

Voice from the Vault

By Gregory Sanford, State Archivist

Election Questions

Election seasons always bring a spate of questions from the news media and others looking for context, seeking to confirm superlatives ("this is the first..."), or, I occasionally suspect, seeking something fresh after everything has been said. While I am writing this in October so more questions may be lurking out there, I thought I would share some of the questions we received.

We were asked whether a Vermonter had ever run for president. Howard Dean sought the Democratic presidential nomination in 2004 but, of course, fell short (though his use of the internet for mobilizing supporters and fund raising presaged the current candidates' use of digital communications). Calvin Coolidge did serve, but was no longer a Vermont resident when he ran. We believe the honor falls to John Wolcott Phelps of Guilford who ran as the American Party's candidate in 1880. He received 1,045 votes in the national election.

Here I must pause and apologize to long-suffering readers since the 1880 election produced one of my favorite campaign quotes, one that has appeared in previous columns. A New York Democratic newspaper contemplated Vermonters influencing the Empire State's 1880 vote, warning that, "From the slums of the Green Mountains, the unclean alleys and blind lanes of Woodstock, Bethel, and Pompanoosuc, are to come the brawlers who shall terrify the peaceful citizens of Cow Bay and Mackerelville [NY] and vote the Republican ticket early and often."

That New Yorkers feared Vermonters influencing the Republican, not American Party, vote leads to another question we received. The most interesting form of the question came from a reporter assigned a story comparing the Republican allegiance of Utah to the Democratic allegiance of Vermont in presidential elections. Unknown to the reporter, the assignment was serendipitous in that there is an earlier Utah/Vermont link: in 1912 only Vermont and Utah voted for the Republican presidential candidate William Howard Taft. Vermont was the most Republican state in the nation for over a century and did not vote for a Democratic presidential candidate until the Lyndon Johnson/Barry Goldwater race of 1964. Utah occasionally faltered in its Republican fealty and in 1936 only Vermont and Maine voted for Alf Landon, the GOP presidential candidate. To show how things have changed, some reporters of more recent vintage called to inquire whether Vermont had ever voted Republican.



Alexander Twilight

An unanticipated question was whether Vermont had ever elected a woman of color to the legislature. The answer is yes, Louvenia Bright of South Burlington served in the Vermont House for three terms between 1889 and 1894. Many readers are aware that Alexander Twilight of Brownington became, in 1835, the first African-American to be popularly elected to a state legislature.

Since we hold campaign finance records we routinely receive calls about trends in campaign spending. Media costs are one of the drivers of campaign spending and the first reported use of radio was by Frank Partridge, who ran in a special election for the U.S. Senate in 1932. The first reported use of television advertising was by Robert Stafford in his 1958 race for lieutenant governor. Paul Gillies, who once read through all our campaign finance

reports, discovered that the majority of statewide candidates prior to 1945 funded their own campaigns (at the time only primary expenses had to be reported; victory in the Republican primary was tantamount to election. As a further side, there were no contested Democratic primaries for statewide office from 1916 until 1960). The first candidate to report not spending any personal money was Robert Stafford in his 1964 primary for the Republican nomination to the U.S. House; all of the \$587 he spent was from contributions.

Finally, as is often the case when there are at least three candidates for governor, we received questions about what would happen if none of the candidates received the constitutionally-required majority. The election is then decided by the joint assembly, which occasions further inquiries about any cases when someone other than the plurality candidate was chosen. That last occurred with the lieutenant governor's race in 1976. Several legislators, who would have voted for the plurality winner, knew that the candidate was about to face criminal charges related to his insurance business. They consequently supported the second place finisher providing enough votes to put him over the top in the joint assembly vote.

There have been a few scattered other examples of the joint assembly choosing someone other than the plurality winner. The most spectacular case was the 1837 state treasurer's race when the third place finisher, who had received only 3.7 percent of the vote, was elected by the joint assembly. Of course history often provides mixed messages. In 1837 the third place finisher refused to serve. Since the joint assembly had fulfilled its constitutional obligation by electing a treasurer, they could not hold a second vote. Ultimately the governor appointed a treasurer to fill the vacancy.

Those interested in learning more about our electoral past can visit our website to learn the results of state officer races (<http://vermont-archives.org/govhistory/elect/index.htm>); see state officer campaign finance totals (http://www.sec.state.vt.us/seek/fin_seek.htm); follow the original arguments over a direct primary (<http://vermont-archives.org/govhistory/governance/Primary/direct.htm>); or learn about the majority requirement for election (<http://vermont-archives.org/govhistory/governance/Majority/majority.htm>).