

Voice from the Vault

By Gregory Sanford, State Archivist

Government: One Big Nuclear Family?

We have long celebrated our government's system of checks and balances, achieved in part by apportioning authority among the executive, legislative, and judicial branches. Chapter II, Section 5 of the Vermont Constitution requires that the three branches "shall be separate and distinct, so that neither exercise the powers properly belonging to the others."

In reality our system is more a balance, than separation, of powers. Each branch jealously guards its own prerogatives; the checks and balances are part of a continuously unfolding effort to map the border lands between each branch.

While constitutionally separated, not that long ago the executive and legislative branches went about their business cheek to jowl within the statehouse. The six executive officers were in the statehouse alongside 246 representatives and 30 senators. The Supreme Court was next door at 111 State Street.

These thoughts emerged while reading records relating to the construction of a statehouse fallout shelter in 1961. It was, of course, the depths of the Cold War and Vermonters, who have occasionally been portrayed as self-absorbed, assumed Montpelier would be high on the Soviet Union's target list. We therefore prepared for the unthinkable and built a fallout shelter so the operations of government could continue in the event of a nuclear attack.

The shelter was in the basement beneath what was the senate municipal and corporate institutions committee room (now the senate appropriations room). Stairs in the committee room led down to the shelter, which was protected by granite walls and a brick ceiling. An air supply was hooked up in the "state house shop," which was a utility space under the old speaker's office immediately behind the statehouse. A water line was run into the shelter with the understanding that Montpelier's water system was buried deep enough to prevent contamination by radiation.



There were, from my perspective, some interesting quirks in the plans. The planners apparently assumed a nuclear attack would occur in the winter since news stories reported that the ice on Berlin Pond would protect Montpelier's water source. A chemical toilet for the shelter was left above ground, in the committee room; it was assumed that sandbags in the windows would protect against radiation.

It was not these quirks, however, that got me thinking about the separation/balance of power. You see the fallout shelter could hold 30 people. To quickly recap, the 1961 statehouse held six statewide officers (and staff), 246 representatives, and 30 senators. If my limited math skills serve me correctly, there seems to be a significant gulf between the number of statehouse residents and the capacity of the shelter.

I mentioned this to some senators who failed to see a problem. Thirty senators, space for 30; what exactly was the problem? If, after the nuclear attack only the senate survived, well we had had a unicameral legislature before (1778-1836). I conducted no such poll among house members.

The record, however, suggests the shelter would also hold at least some executive officers. For example, the shelter included extensions to Governor F. Ray Keyser's phone lines.

This led to speculation about how collegial it would have been in the shelter. While it may appear quaint to us today, there once was a time when the relationship between governors and legislators was

strained, each accusing the other of inaction. This was particularly true in 1961 when the Republican legislature and Republican governor found themselves at such loggerheads that the session lasted 209 days, not adjourning until August 1st.

After finding the list of post-attack food supplies, I began to think determining who got sheltered probably entailed a lot of self-selection, in the sense of, "No, no; you go." Denizens of the shelter would survive post-attack Vermont by feasting on six cases of chopped meat; two cases each of rolled oats and applesauce; and a case each of powdered milk, cheese, peanut butter, and yellow cornmeal.

If the list of food seems a tad sparse that is because it was assumed it would be safe to resume the business of government outside the shelter within two weeks of the nuclear attack. This is pure speculation but after two weeks of eating canned chopped meat the risks of radiation poisoning might have paled in comparison to staying in the shelter.

I recount this past disaster response planning for two reasons. First, I would like to commend the City of Montpelier and the State for the extensive preparations they have made in the event of a spring flood. We all hope that those preparations will not be needed. Still, planning is a lot better than hoping. Certainly their planning seems more thorough than our initial plans for responding to nuclear attack.

The other reason is to highlight our ongoing work to make the archives holdings more accessible. We found the 1961 fallout shelter story in the records of Sergeant at Arms Wallace Whitcomb (by the bye, the sergeant at arms was one of those assigned a place in the shelter). We did so as we added information to our online archival record series database. This is a continuous process and I encourage you to regularly check the database to see what records have been added and are available for research. The database is at: <http://vermont-archives.org/research/database/series.asp>.

The root of archives is ark; that is, a place you put things (think of Noah's Ark, Ark of the Covenant, or even of Raiders of the Lost Ark). For the thousands of years humans have put their most valuable records in archives the assumption has always been that people would have to visit a place to do their research. New technologies, in this case the web, are changing that assumption; we can now make information broadly available beyond the walls of the archives. In this case we are making information *about* our records available online.

As resources become available we hope to begin making the records themselves accessible online. Indeed, we have already begun to do so. The 1777, 1786 and 1793 constitutions are now available, as are the full texts of gubernatorial inaugural and farewell addresses, post-1870 proposals to amend the constitution, and post-1836 veto messages. Again, putting text online is resource-intensive but we think the fallout will be positive.