

Dorman B. E. Kent (1875-1951)
Papers, bef. 1800-1951 (bulk 1886-1951)
Doc 235, 578-581

Introduction

This collection consists of the diaries, letters, and record books of Dorman B. E. Kent (1875-1951), of Montpelier, Vermont. Mr. Kent, historian and lifelong employee of the National Life Insurance Company, was librarian of the Vermont Historical Society from 1911 to 1922, and a guiding presence in its operations for over 40 years. Also included are some genealogical data relating to members of the Kent, Eaton, and Bennett families. The present collection unites several previously separate collections, acquired from various sources: the diaries and records were a gift from Bennett Kent, son of Dorman (ms acc 83.20), and the letters, a gift from David Kent, son of Bennett, in 1991. The collection is housed in five document boxes and occupies five linear feet of shelf space.

Biographical Sketch

Dorman Bridgman Eaton Kent descended from a prominent 19th century Calais, Vermont, family. Remember Kent (1775-1855), who settled in Calais in 1798, had six sons, one of whom was Abdiel Kent (1805-1887). Abdiel was a successful businessman, operating a shoe factory, store, sawmill, brick making business, and other enterprises. Abdiel had two wives: first, Fanny Hinkley Curtis (1822-1854) and second, Lucy A. Bliss (1830-1907). With his first wife, Abdiel had two children, Fanny L. and Murray Abdiel Kent (1847-1915). Murray and his wife, Ruth Bennett, had one son, Dorman Bridgman (sometimes spelled Bridgeman) Eaton Kent, born on November 1, 1875, in Kents Corner, Calais.

Dorman Kent and his parents moved to Montpelier around 1890, where his father, Murray Kent, built the first house on Kent Street. Murray Kent ran a harness shop in downtown Montpelier and was a popular auctioneer. A few years after graduating from Montpelier Seminary, Dorman Kent began a lifelong career at National Life Insurance Company in Montpelier. In 1904, he married Sarah "Agnes" Thompson and in 1905 their son, Bennett Thompson Kent, was born. In 1907, the family settled at 8 Kent Street in a house built by Dorman Kent's father, and in 1909, Richard Howard Kent was born. On March 6, 1928, Agnes Kent died suddenly. By that time, Bennett Kent had graduated from Dartmouth College and was working in insurance in Michigan, while Richard Kent lived at home with Dorman Kent. Richard Kent died in 1946 in a work-related accident at the age of 37. At the time, Dorman Kent was retired and lived alone in a boarding house, having sold the family home. In November 1949, he fell down the granite steps at the National Life office, and was in the hospital for several months before being moved to a nursing home at the beginning of January 1950, where he remained until he fell and broke his hip in 1951. After several months in the hospital, and with a weakened heart,

Dorman Kent died on July 23, 1951, during cataract surgery recommended by his physicians.

Dorman Kent, a compulsive historian, was an ardent collector and organizer of data who lived and breathed his passion. At National Life, he worked as clerk in several departments over his tenure, was responsible for editing the firm's annual rate book, and writing the company's official history. Forced by company policy to retire in 1941, Kent remained as a consultant until his death, his association with National Life spanning 45 years. Dorman Kent joined the Vermont Historical Society in 1909, and served as librarian for 12 years, from 1911 to 1922. The Society became his 'second home.' During his 40-odd years at the Society, he built the library's collection of New England genealogies and Vermont town histories. The diaries in this collection document his activities at the VHS. Kent also assembled his own collection of photographs, artifacts, papers, and books which he stored in a barn on Elm Street in Montpelier. Unfortunately, much of the material was lost in a fire; the salvaged photographs were donated to the VHS and were integrated into the photo collection.

Pride in his Vermont heritage made Kent a walking compendium of Montpelier area history, its current events and its people. He wrote a regular column, "This Day in History," in the *Montpelier Evening Argus*, wrote papers, obituaries, and historical articles, had a regular radio broadcast on items of local interest, and was a popular speaker at community events. These pursuits made Dorman Kent a well-known figure around town. He was a longtime member of The Club, a Montpelier men's literary group. During his 44 years in that organization, he held various offices, including president and official historian. Throughout his life, Dorman Kent kept detailed diaries, wrote lengthy accounts of his daily activities in letters, and meticulously recorded and arranged information on births, deaths and marriages of all the people he knew. How he managed to do it all remains a question for posterity.

Organization

The collection is arranged in four series: Series I contains personal diaries spanning the years 1886 to 1950, with breaks; Series II contains letters to his son, Bennett Thompson Kent, spanning the years 1922 to 1951, with breaks; Series III contains 15 record books compiled in the 1930s and 1940s; and Series IV contains some miscellaneous papers relating to the Kent, Eaton, and Bennett family histories, including letters, bible records, and genealogical data, from before 1800 to 1935.

Scope and Content

This collection documents the life of Dorman B.E. Kent from age eleven until his death in 1951 at age 76. Kent's papers provide a faithful rendering of Montpelier life, its culture, and its people, during the first half of the twentieth century. The letters and diaries contain a uniquely Vermont perspective on national events and politics.

The diaries in Series I begin with Kent at age 11. He faithfully records his activities as a schoolboy living in Kents Corner: sliding, chores, visiting, playing with friends, and reading. The 1918 diary provides commentary on World War I and the influenza epidemic of that year. At the end of his life, Kent's daily entries in his own shaky hand cease on November 17, 1949, when he falls down the steps at National Life. All subsequent entries are made by anonymous "scribes" until the diaries end on December 31, 1950, seven months before Kent's death.

The letters in Series II portray the intimacy and informality of a father writing to his elder son. They describe the lives of both the sender and the recipient. Not only do we glimpse Dorman Kent's daily life, but Bennett Kent's family can also be seen growing and his career progressing. Kent writes of his activities at National Life and at the Vermont Historical Society. His views on such things as FDR and his New Deal agencies emerge: Dorman is amazed that a sidewalk installed in front of his house on Kent Street by WPA workers actually turns out properly. Because the letters are so detailed and lengthy, at about a dozen pages each, they flesh out Dorman Kent's daily life in a more satisfying way than can his diaries.

Dorman Kent was a meticulous keeper and organizer of information. Of particular note is Series III, an example of this propensity. In his record books, Kent arranged and re-arranged information that he considered memorable: vital records, current events, trips he has taken. The records are idiosyncratic, being limited to a universe of people, places, and events of Kent's own selection, on which he had squirreled away bits of information over the years. The vital records are catalogued in several ways: by surname, by age, and by date. For example, in "Graded Ages at Deaths," Kent arranges his data by the age at which a person died, providing an interesting and uncommon demographic. The record books provide insight into Kent's compellingly inquisitive nature, and his attraction to minutiae and historical happenings.

Related collections and materials

Manuscript holdings by or about Dorman B.E. Kent:

Biographical information:

Autobiographical account of his life, DBEK, n.d., found at Misc File 765.

Paper written for The Club (Montpelier), "Dorman B.E. Kent", by H.A. Dwinell, 1962, found at MS B K414d.

MSA 334 contains a history of the Kent family of Calais, Vermont and writings by D.B.E. Kent on Abdiel Kent, Calais history, a paper written for stunt night in Calais, an address given in Calais, and a copy of Dwinell's paper [above].

Writings and speeches by D.B.E. Kent:

Regarding Montpelier:

Article, "The New Ceres", n.d., found at Misc File 1546.

- Account of the Phinney House in Montpelier as told by DBEK to Clara E. Follette, 1949, found at 974.31 M763.
- Article on several citizens of Montpelier living in the last half of the 19th century, 1932, found at 920.K414.
- History of The Apollo Club (Montpelier, Vt.), 1922, found at Doc 178.
- History entitled "Church of the Messiah in Montpelier", 1939, found at MSA 256:8.
- D.B.E.Kent's class prophesy at Vermont Methodist Seminary in Montpelier, 1894, found at MS C 5.
- Newspaper columns, "Events of the Day", 1933-34, and "Events of Past Years", 1950-1951, written for the Montpelier Evening Argus, found at MS B 9.

Regarding Calais:

- Typescript, "Calais, Vermont", n.d., found at 974-31 C125k.
- Article about the Old West Church in Calais in the Montpelier Argus, 1921, found at Misc. File 228.

Writings on other subjects:

- Article on Pliny Holton White, 1915-16, found at MS B W5825k.
- Article, "The Vermont Historical Society", no date, found at 974.30 V591kv.
- Notes on the Chase genealogy, no date, found at MSS 7-777168.
- Memoir of Charles E. Tuttle, 1943, found at MSS 26 #93.
- Biographical sketch of James Whitelaw, 1943, found at MSS 26 #97.
- Note regarding 'Sleeping Lucy', no date, found at Misc. File 1266.

Speeches:

- Text of speech on the 125th anniversary of the birth of Thomas Davenport, 1927, found at MS *X B D2773k.
- Text of speech on William W. Stockney, 1933, found at MS B St51.
- Text of speech on Ethan Allen, no date, found at MS B AL5k.

The Club:

- History of The Club (Montpelier) by DBEK, no date, found at 974.31 M76ck.
- The Club papers, 1905-1994, found at Doc 208-211 and continued in MSA 424.

Other related items:

- Scrapbook of Montpelier news clippings from 1917 collected by DBEK, found at Folio AC 974.31 M769k.
- Miscellaneous papers of DBEK includes tributes to him, no date, found at MSC 24:1.

Regarding Dorman B.E. Kent at VHS:

- Letter to DBEK from Henry N. Stevens enclosed with donation of papers, 1920, found at MS B St476k.

- Correspondence of DBEK and others re: investigation of VHS materials sold by Assistant State Librarian E. L. Whitney, 1949-51, found at MSS 27 #28.
- Correspondence to DBEK from Charles Miner Thompson, 1926, found at MSS 25 #108.
- With son Richard Kent, lists of officers, publications, acts of incorporation, constitution and minutes of VHS from 1840 to 1940, no date, found at MSS 22 #3.
- Correspondence with Guy Hubbard regarding the Connecticut River, Samuel Morey, and the Daye Press, 1920-21, found at MSS 21 #22.
- Correspondence from DBEK asking for a photo of Horace Graham, 1919, found at MSS 20 #53.
- Correspondence by DBEK to Walter S. Fenton re: New England flood control, 1939, found at MSS 20 #14.
- Correspondence to DBEK re: corrections to 1800 census returns, 1939, found at Misc. File 1480.
- Correspondence to DEBK from John P. DeMerritt regarding his father, a Montpelier toolmaker, 1920, found at MSS 19 #67.
- Correspondence regarding the restoration of the Kent Tavern in Calais, Vt., 1948-1956, found at MSC 45.

Inventory

I: Diaries – 1886 to 1950, with breaks

- Doc 235:1 Diaries, 1886, 1887, 1889, 1890.
:2 _____, 1891, 1892, 1893, 1894.
:3 _____, 1895, 1896, 1898 (partial).
:4 _____, 1899, 1904, 1906.
:5 _____, 1912, 1917.
:6 _____, 1918, 1919.
:7 _____, 1920, 1921.
:8 _____, 1922, 1923.
:9 _____, 1924, 1925.
:10 _____, 1926, 1927.
:11 _____, 1928, 1929.
:12 _____, 1930, 1931.
:13 _____, 1932, 1933.
:14 _____, 1934.
- Doc 578:1 _____, 1935, 1936.
:2 _____, 1937, 1938.
:3 _____, 1939, 1940.
:4 _____, 1941, 1942.
:5 _____, 1943, 1944.
:6 _____, 1945, 1946.
:7 _____, 1947, 1948.
:8 _____, 1949, 1950.

II. Records

- :9 Vital records, "Dates of Birth", compiled 1938.

- :10 _____, "Marriages", compiled 1939.
- :11 _____, "All Deaths", compiled 1949.
- :12 _____, "Death Book, Letters A-J", compiled 1938.
- :13 _____, "Death Book, Letters K-Z", compiled 1938.
- :14 _____, "Deaths in Chronological Order", compiled 1938.
- :15 _____, "Graded ages at death of people whom I have known",
compiled 1940.
- :16 _____, "Graded Ages at Death", compiled 1949.
- :17 Records, "Important Events", vol. 1, compiled 1941.
- Doc 579:1 _____, "Important Events", vol. 2, compiled 1939.
- :2 _____, "Record Book 1, January 1 – June 30", compiled 1936.
- :3 _____, "Record Book 2, July 1 – December 31, compiled 1936.
- :4 _____, "Record Book, January 1 – June 30", up to 1947.
- :5 _____, "Record Book, July 1 – December 31", up to 1947.
- :6 _____, "My Trips Away", up to 1947.

III. Letters to Bennett Thompson Kent, 1922 to 1951, with breaks

- :7 September, 1922 through December, 1923.
- :8 1924.
- :9 1925.
- :10 1926.
- :11 1927.
- :12 1933.
- :13 1935, June through October.
- :14 _____, November through December.
- :15 1936, January through April.
- :16 _____, May through August.
- :17 _____, September through December.
- :18 1937, January through April.
- :19 _____, May through August.
- Doc 580:1 _____, September through December.
- :2 1938, January through April.
- :3 _____, May through August.
- :4 _____, September through December.
- :5 1939, January through April.
- :6 _____, May through July.
- :7 _____, August through December.
- :8 1940, January through April.
- :9 _____, May through July.
- :10 _____, August through December.
- :11 1941, January through April.
- :12 _____, May through July.
- :13 _____, August through December.
- :14 1942, January through May.
- :15 _____, June through December.
- :16 1943, January through May.
- :17 _____, June through December.

- Doc 581:1 1944, January through August.
- :2 _____, September through December.
- :3 1945, January through June.
- :4 _____, July through December.
- :5 1946, January through June.
- :6 _____, July through December.
- :7 1947, January through June.
- :8 _____, July through December.
- :9 1948, January through June.
- :10 _____, July through December.
- :11 1949, January through June.
- :12 _____, July through December.
- :13 1950.
- :14 1951, through July.

IV. Miscellaneous papers

- :15 Miscellaneous papers and letters relating to Dorman B.E. Kent and Kent family, 1854-1920.
- :16 Diary, 1886, of Murray A. Kent, father of Dorman B.E. Kent.
- :17 Letters, 1845-1891 and undated, members of Eaton (married into Bennett) family.
- :18 Letters, 1848-1898, and miscellaneous, 1839-1865, Bennett family.
- :19 Genealogical data, vital records, and related items, 1822 and undated, for Bennett, Chase, Curtiss, Kent, Ladd and Wing families.
- :20 Certificate, 1935, D.B.E. Kent elected to High Bailiff of Washington County, Vermont.

Marge Garfield
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