

To Save Or Not To Save: The Path Forward From The Fell Collection

By Nancy Bendiner, May 28, 2022

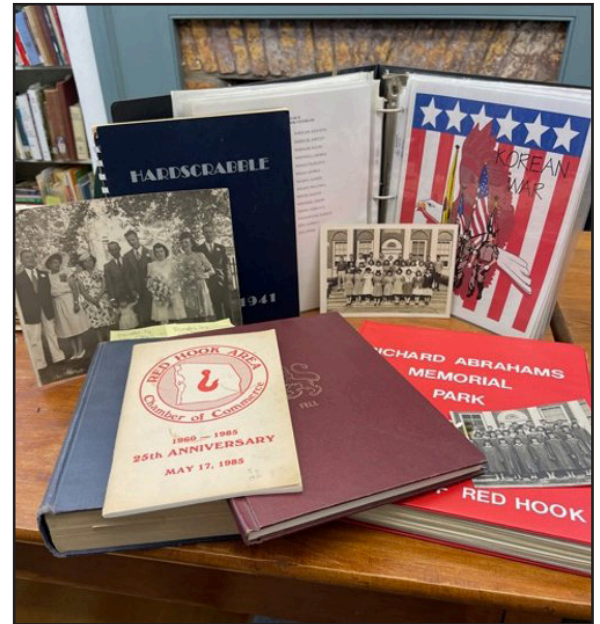
Nancy is a longtime Historic Red Hook member and a volunteer in the Collections Committee. This article originally appeared in our May 2022 Member Newsletter. Interested in receiving these stories in your inbox? Become a member today!

As I walked down the driveway to a yard sale in Red Hook, New York, on that pleasant summer day, little did I know what that walk would mean. Soon I eyed boxes stacked in the garage which did not appear to hold the usual yard sale items. A few papers near the top of the contents beckoned to me, the dedicated document sleuth. With the permission of the family, I explored further and found a cache of family memorabilia, old photos, documents, a few genealogies, and carefully constructed albums, some of which pertain directly to Red Hook history.

From the look of things, I thought that much of this yard sale treasure could find a place in the archives of Historic Red Hook (HRH). I presented this possibility to Butch Fell, son of the recently deceased Gladys Fell (1927–2021) who had lived in the house where the sale took place. He kindly offered to donate these items that his mother and his father Harold Fell (1924–2011) carefully collected over many years.

At HRH, the items in the Fell donation were appraised for their relevance to Red Hook and the HRH Archives. A Finding Aid was created to serve as a guide to the contents. The Gladys and Harold Fell Collection is now among others at HRH available for access. As the archives and its contents move into HRH's new research location, the Story Studio, there is an ongoing process to create digital means to easily locate and research the contents of all collections and holdings.

Within the items donated, I discovered that the Fells played an extensive role in the history of Red Hook. For me this was the beginning of a learning path where I discovered that the donation represented the history of two individuals and their families whose lives also reflected the Red Hook community. Harold Fell, for example, was a mayor of Red Hook and a village trustee. He and Gladys helped take care of Abrahams Park. They both visited Red Hook cemeteries to mark deceased veteran's graves. Harold, a veteran, was integral to the creation of the war memorials at the Red Hook Veterans Memorial Park. There are papers in the donation which describe how funding was sought and plans were made to create this powerful visual symbol.



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I also learned through this experience that at HRH collections sometimes start out based on individuals, families, businesses, and subjects of interest to HRH. The sum of these parts is, in addition, often broader and can highlight Red Hook's role in historic events. However, if there are not enough parts of a donation to create a "collection," smaller donations can find a place as well. A few items, credited to a donor, may seem more relevant if located within a subject collection. Sometimes, an item that may seem minor to its donor can spark exciting discoveries!

I started to think more about what can be done with inherited items or items that one might pass on to future generations or other interested parties. How can one choose what to keep, what to relegate to the trash? What should be rescued and why? These choices can be complicated and emotional, involving memories of one's own life, as well as relationships and even how one sees oneself.

One key issue is that of space and environment—where to locate saved materials and items. Should objects find a place of display? What locations can best shelter fragile items from the past? How can one set limits on quantity— or should one— while sorting through piles of memorabilia? To choose what NOT to save can be an art in itself.

Another issue is to find family members who might want to learn more about their family's past and take care of that past. There is an explosion of photo sharing services and media sites that keep us entertained and informed about our current lives. I suspect though that, for many, a visit to old photo albums is not high on their agenda, at least not in that format.

Recently I spoke with Pam Hoffman, a proprietor of Hoffman's Barn in Red Hook. Sometimes the Barn offers old photographs for sale. She told me that people who owned them don't want them because, maybe they don't know who is in a photo and see no point in keeping them. Sometimes the photos may be extras a family does not feel they need.

I started to ask myself where my own collection of old photos- or even current ones- and family memorabilia will eventually end up, if they survive. This question has in fact grown in urgency as I am now "elderly" and the caretaker of historic items for several families. I am reminded that it's time to find ways to best preserve this history before it's lost. Here I offer suggestions for what one can do to move toward this goal:

1. Label the backs of photographs (ideally in pencil) with the FULL names (include surnames) of the subjects and year and location of the photo if known. Older relatives can help with this project and maybe add stories associated with the pictures.
2. Write down personal memories (while you can still remember them!) and include as well what you remember about now-departed ancestors if you were lucky enough to meet them.
3. Take steps to incrementally involve your family to build appreciation of your own collection. Give to appreciative others old photos or heirlooms along with stories that might accompany them and descriptions of people pictured.
4. Learn how to edit and digitally preserve family photos, historic documents, correspondence, professional records, and videos.
5. Take down (and even record) oral histories- ask your grandma what she was doing when there was an historic event!
6. Take trips with family to old cemeteries and historic sites.
7. Review papers, such as deeds, and photographs related to the history of one's house. House and building histories can throw much light on the times when they were built, those who worked or lived there, and the evolution of communities.
8. If you are getting on in years, you could discuss with heirs your plans for distribution of old items and involve them in choices that could come up. Put notes on objects with associated stories and identify who owned the object. Save pictures of heirlooms and consider giving away the physical items.
9. Locate a historic preservation society and approach them about the possibility of donation. Some such societies can also help locate the most appropriate local repository for your items depending on what you have. If items relate to Red Hook, call 845-758-1920 or email info@historicredhook.org.

I like to think that preservation of and attention to historic items could help us come to terms with the past and understand it better. We could even learn more about who and where we are now and where we are going.