

John H. Carnahan (1929-)
Professional, Political, and Non-Profit Papers, 1954-2002
Doc 833, MSA 959

Introduction

This collection contains the papers of attorney John H. Carnahan (1929-) of Brattleboro, Vermont, as they relate to his professional, political, and non-profit activities. Carnahan was a Vermont District Judge (1967-1973), Democratic nominee for Lt. Governor (1984), and President of the Vermont Historical Society (1993-1995), among other activities. The collection was donated to the Vermont Historical Society and processed by Carnahan's son, Paul Carnahan, in 2022. The collection is stored in one records center box and one archival flip-top box; it consumes 1.5 linear feet of shelf space.

Biographical Note

John Hillis Carnahan was born January 22, 1929, in Manhattan, Kansas, the son of Paul Adelbert Carnahan (1896-1969) and Gladys Kelly Paul Carnahan (1896-1993). He was the middle of three sons. Paul Carnahan lost his electrical appliance business in the depression and the family moved to the Kelly family farm, known as Kelly Grove Farm, in Lansing, Kansas, near Leavenworth. John was educated at the one-room schoolhouse, known as Nine Mile School, at the bottom of the farm's driveway. He attended one year of high school in Leavenworth before his father took a job with the Federal Bureau of Prisons and was assigned to Texarkana, Texas. Carnahan graduated from Texarkana High School in 1946. He then went to Harvard University, entering with the Class of 1950, which was filled with returning GIs and the largest class at Harvard. Carnahan joined the Navy ROTC to pay for college, interrupting his college and law school education to fulfill his NROTC commitment. He graduated from Harvard College in 1951 and from Harvard Law School in 1957 (Class of 1954).

Carnahan enjoyed living in New England and used his Harvard connections to secure a job with the law firm Fitts & Olson in Brattleboro, Vermont, the year he graduated from law school. Less than two years later he became the Administrative Assistant to U.S. Congressman William H. Meyer (1914-1983), the first Democrat ever elected to the U.S. Congress from Vermont. Meyer served one term and was defeated in 1960. Carnahan returned to Vermont and served as the Assistant United States Attorney for the District of Vermont from 1961-1965. In 1965 he returned to Brattleboro as an associate with the law firm of Kristensen, Cummings and Price. Two years later he was appointed District Judge for Windham County by Governor Philip H. Hoff (1924-2018). In 1973 he rejoined Fitts & Olson as a partner; the firm was renamed Fitts, Olson, Carnahan, Anderson & Bump and later was known as Fitts, Olson, Carnahan & Giddings. He worked at that firm until 1995, when he became a sole practitioner. He retired as a lawyer in 2004.

Carnahan became involved in social service agencies as soon as he moved to Brattleboro. He served on the boards of Better Housing, Inc., Community House, Inc., Family and Child Guidance Services, Brattleboro Friends of Retarded Citizens, Vermont Association for Mental Health, Frances Hicks Memorial School, New England Kurn Hattin Homes, Green Mountain

Council of Boy Scouts, Windham County Humane Society, the Crosby Foundation of Brattleboro, Windham County Chapter of the American Red Cross, and Connecticut River Valley Flood Control Commission. Carnahan was appointed to Vermont Governor's Commission on the Status of Women when it was formed in 1965. He was a trustee of the Brattleboro Retreat from 1970-1994, including serving as its chairperson, 1988-1993.

Carnahan was especially active in the Democratic Party and historical organizations. He was Democratic National Committeeman for Vermont, 1979-1988; Democratic State Chairperson, 1977; and the party's unsuccessful candidate for Lieutenant Governor in 1984. He was involved in many campaigns over the years and was a host to many Democratic candidates who visited Brattleboro. He was a trustee of the Brattleboro Museum and Art Center in the 1980s. He began serving as a trustee of the Vermont Historical Society in 1982 and served as its president (1993-1995). He was a founding member of both the Brattleboro Historical Society (1982) and the Estey Organ Museum in Brattleboro (2002). He served on the Advisory Council for the Vermont Division for Historic Preservation and was a trustee of the Preservation Trust of Vermont. He was very active in the Friends of the Vermont State House, including serving as its chairperson (1986-1988). Carnahan was interested in the architecture and history of U.S. state capitols and donated his extensive collection of state capitol postcards to the Curator of State Buildings in 2021.

Carnahan married Mary Elizabeth Faigle (1931-) in August 1955. They eventually had three children: Paul Abram (1959-), Sarah Kelly (1960-2014), and Susan Butler (1965-). In 2021 he and Mary moved from their home of 56 years on Tyler Street in Brattleboro to an independent living facility in Randolph Center, Vermont. In 2022 the Vermont legislature recognized the couple's contributions to the community life of Brattleboro with H.C.R. 84.

Scope and Content

The collection is divided into three series covering three aspects of Carnahan's public life: professional, political, and public service.

The first series contains documents from Carnahan's professional life as a lawyer in Vermont. The first folder contains correspondence at the end of his law school career. It contains a 1954 letter from Kansas State professor and historian Kenneth S Davis to whom Carnahan had evidently written expressing his ambivalence toward returning to Kansas. It also includes an August 1956 letter Carnahan wrote to Dr. Hunt of Texarkana, Texas, expressing appreciation for the minister's influence on Carnahan when he was growing up. Carnahan writes, "It is in the area of [racial] toleration that I believe that I received much from you ... I attribute my lack of dogmatic attitudes very much to your teaching." In the same month, Paul A. Freund, constitutional law professor from Harvard, wrote to Carnahan, thanking him for his note expressing appreciation for his teaching skills. The folder also contains several letters from Osmer C. Fitts of the law firm Fitts & Olson, setting up interviews and welcoming him to the firm, and three other letters (Doc 833:01).

The first series also contains four folders from Carnahan's two years working for U.S. Congressman William H. Meyer (1959-1960) of Vermont, and one folder each from his time as

Assistant U.S. Attorney for Vermont (1961-1965), Vermont District Judge (1967-1973), and his return to Fitts & Olson in 1973. A photograph of members and alumni of the Fitts, Olson law firm taken between 1973-1977 shows how many leaders of the Brattleboro bar worked for the firm at one time. The final folder contains two attempts by billionaire H. Ross Perot (1930-2019), an acquaintance from Texarkana, to get Carnahan to return to Texas to work for him (Doc 833:09).

The second series documents Carnahan's role in Vermont Democratic Party politics. The series is divided into four sections: early political activity; town, county, state, and national Democratic committees; run for Lieutenant Governor in 1984; and various candidate campaign material organized by year. Carnahan was interested in politics in college and wrote to his Senator, John H. Kennedy, on at least two occasions (the collection includes responses from an aide and from Kennedy himself). Carnahan also wrote to New York senator Herbert H. Lehman who Carnahan had apparently heard speak at the Lexington (Mass.) Democratic Club in January 1957, the same month Lehman had left office. He also communicated with Representative Henry S. Ruess of Wisconsin and Anthony Lewis of the *New York Times*, with whom he had mutual friends, Herbert P. (1928-2013) and Nancy Gleason. In an early, undated letter to the *Brattleboro Reformer* Carnahan expresses opposition to changes proposed for the east front of the U.S. Capitol, showing his early interest in capitol architecture (Doc 833:10).

On September 24, 1957, as soon as Carnahan had arrived in Vermont, he wrote to Bernard ("Bun") G. O'Shea (1921-1988), editor of several newspapers in Franklin County, Vermont, expressing an interest in participating in Vermont Democratic party politics, at a time when Vermont was a solidly Republican state. "I cannot claim any positions of influence or particular accomplishments, but I have always been interested in politics and at least since 1948 in Democratic politics," Carnahan wrote. The correspondence between the two reveals interesting details about early Vermont Democratic party politics, including Carnahan's suggestion that they recruit Ellsworth Bunker (1894-1984) of Dummerston to run for the U.S. Senate from Vermont in 1958. Carnahan drove to Swanton to visit O'Shea in February 1958 to talk party strategy. He had planned to go on to Montreal on a personal trip with his wife but was turned back by snow. Instead, they stayed at the Waybury Inn near Middlebury "and got in some skiing there and at Mad River even in the adverse weather, and continued our way south via High Pon[d] Mountain, Bromley, and Snow Valley." (Doc 833:11)

Carnahan became a stalwart of Democratic party politics in Vermont, serving as Democratic National Committeeman from 1979 to 1988. He was in that position during an especially contentious time in 1984 when progressive Ellen David-Friedman ousted a "regular" Democrat as Democratic National Committeewoman. Carnahan seemed to be open to welcoming "new" Democrats. David-Friedman was part of the Rainbow Coalition that supported Jessie Jackson for President in 1984 and 1988. The situation became especially tense in 1986 when Gov. Madeleine Kunin asked David-Friedman to step down because she was supporting Bernie Sanders, an independent, for governor instead of Kunin, the Democratic candidate, who was running for reelection for the first time (Doc 833:19). (Carnahan himself was defeated as National Committeeman by a Jackson supporter and member of the Rainbow Coalition in 1988.)

Series two contains 26 folders of records from Carnahan's only foray into electoral politics (other than being elected as a representative to Brattleboro's town meeting multiple times). Carnahan ran when former Lt. Governor Madeleine Kunin was making her second run for the top job at the State House after having lost two years earlier. Carnahan ran primarily to support Kunin after State Senator Peter Welch and other more visible Democrats decided not to run. As Neil Davis of the *Burlington Free Press* wrote, "For Madeleine Kunin ... the emergence of any fellow Democrat as a candidate for the No. 2 is a godsend." (Doc 833:50) The Lt. Governor and Governor run separate campaigns in Vermont, although Carnahan collected some of Kunin's position papers (Doc 833:43). Carnahan faced an uphill battle in trying to defeat incumbent Peter P. Smith. The personalities of the two candidates were summarized in side-by-side profiles published by the *Brattleboro Reformer* toward the end of the campaign. "Meet Mr. Nice Guy" was the subhead of the article on Carnahan; "A bundle of energy" was the subhead of the article about Smith. Carnahan received some endorsements including from the state's largest teachers' union and from Burlington's *Vanguard Press* who wrote, "We are not sure how much power a Lt. Governor wields. But we do believe that John Carnahan, without Smith's ambitions, will prove a more effective officer" (Doc 833:50). Carnahan lost to Smith 33 to 63 percent. (Smith challenged Kunin for the governorship two years later and lost; he was elected to the U.S. House in 1988 but lost in his reelection bid to Bernie Sanders in 1990.)

Most of the remainder of folders in the second series contain material, including brochures, correspondence, and bumper stickers, from Democratic campaigns from 1962-1995 collected by Carnahan. Carnahan was a supporter of Patrick J. Leahy in his campaigns for the U.S. Senate. Leahy shows up in many folders and in a separate folder devoted to him (Doc 833:74). There are also folders on the redistricting of the Vermont legislature in 1982 and a fund-raising dinner featuring former U.S. Representative Father Robert Drinan (1920-2007), also in 1982.

The series also includes a letter to Carnahan's law partner, Osmer C. Fitts, from Vermont Governor Richard A. Snelling (1927-1991) telling his supporters that he was not going to run for a fourth term for governor in 1982 and that he was not going to challenge U.S. Senator Robert Stafford (1913-2006) if he decided to seek re-election. Snelling wrote, "To be frank with you, I believe that someday, under the right circumstances, I might wish to serve in the United States Senate" (Doc 833:60). (Snelling changed his mind and ran for governor in 1982 and won; in 1984 he ran for the U.S. Senate and lost to Patrick Leahy.)

The third series contains limited records documenting some of Carnahan's involvement with non-profit organizations. Most folders contain individual items like certificates or newspaper clippings; most of his volunteer work is not documented here. The largest group of records (10 folders) is from the Friends of the Vermont State House. Carnahan was involved in this group from its founding in the early 1980s and served as its second chairperson from 1986-1988. The other large folder in this series is a folder of cards and letters of congratulations after Carnahan won the "Person of the Year" award from the Brattleboro Chamber of Commerce in 1990.

Related Collections

The Vermont Historical Society library holds the papers of Ellen David-Friedman (later spelled without a hyphen), 1980-1990 (Doc 506), her Rainbow Coalition collection, 1986-1987 (MSA 220), and the papers of the Rainbow Coalition, 1984-1991 (Doc 454). The library also has several items from the Vermont Democratic Party including its *Yearbook* (324.2736 V5916y) and *Handbook* (324.2736 V5916h). The library has a large collection of political ephemera organized chronologically in its broadside collection under the heading "Political Elections"

Inventory

I. Professional Papers

- Doc 833:01 Post law school correspondence, 1954-1958, 1960
Includes: Letters from Kenneth S. Davis, Osmer C. Fitts, Paul A. Freund, and Charles Harden McCurdy; and letter to Ray E. Hunt of Texarkana, Texas
- :02 U.S. Congressman William H. Meyer, 1959-1960
- :03 _____, "Personal File," 1959-1961
- :04 _____, articles about Meyer, obit. (1983), etc., 1960-2017
- :05 _____, correspondence with Meyer and his wife (Bertha), 1966-1990
- :06 Assistant U.S. Attorney for Vermont, 1961-1965 (file covers 1960-1969)
Includes: Letter from Ernest W. Gibson, two 1965 group photographs with several prominent Vermont lawyers
- :07 Vermont District Judge, 1967-1973
Includes: Typescript, "Some Thoughts on the Ethics of Judging;" newspaper article, "An Inside Look at Brattleboro Justice;" letter from Governor Thomas P. Salmon; photographs; ink sketch
- :08 Fitts & Olson (law firm), 1973, 1984
Includes: Photograph of present and past members of the firm, ca. 1975-1977; color picture of current members of the firm, ca. 1975-1977; list of past members of the firm 1946-1973; letterhead from various dates; bike rack poster 1974; one letter from Robert Pu 1984
- :09 Recruitment letters from H. Ross Perot, 1963, 1967

II. Political Papers

- :10 Early Political Letters, 1956-1958, undated
- :11 _____, Bernard O'Shea, 1957-1958
- :12 Brattleboro Democratic Town Committee, 1983-1985
- :13 Windham County Democratic Committee, 1958
- :14 _____, 1977-1986
- :15 Vermont State Democratic Committee, 1975
- :16 _____, election as chair, 1977

- :17 _____, 1977-1978
- :18 _____, 1981-1985
- :19 _____, Ellen David Friedman Controversy, 1984-1986
- :20 _____, 1986
 - Includes:* State Party Platform
- :21 _____, 1987
- :22 _____, 1988-1989, 1992 & 1993
- :23 Democratic National Committee, 1978-1984
- :24 _____, 1985-1986
- :25 _____, 1987
- :26 _____, 1988
- :27 1984 lieutenant governor candidacy, announcement
- :28 _____, correspondence
- :29 _____, schedules
- :30 _____, strategy & notes
- :31 _____, advertising & brochures
- :32 _____, _____, James Communications
- :33 _____, finances
- :34 _____, Common Cause Pledge & financial disclosures
- :35 _____, issues, education & Vermont NEA endorsement
- :36 _____, _____, labor
- :37 _____, _____, nurses, state employees, Coalition for Handicapped, mental health
- :38 _____, _____, role of lieutenant governor & legislature
- :39 _____, _____, tax reform
- :40 _____, _____, toxic materials
- :41 _____, _____, water quality standards
- :42 _____, _____, other issues
- :43 _____, Madeleine Kunin, candidate for governor
 - Includes:* Kunin position papers
- :44 _____, Peter P. Smith, candidate for lieutenant governor (opponent)
- :45 _____, campaign in counties, Orange
- :46 _____, _____, Orleans
- :47 _____, _____, Rutland
- :48 _____, _____, Washington
- :49 _____, _____, Windham
- :50 _____, newspaper coverage
- :51 _____, photographs
 - Includes:* JHC head shots, Ed Asner, Madeleine Kunin, Patrick Leahy, Randolph Major, Peter Welch
- :52 _____, results and campaign debt
- :53 Campaigns and candidates, 1962
 - Includes:* Harold Reynolds
- :54 _____, 1974
 - Includes:* Pat Leahy, M. Jerome Diamon
- :55 _____, 1976

- Includes:* Jimmy Carter, Tom Salmon, Robert O'Brien, John Alden, Jordan Cole, John A. Burgess, Robert Emond
- :56 _____, _____, presidential elector
- :57 _____, 1978
Includes: Madeleine Kunin, Ron Squires, Don Edwards, Verne Switzer, M. Jerome Diamond
- :58 _____, 1980
Includes: Tim O'Connor, Greg McKenzie, M. Jerome Diamond, Robin Lloyd, Madeleine Kunin, John Anderson (presidential), Robert Babcock, Scott Skinner, Bennington County Democratic Party Annual Dinner (1979), election results
Includes: Photographs of JHC, Timothy J. O'Connor, Joan Mondale, Marcel Leahy, Bill Pritchard
- :59 _____, _____, Edward Kennedy for president
- :60 _____, 1982
Includes: Madeleine Kunin, Tom Ryan, Mark Kaplan, Richard Snelling (letter to Osmer C. Fitts about decision *not* to seek fourth term as governor and *not* to run for U.S. Senate)
- :61 _____, _____, redistricting of Vermont legislative districts
- :62 _____, _____, Fr. Robert Drinan fund-raising dinner
- :63 _____, 1984 (other than JHC campaign)
Includes: Joan Mondale, William H. Schmidt, Anthony Pollina, Mike Jacobs, Jeff Amestoy (R), Bruce Lawlor, William W. "Wink" Pearson, Paul Forlenza, James Jeffords (R); also "Prospectus for Victory 1984" by Edwin Granai, chair of the Vermont State Democratic Committee
- :64 _____, 1986
- :65 _____, _____, Lt. Governor (Howard Dean)
- :66 _____, 1988, President (Michael Dukakis)
- :67 _____, _____, U.S. Senate (William Gray)
- :68 _____, _____, U.S. House (Paul Poirier, James Guest, Peter Welch)
- :69 _____, _____, Governor and Attorney General (Madeleine Kunin and Edward Flanagan)
- :70 _____, _____, Lieutenant Governor (Howard Dean)
- :71 _____, _____, Davenport Day (Windham County Democratic Committee event)
- :72 _____, 1992
Includes: Anti-Peter Welch letter, Phil Hoff, Edward Flanagan, Howard Dean, Patrick Leahy, Christopher Curtis, Franz Reichsman, Peter Shumlin, David Wolk, Don Hooper, David Deen
- :73 _____, 1995
Includes: Howard Dean
- :74 _____, 1977-1986, Patrick Leahy
Includes: Photos of JHC, Patrick & Marcel Leahy, Walter Mondale, Edwin Granai

III. Non-Profit Organizations Papers

- MSA 959:01 Friends of the Vermont State House, bylaws, strategic plan (1983), tax status
- :02 _____, kick-off campaign
 - :03 _____, restoration project, 1985-1987
 - :04 _____, general records, 1982-1985
 - :05 _____, _____, 1986
 - :06 _____, _____, 1987
 - :07 _____, _____, 1988-1989, 1998, 2002
 - :08 _____, invitations, brochures, letterhead
 - :09 _____, personal memberships and donations
 - :10 Calvin Coolidge Council, Boy Scouts of America, 1958 (one letter only)
 - :11 Connecticut River Valley Flood Control Commission, 1965-1971
(certificate only)
 - :12 Better Housing, Inc., 1967 (articles of association only)
 - :13 Brattleboro Retreat, 1970-1994 (newspaper article and certificate only)
 - :14 American Red Cross, 1971 (photograph only)
 - :15 Rally for Freedom and Unity (anti-Klan rally), 1982 (speech, program, poster)
 - :16 Vermont Historical Society, 1982- ca.1995 (trustee profile (1984?) and two photographs only)
 - :17 Brattleboro Chamber of Commerce "Person of the Year," 1990
(newspaper clippings, plaque, presentation speech by Julie Brooks)
 - :18 _____, letters and cards of congratulation

Paul A. Carnahan
CarnahanJohnH.docx
December 2022