

Spring 2019

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Recommended Citation

Barnhill, Madison (Spring 2019) "If These Walls Could Talk," *Tenor of Our Times*: Vol. 8, Article 12.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.harding.edu/tenor/vol8/iss1/12>

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IF THESE WALLS COULD TALK

By Madison Barnhill

I'll always remember the summer of 2018 because it forever changed my life. I spent three months doing preservation work in my home-town of historic Franklin, Tennessee. Located just fourteen miles south of Nashville, Franklin is home to many civil war and historic sites. Being raised in such an environment is what initially led to my love of history. That summer I was selected to work as an intern with two amazing historic organizations: the Williamson County Archives and the Hiram Masonic Lodge No. 7. These internships reinforced my desire to work in the preservation and archival field when I graduate from college.

Interning at Williamson County Archives enabled me to experience the behind-the-scenes work of a museum and archive. My days consisted of tasks like cleaning two-hundred-year-old documents and preparing antique textiles for long-term storage. This opportunity to practice my preservation skills and actually “touch history” made each day of working there a joy. Occasionally, I would take longer than necessary to clean a document because I would get caught up in reading the text and become so fascinated with the history and the story that I could not put it down.

The oldest document I was assigned to preserve was a petition dated from 1803. Several citizens of the town wanted to save a tree from being cut down and replaced by a road (preservation was obviously important to people back in the 1800s as well). The petition explained that this tree was important to the community because it had seen the town grow up around it, and these residents of Franklin wanted to preserve that historic landmark. That tree was standing there before the country was founded; even before Europeans came to this country. The petitioners did not want ‘progress’ if it meant losing a piece of their history. After reading this narrative and feeling such a kinship to the

petitioners, you can imagine how excited I was when I turned the document over to see “Approved” written across the back of it.

Sometimes I would read over a petition or a legal filing and my curiosity would get the better of me. I would stop what I was doing and use the resources at the Archives to dig a little deeper into the background of the issue. On one such occasion I was reading a court filing regarding an out-of-state family that was moving to Franklin. They had commissioned a builder to construct them a home, sight unseen, in a good location. They were now suing the builder because they believed he had built their house in a “poor part of town.” The pages of supporting documents were attached to the filing by an old rusty nail. The family filed numerous complaints about the poor construction of the house and the overcharges that occurred. The documents included meticulous details, such as the number of shingles used (“3250 shingles at \$5 per thousand = \$16.25”), the exact number of door hinges that were used, and how much each had cost. This must have been a grand house because of the large amount of money invested into it. However, the owners were extremely upset because the builder had advertised the location as a ‘prime spot in Nashville,’ and they didn’t think it lived up to that description. This piqued my interest, so I investigated where the home had been located. This proved to be somewhat problematic because the street names listed on the law suit were from the early 1800s. I was able to locate the earliest dated map in the archive and I overlaid it with a current map. I discovered that the piece of property was directly in the heart of Nashville, on the corner of 3rd Avenue and Broadway, where now sits one of the tallest buildings in the state. What a rewarding feeling, to be able to track down the history of the document and solve the mystery of where this ‘poor piece of property’ was actually located.

Days were just as exciting while working at Hiram Masonic Lodge No. 7. It is the oldest public building in Franklin (circa 1823) and the first three-story building ever constructed in Tennessee. Even though it is a national landmark, years and lack of preservation led to its deterioration. Currently, there is a preservation team on-site working to

uncover and preserve its story, and I was selected to intern with them over the summer.

The Lodge housed thousands of soldiers during the Civil War, and both the ravages of war and the soldiers housed in the building left their mark. Hour by hour I painstakingly peeled back layers of paint with a scalpel from one small section of wall; often to uncover graffiti written by a wounded soldier. This preservation process requires the removal of individual layers of paint until the final layer of water-based paint is reached, and then gingerly working around the handwritten messages with instruments such as a Q-Tip so as to not damage or smudge the image. It quickly became obvious that soldiers, many of whom were very young men, or even boys (average age of the civil war soldier was 25 years old) have not changed much over the centuries. Written on almost all of the walls were drawings and animations, math problems figuring out their pay, vulgar messages to each other, as well as simple signatures. Every time I uncovered some new drawing or message, it was like stepping back in time and getting a glimpse of the men who stood in that very spot so many years ago.

Towards the end of the summer the preservation team began to dig under the foundations of the Lodge, which was the dirtiest part of the job. Crawling and digging around under a 200 year-old building can be unsettling; especially if you are uncomfortable with spiders and discarded animal bones. But I continually found little treasures that made the hunt worthwhile. There were shards of stained glass from the original windows, pre-Civil War buttons, remnants of the original painted sheet rock, and a small iron cannon ball. These relics from the past continue to tell the story of the history of this Masonic Lodge.

The experiences I had at the Archive and Lodge during the summer of 2018 were incredibly exciting, and I am grateful that I had the opportunity to work with these two wonderful organizations. Being able to actually touch history and be involved with hands-on preservation work made this my favorite summer yet and confirmed that I had chosen the right career path. Now I know that walls can actually talk.