



Giving Form to Vermont's History: The Challenge for the Future

The Vermont Historical Society symposium made clear that Vermont emerged and has continued to develop in a complex social, economic, and political environment. Scholars must continue to approach and understand the Vermont experience in larger regional, national, international, and, increasingly, global terms. Historians must further encourage and embrace the participation of other disciplines.

By H. NICHOLAS MULLER III

Vermont's history speaks directly to its future. A society that does not understand its past suffers collective amnesia, limiting self-understanding and obscuring prospects for the future. A society that reflexively escapes to mythology for self-perception exacerbates the effects of amnesia and relegates its sense of place to vague, often contradictory, notions. In assessing the current state of understanding of Vermont's past, the presenters in the symposium on the "Future of Vermont History in the 21st Century" directly addressed the future of the state.

The symposium, confined to one full day, placed some artificial limits on the exploration of the status of Vermont history and the direction

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for more study, but the presenters' evaluation of the "Needs and Opportunities" in the study of Vermont's past nevertheless found much common ground. Participants concluded that the condition of Vermont history demonstrates marked progress, particularly in the past half-century, but they stressed the need for more effort in questioning and developing underlying assumptions. They identified avenues for future investigation and called for strengthening the infrastructure on which serious analysis and the promulgation of the results depend.

The story of Vermont lends form and meaning to its present, and a distorted prism warps the perception of that form. For about a century and a half the interpretation of the Reverend Samuel Williams's pioneering 1794 history of Vermont, which he allowed Ira Allen to preview, and Allen's own self-serving 1798 account, dominated Vermont historiography.¹ They invented the "Myth of Creation," the heroic tale of innately liberty-loving, agrarian settlers who boldly freed themselves of British and Yorker tyranny, quelled wrong-headed dissent from within, founded an independent state, and won congressional recognition as the fourteenth state. Subsequent observers reiterated this account and extended the version to events that transpired after the founding years. The rock-hard Vermont love of liberty and self-sufficient individualism spiced with a strong tincture of cantankerousness expounded in the "Myth of Creation" long provided the interpretive framework for such major activities as Vermont's role in the Anti-Mason movement, abolitionism, the Civil War, the rise and dominance of the Republican Party, and other events. Whenever this explanation faltered, as Paul M. Searls effectively argued, observers quickly reverted to Vermont "exceptionalism," those characteristics thought to render Vermont distinct from all other states. Though largely discredited by contemporary scholarship, the Allen version persists in the popular imagination and helps explain the perceived marketing advantage in applying the name of Ethan Allen to shopping malls, furniture, a motel, a bowling alley, an Amtrak train, and dozens of other products and services. Exceptionalism continues to occupy discourse in Vermont, and defining a "Vermonters" remains a popular state sport.

As Michael Sherman's excellent analysis and synthesis of the current state of Vermont history demonstrates, the Allen version of Vermont came under frontal attack and substantial revision beginning in the second quarter of the twentieth century. Though they have not adequately penetrated the popular psyche, professional historians and other scholars, who have increasingly found the study of Vermont a legitimate endeavor, have largely revised and rewritten the Allen version and the sturdy shibboleths it spawned and reinforced. The Vermont Historical Society symposium made clear that Vermont emerged and has contin-

ued to develop in a complex social, economic, and political environment. Despite the state motto of “Freedom and Unity” and the strong self-identification with liberty, Joseph-André Senécal, Marilyn Blackwell, and Samuel A. McReynolds, in particular, pointed out that Vermonters too often have demonstrated an ugly intolerance to ethnic groups, non-Protestant religions, Native Americans, and other racial and cultural minorities. Women have had to persist to gain a full measure of liberty and participation. Despite the predominance of bucolic imagery, industry developed almost immediately and has long maintained a leading role in Vermont’s economy. The symposium pointed to the diverse nature and traditions of those who have come to live and work in Vermont. Presenters noted that “winter” is not an adequate metaphor for Vermont in the last half of the nineteenth century, that Native Americans lived in Vermont and have not disappeared, and that the state’s history reveals other experiences that belie the deeply held image of a homogeneous and agrarian Green Mountain State peopled by ruggedly independent, though tolerant, Yankees.

Scholars must continue to approach and understand the Vermont experience in larger regional, national, international, and, increasingly, global terms. Historians, as the symposium suggested, must further encourage and embrace the participation of other disciplines. Other presenters demonstrated that the time for invitation has already long passed. Ethnologists, geologists, geographers, genealogists, anthropologists, demographers, sociologists, archaeologists, political scientists, epidemiologists, students of material culture, literary scholars, and others have already joined the party. Their growing body of work has made important contributions to the understanding of Vermont’s past.

Conversely, neither the Vermont experience, its history, nor the important archival collections have adequately attracted the attention of “national” scholars. To a significant degree Vermont has addressed major issues of national scope, especially concerning the environment, civil rights, education, and intentional communities. The Vermont experience, in concert with that of the nation and other states, deserves more intensive investigation.

The presenters made it clear that the “Myth of Creation” not only obscured the vital role of imperial politics, economics, war, and fencing for itself amidst the intercolonial rivalry of the founding years, but also that, until recently, it has muted the investigation and understanding of the larger context in which Vermont developed and will continue to act. Ideas, trends, technology, financial operations, the spread of information, and all aspects of life in Vermont, even when generated in a local context, extend to the national scene and beyond. And Vermont and

Vermonters more often reacted to these developments than generated them. In its earliest days Vermont farmers relied on external markets in Canada, Boston, and New York. In return, Vermonters demanded a steady stream of imported goods, helping to explain some of the early “diplomacy” and the Champlain Valley’s behavior in the embargo and War of 1812 eras. The stone industries could not flourish without external markets. The Proctors’ influence, especially in Washington, provided a large governmental demand for Vermont marble, as well as the site of a major cavalry base in Colchester. The Vermont family-owned-and-operated dairy farm, perhaps the most enduring image in the state’s self-definition, could not succeed without external markets. Over the years it, too, responded to livestock improvement, refrigerated transportation, new vehicles and equipment, electricity, state support, and a nationally imposed but eagerly embraced “dairy compact.” In recent years students have made similar cases for the history of railroads, immigration and emigration, labor, industrial development, politics, and the transmission of information.

Rare among states at the close of the twentieth century by having only two native-born individuals serve as governor in the four decades since 1962 covering twenty-one elections, the state that ranks third in the proportion of personal income derived from dividends and interest, and with many important towns having clear majorities of in-migrant residents in the 2000 census, Vermont exemplifies a state that customarily operates in a larger context. Historians, scholars, and other observers must accelerate the study of Vermont in its regional, national, international, and global setting. They have no legitimate option but to turn away from analysis by exception and look beyond the state’s borders.

For a state with a total population smaller than seventy of the largest metropolitan areas in the United States, Vermont has developed a surprisingly robust base of institutions dedicated to the preservation and understanding of the state’s past. Articulating the programs and needs of three principal features of the preservation of Vermont heritage, Jane Beck from the Vermont Folklife Center, John P. Dumville of the state Division for Historic Preservation, and State Archivist Gregory Sanford detailed this richly textured fabric. At the same time they revealed some of its rents and frayed ends.

Developed over time in response to the well-intended initiatives of individuals, institutions, and state, county, and local governments, these heritage organizations often remain relatively isolated, thwarting coordination and cross-pollination and generally ladling a thin financial broth into too many cups. The active Vermont archival community, for example, does not meet in regularly scheduled, structured sessions that might dampen competition and integrate the scopes of the collections.

Archivists might also work to pursue integrated collection management standards and cooperative collection conservation. Gregory Sanford pointed out that much of the work of the State Archives has become electronic and that the World Wide Web provides greater access to researchers. Vermont archival resources should agree to standards of electronic storage and access to avoid establishing another barrier to coordination. In an archival version of Boyle's Law, which posits that gases tend to expand to the volume of their containers, the Vermont Historical Society, the Wilbur Collection at the University of Vermont, the Vermont State Archives, the Sheldon Museum, and other important repositories lament their inadequate physical, personnel, and financial resources, while at the same time they duplicate some programs and services. Each organization, often steeped in tradition and practice, maintains a legitimate and valuable function which it might better accomplish in a coordinated, cooperative fashion. The same issues generally apply to other organizations such as museums, historic sites, libraries, colleges and universities, and the myriad of small dedicated heritage foundations often pursuing overlapping missions. In 1982, the landmark, and only, "Governor's Conference on the Future of Vermont's Heritage" addressed many of these issues in over fifty resolutions, many stressing the need for preservation and maintenance of the historical record. Two decades later most of those remain simply recommendations.² The symposium placed a number of them back on the table.

Despite the richness, Vermont must break down the barriers that inhibit strengthening the institutional resources dedicated to heritage to begin to achieve their full collective potential. The Center for Research on Vermont at the University of Vermont has made a notable contribution to the interdisciplinary study of Vermont history and has given it more cachet among scholars in the past quarter century. But the university keeps the Center on starvation rations. The Vermont Historical Society, with the breakthrough new History Center comprising, for the present, adequate collection and archival storage, and with imaginative programs such as the Vermont History Expo that reach the important popular audience, has at the same time reduced the number of articles in *Vermont History*, the major outlet for publication about the history of the state. This decision, as Samuel B. Hand lamented in opening the symposium, has decreased the volume of published material and may have dampened the study of Vermont's past, as has the decision of The University of Vermont to drop out of the University Press of New England consortium. The healthy growth of the small state and regional publishers cannot take up the slack for monographs that lack the promise of a popular audience. Several decades of scholarship have dated a volume, now out of print, published by the Vermont Historical Society

and used to teach Vermont history.³ The future of Vermont history awaits a collaborative one-volume effort prepared by Michael Sherman, Gene Sessions, and Jeff Potash, now nearly completed, that will both illuminate Vermont's past and provide a context for further study.

The future of Vermont history and the preservation of its heritage will depend on the coordination, strengthening, and support of the infrastructure that underpins it. With vital missions and dedicated and able voluntary and professional staff, most of the heritage organizations, with a very few and notable exceptions, have remained too passive in seeking the financial resources to nourish themselves. This devolves in part from the paucity of coordination that results in too many fishing poles in small or played-out ponds. Vermont does not have the later-developing Midwestern and Western tradition of relatively generous public support for heritage organizations; in Vermont they must actively identify, cultivate, and enlist "homo philanthropus." A healthy future for Vermont history will depend upon much stronger resource development.

The symposium, even limited to a few high-quality presentations, demonstrated that the understanding of the history of Vermont has made enormous strides, especially in the last twenty-five years. Yet the state of Vermont history has not yet lived up to the importance of its task. The degree to which scholars and others will close the gap by dampening "exceptionalism," expanding the context, embracing other disciplines, attracting national attention, and reaching the popular psyche will depend on success in strengthening the infrastructure. The very important symposium on "The Future of Vermont History in the 21st Century" picked up a dialogue organized twenty years ago with the "Governor's Conference on the Future of Vermont's Heritage." Those responsible for preserving and understanding Vermont's past must not allow another two decades to elapse before the dialogue resumes. Vermont can ill afford collective amnesia. The Vermont Historical Society should consider enlisting partners to help mount programs designed to intensify the pursuit of the understanding of the state's past, and its present, on a regular basis.

NOTES

¹ Samuel Williams, *The Natural and Civil History of Vermont* (Walpole, N.H.: Isaiah Thomas and David Carlisle, Jr., 1794) and Ira Allen, *The Natural and Political History of the State of Vermont, One of the United States of America*, (London: J.W. Meyers, 1798).

² Vermont Governor's Conference on the Future of Vermont's Heritage, *Position Papers* (Hyde Park, Vt.: The Conference, 1982).

³ H. Nicholas Muller III and Samuel B. Hand, eds., *In a State of Nature: Readings in Vermont History* (Montpelier, Vt.: Vermont Historical Society, 1985).