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Fifteen and counting : Vermont research 1974-1989 (and beyond)

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*** A Special Research Stimulus ***

FIFTEEN AND COUNTING:

VERMONT RESEARCH 1974-1989
(AND BEYOND)

by

Paul S. Gillies

As a special research stimulus we are pleased to send you the remarks of Paul S. Gillies, Deputy Secretary of State, which were presented at the Center for Research on Vermont's annual meeting in May, 1989. While some of you may disagree with the specific research needs identified in these remarks, the members of the Board of Editors hope that many of our readers will be galvanized into action, and will pursue research projects on Vermont topics suitable for publication in our Occasional Papers series or elsewhere.

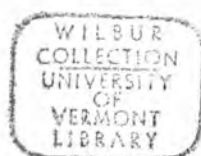
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Fifteen and Counting: Vermont Research 1974-1989 (and beyond)

The Center for Research on Vermont

May 4, 1989

What is research? This apparently easy question must have been answered to the Center's satisfaction frequently over the years, but to one who has been assigned to review and report on 15 years of research on Vermont the question comes naturally. Surely, everything printed or published with the word "Vermont" on it cannot qualify as "research." The dictionary says research is the "careful, systematic and patient study and investigation" of a subject. We need to distinguish pure reprinting of documents then. We ought to cull out the picture books and the pulp, but we need to be careful not to insist on the use of academic sources. Margaret MacArthur's music is as important as the next Vermont history. We need to avoid a documentary bias.

"Vermont" also raises questions about definition. What makes something a fit subject or study? We may all agree that anything about Ethan Allen, Calvin Coolidge, George Aiken, or Robert Frost ought to qualify, but why? What was it about George or John Dewey that makes them Vermonters? Clearly we must deal with the parochialism of the Vermont ethic, the stuff that "Real Vermonters" are made of. Sometimes I think the Vermont ethic is a kind of impact fee that we levy against all Vermonters, holding them to set standards of behavior and performance.

Vermonters, it has been said many times, have had a greater effect on the nation and the history of the world than our size would suggest. But why? Is there something about being born here that endows the young with a special vision, industry, imagination, or creativity? Is it long winters, a lack of opportunity, a rural self-image?

More significantly for this review, what is it that makes Vermont research? We study people who come to Vermont and stay, people who visit for a short time, people who write to people who live here; we study people who were born here, and moved away at an early age. We study and collect anything that is associated with the state.

There are, however, Vermont icons which cannot be ignored. We know we're "in" Vermont when we visit a farm, get caught in a mud hole on a class 3 highway, when we go deer hunting. The classic Vermont symbols include the covered bridge, the sugar house, the village square, the country store; the fiddler, the blacksmith; the church supper, election day in a small town; a good sledding hill, or a rope swing over the river; dry crackers and hard cider. But these are at risk. We cherish these symbols so much that we suffocate them, and turn them into sentimentalized ghouls. The undead return to haunt us, with quaintness and an old timey character. We end up with villages that look like Hollywood's idea of what Vermont should look like; with books that celebrate our "uniqueness" based on cracker barrel humor and broken down cars, plaid jackets and corn

cob pipes.

I want it to be cleaner. I want the "real" Vermont to be free of cant. I don't want anybody to do anything, just because it seems Vermontry to do it, to attract tourists, or humor them. It's just another indignity. Research is our great hope in this war against sentimentality and triviality.

There are probably just as many answers to the question of what is Vermont research as there are reasons to research Vermont. Jaime Davie Butler, in his "The Deficiencies in Our History," the first formal address given before the new Vermont Historical Society in 1846, attempted to shame Vermonters into a greater commitment to research with these words -- "No debt can be more binding on you than to see to it that justice is done to [our ancestors'] memory." Some do it to advance their careers; some do it for money; most do it for love.

The review period is from 1974 until 1989, a 15 year period that is chosen because it represents the period of the Center's existence. It takes us from just before the bicentennial of independence to just before the bicentennial of statehood. From Watergate to the Exxon Valdez; from Salmon's second term to Kunin's third, with four terms of Snelling in between. It embraces the retirement years and death of George Aiken. It has been the golden age of town histories, and the birthing room of studies as various as those of stone caverns, original Vermonters, and the Vermont Constitution. It is a completely arbitrary exercise to review the last 15 years in a vacuum, but the egocentricity of the present (and recent past) tempts us to treat the period as unique and critically vital to our ideas of Vermont. And even with that proviso, it has been.

Think about the last 15 years for a minute, exclusive of Vermont research. During that period, Vermont changed, perhaps more than in any former 15 year period except for the Republic era in Vermont. If that period is the settling of Vermont, the last 15 can be said to represent the resettling of Vermont. The hill farms have become subdivisions; the pastures where sheep once grazed have become condo sites. The thruway has been finished, the tool industry has faded and Vermont has turned to high tech industries; agriculture has changed (more small farms; fewer dairy farms; more "Vermont" products; more development of new markets and new products). In that time we have elected our first Democratic U.S. Senator, our first four term (two year term) Governor, and our first woman Governor. We've had the energy crisis (and energy conservation, Canadian hydro, the disposal of low level waste, the revival of local hydro industry, the state's first trash burning facility); the end of the ten year time lock on our Constitution, several police scandals (including the Paul Lawrence affair, routerbits, Island Pond); the bicentennial; Legionaire's disease, the first and second Pyramid mall proposals; state deficits and surpluses; the end of our military involvement in Viet Nam and the long coming home of the veterans; the hole in the Ozone; the state and tri-state lotteries; Act 200 and the

planning revolution; statewide movements on nuclear freeze, abortion, the death penalty, drunk driving); interstate banking; the Bob Newhart show; the restoration of the Equinox House, Hildene, the State House. Murders. The defeat of the ERA. The discovery of the Eagle.

Vermont is closer today than it ever has been to the world. Our isolation and remoteness are gone. The telephone, the television, the fax machine, the satellite antenna, and the computer have changed everything except the hills. We are still small and rural. We can still see the mountains, and we've done a lot to keep the state clean and good looking.

So we need an identity, an appreciation of what it means to be a Vermonter, a sense of place -- both for those who have always lived here, who are sorting out what's Vermont from what's universal and modern and trendy; as for those from other places, who become Vermonters.

Some people start to become Vermonters long before they move. Some spend years trying to find the ultimate Vermont experience. What makes someone want to join and become a plus member of the 251 Club?

We are cherished. People tell us we're special. And we never tire of trying to define ourselves and the Vermont experience. Maybe it comes from new Vermonters trying to find roots; maybe it's a simple reprieve from the hardship of life in a rootless society; it's part promotion, part heart. It's almost charismatic -- the spontaneous vermontification of the individual.

For whatever reason, during the last 15 years, the size of the Vermont section of most bookstores has grown, filled with attractive looking books on railroads, recipes, jokes, maps, town histories, coffee table picture books, memoirs, farm memories (a popular subgenre includes books by outsiders who moved to hill farms and write about the joys and hardships of life in Vermont), birds, wildflowers, the Green Mountain Boys.

During the period we saw the publication of Swift's *Vermont Place Names*; Graffagnino's *The Shaping of Vermont*; Ralph Nading Hill's *Lake Champlain and Vermont Album*; Morrissey's *Vermont: A Bicentennial History*; Hamilton Davis's *Mocking Justice*; Noel Perrin's *First, Second and Third Person Rurals*; Bryan's *Yankee Politics in Rural Vermont*; Judd's *New Deal in Vermont*; Johnson's *The Nature of Vermont*; *In a State of Nature* (Hand, Muller); Deane Davis's books of stories and memories; a wonderment of local histories; Bassett's *Bibliography*; Haviland, Power's *Original Vermonters*; Curtis's *George Perkins Marsh*; a spate of State Papers; Muller's "From Ferment to Fatigue? 1870-1900; A New Look at the Neglected Winter of Vermont"; *Real Vermonters*; Danziger's comics and Teed stories; Mary Azarian's woodcuts; Ludlum's *Vermont Weather Book*; Meeks' *Human Geography and Vermont's Land and Resources*; Frank Smallwood's *Free and Independent*; Dodge's *Tales of*

Vermont; the books of Marguerite Hurrey Wolf and Cora Cheney; Duffy's *Vermont, An Illustrated History*; Crisman's *The Eagle*; the oral history movement; the good work of Northern Cartographic; an invigorating and growing interest in Vermont history and precedent from the press; and Vermont History even turned color. There was the 1982 Conference on Vermont's History, and the 1983 Conference on Vermont's Heritage for Teachers.

We have seen a marvelous diversity of approaches to Vermont research. We have a growing library of business histories, church histories, college histories; looks into the origin of the skiing industry, the CCC, prohibition, the lives of Vermont writers. We have also enjoyed the attention of an impressive list of scholars residing outside Vermont, whose perspective has shown us just how unique and rich our early history is, in a national context, including Peter Onuf, William Gilmore, and Michael Bellisle.

If you want to study the Vermont Constitution, you can go to the Constitution House in Windsor and lay your hands (if the caretaker doesn't catch you) on the table where the 1777 Constitution was signed (and then go upstairs to the room where the deed was done). The only thing missing is the thunderstorm (and the original document). Or walk through the State House, or the Ethan Allen Homestead, the county courthouses or the churches; the timelessness of the chin at Mansfield, or Plymouth village, or Royalton center, or the floating bridge at Brookfield.

No wonder we cherish the sentiment of the place. No wonder it sometimes colors our view of the past. We go to considerable pains to rebut the negative (the winter of the late 19th century; the role of the Allens in the Haldimand affair; that the first Constitution was actually ratified). The beauty of it sometimes gets in the way, or our values. We want to get at the "real" Vermont, almost desperately, but sometimes we don't want what we find.

We also have a strong institutional support for research on Vermont. There is the Center, for sure, and the local historical societies and the VHS, the Council on the Humanities, the Center for Rural Studies, the libraries and museums; the Council on the Arts; the publishing houses; the special interest societies, including those for railroad history; Vermont public television and radio.

People are reaching out, locating anything there is about Vermont. Researchers are looking at Vermont sources in places as diverse as the Public Archives of Canada; the National Archives; private and family archives; British sources; diaries; newspapers. We have people combing the bottom of Lake Champlain for relics, and digging at Mount Independence, at Crown Point, at building and highway sites all over Vermont. And we have the Stevens Papers.

In 1846, Butler said, "It is no great discredit to our historians that they are in many

respects deficient, since they were forced to make brick without straw, the collections needful for the adequate execution of their task, which are still imperfect, not having been fairly begun, when most of our chroniclers wrote." But we have done better since that time; while there are still imperfections in our collections, we have good reason to be happy about the materials we have collected.

We are also developing a greater consciousness of sources, and the temporality of temporary things, like paper. We are necessarily worried about the destruction of public and private archives, and the poor tools we have to preserve them, especially in the era of the computer disk, the microfilm, and magnetic tape. We are far less likely than earlier times to throw out old papers because we need room for storage of more modern things. Because there is a developed market for antiques, for Vermont books and ephemera, there is less likelihood of destruction.

We need not dwell on what we have lost, to ragpickers, bad judgment and ignorance. In researching Daniel Chipman, one of Vermont's great historians and lawyers and the first reporter of decisions of the Vermont Supreme Court, I found almost nothing. There were a few papers from his later years, at the Sheldon Museum, but most of his life was missing. The experience of the dead end is all too common for Vermont researchers.

Let's get on to a look at the period 1974-1989, and this most personal view of the major events, trends, themes, and accomplishments. In no particular order, consider these milestones:

1. The publication of T.D. Bassett's *Bibilography*, which has brought us together in a common starting point from which to research what has been written about Vermont. Too much time and effort is wasted in playing "Who knows more about Vermont sources." Too often knowing that there is a book or article about something has been allowed to pass as a substitute for research. Bassett is the great leveller then, in giving us all the same opportunity from the start. It warrants continual updating, but with Gilman's work as a bookend, it has and will have a measured impact on the future of Vermont research.

While I'm in the neighborhood, let me add other reference works to Bassett's, including Julie Cox Bressor's *Guide to Papers of Vermont's Governors*; Gregory Sanford's new indices to legislation, municipal and special, updating the work of Albert Cross; the coming Stevens Papers guide; the guide to Vermont Repositories; the updating of Vermont Imprints; among others.

2. Vermont town histories: In 1846, Butler said, "What is of more interest than a town history -- to each man that of his own town? No where in Europe did I seek without finding one. How long shall we desire such histories in vain? What true patriot

loves not his own village."

At the end of the 19th century, there was a strong movement toward writing town history, but the real momentum came in the 1970's. The Bicentennial and the bicentennial celebrations by individual towns led to money and energy to write or update the town histories of many Vermont municipalities, and we have yet to appreciate fully the quality and contribution of these projects. Yes, they are a mixture of the professional and the amateurish, but they contain, even in the roughest of them, a unique and refreshing perspective on this state and its people. They entertain and they document, using sources that have been traditionally overlooked, including town records, personal diaries, and the memories of seasoned Vermonters, the story of individual towns and regions. They have great value to the towns and their residents, of course, but they have a broader audience, and they will continue to stimulate more research on topics, both the homely and the worldly, as they become known.

3. Original Vermonters: William Haviland and Marjory Power's work is critical, and others have followed their lead in giving us a clearer idea of the peoples who lived here before the place became a home for the white population. Through this work, we have broadened the scope of our chronology, and been drawn into a greater appreciation for the archeology of Vermont, and the sensitivity of burial grounds and early residential sites. Chief Homer St. Francis has also had a remarkable role to play in the process; as colorful as he has been politically, he has succeeded in making every Vermonter aware of the heritage of the first Vermonters.

In this category, let's also add the controversy over Vermont's stone caverns, the development of a Vermont perspective on archeoastronomy, and the 1977 Castleton Conference that brought the issue to a head.

4. The Vermont Constitution: We can thank Justices Hill and Hayes for lighting the fuse. The Constitution has, of course, been around since 1777, but our appreciation for it and our recognition of the need for greater study of it is new. The Clio Conference, sponsored by the VHS, changed the way we think about our jurisprudence. The movement has spawned activity among lawyers and scholars, including a number of publications, briefs, seminars, and new interest in the editing and publication of the journals and addresses of the Council of Censors. [Yes, it's coming; the world has been too much with us, but we're fighting back. This year.]

In this category, let's add the important work of Sam Hand and Jeff Potash, in their study and microfilming of the early judicial records of Vermont; Sam's work on the lay judiciary; and the growing recognition that more must be done to save (or salvage) the records that remain in county courthouses.

5. Vermont music: Let's leave the written word for a minute and recognize

the contributions of Margaret MacArthur, and her talented family and friends, in enriching us with her revivals of songs and pieces from Vermont's past; and of Betty Bandel and those of the UVM Choral Union and other groups in performing and recording the works of Vermont composers, including Jeremiah Ingalls; among others. Whether we hear and play work songs, hymns, or dance music, the Vermont experience in music is among the most vital of subjects for research. I think there is more history, and more meaning, sometimes, in a fiddle tune, than a dozen volumes of pretty pictures or funny Vermonter stories.

I will use this opportunity to recognize all of the arts, and in particular dance, and crafts, which have unique Vermont origins, and which have been the passion and conviction of many Vermonters over the last 15 years, who have seen in the recreation and preservation of these works of art a way of making us aware of our heritage, and our legacy. I envy those who have made the commitment to preserving these skills and talents, and I think we are all richer for their work.

As a postscript, let me suggest that the production of *The Contrast* at UVM in the 1970's, and in various other locations, and George Bryan's work with the history of theatre in Vermont, have also had an impact on our appreciation of things Vermont, and brought the Vermont character into greater definition.

6. The Literature of Vermont: Professors Biddle and Eschholz started the engine in 1973, but the movement has continued to bring new life into our appreciation of Vermont writers. This year Mari Tomasi's *Like Lesser Gods* was republished. During the period Vermont has seen the novels and short stories of Howard Frank Mosher, of *Walter Hard's Vermont People*, David Budbill's plays and poetry, just recently the appointment of our second poet laureate (Galway Kinnell), Wolfgang Mieder's short works, the folklore movement. Not all research is found on the nonfiction shelves.

7. Frank Bryan needs his own category. I don't mean to embarrass him or any other person who would like his own category in this taxonomy of Vermont research, but Frank has been busy during this period. In public he downplays his *Yankee Politics in Rural Vermont*, but it remains a major contribution to our political science. His Goat book (with Bill Mares) and the Quiz book (with Melissa Bryan) made us laugh, and promoted the message of Vermont at the same time. *Out!* (with Mares) worked too. And now, with John McClaughry, the *Vermont Papers* promises to stimulate discussion, reaction and lively thought. What makes him go?

Or, for that matter, Kevin Graffagnino's marvelous engine of research and publication. Or T.D. Bassett's. Without them, the decade and a half would have been less exciting, and poorer by comparison.

8. The end of WASP-centric history: Butler said, "I have sometimes thought our writers particularly oblivious of female heroism in our history."

Now we have the development of women's history, family history, a growing literature of Franco-American culture, and that of other nationalities, in Vermont.

9. Oral history: Charlie Morrissey, Gregory Sanford, and others showed us how, and now we have projects by schools and historical societies and others, pursuing the spoken word and the not yet forgotten memory.

But enough of what's come before: let's look ahead to what the future holds.

In 1823, William Slade, Secretary of State, published *Slade's State Papers*, the first time Vermont had published its early records. In his introduction, he explains,

"The general diffusion of intelligence constitutes the life of a free government. Upon every department of such a government the people exert an unremitting influence, and stamp on all its measures the impress of their own character. Called upon to **act**, they should become accustomed to **think**; and though they cannot, ordinarily, possess extended and comprehensive views of other systems of government, they should, at least, understand their own. Every government, therefore, should possess, and should place within the reach of the people, a complete history of its own legislation. Without the possession of such a history, and a practical regard for the lessons it indicates, legislation will be, at best, but a succession of experiments, and, as a necessary consequence, every operation of government will be characterised with instability and want of wisdom."

We have met Butler's challenge, almost a century and a half later. We have a burgeoning women's history. We have made tremendous strides in the collection of archives. We have a wealth of town histories. We have the early legislative records principally intact. But we have yet to fulfill Slade's challenge from 1823. We have, in our research, somehow missed out on the study of our government. And it's showing.

We study politics -- we never hear enough of the eclipse of the Republican Party; of the Aiken-Gibson wing; of socialist politics; and the mountain rule; but somehow the subject of government itself receives scant attention. It's still winter, as far as research on government is concerned. Let me suggest some titles:

1. The Administrative History of Vermont State Government. Andrew Nuquist's *Vermont State Government* is still vital, even though it is more than a generation out of date. We need a comprehensive history of state government. This would amount to a multi-volume work, describing the origins and changes state government has followed from the earliest days to the present. The growth of the bureaucracy and the involvement of government in daily life would be themes. State government's relations with Washington, and with local government, could be fully documented, and we could improve the quality of the debate over the "loss" of local control.

2. Local Government in Vermont: The wealth of town histories is a phenomenal library to access details about the machinery and the issues that drive local government. Maybe we need two volumes here: first, a history, showing the development of the town (and village, city, fire district, etc.); and later, a comprehensive guide to local government, that can be updated annually so that local officials and citizens can see how the system works at a glance.

3. The Legislative History of Vermont: We need a good perspective on the Legislature, historically, biographically, and politically. We need a history that will teach us how the Legislature has dealt with the same issues over time, whether that is the size of state government, alcohol, transportation issues, local relations, and the like.

4. The Judicial History of Vermont: Here too I can imagine two volumes. One is a traditional institutional history of the courts, tracing the development of our modern court system, remarking on the people who have contributed to its history, and tracing its evolution into a discrete and powerful branch of government. The other would be a history of Vermont and its people, using the Supreme Court reporter as the exclusive resource. Everything of importance makes it there eventually.

5. Biographies: We ought to have a comprehensive biographical history of Vermont's Governors from Chittenden to Kunin. We should encourage the writing of biographies of the great jurists, from Nathaniel Chipman to Isaac Redfield, and the Powers, father and son; and Luke Poland, and Sherman Moulton, to name only a few. We ought to insist that Richard Snelling write his autobiography; and that Richard Mallery do the same, and Madeleine Kunin, among others.

6. Transportation systems: The Wilgus book is a rough beginning, but the subject is far from exhausted. This study would embrace the transformation of indian trails into early highways, the military roads, the toll companies, the ill fated canal era, the coming of the railroads and their regulation, the highway building era (by the state), the thruway, air transportation, and on and on.

7. Planning: Some of Vermont had planning in the 19th century. Throughout our history we have tried to tame the environment, or to keep ourselves from taming it too much. With the advent of Act 200, we need a perspective that will encompass the early efforts at town planning, the development of the land, the failures and the successes.

8. An industrial history of Vermont: Arthur Peach announced this volume in the 1930's, but it never came. This would be a business history of the state, which would trace the development of the Connecticut River Valley tool industry, Vermont inventors and designers, the improvements in farming and businesses related to farming, and even the high tech future.

9. The Governor and Council: E.P. Walton gave us the raw material, but to date nobody's taken the subject beyond the documentation. We need an analysis of the role the Council played, and how the creation of the Senate in 1836 shifted the balance of power. A similar study should be made of the Council of Censors.

10. A study of our greatest sinners and their sins: This would be a listing of all the bad experiences related to public life, including the defalcations of the 19th century, the abuse of power, and the misuse of the public trust -- if only to remind ourselves that Vermont is not just a picture. We work too hard at hiding our weaknesses.

I also wish for what all of us have dreamed about -- a good and complete history of Vermont for our times. I want to revive the spirit of Francis Parkman to tell our story, but if someone will come along with the style and wit to do it as well, I'm sure we will all be grateful.

There's nothing to prevent us from any of this research, other than energy and funding, with one exception. This is my call to arms: here, in 1989, we have a greater consciousness and effort toward Vermont research than at any time in our history. We treasure and preserve our best architecture. We are sensitive about keeping records, and anxious to ensure that nothing is neglected or wasted. It's a golden age of Vermont research.

But there is a problem. While we have been concentrating on the old, we are losing the current. I mean legislative records and the papers of state officials. And it's happening without publicity or the kind of public shaming that sometimes avoids such problems.

Legislative records have always been a low priority in Montpelier. They lack a central repository, or any systematic organization. Committee records are kept in the Archives, drafts, evidence and transcripts in Public Records, and the index at the Legislative Council. A devoted researcher could wear out a good pair of shoes walking back and forth between the different repositories, and still not find out what needs to be known about legislation.

But now we have a greater problem: during the last few years, because of budget priorities, the Legislative Council is no longer transcribing legislative hearings from magnetic tape, something they have done religiously since 1970. We never had a complete record, of course, because some committees don't ever turn on the machine; in most, the wiggling finger, when you have something important to say, will get it turned off. But what we had at least was valuable; it was essential legislative history. I know the courts

have doubts about the value of legislative "intent" but legislative history can make the difference in a law suit or in simply appreciating how the law came to be what it is. The tapes won't last forever, and soon the backlog will be so large that there won't be time to recover.

We are losing the records of governors, attorneys general, and others just as fast, but here the problem is enforcement. Nobody wants to challenge a public official on his or her way out the door. But the records are leaving, all but the most mundane, regularly, as each official leaves office or goes home after the session is over. Other states have had marginal success in keeping public records from the shredder or the moving van, and a strong law won't solve everything. What we really need is to make the public nature of public records so obvious, so much a part of our public policy, that to destroy or walk off with a critical record would be political suicide. And we probably need one or two well placed, highly visible prosecutions.

So, let the next 15 year period begin now.

