

# IN THEIR WORDS

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*This occasional section offers readers selections from manuscripts—usually letters and diaries—in public and private collections, with commentary, elucidation, and editing by the owner, curator, or researcher of the documents.*

## George Peck and Mary Greene Nye: Correspondence on the State House Fire of 1857

By JACK ZEILENGA

George Augustus Peck was born in Montpelier, Vermont, on July 10, 1842. For the better part of a century his life was woven into the fabric of the capital city. His formal education took place in the Montpelier school system and as a teenager he served as a page in the Sergeant at Arms's office. After close to two years away serving as a private in Company I of the 13th Vermont Infantry in the Civil War, he returned home and ran a hardware business, Barrows and Peck, for forty-five years. Aside from being a prominent businessman in town, Peck had the distinction of playing a role in fighting the three

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fires that arguably did more to physically reshape the city of Montpelier than any other events of the nineteenth century. In 1857, the then sixteen-year-old Peck worked tirelessly with residents to fight the fire that destroyed the second State House and save what furniture and artifacts they could, including the portrait of George Washington that still hangs today in the House chamber. Years later, fires tore through the heart of Montpelier on two occasions in 1875—March 11 and 12 and May 1 and 2. In both instances Peck, now a member of the fire department, joined with local residents, businesspeople, and firefighters to try to keep the blaze in check, to no avail. George Peck died in Montpelier on January 22, 1940, having seen great changes come to the country and to the state capital during his lifetime.<sup>1</sup>

In 1931, Act 298 commissioned research into the history of the Vermont State House, to be published as a booklet with a special appropriation from the Department of Conservation and Development. Mary Greene Nye, who worked in the Secretary of State's office and had a good deal of experience researching in the archives, was asked to undertake the task. *Vermont's State House* was published in 1936, providing a detailed history of Vermont's capitol buildings.<sup>2</sup> During the research process she exchanged correspondence with George Peck, who was happy to share his memories. In a letter to Peck on August 6, 1935, Nye noted, "I am very anxious to have an account of your PERSONAL RECOLLECTION of the burning of the state house. It is the little details which will make your narrative most worth while, and insofar as you can recall them I am anxious to have you record them. Your story will be kept in the archives of the state and will prove extremely valuable from a historical standpoint as the years go on."<sup>3</sup> Some of Peck's letters to Nye are still filed away, as promised, in the state archives. In these letters Peck discusses a host of topics, from bridges, to schools, to where people lived. Of particular interest to Vermont's history, and specifically to Nye's work, were the letters sharing his experience during the 1857 State House fire. At the time, Peck was in his early nineties, but his writings nonetheless display a vivid memory of those events. Throughout his descriptive letters, Peck keeps a sharp wit and sense of humor. In one of his undated letters he wonders out loud if anyone reading will ever give much thought to his stories and memories or instead dismiss them as "the result of some crazy mans dream."<sup>4</sup>

What follows are the transcriptions of two of the letters George Peck sent to Mary Greene Nye, detailing events of the fire that destroyed the second State House. They offer a first-hand detailed account, which helps to illuminate an important event, as well as some of Peck's own



*Second Vermont State House. Daguerreotype, no date [ca. 1855?].*

opinions about the cause of the fire. Numerals in brackets indicate the page numbers of the manuscript.

[1] 166 Elm Street  
Montpelier, Vermont  
Aug. 7, 1935

My Dear Mrs. Nye

Your letter just recd. and you may be sure that I will be as pleased to do what you ask as you will be to have me do so. Now a little about myself and how it happened to be that the State House had to be warmed in that cold Jan. month. It was the custom in those days to every ten years to have what was called a constitutional convention its duty was to raise and recommend changes in old laws and recommend new ones.<sup>5</sup> The snow that winter was very deep and as a previous thaw followed by a freeze had made it passable when path was cut to the house the snow in large chunks which were easily carried by the crowd to the house chamber when the fire first showed. The house of course was very cold and for several days it had been in process of being warmed. The then Sergeant at Arms, who lived in East Montpelier [2] had employed Anson Davis to do this work. The house was heated by two large wood burning



*Second Vermont State House after the fire. Ambrotype, January 1857.*

furnaces burning 4 ft. wood and a lot of it. The alarm of fire was given about 7 p.m. and every one in town seemed to know it at once. I at that time was in the street, that among the stores, and was not long in making my [way] to the burning building. The fire first showed itself at one of the registers in the representatives hall and the hall was soon filled with the chunks of frozen snow and it was thought we would soon have it put out. Every man in town was hard at work clearing the building of everything moveable. The Washington portrait was taken in its frame by four men who held it high above their heads to keep from injury and was carried to one of the State St. houses. Much of the library was saved the same way. The two Bennington canon were slitley burned. As for our fire department, for this fire we practically had none, no water nearer than the river that was much too far away to be used.

[3] While men were so busy around the burning register and believing they had the fire under control, the fire was at work under the raised floor and up the partishions and as sudden as a blast from a canon, it burst out around the base of the dome the floors were falling in and men in the library had to jump for their lives out of the windows. Fortunately no one was killed or seriously injured. The sight of the burning building was both grand and terrible, the inside of the house was all finished with fine wood. The strong west wind

that then prevailed blew a mass of live coals far over all buildings east of the fire, and the morning after roofs of all houses east of the state house was covered with charcoal, which showed that the snow on the roofs alone saved all buildings east of the fire. Now about what started the fire, I have already told of how it was heated. Cold air ducts were built to take cold from outside and to be carried in and around the hot furnaces and discharged heated to the rooms above.

[4] The aforesaid Anson Davis was employed by the Sergeant at Arms to see to the heating and other work necessary to have the house ready for the convention, and having an economical turn of mind thought best to close up the cold air ducts, he seemed to think there was no need of any circulation of air caused by the hot furnace and the state would thereby save a few cords of wood. Well he did save the wood, but it cost Montpelier 50,000.00 to do it. The sergeant- at-arms at that time lived in East Montpelier and knew nothing of the fire until the next morning. The shock to him so great that it no doubt shortened his life. I feel sure of this for I knew him very well and as he has a granddaughter now living in Montpelier I have refrained from giving his name fearing a wrong impression might be [5] given and the Sergeant at Arms might be blamed for the loss of the state house.<sup>6</sup>

George A. Peck

166 Elm Street  
Montpelier, Vermont  
Aug. 17, [19]35

Dear Mrs. Nye

I have just finished reading the record I have written in answer to your request, and you may be sure that I am not very proud of it. Please remember I am 93 years old and have many indications that the old man with his sythe is close after me[.] I think I have answered all of your questions so you will understand them. If I have failed in any part let me know and I will try to correct them. The reference to 50,000 dollars which Montpelier had to pay was one of the conditions imposed on the town to save it from going to Burlington. A bond for the 50,000 had to furnish personally by responsible men to make agreement secure. I think I wrote for someone a story of the extra session in Apr. following in which I had a position in the sergeant of arms office and heard much of the speaking of the several representatives who wanted the future capitol located in their town.<sup>7</sup>

Geo. A. Peck

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Erik S. Hinckley and Tom Ledoux, *They Went to War: A Biographical Register of the Green Mountain State in the Civil War* (Victoria, B.C., Canada: Trafford Publishing, 2010), 174; Michael R. Doyle, *Events of This Day: Facts of Interest to Montpelier Folks Briefly Told* (Lincoln, Neb.: iUniverse, 2005), 263, 328.

<sup>2</sup> Mary Greene Nye, *Vermont's State House* (Montpelier, Vt.: Department of Conservation and Development, 1936).

<sup>3</sup> Mary Greene Nye to George A. Peck, August 6, 1935. Mary Greene Nye Records (A-061). Box A-061-00001, folder 18: State House— State House Building. Vermont State Archives and Records Administration, Middlesex, Vt.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> From 1777 until 1870, amendments to the state constitution could be proposed every seven years by a thirteen-member body, elected statewide, known as the Council of Censors. Each member held his post for one year from the day of his election. The council had the power to call a convention if they deemed it necessary to amend any article of the constitution, as set forth in Chapter II, section XLIV. Amendment 25, sections 1 and 2, changed this process in 1870 so that it could only occur every ten years. In 1974, Amendment 45 made further changes to the process, eliminating the ten-year period and reducing it to a four-year period, as it stands today. Further changes were made with Amendment 52 in 1994. Today, a two-thirds senate vote with a concurrence of a majority of members of the house of representatives is needed to propose a change to the constitution. If adopted, the proposed amendment is referred to the next biennial session of the General Assembly. If a majority is in favor, the amendment is then submitted to the voters of the state of Vermont. A thorough overview of the Council of Censors and documentation of their work from all known journals and addresses of the time can be found in Paul S. Gillies and D. Gregory Sanford, eds., *Records of the Council of Censors of the State of Vermont* (Essex, Vt.: Offset House, 1991).

<sup>6</sup> The sergeant at arms at the time was Stephen Foster Stevens of East Montpelier, who served from 1855 until his death in April 1857, just three months after the fire. He was the son of Clark Stevens who, along with Col. Jacob Davis, was one of the early settlers of Montpelier/East Montpelier. After Stevens's passing, Erastus S. Camp served as sergeant at arms from 1857 to 1862, through the reconstruction period of the State House.

<sup>7</sup> After the destruction of the State House, there was much debate about whether the state capital should remain in Montpelier. Burlington made a strong bid to become the capital before Montpelier ultimately contributed the needed funding to retain its standing and rebuilt the state house. See T. D. Seymour Bassett, *The Growing Edge; Vermont Villages, 1840-1880* (Montpelier, VT.: Vermont Historical Society, 2000), 128; Rachel Cree Sherman, "Never Did Two Contending Armies," *Vermont History News* 39 (July-August, 1988): 71-73; Michael Sherman, Gene Sessions, and P. Jeffrey Potash, *Freedom and Unity: A History of Vermont* (Barre, Vt.: Vermont Historical Society, 2004), 279.