

VERMONT HISTORY

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- ❖ The St. Albans Raid: A Newspaper Perspective *Wyatt Evans*
- ❖ The Rise and Fall of Vermont City, Dakota Territory *Paul Heller*
- ❖ Miniature Freight Ships on the Champlain
International Waterway *Jerome M. Hebda*

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About the Covers

Inaugural Gowns of Governor Kunin

On August 18, 1920, with Tennessee’s ratification of the 19th Amendment, American women gained the right to vote—and with it, full participation in democracy. (Vermont had the chance to become that decisive ratifying vote, but Governor John Weeks declined to call the legislature back for a special session.)

Sixty-five years later, on January 11, 1985, Madeleine May Kunin was sworn in as the first woman to hold Vermont’s highest elected office. She would win re-election as governor in 1986 and 1988, achieving national firsts along the way: first Jewish woman to be governor, and first woman elected to a third term as a governor. Kunin was no stranger to forging a new path as a woman in politics. She was first elected as a representative from a newly-drawn district in Burlington in 1972. In her third term, she became the first woman to chair the influential House Appropriations committee.

The Vermont Historical Society began conversations with Governor Kunin about donating her inaugural gowns to the permanent collection in the fall of 2019, and the donation was realized in winter 2020, just before pandemic lockdown would have delayed it indefinitely. Keenly aware of her place in history, Kunin had kept the gowns in pristine condition.

Each gown is completely unique, designed in partnership with Vermont-based sewists. The first gown, in burgundy velvet, was made by Lucy Strelczyk of South Burlington. Both design details and the cut of the fabric are reminiscent of Kunin’s Swiss heritage; contemporary newspaper reports described it, however, as “medieval.” It is the only gown worn a second time; Kunin wore it to a White House reception to meet President Ronald Reagan.

The remaining two gowns, worn in 1987 and 1989, were constructed by Elaine Horseman of Essex Junction. Each had challenging features and details. The second gown’s skirt is constructed of shot silk, in which two different thread colors are interwoven (in this case, blue and black) to produce an iridescent and constantly fluctuating teal color. Horse-



man recalled that she had spent a great deal of time searching for a fabric to match the precise shade of teal that Governor Kunin

had imagined, eventually traveling to Montreal to find the match. Similarly, for the third gown, Kunin's vision included a juxtaposition of black velvet and a white satin collar; Horseman struggled to integrate the two radically different types of fabric into the custom design, each with its own weight and flexibility.

Kunin's gowns lie at the intersection of two equally complex narratives: women in politics, and the rich symbolic nature of clothing. At that nexus, representation becomes even more fraught. Prominent women have always attracted attention for their clothing rather than their ideas, and have therefore had to understand and incorporate the language of clothing into their political decisions. Kunin is no exception: "When women lead," she wrote in anticipation of her donation, "they have to think about what they wear."

"When Women Lead: Governor Madeleine Kunin of Vermont" is on exhibit in the National Life Gallery at the Vermont History Museum in Montpelier through January 2021.

AMANDA GUSTIN,
Public Program Manager
Vermont Historical Society

Front cover: Governor Madeleine M. Kunin's three inaugural gowns. Left to right: 1985, 1987, 1989.

Back cover: Governor Kunin's first inaugural gown, 1985, inspired by her Swiss heritage.

Above: Governor Kunin's three inaugural gowns on exhibit at the Vermont Historical Society museum, Montpelier.



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