

## The Archival Mirror

Recently Vermonters, public figures and private citizen alike, have celebrated Vermont's long history of promoting civil liberties and civil rights. The lodestar of these reflections is reference to Vermont's 1777 Constitution, the first American constitution to abolish adulthood slavery. These reflections on civil rights have been spurred by the events in Charlottesville, anti-immigrant rhetoric and actions, stories of racial bias in Vermont schools, and too many other sad realities of our time.

The 1777 Constitution did not, however, remove our human natures. The strengths, and foibles, of our humanity remained. Indeed, according to research by Amani Whitfield and others, the 1777 Constitution did not even immediately end slavery in Vermont.

Similarly, the 19<sup>th</sup> amendment did not bring equality for women. Civil unions and gay marriage legislation did not end anti-LBGTQ sentiments, and so on. Vermonters, like humanity at large, have to grapple with the worst and best of our nature to define what we mean by—and who we include within—our concepts of civil liberties and rights. It can be a

long and painful process for those excluded, from Native Americans to recently arrived immigrants and refugees. And again, current events remind us there is no unbroken ascent toward a fully equal society.

Within repositories around Vermont are records detailing how these strengths and foibles played out over time. Bethany Fair has done an excellent job of providing examples for tonight's talk.

This is too vast a record to cover in a short presentation. Tonight, I will focus on two sets of records. The first is Elin Anderson's field notes for her 1937 book on Burlington entitled, *We Americans: A Study of Cleavage in An American City*. Anderson's notes can be found within the records of the Commission on Country Life.

The second set of records can be found both here and within the Department of Libraries and relate to the 1966-71 fight to rename Niggerhead Pond, Mountain, and Brook in Marshfield. Even restricting myself to these two events there is too much to cover in a short presentation.

In the early 1930s Elin Anderson began researching the relationships, perceptions, and self-perceptions among Burlington's ethnic groups. The 1930 census identified 40% of Burlington's citizens as immigrants or the children of immigrants. That is a remarkable percentage given recent public pronouncements about the growing threat of immigrants to "American culture."

Anderson concentrated on the "old American" or Yankee stock; the Irish; French—and English—Canadians; Italians; and Jews. Smaller ethnic communities were explored but not surveyed—these included Germans, Greeks, Syrians, Asians, and African-Americans. I hasten to add that "Asians" were simply identified as Chinese and African-American was not a term of the 1930s.

Ms. Anderson started with informal discussions with leaders of several ethnic groups. Her team then visited individual households. They found people—mostly women—home in almost 4,500 households.

Subsequently 459 detailed questionnaires were sent to representatives of the targeted ethnic groups.

The responses, if often predictable, are fascinating. In his extended interview Levi Smith remarked, as a Protestant, that “The greatest Puritan influence in our life is the Catholic church...” He favorably cited the Catholics strict stands on drinking, dancing, movies, and other threats to our moral fiber.

He also opined that Burlington’s French Canadians were Republicans since they had a history of bribe taking and the Democrats had no money. Conversely the Irish, who did not expect bribes, were Democrats.

Smith felt French Canadians tended to vote as their employers told them while the Irish voted for anti-establishment candidates—and in the 1930s you couldn’t be any more anti-establishment than being a Democrat in Republican Vermont.

He shared numerous other opinions ranging from the differences between fat and thin Jews to the likelihood of inter-ethnic marriages (he thought the Yankees were the most likely to intermarry).

In his interview, Robert Roberts agreed with many of Smith's points though noted the French were beginning to vote Democratic. He disagreed on Yankees intermarrying: "There is blending to a certain extent but "our kind of people" can't help but feel superior and do not care to intermarry too much with other people."

Roberts did not feel the French or Irish were taking jobs away from the Yankees: "The Yankee would not want to work in the mills and factories, wants always to work on his own if at all possible."

Questionnaire responses indicated that at least some Irish felt they were losing mill jobs to French-Canadians--who were willing to work for less. Such sentiments have a familiar ring.

Mr. Roberts lumped Greeks, Syrians, and Jews together since, in his words, the "old Pharaoh is marked on them, in their nose and lower lip as if they were taken from the bas-reliefs of the Pharaoh's temples."

I must reluctantly move on without fully exploring the responses to the individual questions—again, I simply note they are fascinating. There are sections on how immigrant families worried about the

Americanization of their children or erosion of their religious beliefs—and this was particularly true among Jews and French Canadians.

Respondents broadly characterized each other in terms that might be familiar today: the Jews were sharp business people; the Yankees were leaders but also snobs; the Greeks ran restaurants; the Syrians were shopkeepers, etc. There are comments that stand out: one “Yankee” did not want to comment on the character of Jews since “our savior was a Jew.” A less than prescient respondent thought the Greeks and Italians restaurateurs could not succeed because the “day of foreign restaurants in Burlington is over.”

The questionnaires asked each group about their relationship with other ethnic groups. There are the expected derogatory comments and suspicions but there is a remarkable tolerance.

It is interesting that the Germans, though mostly admired, were still associated with WWI—a suspicion exacerbated by the ongoing Nazis rise to power. One respondent noted that the Germans were “very good under proper control, under bad leaders, worse than most.” Another

confessed, “Until the war I always liked them as citizens; it is hard to live down the war feeling enough to be fair.”

There are two exceptions to the general, if fragile, acceptance by other groups. To pick a medley of responses from the questionnaire on relations with the “Chinese”: “The yellow race is separate.” “No mingling; they can never be absorbed.” “They used to be good laundrymen; I don’t know about them now.” There are a few compliments, though they are somewhat backhanded. Said one respondent: “They [Chinese] sometimes surprise us by their intelligence.”

The other largely shunned group, as you probably suspected, were African-Americans. While there were some positive, if tempered, comments—“The negro’s opportunity is greater than it used to be in this community; education has helped them”—most were along the lines of “They can never be assimilated into the Aryan race.” “They cannot mix nor intermarry.” “Those we used to have were very fine but they have degenerated; a northern [nig---] grows too independent.”

These 1930 stereotypes bring us to the 1960s and the struggle to rename Niggerhead Pond, Mountain, and Brook in Marshfield. I first encountered the fight in an unidentified/undated newspaper report entitled, “Niggerhead, Damning or Decorous.” Research suggests the article is from 1966 and was in the Times-Argus. The article opens with: “Niggerhead Pond, a “vicious dehumanizing epithet” or a quaint Vermont name for a 90 acre pond in Marshfield?”

Opponents of the name change called it a “picturesque” title. They denied this was a civil rights issue; those who saw it such were “allowing their imaginations to work overtime.” Some opponents fell back on the tried and true argument that those seeking the change were from away. As one put it, “we don’t want anyone coming in here and telling us what’s wrong with us.” That many petitioners for the name change were Goddard students and faculty did not help. At Marshfield’s 1966 town meeting town residents opposed changing the name, 91 to 16. The Board of Libraries bowed to the wishes of the town and the weight of the petitions favoring retention of the name.



So it stood until 1971. Again, the Library Board received petitions for and against the change. Again, opponents of the change cited the insidious influence of outsiders. One pro-Niggerhead petition read, in part: “We submit that these names have been in existence for many years; that the names were never intended to show disrespect to any one; that the only people dissatisfied with the names are newcomers to Vermont who represent a philosophy entirely foreign to that of Native Vermont born people.” After darkly warning that caving on the name change would let newcomers take over the whole state, the petition asserted that, “there has never been a racial problem in Vermont and if there ever is such a problem it will be because of the efforts of these people...”

Some opponents of change went so far as to analyze signatures on pro-change petitions. They looked at four petitions totaling 411 signatures and found: Goddard students, past and present—225; UVM, 135; Residents of Vermont, 51.

The Board of Libraries received numerous letters supporting retaining the name. J. Paul Giuliani, a noted Montpelier attorney, wrote: “The racial slur found by the hyper-sensitive guardians of public sensibilities was not intended when Niggerhead Pond was named, nor, I submit, can it be found today...The arguments advanced to support a change of name are specious at best and at worst bespeak intellects whose sense of propriety is totally out of touch with reality and history.”

One letter I found disturbing was from the editor of state papers, the predecessor office to state archivist. In it he mentions historic maps showing the names and then offers various definitions—Niggerhead was a botanical term, a naval term, a logging term, and so on. This led my predecessor to argue: “In view of the very widespread and accepted use of the term...throughout the English language, it is a question whether the current disenchantment with the word by a relative minority should outweigh its broad acceptance in American and British dictionaries.” He did not, however, examine why Niggerhead was applied to various flowers, tussocks, etc.

Though not as numerous there are pro-name change letters among the preserved records. One powerful letter, from Laurence McGrory of UVM (an African-American), read in part: “There are many arguments which could be leveled at the “Niggerhead” issue. Obviously, the term is an intense insult to every Black person. Among other things, it is a constant reminder of what white America has tried to make us for almost 400 years, and, I might add, of what many of us have been taught to believe of ourselves.”

McGrory ended by writing: “I do not ask you merely to change a name. My request is larger than that. I ask that you muster the courage to examine your souls, and that you ask of yourselves, why this need to continue such derogatory acts? Why the need to use every device imaginable to feel superior to someone?...Of course “Niggerhead” should go, whether or not black people live in Vermont. White people should be offended by such language. But, more importantly, if we are ever to be a nation of humans, capable of humanistic behavior, the totality of racism must go.”

The debate drew national attention. On April 6, 1971 U.S.

Representative Shirley Chisholm of NY wrote the Library Trustees: “In this era of progressiveness, when we are attempting to bring about peaceful coexistence in our Nation, it would seem that the eradication of such a name with racist overtones would be [a priority]..Remember—the Dark Ages of outright racism are not that far behind us. It only takes a minute step to place us too far back on the “equality scale.” I am sure that this is not the desire of the people of Vermont.” These words from 1971 have a certain poignancy in 2017.

Still there was resistance. A letter sent to Governor Deane Davis on April 8th suggested “that the name be changed to “White Trash.” This will show that white people do not feel sorry for themselves and perhaps black people can take a lesson from this.”

Contexts change and 1971 was not 1966. Vermont found itself confronting reminders that racism did exist in the Green Mountains.

UVM’s Kake Walk stumbled to an end in 1966. An African-American minister’s house was shot up in Irasburg in 1968 and rather than

investigate the shooting the state police arrested the minister for adultery. In 1968 Governor Philip Hoff sought a youth exchange program with New York City. It would, among other things, bring 700 African American children to Vermont for summer programs. The program caused an outcry among Vermonters and within the legislature. Gov. Hoff has long held that the proposal caused his defeat in the 1970 race for the U.S. Senate. Racism did not seem so distant in 1971.

An April 21, 1971 Library hearing to take testimony on the name change was disrupted by a pro-change speaker and was abruptly adjourned. Yet support for the name change had grown in Marshfield and the town selectboard of Marshfield wrote the Board saying they supported changing the name—in part because of having the town called racist. Governor Davis reluctantly agreed the name change was prudent, On May 18, 1971 the Library Board agreed to drop Niggerhead as a place name within Marshfield.

So what is the point of all this? First, Vermonters are not exempt from human nature. This does not make us bad; it makes us human. That we

must continually wrestle with our biases and prejudices makes us, to me, a lot more interesting than our self-perceptions sometimes suggest.

Second, Elin Anderson's questionnaires and surveys underscore the reality that we are an immigrant nation. They recorded how different immigrant groups perceived themselves and each other. The responses support the contention that we are less a melting pot than a tossed salad.

Third, national propaganda campaigns, as was waged against the Germans during WWI, leave lasting impressions. Whether aimed against a nationality or a religion, hate, once decanted, cannot easily be re-bottled.

Fourth, "diversity" and "politically correct" have become negative reference symbols to too many. As the five-year struggle to rename Niggerhead Pond illustrates; a discussion among white Vermonters about what constitutes a racist term is deeply flawed. Without diversity we cannot have a full or informed dialogue.

Finally, I am giving this talk during Archives Month in the State Archives reference room. My talk was drawn from archival records, all

too many I left out in the interest of time. I found these records through the help of the staff and through my own engaged sense of curiosity.

Many of you may have taken a tour of the building tonight or at previous events. It is amazing when you look at the rows of records that capture our public dialogues from Vermont's founding to the present.

Collectively they tell the story of who we are. Those records, those stories, await you; the first step is as simple as saying, "I wonder..."