

IN MEMORIAM



H. NICHOLAS MULLER III

1938-2022

The death of H. Nicholas Muller III on May 31, 2022, ended a remarkable career in Vermont history. Over the course of five and a half decades, Nick Muller made a significant impact in the Green Mountain cultural heritage community as teacher, editor, mentor, scholar, and organization leader. His passing shines a light on the accomplishments and contributions of a generation of Vermont history practitioners who transformed our field after 1960, filled it with new energy and vision, and helped foster a stronger appreciation of the importance of our state and local past to the Vermont of today and tomorrow. Nick and his outstanding contemporaries—Samuel B. Hand, Deborah P. Clifford, John J. Duffy, Anne F. Spencer, Marcus A. McCorison, Brooks Buxton, Reidun Nuquist—made significant contributions to collecting, teaching, and writing about Vermont’s past. Nick used to joke that when he started at the University of Vermont (UVM) in 1966 you could hold a convention of serious students of Vermont history in a coat closet. Today that community is large and vibrant, and those leaders born between 1925 and 1945 deserve much of the credit.

Nick Muller began his work on Vermont history in the early 1960s. Born and raised in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, he attended Dartmouth College. In the spring of 1960, during his last undergraduate semester, he

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jettisoned his plans for a career as an engineer and decided to go to graduate school in American history. Nick selected the University of Rochester and felt fortunate that noted Franco-American scholar Mason Wade took him on there as a protégé. Under Wade's tutelage he began a dissertation on Canadian history; but when a warehouse fire consumed his notes and half-completed text, Nick decided to write instead about the Champlain-Richelieu waterway as a commercial corridor in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. That brought him to Burlington for research visits and attracted attention at UVM during the 1966 search for a new professor to take over T. D. Seymour Bassett's courses on Vermont history. Asked if he could teach Vermont history, Nick said, "Of course," and that confident exaggeration helped him become the newest member of UVM's History Department in September 1966.

Nick's star rose quickly at UVM. Learning how to teach Green Mountain history with little background and with no textbook was an interesting challenge, but he managed to stay ahead of his students while he taught himself the basics and assembled readings on various aspects of the Vermont experience. Outside the classroom he was ambitious and aggressive and took advantage of opportunities for advancement on campus and elsewhere. The university administration recognized Nick's talents, so within a few years his resumé included positions such as associate dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, head of the innovative Living/Learning Center, and member of several UVM planning committees. Key roles in the creation of the Vermont Archaeology Society, the Vermont Academy of Arts and Sciences, and UVM's Center for Research on Vermont, and as a trustee of the Vermont Historical Society, were ample evidence of Nick's aptitude for leadership in academic and cultural heritage circles. Young Nick Muller could be brash and insensitive, and his tendency to steamroll over more cautious colleagues ruffled feathers during his UVM career; but nobody questioned his ability or his work ethic. By the mid-1970s he was on the rise, with a bright future well beyond Vermont's borders.

I was eighteen when I met Nick. In September 1973 he agreed to oversee my project of compiling a bibliography of source material on the history of Williston, Vermont, where my family had moved in 1969. I worked independently on that initiative, and it wasn't until the Spring 1974 semester that I took History 261, Nick's survey course in Vermont history. A semester of his clear, cogent lectures and the readings he assigned advanced my Vermont education substantially. They also cemented my fondness for writing term papers on Vermont topics for my History and English classes, a tendency that puzzled some of my professors who had little knowledge of or interest in topics like Fort Dummer,

the Dresden Press, Daniel Pierce Thompson, Rowland E. Robinson, and the St. Albans Raid. But I was content in the certainty that Nick Muller and I understood what was important.

As Nick had with Mason Wade, I lucked out when Nick agreed to be my graduate advisor and took me on as his teaching assistant for History 261 in the fall of 1976. Nick was one of the best classroom lecturers I ever encountered at UVM, and I learned a great deal about teaching from him. I learned considerably more about effective writing when he started editing my MA thesis on nineteenth-century Vermont scholar Zadock Thompson; hundreds of blue-ink HNM admonitions, pictograms, and corrections beat out of me a fondness for passive-voice construction, tightened my prose, and started me on the path to becoming a competent writer. I didn't mind the Muller sarcasm because I sensed that he wouldn't be trying so hard to teach me if he didn't think I had potential. It worked, and if I have anything resembling a passable writing style today, Nick Muller deserves much of the credit.

I was working on my thesis when Nick announced in November 1977 that he had accepted the presidency of Colby-Sawyer College in New London, New Hampshire. We hurried through the rest of our work together so I could defend the thesis before he left UVM. Nick took the editorship of *Vermont History* with him, and that was a big help to me. I'd begun working for Special Collections at UVM's Bailey-Howe Library, and daily contact with the Wilbur Collection's books, maps, manuscripts, and other Vermont sources filled me with ideas for articles and monographs. Another editor would probably have told me to slow my pace of submissions, but Nick accepted everything I sent him and worked the results into a dozen issues of the journal between 1977 and 1982. Although he rewrote my texts so that they all looked like he'd written them (a lifelong Muller habit that riled more seasoned *Vermont History* contributors), I greatly appreciated his willingness to help me publish my thoughts. That generosity in continuing our mentor-protégé relationship over time and distance was unusual, and I appreciated how much I benefited from it.

Although no longer residing or teaching in Vermont, Nick continued his work on Vermont history. In 1982 he published two significant Green Mountain books, *An Anxious Democracy: Aspects of the 1830s* with John J. Duffy and *In a State of Nature: Readings in Vermont History* with Sam Hand. *In a State of Nature* was the volume of basic readings that was unavailable to Nick when he started at UVM, and it became the standard text for Vermont history courses for the next quarter century. Nick's Vermont pace slowed when he left Colby-Sawyer to become director of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin in 1985. He gave up the editor-

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ship of *Vermont History* and his publishing on Vermont dwindled to an occasional short article during his SHSW tenure and his final job as head of the Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation.

In 2002, Nick retired to a beautiful lakeside home in Essex, New York. Back in the Champlain Valley and free from the demands of a full-time job, he rejoined the Vermont heritage community in noteworthy fashion. I brought him back onto the board of the Vermont Historical Society, where during my five years as executive director his wise counsel helped the Society wrestle with serious fiscal challenges. Between 2003 and 2020 he wrote and published at an impressive pace: articles for *Vermont History*, entries in *The Vermont Encyclopedia*, and popular pieces for *Vermont Life* and *Living*. He also co-wrote or co-edited five Vermont books: *The Quotable Ethan Allen* (2005); *Inventing Ethan Allen* and *The Vermont Difference: Perspectives from the Green Mountain State* (both in 2014); a tribute to Sam Hand, *Green Mountain Scholar: Samuel B. Hand, Dean of Vermont Historians* (2017); *The Rebel and the Tory: Ethan Allen, Philip Skene, and the Dawn of Vermont* (2019); and *Vermont Heritage: Essays on Green Mountain History, 1770-1920* (2020). The productivity and quality of his work attracted regional and national attention. Nick's new insights into eighteenth-century Vermont, challenging age-old assumptions and framing Vermont's formative decades in fresh and creative ways, were particularly significant. I was pleased to have a hand in four of those five books. We made a good team as collaborative equals, along with our partners on those initiatives—Kristin Peterson-Ishaq, David Donath, John Duffy, and Gary Shattuck.

Nick didn't live to complete one book I urged him to write: his autobiography. Vermont has had a long succession of historians and biographers, but few of us have written about our own lives. Nick had a distinguished career, knew and worked with many Vermont leaders on a wide range of issues and ideas, and had a knack for storytelling that would make an interesting book. I advised him to write more than just "this is what I did," to put more of his heart into it, tell us "this is why" and "this is how I felt/feel about it" in order to produce something special. It took time, but in April 2022 Nick told me he was going to start by writing an article for *Vermont History* with a title like "The Development of a Vermont Historian." His final illness kept him from accomplishing that goal, and it will fall to someone else to tell Nick's story.

I've spent much of my career researching and writing about the history of Vermont and its historians, and I think I have a good grasp of the two-century continuum of leadership in our field. I may be a little short on objectivity, given how important Nick was to my career and how much I cared about him, but I think I'm on solid ground saying that he stands

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among the most important and influential individuals who have labored in the vineyard of Green Mountain history. He was a splendid classroom professor, who introduced thousands of UVM students to Vermont history; an outstanding editor of *Vermont History* and for dozens of friends and colleagues whose books and articles he improved without credit; for decades a powerful voice at cultural heritage board meetings, symposia, and conferences; an influential friend of Vermont political leaders in shaping policies and legislation on Vermont heritage issues; in his prime, a remarkably effective public speaker with scholarly and popular audiences alike; and a productive, thoughtful writer on Vermont history from the 1750s to the 1920s. It's hard to think of any Vermont historian who could top that versatile array of qualities and accomplishments. I think of Nick as the last of the Big Three at UVM—Tom Bassett, Sam Hand, and Nick—whose contributions to and influence on Vermont history between 1960 and 2020 were so important and so wide-ranging. I hope there are young Bassetts, Hands, and Mullers out there. Vermont will need them, and they will have big shoes to fill.

Ave atque vale, old friend.

J. KEVIN GRAFFAGNINO