

Voice from the Vault

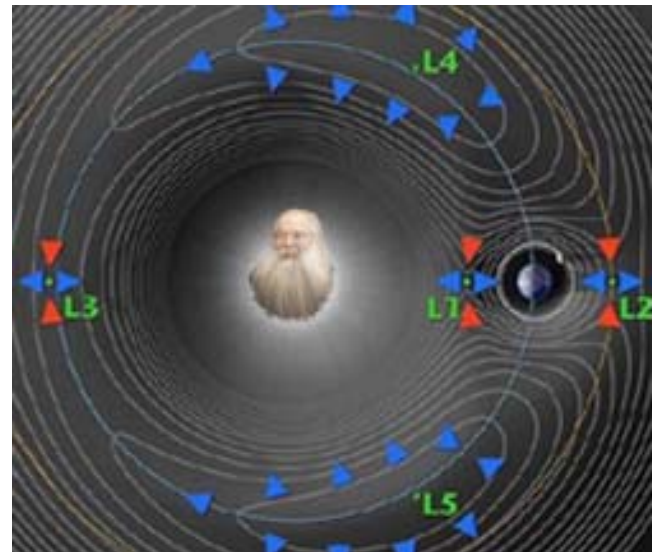
By Gregory Sanford, State Archivist

Home on the LaGrange

While I hope this column has some gravitas, it won't have much gravity. Let me explain. Astronomers have identified places where there truly is no gravity. Known as Lagrangian points, they are voids in space where the gravitational pull of surrounding heavenly bodies effectively cancel each other out. The earth has five Lagrangian points the most stable of which (L4 and L5) circle the sun, respectively, 60 degrees in front and behind the earth's orbit.

Given their complete absence of gravity scientists view the points as celestial flypaper; objects caught in them are suspended in time and space. NASA will be sending two probes into L4 and L5 in the hopes that these suspended objects will provide information on how the solar system was formed.

No, this not another attempt to explain how so much "stuff" accumulated in my old Redstone office over the course of a quarter century (I am, by the bye, now successfully ensconced in Middlesex). Rather Lagrangian points stir thoughts about the archival function and our role in government. Too often archives are perceived as Lagrangian points where objects are suspended in place and time, holding objects that help explain our origins; objects that remain unobserved until someone with sufficient resources probes their depths.



Observers of the Vermont State Archives and Records Administration realize that we have taken a different course, launching probes *from* the vault in order to share our information with as broad an audience as possible. We have had some success and have received some national and even international recognition for our efforts. And yet it still feels as if our efforts are inadequate.

This feeling of inadequacy was once again inspired by public dialogues emerging from an ongoing legislative session. Take, for example, the bundle of issues surrounding whether to relicense the Vermont Yankee nuclear power plant. We have discussed Vermont Yankee (VY) since it was first proposed and built. On February 25, 1983 Richard Saudek, the public service commissioner, wrote Governor Richard Snelling about how to create a VY decommissioning fund. He wrote that several decommissioning methods had been considered, with one "well-considered proposal" calling "for disassembling the reactor and burying the radioactive portion at an approved burial site. Vermont Yankee projects that this will cost \$72.7 million in 1981 dollars. With seven percent inflation, this cost rises to \$423 million by the year 2007 when it is projected Vermont Yankee will cease operations." He then went on to discuss a couple of different strategies for creating "a state decommissioning fund."

Three years later, on June 13, 1986, Public Service Commissioner Gerald Tarrant, responding to Burlington Mayor Bernie Sanders' suggestion for shutting down VY, wrote Governor Madeleine Kunin of his reservations. In particular he was not sure Sanders was right in thinking that 30 percent of the

power currently provided by VY could be off-set though conservation. He thought such conservation efforts would take "closer to 15 than 3 years to reach those levels" and that it would "require consumer participation rates far in excess of those experienced in the last 15 years by most conservation programs..."

I recite these examples as part of my ongoing efforts to demonstrate that the State's archival records can provide context to "current" issues, thus informing our public dialogues; this column is but one example of those efforts. I hasten to add that there is a paucity of archival records that document our evolving discussion of VY. What I found was primarily in gubernatorial records and largely dealt with responses to "incidents" at the power plant. Providing two, somewhat arbitrarily chosen, records on an important issue such as Vermont Yankee obviously does not create much, if any context.

There are innumerable other current issues that have antecedents caught in VSARA's Lagrangian point, which leads to my current feelings of inadequacy. How can we better identify and present the records-based information we hold? How do we move beyond a general sense that we have a right to know toward an understanding of what we need or want to know? How do we address the gaps in our holdings that limit our ability to provide a fuller context?

VSARA was created, in part, to answer the last question. By implementing a modern, comprehensive, and standards-based records management program we hope that government can better document its core functions and activities. The other questions are more difficult to answer. To simply say digitize everything and put it online is inadequate. It does not address the costs of such a massive digitization program or the even more expensive indexing required for locating information germane to any particular issue possible ("indexing" covers a host of realities in a digital and connected world).

VSARA does not have the resources, nor is it necessarily part of its mission, to conduct extensive research, in a timely manner, to interject records/context into every important issue. Vermont's universities and colleges also lack the resources to conduct such research (though I continue to encourage them to explore possible partnerships with us). Advocates can and do research at VSARA but their searches, understandably, are for records that support a particular perspective. Reporters are on deadline and don't have the time or resources to research a fuller context than what is needed to tell today's stories. Indeed, few among us have the time, training, or inclination to spend hours doing research in archives.

I take pride in what the staff has accomplished within our limited resources. The Society of American Archivists recognized their work with an award for our "continuing issues" initiative (<http://vermont-archives.org/govhistory/governance/index.htm>). I was humbled to recently read a talk by a Canadian archivist to New Zealand's archival organization extolling our efforts to make archival records part of the public dialogue.

As pleasing as such recognition is we still need to explore ways to expand beyond our Lagrangian point. I welcome suggestions from you, the long-suffering reader of this column. Perhaps I misspoke at the beginning; this is an issue of some gravity.