

Voice from the Vault

By Gregory Sanford, State Archivist

Myths and Documents.

One of the enduring lines from George Orwell's *1984* is: "He who controls the present, controls the past. He who controls the past, controls the future."

I often think of this line when I encounter folks attempting to achieve a future outcome by manipulating Vermont's past. When done often enough we come to accept such manipulations as historic realities and incorporate them into our own rhetoric.



At the Archives, for example, we regularly receive requests for copies of the "escape clause" in the Vermont Constitution. This purported clause allows Vermont to withdraw from the United States. A variation, which we call the Brigadoon theory, is that this escape clause opens up every hundred years, presumably starting in 1791. After all, would Vermonters, after 14 years of independence (1777-1791), simply embrace statehood without leaving a way out? The requests come from across the political spectrum: those who do not like a national administration; oppose national foreign or economic policies; loath the federal income tax; or fear gun control or other potential restraints on individual freedom.

The truth, drawn from documents, is less satisfying; there is no, nor has there ever been, such an escape clause.

These thoughts emerged while reading news stories on current efforts to withdraw Vermont from the union. I have before me a news release by two Vermont supporters of secession. Part of their argument is based on historical facts of dubious reputation. Let me illustrate by juxtaposing italicized quotes from the press release with quotes from historical documents.

"Vermont did not join the Union to become part of an empire." At the January 1791 convention on whether Vermont should ratify the U.S. Constitution and join the union Nathaniel Chipman argued, "But received into the bosom of the union, we at once become brethren and fellow-citizens with more than three millions of people; instead of being confined to the narrow limits of Vermont, we become members of an extensive empire..." Chipman goes on to enumerate the advantages of joining this empire, the United States. His arguments carried the day and the convention voted for ratification 105 to 4.

"Vermont more or less sat out the War of 1812, and its governor ordered troops fighting the British to come home." Yes, Governor Martin Chittenden did order Vermont troops home from Plattsburgh, but they refused to return, explaining "that when we are ordered into the service of the United States, it becomes our duty, when required, to march to the defence of any section of the Union. We are not of that class who believe that our duties as citizens or soldiers are circumscribed within the narrow limits of the Town or State in which we reside, but that we are under a paramount obligation to our common country, to the great confederation of States."

"Vermont fought the Civil War primarily to end slavery." And yet in 1861 when Governor Erastus Fairbanks convened the special war session of the Vermont legislature he warned not about slavery but that, "The Federal capital is menaced by an imposing and well armed military force, and the Government itself, and the national archives, are in imminent peril." Jeffrey Marshall, the head of Special Collections at UVM, has read

thousands of Civil War letters from hundreds of Vermonters. He reports that only a "handful" of the Vermont soldiers cited slavery as the reason they were fighting; they instead directed their ire at the secessionists, who they characterized as treasonous.

"After the Great Flood of 1927, the worst natural disaster in the state's history, President Calvin Coolidge (a Vermonter) offered help. Vermont's governor replied, 'Vermont will take care of its own'." Whatever Governor Weeks might have actually said, the reality is that Vermont's congressional delegation successfully lobbied for \$2.6 million in federal flood relief. In addition Governor Weeks accepted a check for \$600,000 from the Red Cross to help with flood recovery.

And so on. My point is neither to argue with our current secessionists nor denigrate the beliefs of the authors of the press release. Heck, most of us have, at one time or other, probably cited some of the historical "facts" the authors used. I am simply arguing the importance of having accessible public records to evaluate the rhetoric of public figures.

Locating, understanding and interpreting public records will never be as much fun as mouthing our cherished myths. Public records are, however, evidence of the actions we actually took as a State. They too can be pulled out of context or selectively (mis)used to prove a belief. And yet, I would argue, the stories they hold are as dramatic, and instructive, as those found in Vermont mythology.

That is why I think it so important that we pay more attention to teaching Vermont history and civics in our schools. It is why using Vermont's historical records is so important to learning to become engaged citizens. To learn how to identify and interpret those records creates an intellectual skill that is essential to navigating through our "information age." If we do not learn how to effectively evaluate information in all its myriad forms we will never be able to perform our responsibilities as citizens. To paraphrase Mr. Orwell, "Whoever understands the past, understands the present; whoever understands the present can plan for the future."