

Voice from the Vault

By Gregory Sanford

Some Archival Dribble

So, it turns out that history does repeat itself. This thought is inspired by the announcement that WCAX will re-broadcast the entire UVM-Syracuse basketball game. One suspects, given the midnight starting time, that the station anticipates Vermonters recording the broadcast for future enjoyment for however long their recording medium and interest persist.

And yet, the original NCAA tournament game can never really be repeated. What elevated the game to instant cultural reference point was that wonderful mix of hope (for a UVM victory), expectation (UVM had never beaten a ranked team) and uncertainty (how would hope and expectation play out on the court). That mix only comes from not knowing the outcome; without uncertainty, the whole viewing experience is altered.

These thoughts, in turn, were inspired by the legislature's move to designate January as Vermont Independence Month in recognition of Vermont's dual declarations of independence from both Great Britain and New York on January 15, 1777. It is worth pausing here to celebrate John and Linda Whitney, who took it upon themselves to research Vermont's declaration of independence and to lobby for designating January 15th as Vermont Independence Day. It is their hope that having an independence day will encourage the study of Vermont's history. After much research the Whitney's located the original 1777 declaration at the National Archives. Through their generosity the State Archives and the Vermont Historical Society received copies of the document .

The Whitney's efforts struck a responsive chord within the legislature, which has demonstrated a persisting interest in reviving the teaching of civics; indeed, there are currently three bills and one resolution supporting the teaching of civics: H. 24, H. 425, S. 119, and J.R.H. 25. By expanding the Whitney's original effort to embrace a month long observance, teachers and other Vermonters have an opportunity to promote both history and civics.

Which leads me back to the re-broadcast of the UVM – Syracuse basketball game. Knowing the outcome, can we ever re-capture the hopes, expectations, and uncertainties of Vermont's founders as they pushed the boundaries of political understanding by declaring independence? Can we ever adequately convey what it must have been like to risk life, family and property in pursuit of a civic vision?

Or is any of that important? Isn't enough to simply know that these events took place and accomplished these goals? Isn't it enough, as a civics or history lesson, to interpret the surviving documents to get at core issues of government and governance? Vermont Independence Month, for example, would readily lend itself to understanding the founders' concept of the social contract. The declaration of independence enumerates grievances that, in their entirety, gave weight to the argument that the governing authorities had abrogated their obligations under the social contract, leaving Vermont in a state of nature. Reviewing those grievances provides one tool for looking at the nature of social contracts. Being in a state of nature freed the founders to draft a new social contract (the 1777 Constitution), the provisions of which give further insights into their understandings of the mix of rights, privileges and obligations that constitute an effective social contract. Such an examination of the social contract would meet the legislature and the Whitney's educational goals.

Still, viewing the outcomes of the Vermont experience as inevitable, our view narrows and our understanding is

diminished. There was nothing inevitable about how the relations of church and state or the role of women as citizens, for example, were either codified in our original social contract or continue to be re-defined over time.

It is an interesting archival challenge. We have an increasingly vast array of historical records from which to capture events. Thanks to audio and video technologies we can now hear and see events unfold (or at least hear and see what the recorder chooses for us to hear and see). So what do we attempt to capture to provide the essence of an event? And yet even with these tools, that moment of uncertainty, of unknowing, remains elusive.

And so we record and "re-live" the game knowing that at the final buzzer, victory, and Michigan State, inevitably await.