

# Up in the Tower

*by Beth Nawara, Seasonal Collections Clerk*

I have spent the past two summers in what I refer to as “the tower,” also known as the archive on the third floor of the retreat wing at Mayslake Peabody Estate. There, I work with objects in Mayslake’s permanent collection, or as those in the museum field would say, “I work with the stuff.” I think it’s the best job to have at Mayslake. I photograph and assign a number to every donated item in the permanent collection and enter individual descriptions into a museum software program before making sure everything is properly stored. If I have cataloged each item correctly, I can easily find it later on, even in such an extensive archive.

I am constantly amazed by the variety of objects people contribute to the collection. The Peabody family alone has bequeathed numerous treasures from books and candlesticks to photographs — even an oil portrait of Francis S. Peabody himself. People surprise us by walking in with items or photographs they wish to donate, sometimes with the added benefit of providing the history of a piece or identifying people and places in a photograph. On one such occasion, a woman wondered if we were interested in a set of photos taken when her great aunt’s father worked at the estate. Dated between 1915 and 1917, the images are the only ones in our collection of the farms and grounds before Mayslake Hall was built. We have also received photographs from people who visited the retreat during the Franciscan era.



Although not always financially valuable, these artifacts are historically priceless because they help tell the story of Mayslake Peabody Estate. Sorting through them has provided me with fascinating glimpses of how the property has evolved to suit the needs of its inhabitants. I recently cataloged a group of slides of the nuns’ quarters, an addition set up near the servants’ wing in 1954. Those quarters have since been removed, but the photographs will continue to let us visualize the estate during that era.

During my first summer at Mayslake I was in “the tower” alone, but this year, Carol Nordbrock, the collections coordinator at Kline Creek Farm, has been joining me one or two days a week. Four years ago, much of the farm’s permanent collection moved to the third floor, so Carol is spending more time here caring for Kline Creek Farm’s items and assisting with other District collections. She enjoys preserving artifacts and determining which pieces to put on display, and I appreciate having someone to talk with or to lend a hand repositioning the occasional oversized object.

Collections aside, one of the best perks of working at Mayslake is the heritage gardens that surround the hall. In late spring I love eating lunch outside by the lilacs and lilies of the valley and inhaling their sweet scents. I also like to park my car in the side lot, which allows me to work on my spring ephemeral plant identification as I proceed up the sidewalk.

If you have never been to Mayslake Peabody Estate, I encourage you to come for a tour and to learn about Francis S. Peabody and the ongoing restoration work. And if you or a member of your family has a connection to the estate, remember that we always welcome seeing historical pictures and objects and hearing personal stories of Mayslake’s bygone era.