R.I. copy of Declaration called genuine

By Marvin Pave
Globe Staff

PORTSMOUTH, R.I. — For more than 80 years, the black-framed copy of the Declaration of Independence hung on the wall of the town clerk's inner office until somebody took it down in 1984 when the office was repainted.

Until a few months ago, the yellowed document lay behind a Kodak copier and a file cabinet, mainly because over the years, nobody except for now-retired police chief John Pierce and current town clerk Carol Zinno ever thought it was more than a reproduction.

Last Friday, Pierce and Zinno's "gut feeling" about the forgotten document was vindicated when Brown University professor Robert Mathiessen and Newport Bookstore co-owner James Thomson compared the framed copy with a July 13, 1776, copy of the document kept in the university library.

Their verdict, announced yesterday in this coastal community, was that the town's nearly forgotten copy was in fact the same one sent to Portsmouth Town Clerk John Thurstson (who served from 1775-1784) by the Rhode Island General Assembly in 1776.

While the Portsmouth copy is not one of the 22 surviving July 4, 1776, printings of the document by Philadelphia printer John Dunlap, it is nonetheless an "exciting, rare find, one you can't put a price on," according to Mathiessen.

"This is only the eighth known copy of the Declaration printed on July 13, 1776, for the Rhode Island Assembly by Newport printer Solomon Southwick," said Mathiessen. "I'd estimate that Southwick printed between two and three dozen of them from a copy of Dunlap's, and then they were distributed to each of the city or town clerks in Rhode Island to be read to the public or posted."

The remaining seven, however, are either in libraries, museums or held privately. That makes the Portsmouth document — which includes the signature of Rhode Island General Assembly secretary Henry Ward on the front — the only one of the eight Southwick prints that has survived for nearly 211 years at its intended destination, a Rhode Island city or town hall.

But it wasn't what was on the front of the Portsmouth copy that really excited Zinno and Pierce, who are officers on the town's 350th anniversary "Committee for '86."

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Town Clerk Carol Zinno with copy of Declaration of Independence

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"When we took it out of the frame last Friday," said Zinno, "we discovered that on the back was the inscription 'for the town clerk, Portsmouth' and when it was compared to the document at the Brown Library, we noticed the same writing on the back, except that one read 'for the town clerk, Exeter.'"

Mathiesen said the notation on the back of the Exeter and Portsmouth copies of the document were just one clue as to the Portsmouth document's apparent authenticity.

"We also compared the handwriting and signatures, we measured the type size and the way in which both documents were originally folded," he said. "And that led us to making this announcement today."

Zinno, along with town Historical Society president Jane Gerhard, said the next step is to raise money to de-acidify the document and eventually display it in a climate-controlled setting. "The ultimate goal is to keep it here," said Zinno.

Pierce, who retired as police chief in 1981, said he remembered seeing the Declaration hanging in the clerk's office as far back as 1948. "I always had a gut feeling it was special, but I couldn't convince other clerks to have it authenticated. So you have to give Carol credit, too."

After the framed copy was discovered behind the office equipment last year, Zinno kept it next to her desk. When the 350th committee met recently, Zinno and Pierce started thinking more seriously about the document and what it could add to the town's upcoming celebration.

So Pierce called book dealer Thomson, who called Mathiesen, and the rest, as they say, is history.