Happy Birthday Vermont! Celebrating 225 Years of Statehood

While Vermont initially formed as a republic in 1777, this year marks the 225th anniversary of Vermont’s birth as a state. Thomas Jefferson signed the act that, on March 4, 1791, admitted Vermont into the nation as America’s fourteenth state.

A myth has long endured that Vermont’s constitution includes a secession clause. While this is not true, the Vermont Statehood Bicentennial Commission used the rumor as a starting point to discuss state government issues with the public. A series of debates on whether or not Vermont should secede were held throughout the state, moderated by then-Lieutenant Governor Howard Dean. At the end of each debate, attendees were given the opportunity to vote on the issue, and in every town in which a debate was held, Vermonters voted in favor of secession.

Some readers may remember Vermont’s bicentennial celebrations of 1991. That milestone showcased the independent spirit that Washington spoke of, and was an opportunity to consider what statehood meant for Vermont.

The journey leading to that act was not simple. Early in Vermont’s republic days, the United States Congress disseminated various resolutions regarding Vermont’s requirements for joining the union. Tensions were high between Vermont and the federal government. George Washington was concerned about the situation and wrote a letter to Virginia Representative Joseph Jones, expressing his stance against armed intervention in Vermont. Of Vermonters, Washington wrote “the inhabitants, for the most part, are a hardy race...having acquired property there, would be desperate in the defense of it...”

A more quiet celebration was held for the recent anniversary, when the Vermont History Museum in Montpelier hosted a birthday party. Local cider makers were amongst the exhibits to celebrate moments in Vermont’s history, along with tastes of Vermont’s agricultural heritage. The 225th anniversary of Vermont’s state origins allows us to reflect on the historical and national significance of entry into the union and how it affects present-day Vermont citizens. And while you may need to wait awhile for the tricentennial celebration, you can read Vermont’s original constitution, the full Washington letter, and follow the road to statehood on our website: https://www.sec.state.vt.us/archives-records/state-archives/exhibits/statehood.aspx
Inspired by a poem found in the archival records of the Vermont State Hospital, artist Sarah-Lee Terrat created a unique mural to grace the lobby walls of the new Waterbury State Office Complex. The complex sits on the site of the hospital, which closed its doors after Tropical Storm Irene in 2011. The hospital operated for over a century, and it was the memory of the place that the Art in State Buildings Program wanted to capture with an art installation. Upon learning she was a finalist in the contest to create art for the new space, Terrat went to the hospital’s archival records housed at the Vermont State Archives, the source that documented the story she wanted to tell.

The spirit of the mural came from a poem by a former patient, Jean Killary. Creating what she called a “digital quilt”, Terrat layered the birch trees from Killary’s poem over images of State Hospital records and photographs. With permission from Killary’s family, the poem is now engraved on a wall next to the mural it inspired.

Filmmaker Bryce Douglass, captivated by Terrat’s story and process, created a documentary about the mural. Both Douglass and Terrat will be speaking at the Waterbury Historical Society on Wednesday, April 27th, when the documentary will be shown. Please visit the Historical Society’s website for more information about the event. Records of the Vermont State Hospital are available for public research in the Vermont State Archives Reference Room.

Vermont Counterfeiter: Bristol Bill’s Bogus Bills

During the mid-18th century, the United States lacked a standardized banknote. Financial institutions all over the country would issue their own notes, and counterfeiting was widespread. Some estimates state that ten percent of bank bills were counterfeit during this period—a staggering amount that destabilized the American economy. It is no surprise, then, that the price was high for anyone caught counterfeiting.

An example of this period of American history played out right here in Vermont. William Warburton—alias “Bristol Bill”—brought his criminal gang to Groton, where they focused their enterprise on the production of counterfeit notes. Bill and his partner in crime, Christian Meadows, were arrested in 1849 and committed to the Windsor State Prison after their trial in 1850. Bristol Bill proudly embraced his criminal identity, listing his occupation as “burglar” on the 1850 census. His partner, Meadows, was more cautious, declaring himself as an “engraver”. This caution would be in his favor as he was allowed out under guard to continue his skilled engraving work. He would later be pardoned by Governor Fairbanks in 1853 for his model behavior. A few years later Bristol Bill would also be pardoned, due to his ill health. Both men left Vermont for other adventures.

This case is documented at the Vermont State Archives in a number of record series, including court cases, state prison registers, and the Manuscript Vermont State Papers. Read more about the story in our online spotlight and in the Burlington Free Press History Space column.
Upcoming VSARA Events

**Vermont History Expo—June 18th & 19th**

The Vermont History Expo is a biennial summer tradition hosted by the Vermont Historical Society at the Tunbridge Fairgrounds. The upcoming Expo focuses on the power of water in Vermont history. Come and learn about everything from famous floods to favorite swimming spots, presented by nearly 150 different history and heritage institutions, including the Vermont State Archives.

VSARA archivists will be on hand with an exhibit about the state response to flooding disasters and a presentation on the use of archival records in natural disaster research. We hope you’ll join us!

For more information, please visit [http://vermonthistory.org/visit/events-calendar/vermont-history-expo](http://vermonthistory.org/visit/events-calendar/vermont-history-expo).

From the Vault

The start of spring in Vermont is a sure sign of the maple season! Sugaring has been well documented throughout the state’s history, including this photograph from Montpelier in 1955.

You can find this image and many more in the Department of Tourism and Marketing photographs at the Vermont State Archives series [A-078](http://www.sec.state.vt.us/archives-records/state-archives).

Follow us on Twitter!

See daily documents, historical moments, and more by following us [@VTStateArchives](https://twitter.com/VTStateArchives).

On This Day in History

Just in time for spring—check out these weather, water, and environmental related moments in Vermont’s history!

**1970 (April 4)** – The Vermont Legislature passed Act 250, the Land Use and Development Law. It was designed to protect Vermont’s scenic landscape, and was the first legislation of its kind to be passed in the nation.

**1927 (May 11)** – A compact was signed between Vermont and New York to establish the Lake Champlain Bridge Commission, giving the authority to construct, maintain, and operate a bridge. The Lake Champlain Bridge opened in August of 1929 and was demolished 80 years later.

**1816 (June 8)** – Six inches of snow falls over most of Vermont in what became known as [the year without a summer](http://vermonthistory.org/visit/events-calendar/vermont-history-expo).

Contact Us

Have research questions?

**Contact the VSARA Reference Room!**

1078 US Route 2, Middlesex
Montpelier, VT 05633-7701
Phone: (802) 828-2308
Fax: (802) 828-3710

Email: [archives@sec.state.vt.us](mailto:archives@sec.state.vt.us)

Visit our website!

[http://www.sec.state.vt.us/archives-records/state-archives](http://www.sec.state.vt.us/archives-records/state-archives)