

West Newbury Historical Commission Meeting Minutes

Meeting date & place: 7:00 pm, August 1, 2023, Town Offices, 2d floor and Zoom

Members Present: Chair Bob Janes, Elisa Grammer, Jennifer Conway, Assistant Clerk Max Close.

Town Clerk's Office Archives Project

Assistant Clerk Max Close introduced himself, describing his background in archives and records management. He holds an undergraduate degree in history and a graduate degree in public history, focusing on archives, museum work, and government best practices for records management. Before coming to West Newbury, he worked in various positions relating to archives and records management. Mr. Close noted that maintaining and being able to find Town records is important for good governance.

Mr. Close said that the Clerk's Office has been at work organizing the areas in Town Offices where records are stored and has been concentrating first on records under that office's purview, which range from relatively mundane things like licenses to more historically interesting items of greater historical value—which will be earmarked for display or scholarship. They are working to systemize Town recordkeeping and are developing finding aids so that newly organized records can be found. Ms. Grammer noted that they have already made great progress in cleaning up and organizing the archives room in the Town Offices basement and in the basement storeroom known as “the dungeon.”

Mr. Close described a three-part initiative the Town Clerk's office is contemplating, with the idea of a proposal to the Town (and possible Community Preservation Act funding) for the 2024 Spring Town Meeting:

1. Organizing and preserving Town Clerk-related files. This will require purchases of acid-free folders, bins, etc.
2. Digitizing documents that can be disposed of once they are in electronic form. The plan is to obtain a quote from the firm EBiz, which can do mass digitization of records. The idea is to start by digitizing voluminous records such as licensing, financial records, ledgers, receipts, which must be kept and take up a large amount of space (and may become contaminated with mold or other hazards, endangering other collections). Once digitized and searchable, the records will not only be safely and efficiently stored, but also will become accessible to the Town staff and the public.
3. Working with the Library and its collections and perhaps making the dungeon into a climate-controlled archival space. Mr. Close noted that the Library has historical collections that are not in a climate controlled space and not readily searchable. The idea is to coordinate efforts and consider developing more archival space.

Mr. Close said that he would like to get a letter of support from the Historical Commission concerning these projects. As an example of “lost” documents, the Commission and Mr. Close discussed documents concerning Newburyport's use of the Artichoke waters in West Newbury. Mr. Close said that the Town has been hunting for the agreement between West Newbury and Newburyport, and Mr. Janes said that he believes it is in the Water Department's records and that he may have a copy himself. Mr. Janes will be in to

see Mr. Close about this tomorrow. Mr. Janes added that he knows of and has used a number of Civil War-related materials in the Library and is concerned that some are beginning to disintegrate.

The Commission thanked Mr. Close for his work so far and expressed interest in supporting these projects once they are more fully fleshed out.

Historic Sites Survey Update

Ms. Conway had no updates concerning the last phase of the Historic Sites Survey. It is now awaiting review at the Massachusetts Historical Commission with no clear timeline for their completion of that step. Ms. Grammer noted that she had removed now-outdated information on the Historical Commission webpage to the effect that the phase 3 survey was about to begin and describing the consultants' cars, and their activities driving around taking photos.

Cemeteries

Ms. Grammer said that the Conservation Commission approved the cleanup at the Quaker Cemetery. The next step is to contract with a landscaper for cleanup services for this and the Almshouse Cemetery. She said that she has sent an email to the Town Manager and Town contracting person about this but has not yet heard back.

Ms. Grammer said that the Conservation Commission set a condition that invasive plants at the Quaker Cemetery be disposed of properly to avoid further spread. She said that the invasive plant interns had marked the problem plants and she had pulled them up by the roots and taken them in black plastic bags for proper disposal. Ideally this will reduce or eliminate invasive plants that the landscaper has to deal with. She also said that she visited the Almshouse Cemetery recently and that it is in good shape, but will require minor cleanup in the fall.

The Commission approved Ms. Grammer's proposal to post on the Commission website a summary of the annual cemetery maintenance program, to provide readily accessible institutional knowledge about this project.

Mr. Janes said that he is continuing his work in mapping, photographing, and developing stories about graves of prominent people in Town. He said that he has a useful collection of obituaries. The Commission commended this work and expressed hope that it could be shared publicly when ready.

Monthly Minute Histories

Ms. Grammer said that she has done additional Minute Histories about Gertrude Stanwood (artist who designed the town seal), E. Moody Boynton (inventor, politician), Julia Noyes Stickney (widely published poet, activist). She said that she has asked author and Old Newbury Museum director Bethany Groff Dorau to review the draft of stories collected into a book, and will send it via email to the Commission.

Other Business

Regarding the overgrown bushes on the Training Field, Mr. Janes said that he ran into former nurseryman Rick Thurlow. They went to the Training Field to look at the bushes, and Mr. Thurlow agreed that they are overgrown and should be removed. Mr. Thurlow recommended that the bushes be cut down to the ground and then the stumps ground out. Then smaller replacement plantings could be installed. *Ms. Grammer will share this information with the Historic District Commission.*

At Ms. Grammer's request, the *Commission authorized posting the list of Historically Significant sites on the Commission website.*

Minutes

The Commission approved the minutes of July 11, 2023 by unanimous vote.

Adjournment

7:47 pm

Meeting Documents

- Assistant Town Clerk description of archives project for CPC funding
- the list of Historically Significant properties for CPC funding for the website
- a summary of the Town-owned cemetery clean up program for the website

Respectfully submitted,

Elisa Grammer