

Toms River's Archives Week Paves Way for Reenactment of Historic Blockhouse Fight

by Victoria Ford

In Toms River Township, Tuesday, May 29 marks the start of Archives Week, an educational and interactive celebration of the historic records and three-dimensional artifacts that tell the tale of the township's long and rich history.

According to township clerk and historian J. Mark Mutter, Archives Week is designed to lead up to the events of Saturday, June 2: the Founder's Day parade and crowd-drawing reenactment of the Toms River Blockhouse Attack of March 24, 1782. Mutter implemented the five-day Archives Week last year, borrowing the idea from an Archives Day held annually in Monmouth County in October.

During Archives Week, a multitude of items – he estimated about 100 – are displayed with interpretive signage in the grand entryway of the Ocean County Library's main branch, on Water Street in the center of Toms River proper. The library, which is, "without a doubt, the most heavily trafficked facility downtown," Mutter said, serves as a spacious and attractive setting for the exhibit, which is free and open to the public.

Last year during Archives Week, 1,300 third graders from nearby grade schools made class trips to see and learn about the history behind the items. The oldest Revolutionary War artifact is a cannonball recovered during a county road construction project and believed to have been launched in a failed British attack on the town in 1778; others are much more recent, yet in a way equally significant, such as the baseball signed by every member of Toms River's 1998 World Champion Little League team.

To better illustrate the historic significance of the archives and artifacts for the students, Mutter himself "became" David

Woodmansee, Toms River's first township clerk, complete in period civilian dress. His ensemble comprised a three-cornered hat, a ruffled-front blouse and colorful vest, knickers, stockings, buckled shoes and the bell he held in his hand. Assisting Mutter was Peter Ferwerda, a professional reenactor who represented a Revolutionary soldier.

"(Ferwerda) set up a camp in the library to show what it was like to be a patriot during wartime," Mutter said. "I spoke (to the students) in terms of the role of a civilian, ... and he spoke to the military aspects." Particularly impressive were the historically accurate gun and sword Ferwerda brandished, which drew appreciative "ooh"s and "aah"s from the kids, Mutter added.

The students also were shown an award-winning documentary-style short film called "The Toms River Blockhouse Fight." The 20-minute film, made in the bicentennial year 1976 by Pauline Miller, depicts the patriot view of what happened in Toms River on the fateful morning when 125 British soldiers descended upon 25 patriots who were defending the blockhouse, killing nine of them and capturing their leader, Capt. Joshua Huddy, for whom the park where the reenactment takes place is named.

The show-and-tell-style presentation "brought history to life for the schoolchildren in Toms River," Mutter said, "and we fully intend to do that again this year."

"(The British) came and won the day; they won the battle; but America won the war," Mutter summed up. "And I think that's a great lesson for young people: In life, sometimes you lose, but ultimately, you win. ... Good prevails."