

The Old Train Station News

Newsletter # 108

December 2018

Dear Friends,

Historians depend on the written record; land transactions, birth and death records, weather reports, government and business documents. Here at the Museum, nothing written is trivial, because it all contributes to the picture we have of the past. Historically, we fixated on the rich and famous and dismissed the lives of average people. Women, the poor, and minorities, throughout history, were voiceless, and so we begin to grasp the preciousness of the written record - any written record. We have finally discovered that the letters average people left behind from all walks of life are invaluable evidence of how life was once lived. We begin to know what our ancestors ate, how they dressed, what they dreamed about, thought about warfare, and the conditions in their lives all from their letters. Without that correspondence, it is all a matter of guesswork.

As a genealogist, I am always looking for the tidbit that tells me more about a person other than their birth, marriage and death dates. Finding a piece of correspondence gets me all excited. A few years ago, I discovered a treasure trove of postcards written between MacLean cousins in the early 1900s. They were young and unmarried, and their cards hinted of good times, dancing and young men. One was working in the Boston States and the other at home caring for her parents – a small window into their lives.

Catherine Field writes, *“A good handwritten letter is a creative act, and not just because it is a visual and tactile pleasure. It is a deliberate act of exposure, a form of vulnerability, because handwriting opens a window on the soul in a way that cyber communication can never do. You savor their arrival and later take care to place them in a box for safe keeping.”*

When I was in grade school our teacher encouraged us to acquire a pen pal. She saw it as an opportunity to acquire writing skills (remember penmanship and grammar) and become familiar with life in other countries. From time to time I hear about those that have written to a pen pal for 50 or 60 years, and bless them, they kept their letters. Perhaps while they wrote, life seemed pretty mundane but in reflection, it was a life well lived.

Sadly, penmanship and letter writing has become a matter of history. We are part of the last generation of letter writers. The rush is on in Museums and Archives to get hand-written documents and letters transcribed because the ability to decipher handwriting is quickly disappearing in the digital age.

As I write my Christmas letter this year, I recognize that my list is dwindling. Some because they no longer send cards, others because they have died. But I still get excited when I hear the news from friends I have known for many years. It is a reminder that lives (and writing) matter.



The Epistolarian

Gifts of Our Many Volunteers with Our Appreciation

Merry Christmas to All!

*Join Us - Dec 2nd 2pm
Annual Christmas Gathering*

