



Clerk is the keeper of Cape May County stories

Lizabeth Shay, left, and County Clerk Rita Fulginiti examine a variety of records about the dealings of E.W. Dale, a black entrepreneur, and Annie Knight, owner of Congress Hall in the 1920s.

Freeholders name clerk county historian

by [David Benson](#)

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CAPE MAY COURT HOUSE – Want to know where your great grandmother got married? How about when your house was built?

Records like these and many more are available at the County Clerks' office.

Chances are, anyone who has explored genealogy or local history has at some point made a trip to the clerk's office. Now, in Cape May County, many of those records are available online.

Last week, the county Board of Freeholders formally recognized what county clerks have known for centuries when it unanimously passed a resolution naming the Cape May County Clerk as the official county historian.

Although it's an unpaid position, County Clerk Rita Fulginiti couldn't be happier with the freeholders' decision.

"The resolution made formal something that's been informal for more than 300 years," Fulginiti said last week. "The county clerk has been keeping the history of the county safe for all of that time."

That history is often more than many suspect, and in the hands of the historical detectives in the clerk's office, it comes alive and becomes a story, instead of a recitation of dates and names.

Not long ago, Fulginiti and her team began a research project into the cultural diversity of the county in the early 1900s. The project is part of an annual celebration of the county's archives and history each fall. That team includes Diana Hevener, Lizabeth Shay, Laurie Thomas and Dawn Sheeks.

"We stumbled across records of Annie Knight and her dealings with E.W. Dale," Fulginiti said.

Some might recognize Knight's name. She was the owner of Congress Hall in Cape May during the 1920s, the hotel's heyday, Fulginiti said.

As the clerk's office researched Dale, they found what they said was a treasure that showed off the county's diversity – a black entrepreneur who owned a catering service that provided goods to some of the finest dining establishments in the area.

"He was a well-to-do African American in the early 1900s," Fulginiti said. "He was selling food and drink to Annie Knight. We have menus from that era and E.W. Dale's ledger showing what he was selling to her, including sirloin steak, lobster and lamb chops."

Tracking down the information about Dale wasn't easy. Fulginiti's research team started with his ledger – a list of meals and prices, but little more.

But the clerk's office has much more than ledgers, and the archivists dug deep into county newspapers, court documents, advertisements, licenses and land deeds. They even checked the U.S. Census records to learn more about Dale.

What they found was the story of an entrepreneur who not only catered to the wealthy tourists and parties visiting the Shore, but who owned several businesses in town, including what was then known as the Dale Hotel at Lafayette and Jefferson streets in Cape May.

"We compared newspaper accounts to his ledger to his deed to court records, all to reconstruct his history," Fulginiti said. "We're using one-of-a-kind documents to tell a story that hasn't been told in more than 100 years."

That history is important, the clerk said. "It's a moment in time," she said. "These heritage records are what make us unique. These are our stories."

Now an Ocean City resident, Fulginiti grew up in the Wildwoods. She described herself as strongly connected to Cape May County.

Fulginiti has worked in the clerk's office since 1985, and was elected county clerk in 2005. She's the 26th clerk in a chain of records keepers that stretches to 1693.

Like all of her predecessors, Fulginiti is consumed by the desire collect, conserve, store and ultimately share information that's generated by the county's residents and governing bodies.

Years ago, the clerk's office was often crowded with people researching their ancestors, tracking down land deeds, or looking into immigration or voting records.

That's changed with the advent of the Internet age, and the clerk has had to change with the times.

"What I've found is that we can't do things the old way anymore," Fulginiti said. "As new questions come in, we find new ways to answer them."

Now, instead walking into the office, people will email asking for records. To accommodate the digital age, Fulginiti said that her office has been working to digitize the records and get them online.

"We're making documents available for the way people want to work," she said. "We get emails and calls from people all over the world who are looking for information on their ancestors."

Getting that information to the people is important to the clerk.

"People don't want to hear that they can't get the information," she said. "It's our job to collect, preserve and then make the documents available."

It's time-consuming, and not at all easy with the older documents. Paper disintegrates a little with every touch, and opening a book can break its binding.

"About 2006, we took on the task of the conservation of the one-of-a-kind records that were most at risk," Fulginiti said. "Pages were cut out of the ledgers, washed, dried, deacidified, microfiched, scanned and rebound. The scanned documents are online at capemaycountyarchives.com."

It's a long process to get more than three centuries of documents online, and county residents and governments generate new paperwork every single day.

"What we do is important and it has to be long-lasting," Fulginiti said. "We are preserving the history for future generations. But it's not just me working here. Thankfully there's a team working on this."

"It's a culture around here. It's what we do. These things are greater than all of us, and we recognize that."