

Voice from the Vault

By Gregory Sanford

The Repository of Governmental Choices

I was recently reading about the Repository of Germinal Choice. Some of you may recall the Repository, which existed from circa 1980 to 1999, as the "Nobel Prize Sperm Bank." The goal of the Repository's founder Robert Graham was to offset what he saw as the declining gene pool by providing the sperm of Nobel Prize winners to qualified women (qualification originally meant women who were in Mensa, the society of "bright people" as measured by IQ scores).

The Repository of Germinal Choice is fertile ground for a host of columns, from how "positive eugenics" has persisted (as opposed to "negative eugenics" such as Vermont's 1931 sterilization law) to how gender bias can color "scientific" assumptions (some recent studies suggest that the genetic material in eggs, not sperm, is a better determinant of intellectual potential). But what fascinated me, and therefore is the subject of this column, is the role of the Repository, the physical plant in which the Nobel seed was preserved.

Robert Graham's Repository had environmental and security controls to protect the "donations," as they were called. A repository, after all, is "a place where things may be put for safekeeping."

I have been thinking about repositories, in the context of the Archives, quite a bit lately. The Archives not only depends on an environmentally controlled and secure repository (vault), but also on a research area where the public can comfortably review records and on space where records can be processed to improve access.

The current Archives vault and research area, like a growing number of municipal vaults, is inadequate. By inadequate I mean it lacks sufficient space to hold the archival records of state government; it no longer provides a secure environment for archival records; and the researcher area is not only too small but also cannot accommodate the proliferating formats upon which records are captured from paper to audio and videotape to electronic records.

While these problems have existed almost from the moment we moved to Redstone in the early 1980s, they have been exacerbated by changing realities. These include the 2003 archives law (found as 3 V.S.A. §117) that gave the Archives sufficient authority to administer a modern archival management program and the physical deterioration of the Redstone vault and processing areas.

Though the general assembly first assigned the secretary of state archival duties in 1782, it was not until Act #3 of 2003 that authority was granted to actively work within state government to identify and manage archival records (prior to 2003 the Archives was a passive repository, mainly receiving records designated for deposit by law). Vermont was the last state to enact archival *management* authorities.

Our initial work under Act #3 identified 15,000 cubic feet of records eligible for immediate transfer to the Archives (a cubic foot is equivalent to a banker box). This preliminary archival appraisal only encompassed selected records at the Middlesex record center or in court houses. Even this partial appraisal highlights our space problems since the current Archives' vault can only hold 1,500 cubic feet and is full.

By way of comparison, there are six states, besides Vermont, with populations of less than a million people. Those six states have archival vault capacities ranging from North Dakota's 15,000 cubic feet to Delaware's 95,000 cubic feet.

North Dakota is one of several states currently expanding vault capacity and has begun construction on an addition that will add 35,000 cubic feet of storage.

Again, Vermont's vault capacity is only 1,500 cubic feet. Therefore it is impossible for us to meet the new archival management requirements. Indeed, the vault has long been full, forcing the Archives' staff to manage space rather than records. We must continually weed, film and scan records in order to maintain enough space to accept just those records mandated for deposit under statute.

Further pressure for a new facility stems from the deterioration of the current physical plant. During heavy rains and snow melts water routinely runs into the rooms on either side of the vault, including the processing room. While the threat of water damage from these run-offs is minimal, there is the very real risk of mold blooms that can damage records and are expensive to treat. We did experience water damage to the records in February 2004 when a second floor water pipe burst over a holiday and water came through the vault ceiling damaging over 90 boxes and their contents. In December 2005 a sewer line on the second floor cracked twice, though luckily during work hours so possible damage to the records was averted.

While permanent damage has so far been avoided, Vermont's most valuable records, from the 1777 Constitution to the records of our recent legislation on educational funding, civil unions, and other core issues remain at risk.

An archival repository is more than a vault. There is little point in identifying and preserving archival records if they are not used. Yet the current research area is inadequate, only able to accommodate effectively three or four researchers at a time. Those researchers have to share the space with three staff members who are constantly answering phones, processing records and fulfilling other duties that require space and concentration. While the Dean campaign created an unusually high level of use (up to 20 researchers at a time), there are numerous occasions when rival campaign workers or reporters from different media must share the single researcher table.

Happily, state government has begun to address these myriad problems. Secretary Markowitz has made a new archives and research facility her top priority; Governor Douglas put a line in the capital construction bill for facility design; and the two legislative Institutions committees, after appropriating money for site selection in 2005, are now addressing facility design. As always there is intense competition for limited capital construction funds as schools, hospitals and other important functions seek support, so the concern and interest for the Archives is greatly appreciated.

The Archives holds the collected deliberations and actions of Vermonters. Here is Thomas Jefferson's letter conveying a copy of the Bill of Rights for Vermont's vote; here is Lincoln's telegram to Governor Erastus Fairbanks asking for troops to protect the national capital; and here are the debates over ending town representation through reapportionment. More importantly, here are records of two centuries of our public dialogues. The laws and actions springing from those dialogues gave birth to who we are as a State and as citizens. The records provide the DNA of our current public dialogues, giving shape to what we want Vermont, and Vermonters, to be. We are the Repository of Governmental Choices.

Vermonters take justifiable pride in our state's history of citizen government and our role in shaping national policy, from opposing slavery to protecting the environment. I hope we will soon have an archives and research facility that truly reflects that pride.