

VERMONT



HISTORY

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The Journal of the Vermont Historical Society

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What the VHS Collects and Why

This year marks the 175th anniversary of the founding of the Vermont Historical Society. During the next year, as we celebrate past accomplishments and contributions to the state’s awareness of its history, the board and staff will also look ahead and begin drafting a new museum collections plan. This document will describe the existing strengths and weaknesses of the museum’s collections, define the scope and priorities for future collecting, and guide us as we set future work goals and prepare budgets. It won’t be an easy task. Professional advisors advocating for this “best practice” tell us that the process is often as important to an organization as the final document, since it provides an opportunity to review basic assumptions about what we will collect and why.

Currently on view in one of the new Vermont Heritage Galleries at the Vermont History Center in Barre is an exhibit created with the purpose of showing a broad cross section of the collections. *Icon, Oddities, and Wonders: Stories from the Vermont Historical Society Collections* displays paintings, glass, ceramics, military items, clothing and textiles, furniture, musical instruments, and relics. Some are aesthetically pleasing, while a few look like pieces of rubble. All have a Vermont story and can be placed in an historical context. Each one helps us reveal and explain an episode in Vermont’s history. These items represent over one hundred years of acquisitions.

The earliest acquisition in the exhibit (front cover) is the sword of British poet and adventurer, George Gordon, Lord Byron, who went to Greece to support the war for independence from Turkey and died there in 1824. The sword was given to the VHS in 1902 by the daughter of Montpelier’s Jonathan Miller, who was quite an adventurer in his own right. Miller, too, participated in the Greek war for independence and bought the sword in Greece in the late 1820s. After he returned to Vermont, Miller continued to fight for democracy and became a leader in the struggle to abolish slavery.

Another intriguing artifact on exhibit is a box presented to the VHS in 1905 to commemorate the Battle of Bunker Hill (back cover). It is



full of small relics dating from the 1700s through the end of the 1800s, fragments taken from historic buildings, trees, and military ships from around the country. This type of souvenir collecting, picking apart historic structures and sites, was common practice in the early 1900s and illustrates what was then the Society's identity as a historical and antiquarian organization.

The most provocative piece in the show is a large white banner purchased by the VHS in 2004. It was used at a Ku Klux Klan rally held in Montpelier in 1927. Embroidered in red thread is a shield with a cross under which is

stitched: "Women/ of the/ Ku Klux Klan/ Realm of Vermont /Montpelier." Most visitors are surprised to learn that the KKK was active in Vermont. The banner is a harsh reminder to viewers that the past has many dark periods that we would prefer to forget.

All of these artifacts exemplify important concepts that we think about during the acquisitions process. All meet the primary criteria of having a strong connection to Vermont. Byron's sword illustrates ideological, cultural, and political connections between Vermonters and the world beyond their state and national borders. The Bunker Hill box has been at the VHS for over one hundred years and raises important questions about changes in the purposes and ethics of collecting. What would we do today if offered a box full of pieces and fragments newly collected from historic buildings and sites? Curatorial ethics require careful consideration of provenance and ownership. What message would be conveyed to the public if we accepted artifacts acquired in this way? The KKK banner is a rare survivor. People don't usually save things that show their ancestors in a negative light. Acquisitions like this are uncomfortable but important because they help our museum tell a more complete and complex story of Vermont's past.

These are just some criteria we consider when evaluating possible additions to the collections. We invite you to visit the exhibit at the Vermont History Center in Barre, and the exhibit *Freedom and Unity: One Ideal, Many Stories* at our museum in the Pavilion Building in Montpelier, to see some other examples of what the VHS has collected over time.

JACQUELINE CALDER, *Museum Curator*

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