

LONG ISLAND / TOWNS

Partnership between Preservation Long Island, East Hampton Library opens a window to LI's past



Members of the Long Island Collection team work to digitally preserve historic documents. From left, librarian/archivist Julia Tyson, scanning assistant Adelaide Webb, and librarian/archivists Andrea Meyer and Megan Bardis. Credit: Keri Lamparter

By Joe Werkmeister

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On the eve of the Battle of Long Island in August 1776, the commander of a small militia known as the minutemen of Suffolk County braced for an impending fight.

In a military logbook dated Aug. 23, 1776, Col. Josiah Smith wrote: "The enemy having now landed on Long Island, the hour is fast approaching on which the honor and success of this army and the safety of our bleeding country depends."

The ominous quote in the logbook represents one highlight of a newly digitized record accessible through a partnership between [Preservation Long Island](#) and East Hampton Library's [Long Island Collection](#).

Lauren Brincat, chief curator and director of collections for Preservation Long Island, described the logbook in an interview as “an amazing record of what’s happening here just before this pivotal moment in American Revolutionary War history.”

Preservation Long Island’s vast collection of primary documents from the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries, including letters, legal documents and maps, had largely been inaccessible to the public while in storage. For the past year, a small team of librarians and archivists at the East Hampton Library have been undertaking a painstaking process to scan and archive hundreds of documents to include in its [Digital Long Island Collection](#).

In a statement, Jackie Powers, executive director of Preservation Long Island, described the collection as a “fascinating treasure trove worth exploring.”

Conversation leads to partnership

Andrea Meyer, a librarian and archivist at the East Hampton Library, said in an interview the collaboration began when Preservation Long Island was putting together an exhibit on Jupiter Hammon, the first published African American poet.

Brincat inquired about borrowing two works in the library’s collection. That led to a conversation about digitizing records, which the library offers as a free service for records directly tied to Long Island history and particularly the East End.

Preservation Long Island, the Cold Spring Harbor-based nonprofit, signed off on transporting its records into the hands of the East Hampton Library.

“It’s really kind of a very meaty collection in terms of the level of detail and information in there,” Meyer said.

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The archivists used a flatbed Epson scanner and an overhead, oversized book scanner to digitize pages one at a time. From there, they would edit images through computer software to crop or adjust the contrast to enhance the view. They would add descriptions and key terms for the documents to categorize them.



Adelaide Webb and Megan Bardis work to digitize historic documents. Credit: Keri Lamparter

Meyer said the library's staff began writing out genealogies to sort all the family members who had been writing letters back and forth, which provided a unique glimpse into early American life on Long Island.

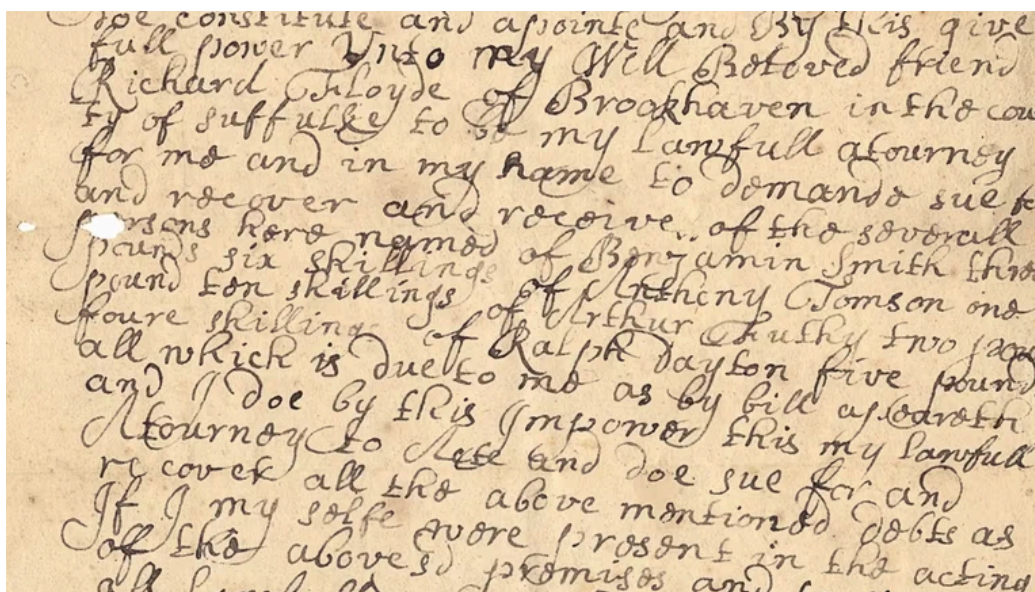
"It's really fascinating, kind of what's going on with these family networks and where they're going, what they're doing, what they're concerned about," she said.

Brincat said most of the records had been in the nonprofit's possession for decades, connected largely to the historic houses it stewards, such as the Custom House in Sag Harbor that dates to the early 1790s.

She said even the nonprofit's own staff hadn't had time to dig into all the material while it was in storage.

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"I think there's a lot we're going to learn ourselves by being able to zoom in on these documents, look at them on our computer, that will enhance the stories that we tell at the Custom House," she said.



A document dated Aug. 5, 1692, detailing the appointment of Richard Floyd as Josiah Brodbent's attorney. Credit: East Hampton Library

An educational tool

Meyer and Brincat said they hope the digital records allow researchers greater access and said the material could benefit education in schools.

The nonprofit Sylvester Manor Education Farm on Shelter Island has relied on East Hampton Library's digital collection and archive over the years to expand its research, according to Donnamarie Barnes, the director of history and heritage.

A portion of Preservation Long Island's documents includes letters known as the Dering family papers, which connect to Sylvester Manor. In an email, Barnes said having those documents digitized "will aid us in further study."

While the digitized documents haven't led to a new discovery yet, Barnes said, "You never know what will be uncovered just when you need to find it."

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Documenting LI's history

- For the past year, a team of librarians and archivists at the East Hampton Library have been archiving hundreds of documents to include in its Digital Long Island Collection.
- The archivists used scanners to digitize pages one at a time. They edit images through computer software and add descriptions and key terms to categorize the documents.
- The library's staff began writing out genealogies to sort family members who had been writing letters to one another, which provided a unique glimpse into early American life on Long Island.



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