

Danvers Archival Center dedicated to Trask for 50th anniversary

By Caroline Enos | Staff Writer , Oct 18, 2022

DANVERS — You can't sum up Town Archivist Richard B. Trask's contributions to Danvers without pausing to take a breath. But you can easily appreciate the impact he continues to make. That was made clear by his friends, family and colleagues at the Danvers Archival Center's 50th anniversary celebration at the Peabody Institute Library Saturday afternoon — and by the center's newly renamed location, the "Richard B. Trask Library." "It's been weird seeing my name on the glass," he said from his desk, looking out at the archives' entrance in the Peabody Institute Library as visitors milled between artifacts on display Saturday. "But it's very nice."



Richard B. Trask, Danvers' town archivist, sits at his desk in the newly named Richard B. Trask Library at the Danvers Archival Center. CAROLINE ENOS/Staff photos

Trask was a graduate student at Northeastern University when he came up with the idea to start the town's first archival center, which opened in 1972. At the time, he was described as a "kid wearing a sweater, tie, slacks and a cheerful grin" by a reporter for North Shore '74, a weekly publication that was included in the Danvers Herald. Since then, Trask has collected thousands of artifacts and documents about the town.

He's cataloged accounts from the 1690s Salem Witch Trials and has become one of the nation's authorities on the history and accuracy of the witchcraft hysteria. He obtained two original copies of the Declaration of Independence, one of which was read to Danvers residents in 1776, and many abolitionist documents from the 1800s. Some of the most interesting artifacts in the archives, however, are preserved memories of ordinary citizens. This includes the diary of an 18-year-old girl who died just before her graduation from the Houghton High School in 1869. "People sometimes simplify life in the past, but it was as complicated in its own right as it is today," Trask said. "And I like to think of us as the memory repository of the town so that everyone is remembered."

Trask has written books on the Witch Trials, other periods of Danvers history and the photography of the John F. Kennedy assassination. He has been interviewed for dozens of documentaries over his career. Now 75, he uses a replica of Salem Witch Trial victim George Jacob's cane that was made for the 1985 movie "Three Sovereigns for Sarah," which he was a historical consultant on, to get around. Many of the people who helped support the start of the archives 50 years ago are gone, he noted.



Beverly resident John Fellows guards original copies of the Declaration of Independence at the Danvers Archival Center during its 50th anniversary celebration Saturday. Fellows is a member of the Danvers Alarm List, a company of colonial battle reenactors. CAROLINE ENOS/Staff photos

But Trask's ongoing work and decades of dedication has given Danvers one of the most prolific town archives around. "I've never seen anybody more dedicated to the history of the town, maybe even more so than Charles Tapley," Danvers Historical Society President David McKenna said to a crowd of nearly 100 people Saturday.

“He’s preserved a lot of history, but Richard’s preserved an awful lot more. “I think it’s great that we’re honoring this building by naming (the archives’ location) after him,” McKenna said.

Trask is a lifelong historian. As a boy growing up in Danvers, he had his older brother build him a pillory in their backyard so that he and the neighborhood kids could film reenactments of life in early Danvers.

He wrote a local history series for the Danvers Herald. In 1974, he helped start the Danvers Alarm List, a company of colonial battle reenactors, in honor of the nation’s bicentennial. The Alarm List would go on to take part in Boston’s bicentennial celebrations in 1976. While there, they were stopped by Queen Elizabeth II, who shook the hand of Trask’s wife, Ethel, and said she was very pleased to see them.

It took a village (or, rather, a town) of volunteers, historians and locals to build up the archives, Trask recalled to the crowd Saturday. None have been more valuable to him than Ethel, who died in 2019 after 46 years of marriage. “I always got kind of a lot of publicity,” Trask said. “Ethel didn’t get much. But she was so much smarter than I was. If something looked good, or if it was spelled correctly, that’s all Ethel.”

Friday would have been their 50th wedding anniversary; the day before the archive’s own 50th anniversary celebration. “I miss her every hour. She did so much for the archives that no one will ever know,” he said.

Trask’s daughter Elizabeth Peterson, her husband Brad and their children Grace and Zachary attended Saturday’s dedication. As did many other members of his family, including Select Board member Gardner Trask III, his nephew. His uncle’s dream has become an institution that benefits not only Danvers, but the state of the nation, Gardner Trask said. “To the benefit of all, Richard embodies the quote, ‘If you love what you do, you’ll never work a day in your life,’” he said.

The archives started in the basement of the Danvers Historical Society on Page Street. It moved to a newly renovated basement of the Peabody Institute Library in 1981.

Trask hopes the archives continue to expand over the next 50 years.

“I expected that within 20 years, I would have everything you could ever collect,” he said. “Every year I get more than I did the year before. It’s just amazing how much stuff is out there.”



Contact Caroline Enos at CEnos@northofboston.com and follow her on Twitter @CarolineEnos.