

VOLUNTEER OPEN HOUSE - MARCH 24, 2012

11 AM -1 PM

HISTORICAL SOCIETY , 143 N. MAIN STREET, BEL AIR

PARTNERS IN PRESERVING HARFORD COUNTY HERITAGE

“This is such a great place; I came to the Historical Society for my love of history and wanted to volunteer. I needed to give back. We’re like a family here.” Mary Cardwell, Archives volunteer

HISTORICAL SOCIETY DEPARTMENTS

Many of you may wonder what goes on in the old Post Office now that it is the Historical Society’s headquarters. It may look formidable, but once inside there is so much to discover. The Historical Society of Harford County was founded in 1885. Over the following 127 years, volunteers developed an outstanding collection of materials defining and preserving the County’s history, developing programs and publications to share that history and developing a house museum (the Hays House) that provides a hands- on colonial experience for area citizens. To continue these efforts volunteers are needed for all Society committees. Here is a brief description of some of the committees and activities, but this is such a multi-faceted organization that you may want to visit to get a more comprehensive idea of what goes on and how you can become a part of the action.

LIBRARY AND FAMILY HISTORY

This committee is responsible for maintaining a library focused on Harford County, its people, places and happenings. It also maintains a genealogical component that studies local family histories, provides tours of the facility and assistance in locating family records. Additionally, committee members provide research assistance by mail for a small fee and are constantly involved in building background resources and updating records about local cemeteries, births, deaths and marriages. Volunteers help in numerous ways. Prior genealogical background is not necessary. Training will be provided. One of the committee’s most daunting tasks is updating Society birth, marriage and obituary files. This can be done even from home. The library committee meets on Thursday’s from 9 AM – 3 PM.

ARCHIVES

The title itself may be alarming, but this is a fascinating part of the Society’s mission. To date, the Society has more than 250,000 items in its archives collection and this number is constantly expanding. These include deeds, documents, maps, photographs and postcards. Donated documents are accessioned by volunteers who read, record and document all pertinent materials. Fragile items often need repair and encapsulation to protect them for the long term. In many ways, this is akin to playing detective, finding clues to our past.

The Society collection contains many varied, interesting and unusual items. Mary Cardwell, one of the long time volunteers described opening a couple of amazing donations. One, an album, contained more than fifty playbills from Edwin Booth’s (the Shakespearean actor, brother of the infamous John Wilkes Booth) appearances and a detailed diagram of the interior of the Edwin Booth Theater in New York in 1859. Another document in the collection is the indenture papers of Dr. Charles Carroll dated 1744. He was the father of Charles Carroll of Carrollton, signer of the Declaration of Independence. The archives are a constant source of amazement, yielding new and entertaining perspectives on our County’s past.

This committee is responsible for numerous collections including the Thomas Galbreath collection, the Mary Risteau Collection, the George Archer collection and many others that trace the County's growth, development and social, political and economic fortunes since its founding in the 1600s when it was still part of Baltimore County. As Dottie Meyers, an Archives receptionist explained, "It's truly exciting, helping a researcher, particularly when they make a real find among our archives."

Committee members tend to be detail oriented people who enjoy sorting, cataloging and exploring some of Harford County's most important, unique documents, manuscripts, maps and objects. Committee members also maintain the Society's photographs, tintypes and daguerreotypes collections. The Society is very fortunate to have the technical assistance of Douglas Washburn, who has restored several discolored and damaged photographs and Rose Marie "Midge" Kalb who oversees the collection. Ms. Kalb noted that "...after her children were grown she worked in a hospital film library, so I've come full circle doing the films at the Historical Society." She also explained that one of the best things about the job is the friends she has made working with the committee.

The image collection provides a wonderful resource for exhibits and for homeowners looking to replicate the historical appearance of their homes or simply for a photograph to show how things have changed. The committee meets on Wednesday's from 9AM – 2 PM.

ARTIFACTS

The Society receives many articles with a provenance from Harford County, such as, furniture, paintings, household items, Native American artifacts, military uniforms and vintage clothes. The current collection includes more than two thousand items which volunteers describe and photograph for computer records and accession. These range from a sterling silver object engraved to Mary Chase in 1807 (daughter of Samuel Chase) to the remnants of a canon ball from the War of 1812, numerous paintings, uniforms, quilts, wedding gowns and historic objects that are used for exhibits and preserved for future study. Volunteers are needed to help conserve, repair and store the items to assure their availability for future generations.

COURT RECORDS

Several years ago, the Society received the Harford County Court Records which date from 1774-1920's. Since these records appeared, five or six volunteers have gathered once a week systematically recording each case and indexing and alphabetizing the cases for computerization. The files themselves are stored in a climate controlled environment. To date, the project has covered 1774- 1880, so there is a long way to go. The group has uncovered numerous fascinating cases including one 1859 charge against John Wilkes Booth for assaulting a man who had insulted Booth's mother. Booth allegedly hit the man with a piece of lumber. Volunteers hope to eventually have all of the records computerized to assist researchers in finding material for future projects. The records provide background on everything from criminal charges to land transactions, bastardy cases, indentures and emancipation of slaves and servants and more. The committee meets each Tuesday between 10 AM and 2:30 PM.

HAYS HOUSE MUSEUM

The Hays House is the oldest house in Bel Air dating back to 1788. It was named for Thomas Hays, one of the major land owners in Bel Air in the early 1800s. The Society operates the house as a living history museum with demonstrations of home crafts and skills, costumed docents and numerous special events featuring elements of life in the early 1800's. Docents are needed to

lead house tours, help preserve the cultural history of the county and educate our children about life in colonial Harford, and essentially be the human face of the Historical Society for our visitors. No extensive historical preservation knowledge or guide experience is necessary. If you enjoy taking on a new persona, escaping to a kinder, gentler time while making a real contribution to the preservation of the County's heritage, then we encourage you to explore this opportunity. It is a chance to work with the public, develop textile exhibits, provide colonial cooking demonstrations, learn about the County's colonial history and practice your gardening skills. Volunteers are asked to give three hours, one Sunday a month (March thru December), please consider joining us.



SPECIAL EVENTS

Each year the Society hosts at least four lectures, a bus trip, several dinners, teas, a yard sale, greens sale and a book sale in addition to other events developed over the year. These events are always fun and help to enhance the Society's mission and visibility. They also help to raise needed funds to meet financial obligations. Dedicated people are needed to plan, organize and staff these events. The opportunity to expand events is dependent on the number of volunteers available. Jobs range from time consuming positions of planning and organization to those with limited commitment like hanging posters, selling tickets, distributing flyers or preparing mailings.

ADDITIONAL VOLUNTEER CHALLENGES & OPPORTUNITIES

There are many other opportunities to become involved. The Society's gift shop boasts a wide variety of antiques, handcrafts, local history books and used books. The gift shop is, of course, run by volunteers and provides a convenient place for researchers to purchase historical books.