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## Towns get creative with century-old cane tradition

Boston Post cane used to be given to the oldest resident in each town

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In Easton, it lies mounted in a display case at Town Hall, for all to see. Kingston residents honor its meaning with a celebration. Raynham folks can visit the senior center to view it.

And on the island 30 miles south of Cape Cod, it's known as the "Nantucket Death Stick."

Now, in West Bridgewater, the Boston Post cane – a century-old walking stick meant to honor each town's oldest living resident – is considered a piece of rediscovered treasure.

"It was always something we hoped we'd find when cleaning or moving stuff – and we finally did," said West Bridgewater Town Clerk Nancy Morrison.

Town officials identified the wooden cane, engraved and topped with 14-carat gold, when the interim building inspector was moving into his new office space on July 1.

Since then, Morrison has been researching the history of the canes in New England and reaching out to town officials across the commonwealth who are still hanging on to the more than 100-year-old tradition.

In 1901, the publisher of the Boston Post newspaper distributed about 700 of the canes across the Bay State – and to cities and towns in New Hampshire, Maine and Vermont.

Towns allowed women to become recipients of the canes in 1930. The newspaper that originated the honor folded in 1957.

Only about 300 original canes are registered today, according to the Maynard Historical Society, which hosts a web site dedicated to the canes.

The practice today in many communities is to keep the original cane – or its replica if the original has been lost – in a case on display somewhere in town where it can be easily visited by residents.

In Easton and Raynham, the canes sit encased at Town Hall and at the senior center, respectively. But many towns still celebrate the achievement of longevity without handing over possession of the cane to an individual.

At a ceremony in a nursing home in February, for instance, Kingston selectmen passed "oldest resident rites" along to Rosemary Wood. In April, Easton held a special ceremony honoring Amalie Kramer upon her 103rd birthday. She's been the town's oldest resident since 2007.

In Nantucket, the tradition has been retired altogether, and the Boston Post Cane stays locked in a vault – available for viewing only upon direct request. And that's exactly where Town and County Clerk Catherine Flanagan Stover said it belongs.

The island put a stop to the tradition around 12 years ago, when it became apparent that the cane was not a good omen for its residents, Flanagan Stover said.

Recipients of the cane were dying within weeks and even days of being handed the antique, Flanagan Stover said, and people just didn't want it anymore.

"That's why we call it the 'death stick,'" she said.

But it's not just about becoming a bearer of bad luck.

"There's also no fair or equitable way to manage the cane," Flanagan Stover said. She said it's too tough to get the relic back when its temporary owner dies, and North Attleboro Town Administrator Mark Fisher agreed.

"The problem is, you're always dealing with a family in mourning," Fisher said.

West Bridgewater's original cane will be displayed, but in a safe and secure place, Morrison said. She said that because there is no written record of the cane's past ownership, it could have been missing for as many as seven decades.

A committee established by officials at a recent selectmen's meeting will join in August to determine which type of ceremony the town will choose to honor its oldest living resident.

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