

Voice from the Vault

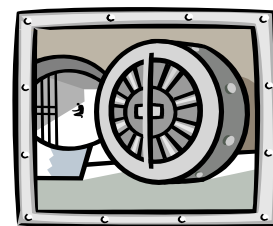
By Gregory Sanford, State Archivist

Premature Burial

"To be buried while alive is, beyond question, the most terrific of these extremes which has ever fallen to the lot of mere mortality...The boundaries which divide Life from Death are at best shadowy and vague. Who shall say where one ends, and where the other begins?"

The above quote is from Edgar Allan Poe's 1844 short essay, "Premature Burial." The universal horror of being buried prematurely was recently demonstrated by a thread on Muninet. The thread began innocently enough with the shared experience of several municipal clerks who discovered gaps between their vault doors and doorframes.

These exchanges quickly segued into questions about whether it was possible to be locked in the vault. The thought of being locked in a vault overnight or worse, over a weekend, was clearly unsettling. Happily those participating in the discussion all reported that their vaults could be opened from the inside; indeed, each had a tale of someone bolting from the vault in panic after being inadvertently shut in.



Panic turned first to relief and then to a form of gallows humor. But what about the records? They are casketed in boxes and volumes, entombed in the vault, and then, with the flip of the light switch and a click of the lock, plunged into funeral gloom. Retaining life, they are treated as dead.

Yes, individual records are disinterred for a title search, boundary survey or some other narrow purpose but by and large the wonderful body of information contained in municipal vaults remains shrouded. That may soon change.

Information and communication technologies hold the promise of renewed life for municipal information. Many municipalities are already putting selected information, such as minutes, online. Some municipalities are making appraisal and grand list information available through their web sites. State agencies, using geographic information systems, are now posting information on everything from watersheds and deer yards to the water flow of individual wells.

Not everyone is comfortable with the re-emergence of municipal information from town vaults. Privacy and security disagreements have been litigated. Concerns about the erosion of record-based fees, established in a paper world, have been raised, as have the costs of committing to information technologies. We ask, how public should public information be? The demand for online-accessible, aggregated information touches on the very role, and future, of municipal officers.

Underlying such concerns and demands is the need to re-think what we do, why and how. This applies equally to the state, as well as municipal, archives. The state archives is conducting a sustained effort to reexamine, and where appropriate, change, what we do.

It is no longer adequate to expect our public to conform their schedules to our hours and come to us. Instead we are attempting to identify what information that public wants and to present it online, available to all whenever it is needed. It is no longer practicable to create detailed inventories and put them in notebooks to await possible users. It is no longer possible, given the increasing volume of records, to do item by item level processing. Instead it is important to let as many people as possible know what records we have. It is essential to devise new processing procedures that create some level of intellectual control, rather than have detailed finding aids for a few collections.

To accommodate these new realities we have redesigned our website to make the growing volume of information more navigable (<http://vermont-archives.org/>). We are increasingly relying on databases, not finding aids, to alert people to what we have (see, for example, <http://vermont-archives.org/research/database/series.asp>). We are not only making commonly requested information, such as lists of state officers or election results, available (<http://vermont-archives.org/govhistory/elect/index.htm>), but are also synthesizing record-based information that can help support decision making by providing context (<http://vermont-archives.org/govhistory/governance/index.htm>). And, given a growing demand for archival services, we are providing online guidance and tools for managing records and information (<http://vermont-archives.org/records/>).

We will continue to add to this content as new information and tools are developed. As noted above, many municipalities are also finding ways to let information escape the confines of their vaults.

One exciting effort that we are privileged to be a partner in is the Town of Colchester's exploration of a comprehensive municipal e-government framework. Rather than simply employ technology on a department-by-department basis, Colchester is stepping back to re-examine workflow among the departments and where a common infra-structure and management plan can enhance information sharing and realize cost savings. What if, at some future date, a citizen could go online and access all the pertinent public information associated with a particular property and neighborhood? What if town officials, where appropriate, could access information across municipal boards and departments in ways that supported their decision-making? What if technology was acquired so it was compatible across boards and departments rather than having one system for listers, one for clerks and another for zoning?

There is much in this broad, e-municipal approach that promises an exciting future for the accessibility to and use of municipal records. As yet it is only a promise, and no more; it is a future that has not yet been achieved. Nor does it, in itself, resolve some of the concerns of individual municipalities outlined above. But we are rapidly reaching a level of expectation and capability that will allow municipal records and information to recross that border from death to life. Will, in the future, we continue to be able to prematurely bury vital information? Nevermore, quoth the maven.