

‘Unfolding Histories’ brings old Gloucester to life

By Keith Powers / Correspondent

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We all went there. And we never went back.

It was fifth grade, or sixth. The school bus took us to a historic house, full of treasures that we refused to be interested in (not cool enough). That was the last time we were there.

It might have been the Sandy Bay Historical Society, or the Essex Shipbuilding Museum. The Sargent House, the Gloucester Lyceum, or the Manchester Historical Museum. Or any of the institutions preserving the past few centuries of New England, which have contributed to “Unfolding Histories,” a beautifully curated exhibition on view now at the Cape Ann Museum.

We can be forgiven. Historic documents are fragile to the touch, impossible to read, and contain a hundred bits of trivial information for every one bit that seems relevant. They are the province of scholars, and rightly so.

One scholar, guest curator Molly O’Hagan Hardy, has done the sorting for you though, organizing public notices, letters, brochures and financial information into 10 categories that tell the story of Cape Ann during its centuries of white settlement. From an early (1604-06) map of Gloucester Harbor, and taking us up to 1900, Hardy creates a narrative that hints at many of the region’s secrets. The story is not always pretty.

What was life like for the native Pequots, Pawtuckets and Penobscots? How about the Africans, who were brought here under duress and lived in challenging conditions, even though Massachusetts was slave-free after 1783? Were you aware that some children — children of all colors — were sold (“Indentured”) until the age of 18, as a trade-off to ensure their education? What about the activities of women in literature, and in the temperance movement, or in organizing charitable welfare services?

Explorations of these facets of pre-1900s life, along with early developments in transportation, the disruptions of warfare, and the frequent tumult of religious activism, are on display in this small but carefully chosen exhibition.

Small is the operative word. Hardy's curation has gathered documents with visual interest and with interpretative possibilities. The 10 categories focus the documents on ideas — not just the fact that we still have them after centuries.

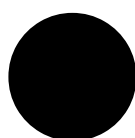
Of particular interest: de Champlain's map of the area around Gloucester (then Beauport) Harbor, carefully labeled, showing points of interest, like native settlements (lots of them: "Cabanes de sauvages, et où ils labourent la terre"). The evidence and interests of Cape Ann's first reading groups (yes, they were here before Oprah), like the Lyceum movement, and the Annisquam Reading Group.

And, curiously enough, a book of penmanship in the education section. In it — Charles Farrington's copy book from 1810 — the lad writes repeatedly in sweeping cursive: "Protracted regret weakens the mind and impairs the health." It's both visually striking, and unnerving.

Such items may sound trivial in the description, but in the context of life in our own native land, centuries ago, make the region seem exotic, and somewhat foreboding. We feel like modern life presents challenges; but with slavery, poverty, political dissent and prejudice dominating early discourse, we may have it easy nowadays.

"Unfolding Histories: Cape Ann Before 1900," runs through Sept. 9 at the Cape Ann Museum. For more information visit www.capeannmuseum.org or call 978-283-0455.

Keith Powers covers music and the arts for GateHouse Media and WBUR's ARTery. Follow [@PowersKeith](https://twitter.com/PowersKeith); email to keithmichaelpowers@gmail.com



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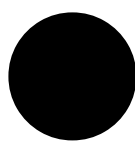
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