madockawando, and Egermet tried to entice Convers out of the garrison to “fight in the open field like a man”. But Convers was having none of that and

answered, "What a fool are you? Do you think 30 men are a match for 500? No. You come with your own 30 men upon a plain, and I'll meet you with my 30 as soon as you will."

But the sachems declined and with great display marched upon the garrison only to be cut down by Convers sharpshooters firing from behind garrison walls. After 48 hours, the Indians and their French commander, Labocree, took out their frustration on the cattle "killing all and cruelly torturing a captive" they'd taken earlier, then "marched off leaving behind their dead".

Needless to say Convers was promoted to major after that encounter and put in charge of all Massachusetts and Maine forces. So it's safe to assume that the now Major Convers did not take on the task of recopying Woburn's early records in his "folio volume" until he had returned from his campaign in 1693 to resume his duties as Town Clerk, duties most likely eminently more relaxing than taking on an army of 500 Indians.

So pleased with Convers' efforts to preserve Woburn's history, town fathers described him as "faithfully and acceptably discharg(ing) various trusts reposed to him by the town".

In fact, Sewell interjected his own assessment of Convers in his "History of Woburn" when he wrote, "By his laudable care, and by the subsequent purchase of the new volume by the town, at the recommendation of his successor in the Clerk's office, Lt. Fowle, the valuable records of almost 50 years . . . were preserved for posterity in a fair hand and in durable form, which otherwise had long been since perished, or been scattered and lost."

And so the tradition of Town and City Clerks continues, and their legacy sometimes goes unnoticed and unappreciated. But Bill Campbell doesn't let that deter him. He has grand plans for preserving and restoring Woburn's records. And he is not averse, like James Convers Jr., to investing his off hours to preserving our city's history for future generations.

But as Campbell stated recently, "Clerks, by nature or realization of their position, are neat freaks. I don't believe there could ever be a sloppy clerk. You have to be a neat freak to do this job."

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