

## Voice from the Vault

By Gregory Sanford, State Archivist

### A Two-faced Opinion

I hate to start the year by casting aspersions, but let's face it: January is two-faced. Of course, what can you expect from a month named after Janus the Roman god of gates and doors (ianua). Janus is represented as having two faces, looking in opposing directions. Janus was one of the original multi-taskers, celebrated at times of planting, harvest, marriage, birth and other important events marking beginnings. He was also associated with transitions between primitive times and civilization, between the countryside and the city, and between peace and war.

Given all this, it is understandable if we start off the calendar year, and the beginning of a new biennium, with one eye on the rearview mirror and the other on the road ahead. Indeed, if there has been an archival theme of late it is how inextricably bound the retrospective has become with the prospective.

As 2004 began we were still an outpost of presidential politics, our limited resources stretched by opposition, and defensive, research. While the research expired, with Governor Dean's campaign and with the New Hampshire primary, litigation over the scope and practice of executive privilege continues. Remaining to be examined are questions about the institutional and cultural purposes for preserving gubernatorial records and, by extension, which records best support those purposes. In an environment of opposition research and gotcha journalism, can we define accountability in a way that has meaning to us as citizens and government officials? When current applications of "accountability" are rife with negative connotations to public officials, how can we accentuate the positives of good recordkeeping in order to gain sustained institutional support?

We observed President's Day by recovering water-damaged documents, the result of a burst water pipe. Our response was successful with a considerable and much appreciated assist from Vermont Historical Society staff and other volunteers. Prospectively, we began updating our disaster response plan and renewing our long-frustrated efforts to achieve a new archives facility that could not only mitigate risks, but also provide the space necessary to effectively manage an archival program.

Concern for municipal record facilities contributed to a legislative appropriation of \$50,000 to implement pilot scanning projects in five municipalities. The municipalities have been selected (Berlin, Brandon, Colchester, Hartford and Richford); specifications for proposals were developed; three vendors were selected; and the three

month long pilot projects will commence in January. In coming months I will provide updates on progress. One product required by the appropriation, draft legislation for digital municipal records, will not be accomplished by the January 15<sup>th</sup> deadline since we need to evaluate the experience once the pilots are complete and because the legislature created a municipal land records commission with overlapping responsibilities.

The municipal land records commission, which received a \$30,000 appropriation, developed a plan of action with an assist from the Department of Information and Innovation and has broken into sub-groups looking at everything from uniform best practices to educational needs. The commission also participated in vendor demonstrations held as part of the pilot scanning project. Its report, including draft legislation, is due January 15, 2006.

The commission is chaired by Tanya Marshall, who is also working at the Archives on a pre-1845 court records project. That project quickly discovered that no one really knew what court records (of any date) were held where, under what conditions. Tanya has visited each of the superior and probate courts and is building a database to all court records. While retrospective pre-1845 records work remains a focus, conversations with court personnel underscored the need for an updated management plan as well as sustained training on record care. We hope to continue to work with the court administrator's office and Buildings and General services to meet these needs prospectively.

A similar need to re-examine recordkeeping practices emerged during the Archives efforts to support a \$50,000 legislative appropriation to convert 20 years worth of analog tapes of legislative committee testimony to digital form. The initial cost estimate for the project, provided by the Public Records Division, was three-quarters of a million dollars. As important as the retrospective conversion is, it is clear that the pressing need is for a prospective management plan for the on-going digital recording of testimony. Without such a plan the problems of the past will simply be replicated.

The refrain of prospective management plans emerging from retrospective projects is largely tied to past failures to sustain effective recordkeeping. In the coming months we must face numerous core questions: Why do we create records (and why in the form that we do)? What do we mean by "accountability" and how do we balance privacy concerns with constitutional mandates to keep the transactions of government transparent to citizens? What do we mean by a "right to privacy?" What are the key barriers to establishing a recordkeeping culture that routinely recognizes, and supports, the need for comprehensive and effective management? It should be an exciting year, which ever way we look at it.