Modernized history
AN LIU POST PROGRAM COLLECTS, DIGITIZES RECORDS OF LI'S PAST

act2 | Former NYPD detective brings crime to the screen
In this issue

In today's cover story, learn about the project helping Long Island historians — and residents — get a better picture of the past.

In Act 2, meet the retired NYPD detective who has co-written and co-produced his own Bronx tale.

And check out the Faith and Seniors calendars for virtual and in-person events.

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For the Records

LIU Post is using a $1.5M grant to preserve LI history for the digital age

By John Hanc
Special to Newsday

Time which steals our years away
Shall steal our pleasures too,
But the memory of the past shall stay
And half our joys renew.

The words are those of the 16th century philosopher and statesman Sir Thomas More — famous for authoring the book "Utopia." But the passage was also a favorite saying of Virginia Wines. Born in 1921, she was descended from some of the earliest settlers in Southold, whose founding dates to the 17th century.

Wines grew up in the vanished farm community of Sound Avenue — now part of the Town of Riverhead hamlets of Jamesport, Laurel and Aquebogue — and devoted more than 30 years of her life to collecting, transcribing and organizing letters, diaries, church records, oral histories and other materials related to the history of that part of the North Fork.

Her son Richard recalls how — even after church on an Easter Sunday — she would be sitting at her old, gray Royal typewriter, set up on a table in the living room of the family's 1862 Victorian farmhouse. There she would/transcribe old letters and diaries lent to her by descendants of other local families: Hallock was the most prominent, but the names

Among the items in the Virginia Wines collection is a photo of 11 women, above, wearing Victorian-era clothing. It is accompanied by a piece of paper, labeled "Sunday School Class," that lists the women's names and birth and death dates, noting they lived on Long Island from the mid-1800s to the mid-1900s.

At right, another page from Wines' collection includes a photo of a woman holding a baby in front of a house that is accompanied by notecards, one titled "Hallock - Dunn."

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A book from St. George’s Episcopal Church in Hempstead, one of the oldest houses of worship in today’s Nassau County, records such events as the 1726 baptism of an enslaved child.

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ON THE COVER. Gregory Hunter, right, director of "Digitizing Local History Sources" at LIU Post, is joined by graduate students Erika Hendrix, left, and Rudie Hurwit in the lab where documents and photos are scanned.

included Wells and Young, as well as Wines.

“It became her mission in life,” recalled Richard, now himself a historian and director of the Hallockville Museum Farm in Riverhead. “She was eager to tell everyone about it.”

Unlike her son — who has a doctorate in history from Brown University — Wines was not a professional historian. Although educated at Cornell University (and a crack typist, Richard added), she spent much of her working life as a server at The Modern Snack Bar, a popular eatery in Aquebogue. But she had a fascination with local history — and she seemed to know that, as More wrote nearly 500 years ago, time would steal away the memories of the past — if someone wasn’t willing to make the effort to record and
Virginia Wines was that someone — compiling, over the course of three decades, 23 loose-leaf binders packed with material she doggedly collected and carefully transcribed. As the products of her research grew, she enjoyed weighing the binders. The last time she did so — not long before her death in 1993 — her son recalls that they tipped the scales at 181 pounds.

‘IT’S MIND-BOGGLING’

On a recent Thursday morning, about half of those loose-leaf binders are lined up on the floor of a digital lab on the second floor of the Palmer School of Library and Information Science at the LIU Post campus in Brookville. There, a graduate student from Scarsdale named Patrick Grogan is scanning the collection — piece by piece: Part of a groundbreaking project in digitizing local history.

“I’m seeing dates on records back to the 1600s,” exclaims Grogan, when asked what he has scanned in the Wines collection. “I’ve read letters written during the Civil War and reactions to the assassination of Abraham Lincoln. It’s mind-boggling.”

Indeed, it is — not only the depth of the material that Virginia accumulated, but the sheer scope of “Digitizing Local History Sources,” the name of the six-year program aimed at collecting and making electronic images of more than 70,000 pages of historical materials from 44 participating historical societies and museums across Long Island that will be available to the public through one website.

Funded by a $1.5 million grant from the Robert David Lion Gardiner Foundation in 2017, DLHS is a huge boon to professional historians as well as those who are just interested in Long Island’s long history.

“Covering the entire history of Long Island, from 1600s to modern times,” said Chair William St. John of the DLHS board.

“THe donation has funded fellowships for students work-
A Swezey’s Department Store Advertising Scrapbook, 1950-1954, shows a boy and his horse.

A glass-plate negative labeled “1910 Glenwood Hunter” from A. Noble Chapman of Patchogue.

Graduate student Michele Besson scans pages of articles and photos amassed by Virginia Wines, whose collection of binders once weighed in at 181 pounds, according to her son Richard Wines.
LIU project scans LI history

COVER STORY from E5

The LIU project has digitized from negatives held by the Southampton History Museum of the work of photographer Bert Morgan, who documented life among the rich and famous in Southampton in the mid-20th century.

There are scrapbooks of families who emigrated from what is now the Czech Republic and helped establish the Suffolk County community of Bohemia (these from the collection of the Bohemia Historical Society).

There are records of St. George’s Episcopal Church in Hempstead — one of the oldest houses of worship in what is now Nassau County — including the 18th-century baptismal certificates of people enslaved in the households of church members.

And consider the remarkable collections donated by the Patchogue Historical Society. The LIU project has digitized about 2,000 black-and-white photographic negatives taken by A. Noble Chapman, a commercial photographer, from 1898 to 1915. They had been given to the society by the photographer’s family decades ago. Now they’re available with a few taps on the keyboard. The Patchogue Historical Society also contributed to the DLHS project about 40 scrapbooks of advertisements, photos and marketing materials for the iconic Swezey’s Department Store, a fixture from the 1940s to the 1980s.

All of this has been collected during the past few years (the progress of the effort, slowed during the pandemic) by Palmer School staff and students who have fanned out to the Island’s historical societies and museums, in some cases using portable scanners to capture images of often-fragile materials. (In partnership with the National Park Service, scanning briefly took place in a ferry terminal to save students from traveling to and from Fire Island by boat.)

In other cases, such as the Virginia Wines collection, materials were brought back to the labs on campus, where the high-end digitizing equipment Hunter acquired for the project through the grant renders images of startling depth, resolution and clarity.

“What we’re hoping to create here,” says the enthusiastic white-haired Hunter, a professional archivist before becoming an educator 32 years ago, “is a mega-archive of Long Island history.”

CULPER RING DOCUMENTS

And it’s already yielded Long Island historical discoveries. In one case, a Revolutionary War-era letter turned out to reveal a hitherto unknown fact about the famous Culper Spy Ring. A researcher at Drowned Meadow Cottage Museum in Port Jefferson who was analyzing a collection of Digitizing Local History Sources materials discovered a letter that seemed to suggest that Gen. George Washington and his spymaster Benjamin Tallmadge used illicit trading — operating out of Drowned Meadow, today’s Port Jefferson — as a cover for the Setauket-based espionage ring.

The potential for such discoveries has gotten Long Island’s historical community buzzing.

“It’s very exciting,” said former Town of North Hempstead historian Howard Kroplick. “It’s a real service for preserving the history here on Long Island.”

Kroplick himself was impressed when he looked through some of the 2,300 images from Suffolk County Vanderbilt Museum & Planetarium that are now part of DLHS. Those images, said the Vanderbilt’s archives and records manager, Killian Taylor, included images of William K. Vanderbilt’s family and his Eagle’s Neck estate, but also his travels around the world. And his many passions, which included racing cars. Kroplick, who has written about the Vanderbilt Cup races that “Willie K.” (as he is known colloquially) sponsored on Long Island, knows the museum’s collection well (see sidebar). But when he looked at the digitized images, he exclaimed, “I saw a couple of photos that I’ve never seen before!”

Interpretation of the digital archive is the next phase of the project. That will largely be the work of historians and others as they begin to dig into the vast but raw resource that is being compiled.

“They’ll be able to add additional content and provide further linkages and provide context,” Hunter says during the tour of the digitization labs. As public access to the site has been available for only a year, he says, “we’re still learning from the public and the historical societies on how we can enhance access to the materials.”

In the meantime, the methodical work of Hunter and his students continues — along with their appreciation of the generations of local historians, like Virginia Wines, who assembled the collections they are now helping to digitally preserve.

“God rest her soul, I wish I could have talked to her,” says Grogan, the Palmer School graduate student who has spent many hours digitizing the fruits of Virginia Wines’ life work.

While Wines herself is long gone, the students found a photo of her from a newspaper article. A photocopy of that picture — with Wines smiling warmly — hangs outside one of the labs at Palmer.

Wines had another favorite quote, her son says — based on a stanza of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s poem “The Wreck of the Hesperus,” which she frequently read aloud to students. “No footprints on this Ball of Sand.”