

Voice from the Vault

By Gregory Sanford, State Archivist

The Flight of the Pink Flamingo

My staff, if not quite tolerant of the housekeeping I apply to my office, at least find it a useful analytical tool for probing my psyche. Recently a staff member, spying a stack of yellowing newspapers under my desk, speculated that this was a carry over from my youth when I must have hidden girlie magazines under my bed away from the prying eyes of parents (as if this hiding place was not well known to parents across the ages).

Not so, I hastily defended myself. The pile reflected articles that caught my fancy as potential material for this column. Here, for example, was a column from November 2006 decrying the demise of the pink flamingo lawn ornament two months short of its 50th anniversary. The flamingo was invented by Don Featherstone of Union Products (he went on to become company president). For aficionados, the way to tell whether you have an authentic flamingo is to look for Mr. Featherstone's signature on the tail.

The article noted how the pink flamingo's sustained success was, in part, the result of changing public perceptions of its value. Once a humble lawn ornament available in 1957 for \$2.76, it became a symbol of American kitsch and, in the hands of baby boomers, a challenge to the boundaries of high art and good taste. Jenny Price, the article's author, linked the flamingo's demise to its acceptance by the art community. In the 1990s, for example, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles sold the flamingo in its gift shop. Mr. Featherstone attributed the demise to more mundane reasons such as the rising costs of resin and electricity. Since this column is to inspire rather than depress, I should note that the copyright to the flamingo has been purchased and a New York company will be resuming production.

The rise, fall and resurrection of the pink flamingo lawn ornament could be an analogy for the Archives during my career. Okay, that may be a stretch but remember I am trying to justify that pile of yellowing newspapers. The State Archives—indeed, archives in general—were created as places to preserve and make accessible essential evidence of the commitments and actions of the institutions they serve (in my case, state government). As I have recounted before, over time that initial rationale changed and the Vermont State Archives became less associated with institutional evidence than with historical research. When I was



hired (October 1982) the Archives, then known as State Papers, primarily focused on annotating and publishing 18th century records.

Just as we applied changing cultural values to the flamingo, changing popular perception relegated archives to being a preserve for historians, including the unfortunate linking of archives to "dark and dusty."

In my early years I applied the skills I had learned in academic manuscript repositories, arranging and describing records and creating detailed finding aids to help researchers locate information. Much of this work reinforced the idea that the archives was a historical, not institutional, function. In the second phase of my career we began to promote the Archives as an institutional resource for providing context to current public dialogues, the "continuing issues" section of our website being a prime example (<http://vermont-archives.org/govhistory/governance/index.htm>).

Currently the Archives is engaged in providing guidance for managing records and information so that essential evidence, born in a digital world, can be kept accessible. These efforts are reflected in part by the "managing records" section of our website (<http://vermont-archives.org/records/>).

The newest effort is a voluntary collaboration between the Archives in the Secretary of State's Office and the Department of Information and Innovation and the Department of Buildings and General Services (Public Records) within the Agency of Administration. The goal of the collaboration is to provide guidance on how to incorporate good recordkeeping practices into paper and digital systems.

The collaboration launched a newsletter in September, the first issue explaining our origins and goals and noting an agreement on policy for managing records in all public agencies (<http://vermont-archives.org/records/standards/pdf/RecordsManagementPolicy2007.pdf>).

The newsletter can be found at: <http://vermont-archives.org/records/iSTART/newsletter/pdf/iSTARTNewsletter200709.pdf>

The October and November issues will look at recommended file formats for records of continuing value. In December we will begin to look at policies for managing electronic communications, such as e-mail.

As a result of these programs, cultural understandings of the Archives, like those of the flamingo, are changing again.