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## Chasing your tale

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By MICHAELA HALNON

Sheila Morris was helping a friend clean out her basement last October when she was unceremoniously gifted a stack of old envelopes.

“[My friend] said, ‘Maybe you would want these, I know you like old things,’” Morris said, laughing. “She was just going to throw them out otherwise.”

Small remnants of sealing wax and handwritten postage – 10 cents – marked the outside of each envelope.

Inside, Morris was shocked to find, were handwritten love letters dated 1819.

George Shaw and Susan Griswold penned notes for more than four years – he from Danville, she from Burlington. The long-distance courtship ended when Griswold suggested she might choose a different suitor if Shaw didn’t act soon.

They were married three weeks later.

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“Nobody could



Sheila Morris, president of the Vermont Genealogy Library is pictured. Located at Fort Ethan Allen in Colchester, the library offers open hours and vital records to help locals track their ancestors. (Photo by Michaela Halnon)

write like  
that  
today,”  
Morris  
said of  
the  
flowery

language and flowing penmanship.

“I can say no more even if my paper allowed,” Griswold wrote to Shaw on April 29, 1819.

An exciting find for most, these letters were especially thrilling for Morris, president of the Colchester-based Vermont Genealogy Library.

The library, founded in 1996, originally served only as a French-Canadian genealogy society and had around a dozen members.

Now, they help more than 400 members and countless one-time visitors and students investigate a variety of other ancestral backgrounds – Irish, English and German to name a few.

A \$30 annual membership fee and \$5 per visit grants access to 60 volumes of Vermont marriage and baptismal records, state vital records from 1760 – 1941, more than 4,000 books and several online genealogy search engines, like the international version of Ancestry.com, among others.

The “computer room” has proven popular, but Morris cautioned visitors not to rely too heavily on the resource.

“Ancestry.com still has its issues,” Morris said, noting the site uses transcriptions that are often inaccurate.

She struggled to track one of her relatives on the site and soon found her own maiden name, Waite, was recorded as Waile by a typist because ink crossing the “t” had faded away on the original document.

Visitors also have access to library volunteers. Morris teaches beginning genealogy at the Burnham Memorial Library, like the very basics of making a family tree.

Her best tips? Always check your source, and stick with one ancestral branch at a time – it's easy to get distracted, she said.

But looking for more information about Susan and George Shaw has been anything but beginner-level.

Morris deployed several library members on the case. They've been tracking down information for almost nine months, hitting some interesting bumps along the way.

Included in the letters, for example, was a smaller stack from Shaw's second wife, whom he married after Susan Griswold's untimely death.

Who kept the letters from both wives together is a mystery Morris still can't sort out.

But perhaps most puzzling, Morris can't draw a link between her friend, the original owner of the letters, and the Shaws. Members have tried to find descendants for months, struggling to keep the thread as last names change.

"Working forward is a lot harder than working backward," Morris said.

They've made some headway, though, and plan to show a potential local descendent the letters before they're donated to the University of Vermont special collection.

The library also hopes to eventually publish a book about the Shaws, detailing the letters and including a narrative explaining the research steps along the way.

It's the close of an exciting journey for Morris, who says she's certain another might be just around the corner.

"I have a feeling lots of people have history around them, and they don't even know it," she said.



vital records are just some of the documents available at the library, located at Fort Ethan Allen in Colchester. (Photo by Michaela Halnon)

