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DAR HISTORIC PRESERVATION GRANTS

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No Records, No History Opening and Preserving Sam's Box

The Bixby Memorial Free Library in Vergennes, Vt., recently preserved historic documents from the Strong family dated to the

late 1700s, thanks in part to a DAR Historic Preservation Grant sponsored by the Seth Warner-Rhoda Farrand Chapter, Vergennes, Vt. The library serves the Addison County area and has one of Vermont's most complete collections of local history. This project combined volunteer efforts with conservation expertise and could serve as a model for the future conservation of other significant items in the library's collection.

The Strong family was one of the founding families of Addison County. John Strong was a Revolutionary War Patriot who served as a judge, surveyor and state legislator. He also represented Addison County at the state convention that adopted the Constitution of the United States and approved the admission of Vermont to the Union as the 14th state. John's son Samuel served as a Brigadier General during the War of 1812. He represented Vergennes in the Vermont House of Representatives, and he served as an assistant judge in Addison County and as mayor of Vergennes.

The Bixby Memorial Free Library has a long-standing relationship with the Seth-Warner-Rhoda Farrand Chapter. When

Cornelia Wagstaff, a chapter member and direct descendant of Samuel Strong, passed away in 1976, her family donated a box of Samuel Strong's personal papers to the library. The box was nicknamed "Sam's Box" and remained untouched until a roof failure in 2007 caused water damage to the room in which it was stored. Some of the documents in Sam's Box were also affected and in need of conservation.

"It's really simple, isn't it? No records, no history," said Maureen Labenski, who wrote the grant application. "Ink fades, paper disintegrates, stains obliterate



Left to right: Maureen Labenski, Joy Minns, Rena Trepanier, Susan Ferland

words, handling produces tears—and just like that these unique and important guides to the history of Vergennes and the Champlain Valley could be lost to history."

Four DAR members, Joy Minns, Rena Trepanier, and Susan Ferland from the Seth Warner-Rhoda Farrand Chapter and Maureen Labenski, from the Green Mountain Chapter in Burlington, Vt., volunteered to assess each item from Sam's Box and rate them on a scale developed by a paper conservator according to condition, historical significance and priority for conservation. They determined that four items had enough historical or cultural significance and were in good enough condition to justify conservation:

a handwritten folio of four pages that includes an epic poem related to the French and Indian War, a large hand-drawn map showing plots belonging to the Strong family, a 1795 envelope and deed to the land for Samuel's home, and a promissory note signed by Samuel Strong.

The Bixby Memorial Free Library contracted Barbis Fine Art Conservation in Woodstock, Vt., for the conservation work, which included cleaning surface soils and removing stains; de-acidifying paper and restoring it to a natural pH; relaxing folds and creases; filling holes and tears with Japanese rice tissue; and enclosing the documents in a special envelope for safe handling. The library exhibited the papers in summer 2021, and they are now available for research and educational purposes. ☀

Editor's note: The Vermont State Society has owned the John Strong Mansion in Addison, Vt., and operated it as a museum since 1935. You can read more about this historic house in the November/December 2002 issue of *American Spirit*.

What Else Was In Sam's Box?

The box contains documents related to the Strong family and the early history of the Vergennes area. They include:

- A leatherbound, handwritten journal written by Mary Tucker, the first librarian in Vergennes. It is in poor condition and beyond conservation, but readable by a dedicated researcher.
- Ledger from 1860-1864, showing accounts for school and algebra grades for students.
- More than 50 documents related to Samuel Strong as Justice of the Peace.