

document and hear Joe's stories, and hear a little of the family history.”

Until the document had dropped into his life, Joe had not been aware such a certificate ever existed and he does not believe that his father Ollie knew about it either. Joe jokes that when he found it, he was sure he would have turned white, if it wasn't for the fact that he was white already, as white as his Oakville mother was.

Ollie fathered Joe, another son — a brother whom Joe first met at his father's funeral — and an older brother, who died in the Korean war.

There was no question that Ollie was a hero in Oakville. He was a prized athlete in the town.

What Ollie excelled at was athletics, and if you are interested, you can read all about his feats on one of the pillars at the lower level of Oakville Place. An inauspicious site to honour one of Oakville's greatest athletes, but it is there that you can learn that he toured North America with the Buffalo-based black pro-baseball club, the Cuban Giants, played baseball with Hamilton's City League International Harvesters was a championship runner and came back to live in Oakville when backers coaxed him to play shortstop with the Oakville Oaks by buying him a dry cleaning business.

But why give the document to Oakville?

Joe felt that since his great grandfather had settled in Oakville, his father lived here and he had been born and he went to school here at times, he felt that it was only fitting that Oakville should have it.

Preservation Process

Even before the museum took possession of the 155-year-old document, it had to do the research necessary to authenticate it. Once this was done, museum staff had to do what they could, using the best conservation methods available, to preserve the document which could be further damaged in the wrong hands, and then create a secure space to hold and display it, boosting security in the museum to provide increased protection of what they had determined was a highly-prized item.

The museum information points out that all documents are adversely affected by time and the break down over time and they can also be affected by light, moisture, mould, insects, pollution, poor storage conditions and frequent or careless handling.

The Johnson freedom paper had been affected by many of these elements already. Janice Passafiume, of Jana Fine Arts CPR Ltd., a specialist in paint and paper conservation, was picked for the restoration. She notes that such certificates, were documents made of either sheep, goat and calves skin to honour special events.

As it was, the problems with the Freedom document were many: it was brittle and showed overall deterioration; badly stained from the pocket watch's metal: the ink (made of iron gall) had faded and corroded the parchment: there were holes made from insects: folding had created deep raised creases and tears: it was scuffed and worn from handling and its age and storage in damp conditions had caused strong brown stains called foxing.

The conservation process undertaken by Passafiume and her husband in their Etobicoke studio, took several months, double the time she had expected it to take, in all, 80 to 100 hours, much of that staring through a microscope. First she had to examine the piece in detail. The parchment was removed from the cardboard backing that Joe had stuck it to for display. It was examined under a microscope and infrared and ultraviolet photographs were taken to help determine exactly what needed to be done.

The treatment first consisted of gently dry cleaning the parchment, removing all surface grime and mould spores. The flexibility of the parchment was improved using pressure to flatten and expand the document.

The tears and small holes were repaired using a unique combination of small pieces of cow intestine and Japanese paper held in place with gelatin.

That was the recovery procedure. Once that had been done, the museum had to design a space where the document could be placed where it would not deteriorate and be further effected by the elements and could be viewed.

Here's where the best resources available to museums came to bear. What they did was to essentially have a micro-chamber built to hold the parchment taut. Using a special paste, a number of linen threads were attached by one end all around the document's edges. The other ends of these linen threads were glued to the matting, much like the netting for a trampoline.

In this way the parchment could be held flat and upright and the entire document could safely expand and contract with any changes in temperature and humidity in the relatively controlled atmosphere of the museum.

In order to prevent light from affecting the document a special glass cover filters out ultraviolet light and a thick blackout cloth protects the document from light when it is not being viewed.

Cross admits that the cost for carrying out the conservation obviously has not been cheap. She would only say that the price was significant.

“It took up our conservation budget for the year, and then some. But it was worth it.”

The museum also upgraded its security system and Cross feels that the document could not be removed unless the whole wall containing the document came with it.

Although the document is valuable it would not be the most valuable item in the museum though. A painting by Vermeer holds that honour, but the Freedom paper has not been fully appraised, yet.

That will be done when the Museum is applying for the document's classification as a cultural property and as a significant piece of history.

So it was that the document, in its new home, was officially unveiled during Black History Month in February of this year.