

Voice from the Vault

By Gregory Sanford, State Archivist

Planning for a New Archives and Research Facility

In his 1846 enumeration of "Deficiencies in our history," James Davie Butler opined that the "fruits of our historical harvests and gleanings ought also to be gathered up in a chief place of concourse, instead of in a corner [of the statehouse] where they are now secluded." I recalled Mr. Butler's remarks as I again begin work with the Department of Buildings and General Services and the General Assembly on locating, designing, funding and building a new archives and research facility. It is a sad metric of the success of my tenure that I have been having these discussions since 1985.



In recent years I have heard from a number of municipalities who have built, are building, or are planning to build new offices, including space for their records. It might be useful to share some of the issues we have considered in planning a new facility.

Selecting a site entails several concerns. First is the security of the building from natural disaster. In Montpelier this primarily means having a site that is above the flood plain. There are, however, considerations. One site we examined would have had a 50 or 60 foot cliff just 15 feet behind the facility, exposing the building to water runoff and rock slides. The built environment around the facility can also be an issue. I learned of one municipal vault which was next to a brewery that regularly vented steam. This may have contributed to some condensation problems in the vault. A key goal in our site planning is to be near the primary creators and users of archival public records.

The site should be near fire and other emergency services. While our citizens do not often give it thought, the loss of records affecting title to land would be costly and unsettle their ability to document ownership or compliance with state and local permits. Vaults should be at least four-hour fire-rated.

Sprinkler systems can help mitigate the risk of fire, though in designing a vault there should be consideration of how to evacuate the water after a fire. When we built the current vault back in the early 1980s the standard was not to have any penetration of the vault by water lines, including sprinkler systems. It is now understood that water damage is easier to repair than fire damage and sprinkler systems are allowed. In designing a new facility you have to decide what kind of sprinkler or fire suppression system to install (wet pipe, dry pipe, misting, chemical, or gas) and understand the advantages or disadvantages of each, as well as their costs. Where municipal water systems are not available make sure the water pressure meets the needs of whatever system you choose.

Since money is always a factor, the footprint of a building can be reduced through the use of high density (mobile) shelving. That requires sufficient floor load-bearing capabilities; the National Archives of Australia suggests a floor loading of 250 pounds per square foot for mobile shelving.

One of the most difficult calculations is how much space is needed for future acquisitions. Our current space, capable of holding about 1,500 cubic feet of records, is by far and away the smallest vault among state archives. In 2005 we examined five other states with populations of less than a million. Their vault capacities ranged from North Dakota's 15,000 cubic foot capacity to Delaware's 95,000 cubic feet. Since that report North Dakota has added another 25,000 cubic feet of capacity.

We also examined trends in other state archives in order to plan for a facility that met our 10-year needs. We learned that between 1986 and 2004 the volume of state archives holdings grew by 171 percent. We also

learned that a new facility spurs growth as pent up backlogs of archival records are transferred to the archives; the average annual growth was 15 percent per year for the first ten years, when growth settled at about five percent per year.

We knew Vermont, with relatively weak records management programs and a vault capacity frozen at 1,500 feet for two decades, had a significant backlog of archival records eligible for transfer if a new facility was built. We identified some 15,000 cubic feet of court records alone that could be transferred if we had the space. We continue to hear from agencies that would like to transfer their archival records to a secure facility which could provide reference services (thus alleviating reference burdens in agencies). We recently learned, for example, about 1,000 cubic feet of Act 250 permits in state offices that could be acquired. A new municipal vault may encourage boards and commissions to deposit their records with the clerk as well.

One of the great unknowns in planning space is the impact of digital records. Currently computers have accelerated the growth of paper records (see my June 2006 column <http://vermont-archives.org/publications/voice/pdf/CrowingAboutPaper.pdf>). But we are working on standards and guidelines for managing digital records as digital records. Once implemented by agencies we anticipate the volume of paper records will decline. How do we factor digital records into the design, not only in planning for space but also in providing access; should server rooms be added or arrangements made for offsite storage with online access?

I have focused on storage of the records, but we are a reference service and the new facility should be able to accommodate users (nationally, new facilities can lead to an average increase in use of 30 percent) and provide the effective retrieval of records while keeping line-of-sight control of the reference room. The reference room will need to accommodate access to a proliferation of record formats including paper, digital, audio, microfilm, etc.

And there is a less tangible, but nonetheless important consideration. We are not planning for warehouses, but for facilities that reflect the value of the records to the community. As Tom Wilsted wrote in *Planning New and Remodeled Archival Facilities*, "Archives bestow legitimacy on a state or a nation and enhance its stature in the eyes of its people. Archival buildings not only provide a place to house the archival record but are also a visible sign of its value and symbolize the importance or a country's, state's or...[municipality's] cultural heritage." James Davie Butler would agree.

NOTE: There are numerous sources for learning about planning archival facilities. Tom Wilsted's book, mentioned above, is a good source for getting an overview of planning considerations. Even though he is addressing larger archival facilities there is much a municipality could learn about and apply to their particular setting. There are also online sources. To learn more about storage environments or sprinkler systems, for example, go to the Northeast Document Conservation Center's publications online at: <http://nedcc.org/resources/leaflets.list.php>. And, of course, we would be happy to help you locate information for helping to plan a new archives.