



An Empty Toolbox? Archives and the Future of Research

*From the Symposium Panel
“Tools and Resources for Future Research”*

By GREGORY SANFORD

I think I can keep this short. I have no idea what tools and resources will be available for future research.
Okay, any questions?

I would rather talk about something I have some knowledge about: present and past tools and resources. Let me begin with a few quick vignettes.

In 1864 Vermont mandated that the “official correspondence” of governors was “the property of the state,” to be preserved by the secretary of state. Governors accordingly began to leave copies of their outgoing correspondence. In the 1890s new office technology, specifically carbon paper and the filing cabinet, allowed incoming and outgoing correspondence to be filed together for the first time. Consequently, without any statutory change, “official correspondence” came to mean incoming as well as outgoing letters, enhancing its value as a resource.¹

In 2001 Governor Dean publicly referred to an e-mail he had sent relating to Okemo Mountain Resort. When an opponent of the resort’s planned expansion asked for a copy, his public records request was rejected. The governor’s legal counsel noted that the governor had neither a computer at work nor a state e-mail account. Instead, he used a

.....
GREGORY SANFORD is the Vermont state archivist. In 2002 he received the New England Archivists’ Distinguished Service Award. He and the archives staff also received the Hamer-Kegan Award from the Society of American Archivists for publications promoting the value of archival records for the “continuing issues” section of the State Archives Web site (<http://vermont-archives.org/>).

Vermont History 71 (Winter/Spring 2003): 98–102.

© 2003 by the Vermont Historical Society. ISSN: 0042-4161; online ISSN: 1544-3043

private e-mail account at home; thus, the argument ran, his e-mails were not subject to disclosure. The legal counsel added, "The governor does not save either e-mail sent to or from his computer at home."² The challenge was not litigated and the records of one of our most significant gubernatorial administrations are already diminished.

In autumn 2001 the Statehouse network server's storage capacity was overwhelmed with accumulated e-mail to and from legislators. The civil union bill alone generated a reported 200,000 e-mails. To keep the system from crashing it was programmed to automatically delete e-mail messages once they had been on the system ninety days. Another resource vanished, not because of an appraisal of its legal or historical value, but because of limited network storage capacity. Storage space, whether virtual or physical, constantly limits our capacity to preserve resources.

Our research interests do not shape what future resources will be available. It is the rare individual or institution that primarily creates records for future research. Rather, records are created to document current transactions. Administrative, social, economic, and technological environments, and decisions, shape the form of that documentation and how long it is retained.

Should our focus be speculating on research trends, or on articulating documentation plans for the systematic identification and preservation of resources? Should we seek to gain a better understanding of why we document what, and how?

Citizens increasingly use digital cameras, video or its digital equivalents, or even Websites to document their lives, their communities, schools, and businesses. Without active management plans, and sustained resources, how long will these documents exist?

As writers turn to word processing, drafting and redrafting electronic manuscripts, what will remain of our traditional literary resources? Who is preserving the growing number of online newsletters, journals, and broadsides produced in Vermont?³

As e-mail replaces what we now dismiss as snail mail, what correspondence will remain for future reference? Indeed, does e-mail differ from paper correspondence in terms of content and purpose and, if so, how? Will the answers to these questions affect how we appraise e-mail as opposed to traditional correspondence?

Maps are being used for ever-expanding purposes, from environmental understandings to tax mapping to redistricting. Maps are also increasingly created through geographic information systems and other technologies. How will they be preserved and catalogued? Similar concerns surround the digitization of existing maps; at the moment the

Agency of Transportation is digitizing its map collections and disposing of the originals.⁴

As businesses employ online transactions, and national and international interests absorb corporations with strong Vermont identities, including Ben & Jerry's, how will we document our business community? What exactly is a *Vermont* business nowadays?

The list of questions is almost limitless. And yet, looking just at technology, I know of no Vermont repository that has established a sustainable plan for capturing computer-based records. That includes the State Archives. We have tried, and have a new project underway, but there are real obstacles to be overcome. Again, my point is that the present does not automatically document itself. To continue to rely on serendipity and chance is dangerous.

Moving from resources to tools, there is more to celebrate. Technology is offering new opportunities for access. Already many Vermont repositories have a Web presence. Typically those Websites offer general information on holdings, as well as location, policies, and hours.

Some of the larger repositories have posted finding aids, sample photographs, and information on upcoming programs. Representatives from several repositories are building a union catalog to Vermont holdings known as ARCCAT. ARCCAT allows you to search across repositories for records germane to your research. The University of Vermont's Special Collections is using encoded archival description to provide deeper views of their collections, including links to source documents. At the State Archives we are providing contextual overviews of continuing issues of government and governance. Those overviews are frequently linked to source documents.

All of these developments are exciting, but again they raise issues that demand our sustained attention. A research project I strongly encourage is an examination of the content of Vermont's historical and archival Websites. How do we present ourselves? What do we choose to highlight, and why? How do we know what our users expect? Indeed, who are, or could be, our users? Should we continue to focus Web presentations on the known interests of certain research communities, genealogy and the Civil War come to mind, or are we missing opportunities to broaden our research communities?

Most of the access tools I just cited follow the tradition of publicizing finding aids and then waiting for researchers to show up. Increasingly, researchers expect not simply an online finding aid, but also the source documents online. How will we achieve the resources to move in that direction? And should we?

I have become interested in how we are losing some of our basic

identities to technology. From my world, the term “archives,” or more precisely, “archiving,” has been appropriated and redefined by technology. Archives are institutional records of continuing value. Archival management is the professional understanding of how to identify records of continuing value, and how to keep them authentic and accessible over time. “Archiving” to information technology staff and the administrators they serve simply means backing up active data for short-term security.

Even what we mean by “history” is at risk. The Web and other broadcast technologies and media are image driven. If you take a Web design course you will be taught that you have seconds to capture a viewer’s interest; that text should be limited; and that images attract attention.

An example: Connecticut History On-line is a wonderful project involving the University of Connecticut, the Connecticut Historical Society, and the Mystic Seaport. They have developed a Website with some 14,000 historical photographs. But are photographs history? What will happen to popular understandings of history as more and more repositories feed the Web’s demand for images over text? Will collecting policies and resource allocation come to reflect image over text?⁵

In Vermont a well-respected local historical society spent a reported \$40,000 to digitize its photograph collection. It did so largely as a preservation step. The vendor reasonably argued that digitizing the photographs reduced handling of the originals and therefore helped preserve them.⁶ And yet, would the \$40,000 have been better spent creating an adequate vault environment to preserve all the society’s collections? Was the decision made as part of an overall business plan for managing the collections? And what about the special preservation needs of digital images, particularly if the vendor goes out of business? What will “preservation” come to mean as we pursue our love of technology?

I could go on; the issues I see confronting us are numerous and difficult. Will we have to develop a new media literacy to help us understand what is presented on the Web, why, and how? Will students, tapping into Internet resources from their dorm rooms, be exposed to the full range of historical inquiry? What will happen to serendipity as better and faster search engines increasingly narrow responses to Internet searches for resources?⁷

What are the future tools and resources for historical inquiry? Again, I do not know. I strongly believe, however, that we must act, and act collaboratively and cooperatively in the present in order to have a say in what those tools and resources will be.

NOTES

¹ For a good examination of the impact of office technology on business practices and records, see JoAnne Yates, *Control through Communication: The Rise of System in American Management* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989).

² See the *Burlington Free Press*, 13 November 2001, p. 3B.

³ For example, sets of *The Watchman*, a key nineteenth-century newspaper that provides Whig and later Republican perspectives, have been preserved. There is currently (April 2002) an on-line political newsletter, published by Progressive Michael Badamo, also called *The Watchman*; who is preserving that? Is it adequate to preserve printouts of the online *Watchman*?

⁴ The Agency of Transportation made this decision despite a policy adopted by Public Records, the state's records management program, requiring that a hard copy, paper or film, be preserved of any records being digitized that have a retention period of more than ten years. A compromise will have the original maps, once digitized, appraised by surveyors and those deemed to have a continuing value deposited with some undesignated repository.

Maps are not the only record format being digitized. In a January 2001 report to the General Assembly on the Administrative Procedures Act, the Legislative Council noted the deterioration of forty years worth of audio (analog) tapes of legislative committee hearings. Deterioration included the obsolescence of some formats, such as reel-to-reel tapes. The proposed solution was to digitize the tapes for \$100,000. No mention was made of how to index or manage the digital copies to avoid recreating the problems that led to the analog tapes' deterioration.

⁵ Numerous observers have commented on image-driven technologies and broadcast media. See for example, Neil Postman, *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992).

Another wonderful consortium-based project is the Maine Memory Network. It does provide texts, as well as photographs, sound, and video recordings. It allows a user to cut and paste selected items into exhibits or articles, which raises a separate issue. Is the recombination of preselected material, already pulled from the contexts of parent collections, substantively different from traditional historical research and writings? If so, how, and what obligations do such Websites have to explain selection criteria and other contexts?

⁶ The vendor perhaps provides an example of how we, as records professionals, have failed not only to make our concerns understood, but also to develop effective partnerships. The vendor, Photo-Ark Digital Imaging, routinely promotes digitizing as a preservation tool while dismissing professional concerns.

In an editorial in the February 2000 issue of the company newsletter, *Digital Archiving*, the owner wrote: "Only a year or so ago, the collections management community in New England had yet to accept the value of the new technology. Most curators were wrestling not only with new information, but a bit of misinformation as well. As we enter the new millennium, it's clear that digitization of historical photographic collections has become the method of choice for collection managers throughout the New England area. There simply is no better way to achieve the preservation of photo artifacts than to digitize them."

The issue, again, is not that digitization isn't a powerful access tool, with some short-term preservation value (it is), but rather that decisions to digitize collections must be balanced within business plans that address all collections and the overall mission of each institution.

⁷ Cass Sunstein in *republic.com* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001) opens with a useful discussion of "the neighborhood of me," and individualized search engines, collaborative filtering, and other emerging Web tools that narrow the range of information one is exposed to on the Web. Sunstein's focus is on the Web's move toward "The Daily Me" and its impact on public forums, free speech, and other expression and communication issues.