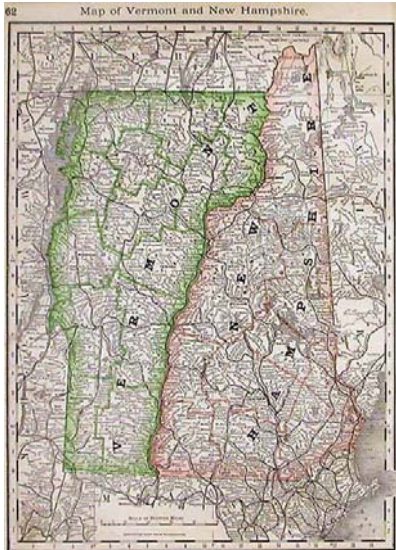


Voice from the Vault

By Gregory Sanford, State Archivist

Mapping Change

I pity the early cartographers who tried to map what we now know as Vermont. The boundaries of Vermont were under dispute. The landscape was populated by place names associated with Native Vermonters as well as with the competing European settlers and claimants. Trying to phonetically translate Native terms was a challenge in itself. Was it the Winooskitook, the Ouinoustick, the Winooski, or, avoiding the problem altogether, the Onion River? What about French names? Was it La Riviere a la Mouette or should the engraver's error that translated this as Lamoille be retained? And what should one do with the names of New York patents, such as Kersborough, Meath and Minto that overlay towns named by New Hampshire and later Vermont?



Mapping Vermont's public records laws can be equally confusing. Can we easily navigate among personnel and personal records or between an undefined right to privacy and "a clearly unwarranted invasion of personal privacy?" And what about the heretofore uncharted territory populated by "records which by law are designated confidential or by a similar term?" [The quoted language is from 1 V.S.A. §317(c).]

The Archives has begun to map Vermont's public records laws through an online database (<http://vermont-archives.org/records/access/database/index.htm>). The database currently allows for an "agency search" that provides a drop down list for finding public record exemptions for specific agencies. Exemptions common to all agencies can be found by clicking on "all agencies" while municipal exemptions can be found by clicking on "municipalities." Categories of exemptions, such as "consumer privacy," can be found by using the exemption drop down list.

The Archives is continuing to work on the database and hopes to add case law links and note fields that further clarify the intent of specific exemptions. In putting the database together we benefited from the work of Leah Korce of the Vermont Law School and from Assistant State Archivist Tanya Marshall's database skills. We welcome comments.

One question we have already encountered is what the Archives interest is in Vermont's public record laws. The answer, in part, is simply that in helping agencies and municipalities manage their public records we need to know what right to know mandates apply.

The answer also embraces the value in re-thinking what we, as custodians of public records, do and how we do it (see my September Opinions column on "[Premature Burial](#)"). Whether the result of conscious thought or ad hoc incremental change, the Archives' role has been transformed throughout our history. In 1782 when the general assembly first enumerated the duties of the office of secretary of state, the preservation and accessibility of records with a continuing legal value was the primary concern. The 1782 required "all public Acts, Papers and Records that belong to the State, excepting particular Records and Papers of the [Executive] Council, be deposited and remain in the hands of the Secretary of State." The secretary was to "grant Copies of All Records when thereto requested, taking therefor reasonable fees..."

The evidentiary role of the Archives was expanded through a subsequent series of acts. For example the Archives became the depository for the "official correspondence" of governors in 1864, town boundary surveys in 1902, and legislative committee records in 1917.

In 1823 Secretary of State William Slade expanded the role of the Archives to make records, and the knowledge they

represent, broadly accessible. Slade wrote that, "Every government...should possess, and should place within the reach of the people, a complete history of its own legislation. Without the possession of such a history, and a practical regard to the lessons it inculcates, legislation will be, at best, but a succession of *experiments*, and, as a necessary consequence, every operation of government will be characterized with instability and a want of wisdom."

Slade met his own charge by publishing a volume of State Papers related to the formation and early years of Vermont. Act 259 of 1912 linked the Archives' evidentiary and publication roles by requiring the secretary of state to publish "the charters of all towns and gores granted by the state, such volumes or parts of the papers of the surveyor general, including the reproduction of maps thereof, and such other manuscript records of his office as in his judgment are of general public interest."

After publication of an index to surveyor general records and of Vermont land grant charters, the evidentiary value of records was slowly subsumed by a program to annotate and publish 18th century government records. While these volumes made early Vermont government records more broadly accessible, the link between archival records and ongoing legal and public issues weakened. The Archives came to be seen as a historical, not evidentiary, function of government and government recordkeeping suffered.

In the 1980s the link between the evidentiary and publication roles was re-established, starting with the publication of an index to municipal governance charters. At the same time the Archives began improving access to 19th and 20th century records through better management practices and the creation of finding aids. In the 1990s the archival role was further transformed through the use of computers and the Internet. For example the Archives began a "Continuing Issues" web publication that synthesized record-based information related to public dialogues before the legislature. The use of the Internet marked a major change in the Archives' role. No longer were government officials and citizens expected to come to us and look through finding aids to find information. Instead that information, summarized but supported by online copies of records, was available to anyone with access to the Internet. The Archives again became a decision-making tool.

In 2003, in part because the evidentiary and knowledge functions of the Archives had been re-established, a new law enumerated for the first time the authorities needed to actively identify and *manage* archival records. Management meant no longer passively awaiting for records, but instead actively working with agencies to identify and preserve archival records. Many of the tools now being created by the Archives, such as the right-to-know database, derive from these new management authorities and practices.

This breathless rush through the Archives' history demonstrates how what we do, and how we do it, constantly changes. There is, by the bye, a strong need to better understand how the roles of municipal archives have changed. While we still record, file, copy, etc. our records, how we do those tasks is being transformed. Traditional record formats and media are also changing. With the Internet it is becoming essential to better understand what our actual and potential users want, in what form. It is an exciting, if daunting, time. We are rightly concerned with the impact of new technologies but how will spreadsheets, databases, and geographic information systems allow us to enhance citizen awareness of and participation in municipal government? I look forward to working with all of you as we re-think our archival responsibilities.