

## Voice from the Vault

By Gregory Sanford

### **Mrs. Nye and Me**

It was recently pointed out to me that sometime this year I will become the longest serving Vermont state archivist. The current record holder is Mary G. Nye who served as Editor of State Papers (as the position was then known) from 1927 to 1950. Since I began my tenure in October 1982 I will soon pass Mrs. Nye's 23 years of service.

I hardly needed to be reminded of my advancing years. I get such reminders every morning as I take stock of the increasing number of my moving parts that no longer appear to be under warranty.

When I first started there were several reminders of Mrs. Nye, including her old Smith-Corona typewriter. Indeed, one of my first memories is of the arrival of new IBM Selectric typewriters. The Selectric's ten character recognition function allowed for the easy correction of typos (as long as you caught them within those ten characters). This was cutting edge technology, though even with using only two fingers I still had frequent recourse to the White Out bottle.

Though the transition from Mrs. Nye's Smith-Corona to the IBM Selectric took over 30 years, new office technology now arrives within alarmingly short timeframes. I would like to report that I successfully managed my own records as we moved from the Selectric to computers and from Professional Write to WordPerfect to Word and from various e-mail systems to an increasing reliance on databases, but, alas, I cannot.

Of course how a record was created, from quill pen to Smith-Corona to computer, does not affect the records potential value. For example, Mrs. Nye spent a significant part of her 23 years typing index cards every time she found a name on the documents within the Manuscript Vermont State Papers (the Archives' earliest records roughly covering the years from 1777 to 1840).

The Nye Name Index is an incredibly valuable access tool, primarily for genealogists. Mrs. Nye was less concerned with creating a subject index and could be a tad idiosyncratic in creating subject headings (my favorite subject card reference, "wilderness, howling" was apparently a phrase that caught Mrs. Nye's fancy but not one that is particularly useful as a reference to government records).

One of the opportunities that new office technologies provide is the ability to present information captured in our holdings without requiring the public to physically visit the Archives. Thus a couple of years ago we began to use student interns and temporary staff to create a database from Mrs. Nye's Index. Given the number of cards we limited our effort to the pre-1800 entries; even with that limitation there were 53,000 cards to enter.

I am happy to report that the Nye database to pre-1800 cards is now available online. It can be found at: <http://vermont-archives.org/research/database/nye.asp>. A researcher can enter either a name, a description (for example, a town name) or a date and the database will retrieve information from all the cards that contain that information. Even with limited advertising the site is very popular with close to 7,000 searches being done within its first month of being online.

The advantage of having a database to the Nye Index is that use can be expanded beyond genealogists. Someone interested in town history, for example, can type the name of their town into the description field to see what pre-1800 cards we have as well as an exact cite to the document. Many of these early cards are to petitions for roads and bridges and could possibly be used to identify early (ancient) roads in a town. Or if someone was interested in what Vermonters petitioned the general assembly about in a particular year, they could type in the date in the date field.

We hope to improve the searchability of the database as time allows. Improved search capability would allow more refined searches; for example, since Nye is a name index and multiple people often signed a single document, a current search might produce multiple hits to a single document. We hope to attract support for tackling the 1800 to 1840 cards (approximately three times the size of the pre-1800 entries).

We have also put online a database to our archival record series so that people can gain a sense of what we have. As time allows we will create links in the database to any existing inventories to those record series. Our ultimate goal, however, is to use databases as the "inventory" since a growing number of studies indicate that researchers do not like, or do not use, traditional box/folder inventories.

These new databases represent quite a leap from Mrs. Nye's Smith-Corona; indeed, they represent quite a leap in how the Archives does its work and interacts with potential users. Creating the databases required much discussion over identifying user needs, over returns on investment, over appropriate technologies and a general examination of what an archives can or should be in the age of information technology.

These discussions and decisions will have to be constantly reviewed as new technologies become available or as our user expectations change. Change is now a regular part of our lives as archivists and custodians of records.

There will come a point when, like Mrs. Nye, I will relinquish the privilege of serving as state archivist. I am fairly certain that my successors will look back on my tenure and see, not an effort to apply new technologies but rather the equivalent of a Smith-Corona typewriter. I look forward to seeing what changes will come.