

COLUMBIA COUNTY NEWS TIMES

Bank documents found above century-old Harlem bank vault

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Several Harlem leaders have discovered what they said is a "treasure trove" of history, as thousands of old bank documents were discovered in a building that once housed the Bank of Columbia County in the early 20th century.

Harlem Mayor Bobby Culpepper said that DeFoor Realty, a company he works for, had purchased the building, on the corner of N. Louisville and N. Hicks. The building was undergoing renovations, preparing for the real estate company to move in, when local historian and Harlem native Phil Turner paid a visit.

"I went in to see the bank vault because it was still the bank when I was a boy. I had a paper route and I would go in and Ms. Emily Crawford would handle my account for me and I'd see the vault," Turner said. "A Whittaker Electric guy was in there and was working and he just indicated that they had pulled some stuff from over the vault, where the bank vault was."

Above the vault is an attic door, which had been hidden after the installation of a drop ceiling. Inside the attic, piles of boxes were found that had been untouched for decades.

Culpepper said he enlisted the help of several city workers to remove the documents to a neighboring building, where Turner, along with Columbia County Commissioner Bill Morris have worked to sort through the documents.

Morris, Turner and Culpepper said they were all shocked at the amount of documents taken from the attic.

"At first I was overwhelmed by the volume of it, but we got started off on the right foot," Morris said, adding that they called on Nancy Glaser from the Augusta Museum of History for help. "She came in here and helped us organize it and get some ideas about what we wanted to do, how to go about protecting ourselves from the mold and mildew."

Since February, Morris and Turner say they have spent roughly eight to 10 hours a week, off and on, working on sorting through the documents, which contain a variety of checks and savings account books, some dating as far back as 1912. Merchandise receipts from Harlem's old W.E. Hatcher's & Sons dry goods store, along with some handwritten letters were also discovered.

Not all of the documents will be kept, Turner said, adding that Glaser has given them a crash course on what can be kept for research, or for museum displays, and what can be thrown away.

"The more you get into it, the easier it is to tell what you're looking at and if it has potential value," Turner said. "It is hoped that we will have a portion of this material placed in the new library for people to see and perhaps used for historical purposes, and then part of it will hopefully go into a Harlem museum if we can find the space to accommodate it."

The process to preserve the documents has been time consuming, the men said.

A large majority of the documents will be disposed of, including hundreds of duplicate copies of checks. But the documents that will be kept, including any handwritten letters or notes, are separated into piles and then placed into large plastic bags and frozen for 24 hours.

"That's what Nancy said to do is freeze it for 24 hours and I guess it kills whatever microorganisms are in there," Morris said. "So I'm the freezer man."

After freezing, Turner said they spread the documents out on tables, place screening over the old pages and use a shop vac to remove any excess debris. From there, the papers will be placed in acid-free folders.

While the process has proven tedious, Morris said the opportunity has allowed him to take a glimpse into Harlem's past.

"The thing that I have kind of keyed in on is this stuff is over 100 years old. These people were living their lives during WWI. It affected their everyday lives and I'm sure it affected their banking, their savings, how they were going to spend their money, how they weren't going to spend their money," Morris said. "That's what I try to take from this is that this is not just a piece of paper with a name on it. It's a story. Every check can tell a story."

For Turner, who has a passion for interviewing veterans, specifically fighter pilots, the documents are a way to glimpse into Harlem's past, including the importance of the old Hatcher's dry goods store.

"My next door neighbor is about 95 years old, Jack Hatcher, he is one of the Hatchers," Turner said, adding that he has conducted video interviews with Hatcher on Harlem's past on multiple occasions.

"Also, (Hatcher) has a ledger, running back to 1916 and I got him on video reading from the ledger, which even though he was just a boy, it ran from 1916-1920, he knew the names," Turner said. "Hatcher's store acted as a bank for people who could not get bank accounts. The largest one that he found was a black farmer who got \$25 to put in his crops and they operated as an interest free bank, that you could pay back."

The most interesting thing discovered so far, Turner said, was a 1921 memorial book to WWI, which he said was found in almost pristine condition.

"It's a very nice piece that I assume will end up in the library," Turner said. "It's the best thing that I would say that we have found in terms of being some potential historical value and condition."

The documents are still being sorted, though a large majority has been completed. In the meantime, Culpepper said DeFoor Realty's owners have been working with the discovery.

"Since they bought the building they have been very mindful of the history of it and were thrilled for us to do this," Culpepper said.

The company plans to continue with the renovation of the building that used to be the home of the Bank of Harlem, later named the Bank of Columbia County. The bank was then moved to where Regions Bank stands today.

Culpepper said he hopes to be able to display some of the documents in the newly renovated DeFoor Realty building.