

Voice from the Vault

By Gregory Sanford, State Archivist

The Other Side of the Table

Yesterday was my birthday. Another milestone in my late youth (a designation arrived at by dividing chronology by maturity), I marked it by spending the morning researching municipal records. This may seem a rather staid way of celebrating, but it was the perfect gift.

I confess I have done little research in municipal records; indeed, I do little research nowadays except in responding to requests for information. So it was a joy to hunker down with volumes of land records and minutes in search of Jerusalem, a religious community thought to exist between Lord's and Devil's hills in the early 19th Century. My pleasure was enhanced by having Paul Gillies serve as my guide through the records.

Armed with local memories, a few names, and the location of some cellar holes, we worked our way patiently back through time. As it rained outside, the present slowly dissolved as we moved from volume to volume tracing changing land use and ownership patterns. Some promising leads petered out, others emerged. The handwriting, some legible, some a challenge, changed as clerks came and went. The depth of description went from detailed boundary descriptions to the vague recordings of the late 19th Century, to the pre-1850 practice of referencing original lots.

In the end, a documented community eluded us. The names we had appeared briefly during the first decade of the 1800s as landowners and town officers, but their property was not where Jerusalem was believed to be located. After a son's term as hayward, all mention of that family ended. Instead we got caught up in the intense land speculation of another family, father and son, who bought, sold and leased property throughout the town during the 19th Century. Their ownership of the Jerusalem area persisted through that time.

As an archivist, there is a value in occasionally sitting on the other side of the research table. My appreciation of how well the town is served by our clerk was greatly enhanced; the volumes were well conserved and the records complete and orderly. So was my appreciation of the unique vantage point municipal records provide on the history of communities. Though, in this case, the records were silent on the information I sought, the experience reminded me of the complex interplay of record, memory and landscape that make up our sense of community. There is, among the older members of the community, a strong memory of Jerusalem. Details of that memory, passed from grandparent to parent to child, embrace an isolated religious community, perhaps squatters upon the land. There remain community memories of an outbreak of bubonic plague and of graves marked by stones arranged in patterns designed to halt the spread of the disease.

These personal memories are anchored in the cemeteries and cellar holes, though the exact location of each resides in the fragile memories of older residents. The landscape also offers clues, from the wonderful juxtaposition of Lord's Hill, Devil's Hill and Jerusalem to other local landmarks such as Debby's Hill and Debby's Spring, named after one of the purported community members. The records helped confirm some of these names, including references to the Jerusalem Pasture.

The records offered glimpses of local economies with their reference to pasture land, sawmills, sugaring equipment and old roads. They also revealed a surprisingly high level of land speculation, at least among the members of one family, for over a century.

The experience even provided useful context to current discussions over scanning and electronic records. In some cases faded ink and crabbed handwriting will be a challenge to scanning. The thought that, at some future point, I might be able to access the records from home, rather than taking a day off, certainly had an appeal. And yet, if that day comes, something will be lost. That tactile sense of holding records, of holding history, and having a direct connection to the long forgotten town officers who created the records will be lost. So will the camaraderie of the clerk's office and the ability to ask questions of those most familiar with the records.

And so, even though Jerusalem remained elusive, it was a wonderful day. To my town clerk in particular, and to all clerks in general, thank you for all you do and for helping a man, in the fullness of late youth, enjoy his birthday.