

Lohmann: Finding history in unlikely places

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Virginia Black knew that her mother had a collection of old family papers hidden away for safekeeping, but she didn't know precisely what it included, and she certainly didn't think anyone else would care.

But after her mother died, Black started going through a Tupperware container that had been stashed beneath her mother's bed. She discovered letters and other documents belonging to James Cooper, a great-great-grandfather — or maybe it was a great-great-great grandfather, she's not altogether certain — who had served as a U.S. senator from Pennsylvania and at the end of his life as a brigadier general for the Union army in the Civil War.

Just the sort of stuff Laura Drake Davis is looking for.

"Wow," said Davis, a senior state records archivist for the Library of Virginia, as she leafed through Black's stack of fragile papers. "These are quite good."

Davis is a coordinator of The Civil War 150 Legacy Project, a collaborative effort of the state library and the Virginia Sesquicentennial of the American Civil War Commission. The aim is to find and digitize privately held materials — such as family letters, diaries and photographs from the Civil War era — that have been stashed in attics, sock drawers or under beds in Tupperware containers.

The resulting online collection will be publicly accessible and, project organizers hope, "shed light on things that haven't been studied before, but also bring a new perspective to things that have been studied," Davis said.

I caught up with Davis at the Powhatan County Public Library last week, one of the most recent stops of her road show. She and fellow coordinator Renee M. Savits hope to visit every county and independent city in Virginia at least once by June 2012, and they hope people such as Virginia Black show up with little treasures they may not have realized they had.

"I'm so glad to share these with somebody who's interested," said Black, who lives in Powhatan with her husband, Mike.

Said Davis, "That's why we're doing the project. You get to share, but you also get to keep them."

The program works this way: You bring in whatever items you have, the archivists scan them with a high-resolution scanner, you fill out a permission form for the library to include them in the collection (and whether you want to be identified as the person who is the source) and jot down any details about the item you know. You go home with your belongings, and the library has another piece of the Civil War puzzle for historians, school kids, genealogists or anyone else who is interested in that era. Because of the turnout statewide, it takes three to six months for images of items to reach the project's website.

So far, Virginians have brought in a variety of items: soldiers' diaries, oaths of allegiance, parole passes for soldiers released from prison camps, letters, photos, drawings. Among Black's possessions was a certificate appointing Cooper brigadier general. She also had a booklet put together after his death with newspaper clippings attached to the pages with straight pins.

The joy of the project, Davis said, is not knowing who will show up with what at any stop, or what conversations will come up. At the Powhatan library, Sandra R. Kemp arrived with photographs of her ancestors who were slaves at Belmead Plantation, while Helen Graham came with numerous items including documentation of a Confederate soldier buried in the yard of her home, Roseneath. While they waited, they chatted about people and places and the history of the county.

"The social aspect is tremendous," Davis said. "You learn a lot."