

ART'S GALLERY

Cheers to Tom Oram's quest to preserve mementoes of his family's role in U.S. history

IF you've ever tapped a keg of beer, you owe a vote of thanks to one of parishioner **Tom Oram's** ancestors.

His great-grandfather, **Richard Chapman Fleming**, received a patent for "Improvements in vents

records on just how one obtained a patent when the U.S. Patent Office was in its infancy," Tom said. (The Smithsonian is looking into the possibility that Mr. Fleming may have worked with another attorney who also has a patent for a

for raising liquid from a barrel, leads her to believe "that the two men somehow must have collaborated on developing their inventions." (Lincoln's patent—No. 6469—was granted in 1849 and is the only patent ever granted a

President. While it was a great idea, it was never manufactured. A replica is on display at the Smithsonian.) Fleming's patent—No. 78447—was granted 19 years later "and not sold for very much money," Tom says. Tom said that today's barrel taps "still use the same functioning principles as my great-grandfather's. His invention was officially labeled as 'The New and Improved Barrel Vent.' Prior to his invention, most barrel taps were basically spigots." Tom said his great-grandfather kept 13 letters that he wrote or received from "the then newly formed United States Patent Office, explaining how one went about obtaining a patent and, eventually, the (patent)

office's letter to him, granting it to him."

Last fall, Tom traveled to the Smithsonian in Washington, D.C. to officially turn over various documents to Dr. Johnson.

Tom said Dr. Johnson "has found that there may be a working replica

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Tom Oram at the Smithsonian Institution with Dr. Paula Johnson, Curator, Division of Work and Industry, National Museum of American History

for Barrels" in 1868. Where he came up with what we now call a keg tap is lost to history, but the patent and other documents now in the hands of the Smithsonian Institution clearly show Mr. Fleming's role in creating the "barrel vent." "My great-grandfather was an attorney and he kept copious

similar vent. That attorney? **Abraham Lincoln.**)

Tom says Dr. **Paula Johnson**, Curator, Division of Work and Industry at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History, said Lincoln's patent for raising stuck ships or barges off a sand bar and Mr. Fleming's patent

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of the barrel vent in the Smithsonian's archives and is in the process of checking into it." Dr. Johnson, in a follow-up letter to Tom, thanked him for "making the trek to Washington to hand-deliver the sheaf of historical documents" relating to the barrel vent.

"We're delighted to add them to the collections. I am also very grateful for your commitment to having the documents professionally conserved prior to donating them to the museum. They are stable and happy!" she wrote.

"We had the original document in our home in Fishtown," Tom said. "As I always loved history, I took really good care of it, not realizing its potential value at the time. A few years back, I had some restoration work completed on it at the Conservation Center for Art and Artifacts (CCAA) in Philadelphia. It was almost pristine and, thank goodness, did not need any serious restoration work." (In its report, the CCAA said Mr. Fleming wrote the letters in ink he

Tom says one of the Civil War documents "is very rare...No one... has ever seen anything like it."

had made.) "After the work was completed, I donated the patent to the Smithsonian."

Working with Tom on this project was **Mark Homa**, "a man with many untapped talents" Tom met several years ago in Newtown. "While working for CBS in New York, Mark became familiar with intellectual property and what to do with it."

Tom gives great credit to Mark for his help in getting the information to the Smithsonian. Their efforts began in 2015 and culminated with the Smithsonian's acceptance of the documents in September. Homa said one of the important factors for the Smithsonian was "the direct link a descendant (Tom) had with the inventor...and a verifiable paper trail."

"The barrel tap patent will be on display for short periods of time throughout the year (at the Museum of Natural History)," Tom said. "They do not want it exposed to light for any length of time." He said he always kept the documents in a dark storage area, even as a child back in the 1940s.

The beer keg tap is not the only work Tom is doing with the Smithsonian. "The Smithsonian is interested in having the original copies of the Civil War documents relating to my great-great-grandfather **Thomas Cooper Oram** and his wife. I will be donating the documents to the Smithsonian, where they will be treasured and well taken care of for centuries." Mark is also helping Tom on this project. Tom says one of the Civil War documents "is a very rare document...No one I have spoken with involved with historical Civil War artifacts has ever seen anything like it." He says it is a "certificate of recognition that was given to my great-grandmother for her volunteer service to the Union Army. It was listed as 'Union Volunteer Refreshment Saloon' and dated 1862."

And one more major historical Oram note:

Tom says Thomas Cooper Oram's father, also named **Thomas Cooper Oram**, fought with Gen. **George Washington**. "His brother, **James Oram**, was one of Washington's closest friends and co-authored the first biography of the general."

Tom was born in Philadelphia, son of a doctor and a housewife. He graduated from Philadelphia University with a marketing degree and made a career in public education, ultimately becoming assistant schools

superintendent in South River, NJ. Tom said his father worked for a "large chemical corporation based in Chicago."

Tom devotes a lot of time to the parish, helping with the parish photo directory, Aid for Friends, Penndel Food Pantry, Holy Folders and serving on the Property Committee. "We have a lot of old buildings," he says, noting how expensive they are to maintain. He is also active in the Michael J. Fox Foundation's efforts to find a cure for Parkinson's Disease.

He and his late wife, Kay, moved to Yardley and joined St. Andrews in 1970, four years after they married. He remains a regular at the 8:00am service. He has two sons, **Thomas Matthew** of Plumstead, an emergency room physician at St. Mary Medical Center; and **Mark**, a corporate attorney for Caterpillar Corp. in Peoria, IL., and four grandchildren.

Talk with Tom for only a brief time and his loves for family, the parish and history are obvious.

Art Mayhew