

## Voice from the Vault

By Gregory Sanford, State Archivist

A plumber friend once explained his success as knowing three basic rules: water runs down hill; plumbers are paid well; and never put your fingers in your mouth. On February 16<sup>th</sup>, a state holiday, the Archives had rule number one confirmed when a water pipe broke on the second floor, ran down onto the first floor, and from there found a way through the re-enforced concrete ceiling of the basement vault. Only a small amount of water made its way through the ceiling, but 90 boxes were affected.

A few people called (did I detect a note of satisfaction?) to say, "And you are the guys who are always warning us about disaster planning." Exactly the point: no one is immune from risks. That is why disaster mitigation and planning are so essential. Our test was not that we had a problem; it was how well we responded. I give us a mixed grade.

### **What we did right:**

The alarm system worked well (though not the way we anticipated) and within minutes the Montpelier Fire Department and staff from the Archives and Buildings and General Services were at Redstone.

We knew who to call and quickly had a sufficient number of people on-site to respond to the emergency.

One group focused on the building (water shut off and repair; arranging for additional dehumidifiers, fans and a wet vac service; and covering all vault shelving with plastic tarps in the event of new leaks).

Another group tackled the records. We segregated the records into three categories: records that were wet; dry records in damp folders; and dry records/folders within wet boxes. One group line-dried wet records; one group replaced folders with even slight dampness; and a third group removed all (dry) folders from slightly wet boxes and arranged them on tables to provide precautionary air drying (to minimize the chance of mold).

Knowledge of the holdings allowed some quick assessment of the relative value of the records (no 18<sup>th</sup> or 19<sup>th</sup> century records were affected) while finding aids eased the task of re-filing and boxing the records.

Photo documentation was made for insurance purposes, lists of discarded boxes and folders were compiled (both to guide re-filing and for figuring replacement costs) and the names of those responding, and how long they stayed, were recorded.

A parallel effort was going on in the two non-Archives offices directly

under the water break; it is worth noting that because of the Office back-up policy no electronic records were lost though some IT equipment was damaged.

Within six hours of the alarm the situation was stabilized.

**What we need to change:**

The alarm was set off when a smoke detector in the ceiling below the break was short-circuited by the water. If we relied exclusively on the vault water sensors more time would have elapsed and more damage would have occurred. We need to re-evaluate our security systems.

Too much of our response was guided by the knowledge and experience of the Archives staff and Paul Carnahan and Jackie Calder from the Vermont Historical Society (VHS). While this re-enforces the value of staff training we need more accessible and formal procedures in the event staff are unavailable. We will be developing quick check-off lists that anyone could locate and use.

We had not maintained our inventory of disaster response supplies and had run low on key items. We had to purchase additional plastic tarps and other supplies. The VHS staff brought some of their response material, underscoring the need for more formal partnerships and the off-site storage of disaster supplies.

Other, larger concerns need to be addressed. How, for example, did water leak through water-proof carpets and the cement ceiling of a four-hour fire rated vault? For any of you planning new facilities, our experience re-enforces arguments against putting vaults in the basement; water does, as noted, run down hill. Similarly, for communities thinking of putting vaults and offices in historic buildings (in our case a 19<sup>th</sup> Century summer residence), our experience suggests careful risk assessment of how well the building can be retrofitted for new uses (insulation, plumbing, wiring, workflow, etc).

We were lucky that our response was quick and the damage minimal. We greatly appreciate the quick and informed response of the Montpelier Fire Department, State Buildings and General Services, the Vermont Historical Society, the Archives staff and volunteers Andrew and Reidun Nuquist and David Corliss. We will be particularly fortunate if our experience encourages all of us to review our disaster mitigation and response plans.