
Using Oral History to Assess Community Impact: A Conversation with Beverly C. Tyler, Historian, Three Village Historical Society

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ABSTRACT This article examines the impact of an acquisition by Special Collections at Stony Brook University Libraries on community relations. The department acquired two historically important letters about the Culper Spy Ring, an intelligence gathering effort on Long Island, New York, initiated by George Washington during the American Revolutionary War. Through a guided conversation with local historian Beverly C. Tyler, the authors gained insights on how the letters influenced the community's re-telling of history and the development of new exhibitions and programming. The conversation also provided context for the relationship between the university and its neighbors. The narrative developed into a significant asset in its own right, in the form of an oral history that provides evidence of a previously undocumented facet of university-community engagement over time.

KEYWORDS outreach; community engagement; revolutionary war; local history; narrative interview

Stony Brook University (SBU), a public research university center founded in 1957, is located on the north shore of Long Island, in southeastern New York. SBU is part of the State University of New York ("SUNY"), the comprehensive statewide system of higher education, with its main campus situated in Stony Brook. With the neighboring communities of Setauket and Old Field, the area shares a rich cultural heritage and is collectively known as the "Three Villages."

Two historic acquisitions by SBU spurred the fostering of collaborative outreach activities with the local historical society, museums, and non-profit educational organizations. Original letters documenting the Three Village-based Culper Spy Ring, formed in 1778 under the direction of General George Washington, were acquired at auction and are curated by Special Collections, a division of SBU Libraries. Orchestrated by Washington during the American Revolutionary War (1775-1783), the Culper Spy Ring was tasked with gathering and disseminating intelligence about British activities on Long Island and in New York City.

In the past ten years, interest in the two letters and the history of the spy ring has grown exponentially. Contributing factors include the publication of two best-selling books—Alexander Rose's *Washington's Spies: The Story of America's First Spy Ring* (Bantam, 2006) and Brian Kilmeade's *George Washington's Secret Six: The Spy Ring that Saved the American Revolution*

(Sentinel, 2013)—and the broadcast of the Culper-inspired AMC television drama series *TURN: Washington's Spies*.

To assess the impact of the letters, SBU faculty Kristen Nyitray (Associate Librarian) and Sally Stieglitz (formerly Visiting Assistant Librarian) sought to collect qualitative data and subsequently conducted an oral history interview with Beverly C. Tyler, Historian, Three Village Historical Society (TVHS). Founded in 1964, the society is dedicated to the preservation and interpretation of local history. As SBU is located in the center of the Three Villages, Nyitray and Stieglitz sought out Mr. Tyler's unique perspective of the longtime relationship between university and community, both to enrich the understanding of the documents held by SBU Libraries and to inform and improve future town and gown interactions. Consequently, Mr. Tyler was invited to speak at length; the narrative was guided by open-ended questions prepared by the librarians and resulted in significant qualitative data on community history and university-community engagement.

Although SBU Libraries and the TVHS had previously collaborated on programs, this encounter was an opportunity to examine, in depth, a community member's perspective on those interactions. The initiative was sparked by librarians Nyitray and Stieglitz's shared research interest in engagement and arose out of ongoing discussions on how to collect meaningful data from community partners. This was the first instance of SBU Libraries seeking to collect such data. Valuable as a stand-alone research project, this foray into qualitative data collection emerged as a blueprint for future interviews.

Topics covered in the interview with Mr. Tyler included his family history, the influence of the Washington letters, and the relationship between the community and the university.

Excerpts from the Interview with Mr. Tyler (August 20, 2015)



Kristen Nyitray discussing the Washington letters at «Take Your Child To Work Day» Stony Brook University, 2014

Kristen Nyitray (KN): When did you move to the Three Village area? Have you always lived here?

Beverly Tyler (BT): My ancestors go back to William Jayne, who came here about 1670.

KN: You were [living] here before the groundbreaking for [Stony Brook] University in 1960. How would you characterize the relationship between the university and the community initially and how it has evolved?

BT: It's always been somewhat of a distant relationship. For the most part, at least early on, there wasn't a great deal of connection and even today I don't believe that there is as much of a connection as there should be.

Sally Stieglitz (SS): What about people from the community coming to the campus? Have you seen a change?

BT: Oh yes, lots of changes. For instance in 1985, [19]86, a [SBU] theater arts professor did a program called *Eel Spearing at Setauket*, which is based on [19th century, Setauket-born painter] William Sidney Mount's [painting] *Eel Spearing [at Setauket]*. She did the play with her students, gathering all the information on tape and by video and then hiring people from New York City and the university to play individuals from the community. So that was a really joint effort between the university and the historical society to do a particular project.

SS: I think that developed some good will?

BT: Oh yeah. The members of the community who were featured in the play were sitting in the theater in the round in benches, in pews, actual pews, and every once in awhile the actor would walk up and put her arm or his arm around and sometimes bring them into the scene with them as they were doing it. It was wonderful. It really didn't get into the larger community as much as we would have liked.

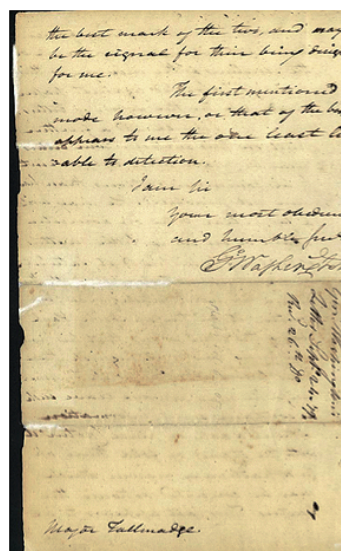
KN: Do you find that surprising? Because so many people from the university live in the community? Why do you think there is this disconnect?

BT: It's not with the university people and the historical society. It's everybody else that just doesn't have the time or the inclination to be part of it. More people should be interested but sports seem to be an overriding thing, but in a way it's good because a lot of people really follow university sports. I don't know if we should call it a disconnect anymore or not. It certainly could be better.

KN: Let's shift gears and talk about George Washington and the Culper Spy Ring, 2006 was really the beginning [when Special Collections acquired the 1779 spy letter authored by Washington]. We were able to start to grow our own collections here, and become more focused on Long Island history as it relates to the nation. I would say that acquisition [of the George Washington letter] really laid a foundation - it solidified our collecting scope. So, we are curious to know your opinion: do you think this acquisition [of the George Washington letter] also may have influenced Three Village Historical [Society]? Did you change the scope of your programming? How did it impact the organization's focus and outreach activities?

BT: As far as the spies are concerned, we've always had a good story about Washington's visit to Long Island in 1790. And we've always had that national focus that Washington made one trip to Long Island and basically stayed at the three locations where spies were operating. It's interesting that you basically talked about 2006 being when you started because that's the year that Alexander Rose wrote his book, *Washington's Spies*.

KN: It all happened concurrently, right?



Excerpt of letter, George Washington to Benjamin Tallmadge, September 24, 1779.

BT: Yes, it did, it did. But it influenced people like myself and Liz Kaplan [former educator and exhibit project manager, Three Village Historical Society]. And it influenced Liz Kaplan enough for her to [suggest that] we really need to do this. Because reading his book brought out, just the way your letter of Washington brought out, new information, new details, new personalization of the relationship between the Revolutionary War, the Setauket Spy Ring, and the area.

KN: I think that also - it was a convergence of all factors. It happened within a three month period.

BT: Yeah. We would not have been able to do the exhibit without a number of factors. One, of course, is Rose. The second factor is the Library of Congress. Because basically we have no original documentation of any sort about the Revolutionary War or about the Culper Spy Ring in our collection. We have nothing.

KN: What in your collection is representative [of the spy ring]?

BT: [A facsimile of] your letter.

SS: So if you could, we understand all these things played a big role, but we're mostly interested in what impact, if any, you think the letter...

BT: The letter, it was one of the three things that had the most impact: your letter and the Library of Congress and Rose's book gave us the ability to put on an exhibit that had original documentation, of primary sources. It's the only original letter that's in the exhibit. The one letter that's there as a feature of the exhibit is the letter at [Stony Brook] University, actually before you restored it. And it has the transcription right next to it and it has all that detail about what was going on, so between that letter and the one from the Library of Congress from [spy Abraham] Woodhull to [intelligence officer Major Benjamin] Tallmadge, that tells the story that we want to tell.

SS: You were telling it differently before then, weren't you?

BT: We weren't telling it well before then.

SS: Because I've been here for twenty years and I just remember going to events. It was more like a children's table with coloring books.

KN: [There is now] a more academic approach.

BT: Yeah. That's all we had, we had no documents at all.

SS: So fast forward to when [the university] got the letters and to now. What's changed?

BT: Well, number one, the school districts, starting I think in the 1980s, insisted on primary sources for the kids. And so we didn't do much on the [Culper] Spy Ring simply because there weren't any that were available.

KN: Could you just give us a brief summary of the kinds of programming and outreach that you do that relate to the Culper Spy Ring? I know you do the walking tour.

BT: Yes, I was doing that before 2006. I was doing a walking tour but not directly related to the Culper Spy Ring.

KN: Was there was some representation of the Culper Spy Ring?

BT: Oh, absolutely. A lot of the teachers were doing programs on the Culper Spy Ring really very early.

KN: But would it be fair to say though that since, again, I'm just going to use 2006, that there's been a shift in the curriculum, or the way the story is told?

BT: Yes.

KN: We have the older books [in Special Collection] and they all seem to focus on the [oral tradition account of] petticoats and the clotheslines [to communicate intelligence]. Now you read articles and there are footnotes and citations. [The letter] has elevated [the study of] it.

BT: It was, yes, it started basically with the local area, it basically started with [Setauket resident and spy descendent] Kate Strong.

KN: And was that not more oral tradition?

BT: Well, she [Kate Strong] did this story, "Nancy's Magic Clothesline" [published] in the *Long Island Forum*.

SS: So at some point there was a shift from this storytelling, children's...

BT: Yeah.

SS: ...to academic.

BT: Absolutely.

SS: I've also noticed, on tours I've taken, the one I took this summer was the spy tour, there were thirty to forty people on it. The previous tour I'd been on was two to three people.

BT: Yeah.

SS: So what changed?

BT: [The AMC television program] *Turn: Washington's Spies*. *Turn* changed everything. It's put Setauket on the map. People know how to pronounce the word "Setauket."

(laughter)

BT: And, you know, I understand that while in 2013 my average [Abraham] Woodhull [re-enactment] tour [attendance] was between six and fifteen. In 2014, the average was over sixty. And one, two tours were eighty-four. [In] 2013, the average attendance at the *Spies!* exhibit was between zero and three. [In] 2014, the average was twenty-five to thirty.

SS: So you're seeing big change that started around 2006 but even bigger change. Do you think there's been some kind of snowball effect?

BT: Well, *Turn* has definitely put Setauket on the map to the extent that not only those two tours, the Woodhull tour and the spy exhibit, which are directly related to the spying, but I've increased the maritime tour in East Setauket. So, Setauket has become a destination that it wasn't before.

KN: I want to briefly discuss the most recent [event], the first Culper Spy Day [which did not include university participation in 2015, but did in 2016]. Is coming to the university an obstacle?

BT: No, I think it's a necessary part of it. Absolutely essential. Because you've got the original document here, folks. This is it, this is the only one. We don't have any others.

KN: I understand. I think it is a way to bring together the community with the university.

BT: For sure.

KN: It could serve that function because not everyone connects through sports, etc. But

history, that is something that I think could bring all these [disparate groups together].

BT: Well, it's definitely one of the things that we've tried to make the relationship between the university and the community more useful.

KN: Do you have a sense of how many people have viewed the permanent exhibition? And then how many people have participated in your tour?

BT: It's well over 1,000 and maybe approaching 2,000.

KN: I have a website on George Washington and the Culper Spy Ring [<http://guides.library.stonybrook.edu/culper-spy-ring>]. It has over 5,000 [hits] now for the year. It is still always in the top three Google results for information about the Culper Spy Ring.

BT: And is that on our website? Is that your....

KN: It is on the [Stony Brook University] Libraries' website.

BT: Well, for instance, the link...your link should be on our website for the spy stuff.

KN: That is great - that we can develop those kind of connections.

SS: Because, from our perspective, even though it's not our primary mission, it's definitely part of our strategic plan to be involved in the community.

BT: Oh absolutely. If enough of this stuff gets connected through history... the historical society felt right from the beginning, that it was very, very important to be involved with all, with as many other community connections as possible. The university's the main one.

KN: It can be mutually beneficial for us to partner.

BT: Oh absolutely.

KN: But we always are thinking: what is the obstacle here? And it is not just about Special Collections, I think it is the library in general. Who are our users? Do people from the community use our library?

SS: But people may not be aware that we're such an open resource for them.

BT: Oh, your library's incredible.

KN: We have visitors bring letters of reference vouching for them, e.g., I am who I say I am, and this is why I should be allowed to see these documents. And we say, "you just had to call."

(laughter)

KN: We've had one day visits to the Brewster House [historic home in East Setauket] and Setauket [Elementary] School.

BT: That's right. That letter has been around. Setauket is becoming a destination on its own, separate from *Turn*, but influenced by *Turn's* scope. The other thing we do is the walking tour around the [Setauket] Village Green with every single fourth grade student in the Three Villages. That's our Founder's Day program.

KN: We need to get a building, a tiny house in the Village Green so we can bring our letter.

SS: Like a Little Free Library? A Little Free Special Collections?

(laughter)

KN: Well, this has been wonderful and thank you so much for sharing your knowledge and your time.

Conclusion

When connected to a community, collections are meaningful and impactful. Several key insights were gleaned from the interview. First, town and gown relations are strengthened through shared interests and activities, in this instance, local history. Second, SBU Libraries' acquisitions of the Washington letters were influential; they spurred the TVHS to grow its spy-related programs, which consequently brought greater attention to their own organization and to SBU's Special Collections. Third, partnerships with the community take effort and will not flourish without nurturing. Fourth, university collections can elevate primary and secondary education. By giving TVHS access to primary documents for an interpretive exhibition, SBU's collections enhanced the local school curriculum. Finally, publicity and marketing efforts need to be recognized, supported, and sustained. The promotion of library services and collections should be part of a university's portfolio of communication and media relations activities.

What began as an attempt to evaluate the influence of two pivotal acquisitions on community engagement yielded more than untold information about the dynamics between SBU Libraries and the local community; it gave rise to a new source of institutional memory. Conducting an interview was found to be a novel and viable approach to assessment. Employing this method to gather anecdotal evidence provided the authors with observations and perspectives that could not have been obtained with a traditional survey instrument. The interview fostered the recall of first hand experiences and memories. Rich narrative provides context that a questionnaire may not evoke. The interview also encouraged reflection about the past and contemplation about future collaborations.

Crafting a focused conversation can serve as a model for other institutions seeking to evaluate the impact of outreach efforts. The dialogue documented the multi-dimensional roles that can be fulfilled by a special collections department, from a preserver of history to a facilitator, a negotiator, and an ambassador of goodwill. A valuable asset in its own right, the oral history interview decidedly served a dual purpose. Researchers have access to insights about the George Washington letters and their significance in the Three Villages, and the library is more informed about the impact of its collections on community relations.

About the Authors

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