

Portsmouth 400 book tells city's history in 101 objects

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PORTSMOUTH — What do a floral cotton dress, a wooden leg, the clockworks in the North Church steeple and a pet cemetery have in common? They are featured in the soon-to-be-published "A History of Portsmouth NH in 101 Objects," a 224-page softbound book with color photographs of objects whose stories paint a vivid and diverse picture of the city's evolution.

The book came about as a legacy project for the Portsmouth NH 400th anniversary in 2023 and its production was voluntarily spearheaded by

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The E. Howard and Company clockworks in the North Church steeple are the focus of "A History of Portsmouth NH in 101 Objects" essay about an unusual collaboration to preserve an icon.

STEPHANIE SEACORD PHOTO

Portsmouth 400

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Stephanie Seacord.

Seacord is the former director of marketing for Strawberry Bank Museum, a Portsmouth Athenaeum proprietor, former Portsmouth Historical Society trustee and currently the city's public information officer. She led a team consisting of the book's editor, Kathleen Soldati, and a five-member editorial board that included leaders from Strawberry Bank Museum, the Athenaeum, the historical society and the Portsmouth Public Library.

"This volume will give readers a sense of who we are and where we are as Portsmouth continues its journey from before 1623 to beyond 2023," Seacord said.

Each of the 101 objects is depicted with a full-page photograph accompanied by an essay by a local author.

The book's content is not just a cabinet of curiosities, Seacord notes.

"The idea is that each object should be a representation of a story that is central to Portsmouth."

Recounting history one photo and essay at a time

True to that vision, Elizabeth Farish's narrative, accompanying a photo of the aforementioned cotton dress, sheds light on the broader story of Portsmouth's connection to the trade of enslaved people. Jessica Ross's "Uncle Billy's Sunday Leg" provides insight into the evolution of medicine here during the Civil War era. The clockworks in the North Church are the focus of Portsmouth City Attorney Robert Sullivan's tale about an unusual collaboration to preserve an icon. And Peter J. Michael's "Creatures Great and Small," about the pet cemetery, conveys the meaningful relationship local citizens have had with their pets.

There are 80 contributing writers, with some doing double duty, but they all have a unique connection to the object they wrote about.

Mayor Douglas McEachern contributed an essay accompanying a photo of Portsmouth's original 1923 City of the Open Door brochure. Food writer Rachel Forrest penned a tribute to Gilley's hot dogs. Navy veteran D. Allan Kerr offers insight into the role of the Portsmouth Naval Shipyard and its submarines. Seacoast Media Group Executive Editor Howard Altachiller writes about the history of the Portsmouth Herald.

Seacord says she sees the book as "a record of what we value in 2023 on the 400th anniversary of Portsmouth's settlement, a resource for historians and fu-



Stephanie Seacord directed the production of the book for Portsmouth 400 and Kathleen Soldati edited "A History of Portsmouth NH in 101 Objects," which is now available for pre-order from RiverRun Bookstore in Portsmouth. PHOTO BY DANIEL J. WHEELER

ture generations, and an illuminating tour of the city's past for the general reader."

Discounted \$35 pre-publication orders for the book, which will be available in December for \$29.99, are being accepted now at RiverRun Bookstore, which is publishing "A History of Portsmouth NH in 101 Objects" through its Piscataquis Press.

Choosing the 101 objects for Portsmouth

Seacord worked with an editorial board to determine which objects would be chosen and they sought feedback via crowdsourcing. "We were collaborative, collegial and always willing to hear someone's defense of an object," Seacord explained.

"The objects we focused on were chosen because they are so dynamic," she added. "The artifacts are physical connections to extraordinary events. The photography and the objects themselves are so striking that they lead you into wanting to know more about the object."

Seacord stresses that the book is not the history of Portsmouth in 101 objects, it's a history.

"One of our goals is to get people to think about what they would put in the book. We want the conversation to continue and we have a Facebook page that is intended in part for that."

The idea of using 101 objects to tell Portsmouth's story was suggested by Strawberry Bank Museum's Lawrence Yerdea, who was inspired by a similar pro-

ject created by Smithsonian museums' curators and scholars.

Venerable local photographers Ralph Moring and David Sherry provided most of the photos and did so for free.

"If we didn't have David and Ralph's photos, we wouldn't have a book," Seacord said.

Point of view matters

An Assistant Mayor Johanna Kelley notes in her introductory essay, this way of sharing history - with the emphasis on photos accompanied by stories from the point of view of those with close ties to the object featured - is fitting.

"We are taught about our history through the lens of the people who led it, but not often by the people who lived it," she writes. "I would also argue that even more revolutionary is the written word. Millions of people, over hundreds of years in our history, had little to no access to learning to read and write."

A read of a pre-publication copy of "A History of Portsmouth NH in 101 Objects" is truly a delight. Not only is the book enlightening, it proves that Portsmouth is full of great stories - and great writers. Each of the volunteer essayists has a distinct voice.

The journey through Portsmouth's history stops at a few house museums and historic sites, but it also includes Yorker's, a barbershop and The World Famous Elvis Room. Ultimately, "101 Objects" celebrates the richness and vitality of the city.

While heading 80 writers as project director sounds daunting, Seacord describes it as uplifting. She was moved when she saw how the writers treasured the moment captured in the photo and the opportunity to tell its story.

"Consistently, the response we got was 'I would be honored to be included in the book.' For me, it was about finding the right voices and letting them speak to their passion."

"Kathleen Soldati was perfect to head this ship," Seacord added. "The board chose her as editor because we needed to keep the authors' voices alive and not everyone can do that. You have to edit in a way that shapes the object in front of you instead of the object you want. We wanted the book to represent the voice of the community."

In this way, Seacord says "101 Objects" is less about the objects and more about the story of the people behind them.

Pre-publication orders may be placed at riverrunbookstore.com, by calling RiverRun at 603-439-2100, or by visiting the store at 21 Daniel St. in Portsmouth.

Information: 101objectsportsmouthnh.com