

Voice from the Vault

By Gregory Sanford, State Archivist

The Black Flies of My Mind.

I confess that I am not the most linear of thinkers. A note from Ginny that the column is due today releases thoughts like a black fly hatch, darting, swarming, and biting for attention. For example, this is being written two days after the inauguration of President Barack Obama, which released from some recess of my mind thoughts about the 1896 inauguration of William McKinley. Vermont, in recognition of giving McKinley a higher percentage of its vote than any other state, was the only state accorded a special reviewing stand at the inauguration. A more wobbly mental black fly leads me to recall that Vermont made a special cross of butter for McKinley. I will leave it to your mental black flies to recall William Jennings Bryans' Cross of Gold speech, to which the Vermont cross alluded.

These thoughts disappeared into the swarm as I began to think about the reaction to President Obama's inaugural speech. I read the speech before I watched it on the evening news. I was moved by his words and thought of the echoes from the inaugural addresses of Lincoln, FDR, and Kennedy that could be seen in the President's words (a black fly reminding me that Governor Richard Snelling read all Vermont inaugurals as he prepared his own address in 1977 quickly disappeared but you can see the result on our inaugurals page at: <http://vermont-archives.org/govhistory/gov/govinaug/index.htm>).



Ondis, the woman who (mostly) tolerates me watched the inaugural first and, when I arrived home, expressed some disappointment in the address. I understood her reaction once I watched the inaugural because the context of the speech, the crowd and the emotions it released, overwhelmed the words.

An archival black fly wandered by, leading to thoughts about the importance of context to the documents we preserve. Our media/image-driven world allowed us to share the emotional context in ways that could never be captured simply by reading the text. How could we ever recapture the immediate contexts of other documents from our pre-connected past? In some cases contemporary news accounts provide at least some context. For example, I can feel the discomfort that Edna Beard, the first woman elected to the Vermont legislature, must have felt after being allowed to pick her house seat first and then being forced to sit, alone, for over an hour as no male legislator chose to be her seatmate (let's tip our hat to Horatio Luce of Pomfret who finally stepped forward "amid a storm of laughter and applause"). What, I wondered, was the reaction/context to the seating of Alexander Twilight of Brownington, who in 1836 became the first African-American elected to a state legislature?

Thoughts then swarmed about doing a column for Black History Month (February). Vermont has a proud history of treating African-Americans as citizens from the 1777 Constitution's prohibition of adulthood servitude, to early "kidnapping" laws to prevent African-Americans in Vermont from being sold into slavery, to our defiance of the Dred Scott decision by noting that in Vermont African-Americans were citizens and thus not subject to the ruling. Balanced against this is the evidence that racism did indeed exist here from the harassment of Lucy Terry Prince in the 18th Century to Governor Phil Hoff's oft-stated belief that his political career was temporarily de-railed by his support of the Vermont-New York project that brought African-American children to Vermont.

Archival thoughts, however, returned, making a leap from the relationship between documents and their historical context to some responses to last month's column on the history of microfilming Vermont records and what we believe about records. Some agencies expressed initial concern that we would no longer be filming their records. Those concerns were mitigated, for the most part, when we explained the curious evolution of microfilming. Microfilm is the best medium for the long-term preservation of records that cannot be maintained in their original formats. However, at some point in our state's records program past it became common practice to simply send records to "Public Records" to be microfilmed. Consequently many records have been microfilmed that do not have long-term preservation needs. Over time agencies came to believe that microfilm was the only appropriate medium for those records.

Other agencies, which had been using our small scanning operation to have their records imaged and stored on CDs, also came to believe that CDs were the only appropriate medium for their records. Yet as we have discussed in other columns, CDs are not an archival medium and have limited value even for short-term records (see, for example, the January 2006 column on "End of Year Ponderings on iPods and Progress" at: <http://vermont-archives.org/publications/voice/index.htm>). We will be working with these agencies through our Targeted Assistance Program (TAP) to appraise the records, determine justifiable retention periods, and identify the best medium for keeping the records. In tight budgetary times this will lead to long term cost-savings.

Several municipalities also raised concerns about our discontinuing of microfilm services. These municipalities had used the service to create security copies of land records in case anything happened to the originals stored in their municipal offices. This is an appropriate risk management decision that is encouraged by the Vermont State Archives and Records Administration. We are actively working on alternative strategies and services that meet the new standards for reformatting land records recently issued by the Property Records Industry Association (PRIA). We will keep you posted as we develop plans. In the meantime one of our record analysts, Katie Sherman, is available to answer any questions you may have related to municipal records at Catherine.sherman@sec.state.vt.us.

My mental black flies continue to swarm, taking my thoughts here and there, but Ginny is tapping her foot waiting for this column. I better finish and not bug her any more.