

Voice from the Vault

By Gregory Sanford, State Archivist

My Fellow Vermonters: Gubernatorial Inaugural and Farewell Addresses

Governor Samuel Crafts was disturbed by the nature of political campaigns. In 1828 he warned, "That the privilege of electing our rulers...should be the cause of such unprecedented agitation of the public mind, must...be a source of the deepest regret....If the highest officers in our government...are to be vilified—their characters traduced, their motives questioned, and their acts misrepresented; the time cannot be distant when the wise, the prudent...will retire from the contest; and our offices will be filled with the ambitious, the unprincipled, and the designing."

Not so fast, replied Governor Charles Williams in 1851. Yes, we must be aware of appeals to passion but, "The merits of public men and measures must be...discussed freely....Every attempt to repress this liberty of speech and of the press, and to silence an inquiry into the propriety or wisdom of public men and measures, whether by law or...by appeals to the passions, the fears, the avarice or ambition of individuals, must be futile and vain, and can obtain no permanent favor of the thinking and intelligent citizens of the United States."

The above quotes were drawn from the inaugural addresses of Crafts and Williams. In October the Archives hopes to have the full texts of Vermont's gubernatorial inaugural and farewell addresses available online (please check our website at: <http://vermont-archives.org/govhistory/gov/govinaug/index.htm>).



Inaugurals are mirrors that reflect not just the concerns of individual governors but also of the Vermonters who elected them. While inaugurals set out an administration's legislative agenda, farewell addresses allow moments of reflection by the departing governor. Governor Deane Davis, for example, devoted a significant portion of his 1973 farewell to the questions, "What is the Vermont quality of life? Can we describe it? Can we agree on it? Is it a physical thing? Open spaces, friendly hills, wooded terrain, gurgling brooks, solitude of woods, lakes and streams? Or is it an attitude of mind?"

The addresses, in their aggregate, are invaluable for tracing our changing perspectives on the continuing issues of government and governance. This value is enhanced since virtually all of the addresses discuss the same subjects: education, taxation (particularly the property tax), public health, economic development, the structures of government, etc.

The above excerpts illustrate the point. Certainly as the 2006 campaign season moves toward November's election we find ourselves again trying to define "negative campaigning" versus legitimate examinations of the merits of individuals and programs. Discussions of the "Vermont quality of life" remain embedded in our public dialogues.

Sometimes the addresses startle us from our assumptions about "modern" issues. In his 1921 farewell, Governor Percival Clement celebrated "the splendid success" of work camps and the use of paroles as alternatives to incarceration (though Clement suggested a "person sentenced for a felony should not be paroled until he can speak, read, write and understand English of everyday use"). In his 1955 inaugural Governor Joseph Johnson proclaimed that, "I am convinced that the time has come for the State to accept a measure of responsibility in the matter of providing hospital care for the medically indigent. I believe that it is generally accepted that every citizen, rich or poor, should have access to the latest and best developments in surgical care and medical treatment if needed."

Governor William Slade expressed concern about the impact of globalization on labor in his 1845 inaugural: "The question of protection to labor, in its otherwise ruinous competition with the starved and cheapened

labor of other countries, continues to be one of undiminished interest. Indeed, the interest has increased, as efforts to give ascendancy to free trade principles have become more active..."

While the addresses are by far and away somber recitations of programs and goals, some governors interjected moments of humor. In his 1941 farewell address Governor George Aiken praised the State's efforts to promote winter recreation as a revenue source: "Vermont is one of the few states that can sell four feet of snow and twenty below zero at a profit."

And sprinkled among the promises of new programs and services were cautions about keeping an agenda of affordability. In his 1963 inaugural Governor Philip Hoff cautioned, "We are a small state. We are limited in numbers of people and yet we are trying to provide essentially the same services that are carried on in states twice and many, many times our size, and it is terribly expensive and we have limited resources...The time has come to sit down and take a good look at ourselves and try to analyze who we are, what we are, what we have in the way of possible revenues we can raise and still make Vermont an attractive place to live..."

Most governors noted not only the costs of sustaining programs, but the increase in public expectations once new programs were launched. Thirty years before Governor Hoff's remarks, during the Great Depression, Governor Stanley Wilson used his inaugural to say: "We speak of essentials of government. The actual essentials of state government are few. Not long ago the state spent nothing for highways, public health, care of the insane, care of tubercular persons, public welfare, conservation, agriculture, forestry, industries, and supervision of public service corporations and but little for education and debt service...Probably we have no state endeavors that do not have merit. Some are absolutely essential to the continuance of our functioning as a state. Others are essential according to modern standards. Some are desirable only if we can afford them."

And thus the addresses carry our conversations with ourselves across the years. Sometimes a particular issue rises to prominence across inaugurals, such as the extended discussion over the death penalty that can be found in inaugurals from the late 1830s and early 1840s. Sometimes you can see the competing visions of Anti-Masons, Whigs, Republicans and Democrats. Sometimes you can trace world events through the multiple inaugurals of a single governor. For example, the stark contrast in tone between Governor Tom Salmon's 1973 and 1975 inaugurals reflects the impact of the oil embargo on his vision of government. The inaugurals even try to make sense of these swings in perceptions. As Governor Madeleine Kunin observed in her 1985 inaugural, "In Vermont, we have grown up with the knowledge that nature indeed may be harsh and unpredictable, but also with the assurance that each season brings its own renewal and each year follows a certain rhythm. We know it is not only possible to blend austerity and optimism, but it is part of the human condition, and it is essential to our survival."

A personal note: In 1976, to prepare for his own maiden address, Governor-elect Richard Snelling read all the inaugurals of his predecessors. That study convinced Governor Snelling of the value of the inaugurals and he sent Paul Gillies from his Planning Office to talk with Dr. Sam Hand of UVM's history department about publishing the addresses. Dr. Hand, in turn, had his assistant work with Paul on the feasibility on such a publication. The projected publication costs shelved the idea, but several years later, when the then-position of Editor of State Papers became vacant, Paul, who had become Jim Douglas's deputy secretary of state, remembered Sam's assistant. He encouraged the assistant to apply for the position which is why, in October, 1983, I was appointed to what is now the job of state archivist. The Archives' web-publication of the inaugurals and farewells is the long delayed realization of Governor Snelling's desire to put the addresses within the reach of Vermonters.

