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# Hartford Turns Over Treasure Trove Of Public Records To Library

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The Hartford Courant

November 17, 2010

HARTFORD —

Think you pay too many taxes? Hartford firearms tycoon Samuel Colt paid taxes on 20 houses, 274 acres of land, four stores and even on his clocks and musical instruments.

That's just one example of a wealth of facts and interesting tidbits contained in thousands of recently cataloged public documents chronicling city life back to 1639.

Here's another: In the 1860s, there was a noticeable spike in applications for permits to add closet-sized rooms to city dwellings. It coincides with the advent of indoor plumbing.

The public documents have spent hundreds of years stored and — in some cases — stuffed into the nooks and crannies of city hall's five-story vault.

No one seemed to throw anything out, leaving a bonanza for historian Bill Faude, who, over more than three years, has so far organized nearly 900 boxes of documents. Unfortunately, the filing system was less than comprehensive, he said.

"The most daunting aspect was that the alphabet ruled," Faude said. It was a broad system, meaning that things pertaining to the Burr Mall were as likely as not to be sharing space with records about the Bushnell.

With the support of city leaders and grant money from the Connecticut State Library, the Beatrice Fox Auerbach Foundation Fund and other sources, Faude has cataloged about half the documents in the vault.

This morning, in a symbolic ceremony in the Hartford History Center on the third floor of the Hartford Public Library, city officials will hand over the walking stick presented to every Hartford mayor since Thomas Seymour in 1784 and the rights to the public documents.

By spring, the history center expects to be able to make a large portion of the documents available to the public, in person as well as online.

For Mayor Pedro Segarra, the opportunity to help provide scholars, history buffs and amateur genealogists with the documentation to put the city's development into historical perspective was too good to pass up.

Segarra said that once the collection is cataloged and available for viewing, Hartford will take its rightful place as a key player in historical research, attracting scholars from around the world.

"From a constitutional development point of view, if Connecticut is the Constitution State, then Hartford was the brains behind the Constitution," Segarra said. "Thomas Hooker clearly had it in his mind that he wanted a different community and wanted a participatory democracy."

Segarra said the documents will allow research into the city's role in the Industrial Revolution and its place in American literature.

"Very few people understand the significance of these documents," he said.

State Archivist Mark Jones called the collection a "tremendous resource" for the study of American urban history.

"There's a tremendous amount of social history there," he said, referring to documents that show the economic and political boundaries of different city neighborhoods. "These things are not mentioned often in the early history of cities."

For instance, Faude said the documents reveal an unflinching portrait of the rough-and-tumble waterfront area known as Front Street, now the site of the Adriaen's Landing downtown redevelopment project, including the Connecticut Science Center.

He also cited city records documenting a seemingly mundane effort to move an African American church as part of a street-straightening project. The project, however, removed the church from prime real estate bordering Bushnell Park to swampland near the city's police station.

Faude said Colt's tax bill reveals a man who wanted everyone to know exactly how rich he was. "He's listing everything," Faude said. "He wants to be the top taxpayer in town."

Brenda Miller, curator of the Hartford History Center, which will display the collection in its climate- and light-controlled facility on the library's third floor, said it will augment other collections already available to the public.

"We do have other collections, but this sets the tone because it is so extensive," she said. "Having this is like an anchor."

Miller envisions partnerships with historical groups and educational institutions to make the collection widely available to anyone, even if they just want to learn about the history of a family home.

"We will take care of, preserve and make sure the public has access to it," she said.

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