



Brickyards and Frameworks: A Retrospectus and Prospectus on Vermont History Writing

Under the stimulus of the breakup of some old models of national, state, and local history, and armed with a panoply of new methods and models for dissecting our past, we have assembled a brickyard of small studies. Many of these reveal small gems of new insight about the lives of individuals, the look of communities, and the operation of institutions in our immediate neighborhood or region. Some new ideas about Vermont's history lie among the bricks, but we may lack any common agreement on what the final product is supposed to look like.

By MICHAEL SHERMAN

BASSETT'S BIBLIOGRAPHY (1981)

Just over two decades ago, Tom Bassett did what I have been asked to do for this symposium: to take a reading on what has been accomplished in Vermont history and assess future needs and directions. He had just completed the work of compiling a bibliography of Vermont history, volume four of the *Bibliographies of New England History*, a series that continues to this day. It is a surprisingly

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thick volume: 293 pages, double column, folio size, that includes 6,413 entries. One of the thickest volumes in the series, it took its publishers by surprise—they anticipated 3,000 entries—and created new challenges for those responsible for raising the funds to publish it. As Samuel B. Hand noted in his memorial essay for Bassett published in *Vermont History*, that did not concern Tom himself in the least. His job, as he saw it, was simply to be comprehensive.¹

Having completed the task of assembling such a large list of writing about Vermont history, Bassett wrote an eloquent foreword that says a lot about what he discovered and what he concluded about the state of Vermont historiography. Much of what he had to say twenty-one years ago remains relevant to what I can say on this topic today.

Bassett himself was somewhat surprised by the results of his work. His bibliography succeeded but did not duplicate that of Marcus Gilman, whose *Bibliography of Vermont*, published almost a century earlier, itself included 7,000 entries. Musing on this prolific historiographical tradition, Bassett commented, “Here is a state with virtually no colonial period, a state . . . where nothing of national importance ever happened, and one which has always had the fewest people of any in New England. Can such a state have much ‘history’?”² Bassett offered three reasons for the astonishing productivity: “Vermont’s kaleidoscopic diversity as a border area[:] . . . the publicity that for fifty years has successfully identified Vermont as the epitome of old-fashioned rural democracy[; and] . . . the growing number of able writers on Vermont themes whose chief purpose is to entertain a broadening public grown more history-conscious.”³ Each of these deserves some comment.

Although Bassett did not elaborate on it, the idea that Vermont historiography up to 1981 had been driven by a “kaleidoscopic diversity as a border area” may surprise many of us who read and work in Vermont history. Bassett himself noted later in his foreword that “one clear need in any revision [of Vermont history] is to shape a new, comprehensive image of Vermont with a strong ingredient of ethnic history. Indians have been treated as if they never lived here . . . Immigrants who were refugees from the rural poverty of Quebec or Ireland, from American slavery, or the pogroms of czars and Hitler, found nothing written in Vermont history to say that they counted.” He pointed to Elin Anderson’s study of Burlington, *We Americans*, published in 1937, as the pioneering work in an emerging historiography of ethnic groups.⁴ But the tradition was slow to develop, Bassett argued, because those groups were slow to gain recognition or power. Perceived as victims or pariahs, ethnic groups remained outside the mainstream of public life and, Bassett argued, outside the purview of those who wrote about Vermont’s

past until the end of World War II. In 1981 he observed, “we are on the threshold of major historical attention to them.”⁵ Researchers in this field faced some formidable challenges. Mastering languages, learning the techniques of taking and analyzing oral history and archaeology, and identifying, locating, and using other nontraditional sources, not always found in libraries presented the first layer of obstacles to progress in developing this line of inquiry. At the conceptual level, “the idea [of ethnic history] calls for comprehension of the interaction between earlier and later arrivals and the complexities of the interlocking community institutions that the newcomers changed.” Bassett concluded somewhat sadly that “the field is strewn with unfinished work.”⁶

What else could Bassett have meant by his reference to Vermont as a place of “kaleidoscopic diversity as a border area”? His recommendations later in the foreword for more study of religion and religious institutions, schools, literary and cultural institutions, politics, and the Vermont economy for all periods following the Civil War suggest some of the topics he saw as elements in the kaleidoscope and some of the landmarks for identifying change over time in a society so often seen both within and without as a place unchanging and unchanged.

More interesting, however, is Bassett’s reference to Vermont as a “border area.” When he wrote his foreword, the historical profession was busily re-examining the meaning and usefulness of Frederick Jackson Turner’s “frontier thesis,” proposed in 1893. Turner saw American history as a succession of reinventions, adapting a model of evolution to the movement and development of society. American history, he argued, was a continual reinvention of institutions, “a recurrence of the process of evolution in each western area reached in the process of expansion. Thus,” he claimed, “American development has exhibited not merely advance along a single line, but a return to primitive conditions on a continually advancing frontier line, and a new development for that area. American social development has been continually beginning over again on the frontier. This perennial rebirth, this fluidity of American life, this expansion westward with its new opportunities, its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society, furnish the forces dominating American character.”⁷

I do not know if Bassett meant to join in this debate with his comment, but his substitution of the idea of Vermont as a “border area” for “frontier” is provocative. It suggests neither a clash of cultures nor the obliteration of the successive waves that Turner evoked in his imagery, but rather a porous political, intellectual, and cultural environment, perhaps even concentric circles, where ideas and institutions are continually adopted from neighbors and adapted to local needs and conditions.

For Vermonters used to thinking, hearing, and writing about themselves as an isolated, exceptional society, as much of the historiographical tradition that Bassett included in his bibliography insisted upon, his suggestion that a porous border was a factor stimulating historical writing is an important counterpoint. Perhaps we might profit from Bassett's suggestion that we think of ourselves not on the edge or fringes of regional or national history but in the middle of several contexts that are less traditionally and rigidly defined by state or national borders.⁸ Such a revisioning of our history would do much to help us think again and perhaps more constructively about Vermont "exceptionalism."

That theme counted as Bassett's second "reason" for the large amount of historical writing about Vermont: its reputation or identification as "the epitome of old fashioned rural democracy." Vermont's historiography has long been dominated by the telling and retelling of its dominant myth—as Bassett called it—of its founding as the determined effort of a few leaders dedicated to forging an independent state in the vacuum created by the collapse of New France and the rise of a New England, and between the questionable authority of colonial New Hampshire and the oligarchy of New York. That historical tradition, embedded in Ethan Allen's narrative of his triumph at Ticonderoga followed by his humiliating capture in Montreal and treatment as a prisoner of war, was transmitted through the historical writings of Samuel Williams, Ira Allen, and Zadock Thompson, and fixed in the imagination of every Vermont school child for another century through Daniel Pierce Thompson's novel, *The Green Mountain Boys*. "Few challenged this myth," Bassett wrote in 1981, "until half a century ago. The guardians of the temple defended it vigorously against the occasional outsider." Only in the late 1970s, Bassett observed, did the myth begin to give way to revisionism by more recent historians, such as J. Kevin Graffagnino, H. Nicholas Muller, and Charles Morrissey. "Gradually," Bassett observed, "new arrivals found the Allen myth one to which they could not relate. Yet the force of tradition scours a channel that is hard to divert. The revision of Vermont history has only recently begun," he commented, "Now I add my voice, but with the warning that today's history becomes tomorrow's folklore."⁹

The scores of town histories written for the 1976 national bicentennial tended to reinforce the older story rather than take up the newer one. In a period of lingering distrust of national government in the wake of the Vietnam War, Watergate, an energy crisis born of petroleum shortages created by the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries, and out-of-control inflation, Vermont exceptionalism, Vermont

as “the epitome of old fashioned rural democracy,” held on in popular imagination and consequently held its grip on much of Vermont historiography. It continues to hold its grip on Vermonters’ imaginations and their view of the relationship of the past to the present. The image of Ethan Allen is invoked frequently and freely to market everything from furniture to bowling. It is omnipresent in Vermont politics as a metaphor for rugged individualism and antistatism.¹⁰

The third factor accounting for the abundance of Vermont historical writing is what Bassett identified as the profusion of “able writers on Vermont themes whose chief purpose is to entertain a broadening public grown more history-conscious.” Professional history, that is, history written by professionally trained scholars, came late to Vermont, and tended to concentrate on the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. During the interwar period of the 1920s to early 1940s emerging scholars at major institutions began to be attracted to Vermont topics. Bassett mentions Edward D. Andrews and John C. Huden at Yale, Harold F. Wilson and Lewis D. Stilwell at Harvard, Florence Woodard and Chilton Williamson at Columbia, David M. Ludlum at Princeton, and Walter T. Bogart at Stanford, whose works, now considered classics, were the result of their Ph.D. dissertations. But “clergy, teachers, and lawyers, less frequently editors and physicians, wrote the earlier histories,” Bassett notes, and “members of the same professions are writing Vermont history now, with additions from the fields of publishing, reporting, publicity, and book dealing. . . . This growth in the Vermont historian pool,” he explains, “came partly with the recent immigration of many with leisure, skills, and interests in the local past. It has also grown out of a conscious policy adopted by the State Bicentennial Commission to involve as many as possible in historical work, and therefore to emphasize town projects.”¹¹

Bassett wrote this foreword at the end of a period in the 1960s and 1970s when social and political turmoil divided the nation, when our national institutions and our national history seemed sullied and discredited by Vietnam, Watergate, the energy crisis, the revolution in Iran, and repudiation of American influence around the globe. It was a time, too, when the history profession became bitterly divided within itself. “The new historians,” a generation of scholars that entered the profession during the era of the civil rights and antiwar movements, were disillusioned by narrative history and by what they perceived to be a patriarchal, jingoistic perspective in the writing of history. Many were devoted to the methods and techniques of quantitative social sciences, and most were eager to rewrite history to include ethnic minorities, women, the socially and the economically invisible and historically

silenced. They had an enormous effect on changing the direction of American historiography, but before that happened, they alienated many older colleagues (Bassett, significantly, not among them) and many readers outside academia. By contrast, a feel-good history like the nationally televised “Bicentennial minutes” helped feed a taste for a more pleasant and heroic past and nostalgia for vaguely defined “good old American values.” The popularity of Alex Haley’s *Roots* likewise opened an avenue for the personal exploration of the past through genealogy and family history. The proliferation of town historical societies and town histories during the national bicentennial picked up these themes of quieter, more settled, less volatile times and places on the American cultural landscape. Much of this emphasis is reflected in Bassett’s compilation, in his observation that three-fifths of the entries he put into the *Vermont Bibliography* came from serial publications, and his comment that “most of these addressed . . . a popular audience. This is journalistic history,” he commented, “sometimes superficial, but at its best, as in *Vermont Life*, linking background with contemporary significance.”¹²

Far from being scornful of the efforts of local amateurs, collectors, antiquarians, and journalists, Bassett recognized the power of their work to shape attitudes and opinions, as well as the contribution they made to the formation and perpetuation of a Vermont identity based on some perception of Vermont’s past. “Vermont history can entertain and touch the imagination,” he admitted. “Yet both common readers and professional historians always have an underlying need for a story that will tell who Vermonters are, that will identify Vermont character. What habits, attitudes, and events have they shared with other kinds of people, and what makes them different? As Vermont character slowly changes, Vermont history (the story that explains how Vermonters have come to be what they are) needs revision.”¹³

Bassett had some recommendations for how that revision ought to proceed. In general, he called for more research and writing on Vermont after the Civil War. He wanted to see more work on religion, with attention to the effects of shortages of pastors and rural isolation on hierarchical denominations, and examination of the centralization in recent times of denominations with congregational polity. He wanted to see more study of education, how schools reflect society, the hybrid institution of the academies, female seminaries, and the Vermont public high school. He also wanted to see more on higher education in Vermont. He was especially interested in the history of what he called “faltering and deceased” institutions: New Hampton Institute of Fairfax, Windham College of Putney, Mark Hopkins of Brattleboro, Goddard

College of Plainfield—an institution that continues to keep observers guessing—and the Putney Graduate School of Teacher Education. He wanted to see more attention to town literary and cultural institutions—libraries, newspapers, town literary, musical, and dramatic clubs—to understand how they educate and reflect adult society.

In the area of agriculture, he thought we needed closer examination of farm women and children, finances and debt during the earlier period of Vermont history, the role of the Farm Bureau as a social and cultural influence, and how farmers entertained themselves.

Except for railroads, he judged the economic history of Vermont “abysmally vague, especially for the late nineteenth century,” and he recommended specific topics in the stone industries, paper, scales, and other manufacturing areas.

Bassett urged more study of Vermont’s constitutional, legal, and political history. He hailed the work of Samuel B. Hand, Gregory Sanford, and Frank Bryan in analyzing the rise of Republican hegemony and its erosion after 1927; and he saw promise in the statistical methods of “the new history” to gain a deeper understanding of the endurance of the Republican Party in rural areas up to 1960.

Despite the fact that almost half the entries in Bassett’s bibliography were produced in the thirty years before it was published, “practically no historians,” he observed, had applied the theoretical or quantitative methods of the social sciences to studies in Vermont of “internal migration, social mobility, social classes, comparative site valuation, and the community organization of small towns and neighborhoods [or] to correlate voting behavior with other social factors.”

He called for more studies of the recreation industry, acknowledging “many suggestive essays” but asking questions about the role of transportation, photography, and public funding at the state and federal levels. He urged a close study of the papers of James P. Taylor at the Vermont Historical Society as one of the key figures in what had already emerged by 1981 as a key feature of the economy and economic history of the state.

Bassett ended his litany of unanswered, indeed of unasked questions, by calling for a closer examination of private lives and of the private and public lives of women. “When did women work in the fields as well as in the farmhouse? When did working women find liberation? Did disfranchised women have a vote in the household? Until we have more women’s history, human history cannot replace men’s history.”¹⁴

On many of these points, Bassett was remarkably in step and in tune with the trends in American historiography, and perhaps even prescient. On one point, however, he was surprisingly pessimistic and misread the signs that pointed to the future. Closing his essay, Bassett

noted that “although six sevenths of the titles in this volume were published since 1897, when Gilman’s *Bibliography of Vermont* appeared, the publication explosion that they represent may be over. Popular interest in history may recede, and high costs may check the output of books and articles in history.”¹⁵

SINCE BASSETT: 1981 TO THE PRESENT

Happily for us, popular interest in history has not receded and for whatever economic reasons—computerized typesetting and printing to offset the rising costs of paper, the rise of print-on-demand publication, perhaps even the arrival of on-line books and journals—the output of books and articles does not appear to have abated substantially. Volume seven of the *New England Bibliography*, which surveyed multi-state studies, listed 179 additional titles that included Vermont up to 1989; volume eight, the first update of the six states and multistate listings up to 1989, added 852 items to the Vermont list; volume nine, updating the entries to 1995, listed an additional 507. Volume ten, in process, will add about 350. So the two decades since Bassett published his bibliography have seen a total of at least 1,700 new items in Vermont history. A substantial number of these entries are M.A. theses and Ph.D. dissertations, and although several of those have turned into published articles or monographs, that is not uniformly the case. So we have lost some research findings as students formerly interested in Vermont history have gone on to other places and occupations. As in the earlier *New England Bibliography* compilation, a large proportion of the items listed in the update volumes come from serial publications. In addition to *Vermont History*, which continues to be a major outlet for publication of scholarship in this field, a few of the most active and useful serials in Vermont are the *Chittenden County Historical Society Bulletin* (started in 1966), *Rutland Historical Society Quarterly* (started in 1971), *Hazen Road Dispatch* (started in 1975), and the Center for Research on Vermont’s *Occasional Papers*. *Vermont Life* continues to publish pieces with historical interest, as it has done since its inception in 1946. A few publications have disappeared or been replaced. *Vermont History News*, which published short articles, no longer exists, but *Vermont History* will soon pick up that niche by including some of the items that appeared there. An interesting and useful journal, *Kfari: The Jewish Magazine of Rural New England and Quebec*, was published briefly between 1988 and 1991. The Central Vermont Chamber of Commerce published a magazine for ten years between 1984 and 1994 that included articles on regional history. A similar publication for Southern Vermont had a much briefer run of only four years from 1984 to 1988.

Some serials outside the state are good sources for material on Vermont history. *The New England Historic and Genealogical Register* and the annual proceedings of the Dublin Seminar for New England Folklife almost always contain one or two items with Vermont content, and occasionally an article with a Vermont focus turns up in the *New England Quarterly*. In general, therefore, numbers alone suggest that Vermont history is alive. Whether it is alive and well, intellectually vigorous, and relevant, is something that we need to examine a little more closely.

Bassett himself contributed substantially to the agenda he proposed in his 1981 foreword with publication in 1992 of *The Growing Edge: Vermont Villages, 1840–1880*, a remarkable distillation of his 1952 Ph.D. dissertation. In 2000, the last year of his life, he published *The Gods of the Hills: Piety and Society in Nineteenth-Century Vermont*. He also contributed several chapters to the 1991 bicentennial history of the University of Vermont and wrote an interesting article on documenting tourism for the Society of American Archivists that suggested a methodology for another one of the topics he urged upon the next generation of Vermont historians.¹⁶

A cursory examination of the historiography since 1981 shows that many of the other topics Bassett suggested attracted the attention of scholars and writers in the next generation. The last two decades have seen the publication of some new classics in Vermont historiography. First is the suggestion that several myths about Vermont needed re-examination. The founding myth—the story of Vermont’s origins as a state—is one of the stories that has received significant revision. Some of this appears in books such as Randolph Roth’s *The Democratic Dilemma: Religion, Reform, and the Social Order in the Connecticut River Valley of Vermont, 1791–1850* (1987), Michael Bellesiles’s, *Revolutionary Outlaws: Ethan Allen and the Struggle for Independence on the Early American Frontier* (1993), and in Donald Smith’s 1996 article in *Vermont History*, “Green Mountain Insurgency: Transformation of New York’s Forty-year Land War,” which distills his extensive dissertation research on the social, economic, and religious identities of over 600 Green Mountain Boys, and suggests a deeply pietistic element that has been largely ignored. Smith’s work was precisely the kind of social science research that Bassett called for, and while it does not make for easy reading, it expands our understanding of who fought for an independent state of Vermont. Similarly, Robert E. Shalhope’s study of Bennington from 1760 to 1850, which used individual life histories to trace the pattern and dynamics of social structure and association, both expands and deepens the story of early Vermont.¹⁷

The Allens, of course, continue to occupy the center of our founding mythology and history. Publication in 1992 of three volumes of writings by Ethan and Ira edited by Kevin Graffagnino, two volumes of letters of the Allen family edited by a team of scholars led by John Duffy in 1998, and articles on Levi Allen by Betty Bandel, Vi Luginbuhl, and Michael Bellesiles, and on Ira Allen by Kevin Graffagnino, continue to keep them there.¹⁸

Essays in the 1991 publications for the statehood bicentennial, *Celebrating Vermont: Myths and Reality* and *A More Perfect Union: Vermont Becomes a State, 1777–1816*, have helped refocus the myth of Vermont's political origins as a state and its "specialness." Several essays in those volumes called attention to the meaning of myth, as well as its function in creating and preserving communities and communal identity.¹⁹

Another prevailing myth was the "Vermont winter" described by Harold Fisher Wilson in his 1936 study of Northern New England's social and economic history up to 1930. Wilson characterized the late nineteenth century as a period of "abandonment and retrenchment," "rural decline," and the emptying of small towns as people left for the "lure of the city." Hal Barron's book about Chelsea, *Those Who Stayed Behind* (1984) and H. Nicholas Muller's study of Jericho, "From Ferment to Fatigue?" revised that interpretation by examining patterns of stability and movement, land exchanges, and the movement of certain kinds of economic activity, and consequently a sector of the work force, from rural to urban areas. A few articles on urban growth and development in the late nineteenth century have helped fill in some of the missing information that Bassett started to provide in his dissertation and book.²⁰

Some new work has appeared on Vermont businesses and industries, including Victor Rolando's study of iron, charcoal, and lime production, Allen Yale's work on the Fairbanks Company, Dennis Waring's new book on the Estey Organ Company, a recent compilation of essays and interviews on the woolen mills at Winooski Falls, two small but important collections of essays on the Barre granite industry to accompany exhibits at the Aldrich Public Library and T. W. Wood Art Gallery, and occasional articles on other Vermont businesses and manufacturers. We still do not have the survey of businesses that Bassett called for in 1981, but we are seeing the details of a livelier commercial and industrial history and its changes over time, especially as we begin to get histories of the last half century, such as Joe Sherman's *Fast Lane on a Dirt Road*.²¹

The study of Vermont's transportation industries received help with the work of Robert C. Jones and Robert W. Jones on Vermont railroads, Giro Patalono's memoir of working on the railroad, and interest

in Vermont's maritime history as a result of the work of Art Cohn, Kevin Crisman, Russell Bellico, and the Lake Champlain Maritime Museum.²²

As the tourism industry in Vermont has grown, so has interest in its history. Bassett noted a few early efforts and contributed to it with his article for the Society of American Archivists. The field has flourished with Dona Brown's work on nineteenth-century New England tourism, Holman Jordan's patient and detailed work with students at Castleton State College to document tourism and recreation at Lake Bomoseen, several other studies of regional and local tourism, and some tentative examinations of the ski industry. More will surely come of this in the next few years. The next step will be to tie tourism to environmental issues.²³

Useful recent studies of agriculture include Yale's *While the Sun Shines: Making Hay in Vermont 1789–1990*, Charles Fish's memoir and meditation on the family farm, *In Good Hands* (1995), and the Vermont Folklife Center's collection of interviews and photographs, *Families on the Land: Profiles of Vermont Farm Families* (1995), prepared as part of an exhibit on the family farm in Vermont.²⁴ The long lament over the long decline of agriculture in Vermont calls for a study to continue where Howard Russell, Harold Wilson, and Edwin Rozwenc left off in the first half of the twentieth century. And the complicated story of the construction and demise of the Northeast Dairy Compact, as well as whatever its successor may be, will surely find its historian in the next few years.

Some collaborative efforts to expand and bring into focus a view of the whole of Vermont's history deserve notice because they have opened avenues for some new ways to think about our past. In 1982 Samuel B. Hand and H. Nicholas Muller III brought out *In a State of Nature*, a collection of essays on Vermont history, many of which were drawn from *Vermont History*. By making accessible articles and some documents covering the entire range of Vermont history, *In a State of Nature* quickly became one of the most-quoted volumes in our historiography. The two multiyear lecture series sponsored jointly by the Fletcher Free Library and the University of Vermont's Center for Research on Vermont produced two volumes of essays. *Lake Champlain: Reflections on Our Past* (1987) and *We Vermonters: Perspectives on the Past* (1992) included some rehashing of familiar themes and interpretations, but also some revisionist essays that have helped move us beyond tired clichés and brought to a wide audience some recent research on every era from prehistory to the early 1990s. *Vermont State Government since 1965*, a volume of twenty-six essays written by twenty-eight authors and coauthors, published in 1999 under sponsorship of the Snelling

Center for Government and the Center for Research on Vermont, updated the classic study on Vermont government, published in 1965 by Andrew and Edith Nuquist. This new collection of studies led readers into some of the controversies around state government that were emerging as the volume came out and are still with us: land use and planning, education funding, welfare reform, judicial reform, election financing and reform. A whole issue of *Vermont History* in 1988 was devoted to the history and functioning of the Vermont State Constitution, following a state Supreme Court decision that admonished Vermont lawyers to be more mindful of the state's own constitutional history. A 1992 monograph by the late William C. Hill, a former justice of the state Supreme Court, provides historical and legal perspectives on Vermont's fundamental document, which remains one of the shortest and most difficult to amend of the state constitutions.²⁵

Document and primary source editing and publishing have slackened considerably in the past few decades, but the occasional document-with-commentary feature in history journals and a few efforts to provide collections of primary sources of Vermont's history are worth noting, if only to encourage more of that in the future. Reidun Nuquist, then librarian at the Vermont Historical Society, prepared several small sets of documents drawn from the VHS manuscript collections. Published as "In Their Words" in the late 1980s, the feature has appeared occasionally, with contributions by others working in the collections, in the years since she retired. Archivist Kelly Nolin discovered a valuable cache of Civil War letters by Samuel E. and Stephen M. Pingree at Lyndon State College. She transcribed, edited, and published several of them in *Vermont History*. A 1991 volume of the Records of the Council of Censors, edited by Paul Gillies and Gregory Sanford, provides a detailed and fascinating look into a century of constitutional thought, discussion, and reform from 1777 to 1870. In 1993 the Stowe Historical Society published a slim volume of autobiographical sketches of some of its early settlers. In 1994 the *Rutland Herald* published a generous collection of editorials written over a period of fifty years by its owner and publisher, Robert Mitchell. Jeffrey Marshall brought out a volume of Civil War letters written by Vermont soldiers and officers, as well as family and friends back home, and Donald Wickman edited two volumes of Civil War correspondent reports to Vermont newspapers. Samuel B. Hand, Kevin Graffagnino, and Gene Sessions collaborated on *Vermont Voices, 1609 through the 1990s*, a collection of primary sources that covers a wide range of historical topics and informs several issues of current interest and controversy.²⁶

I am emphasizing the written word, of course, but documents in

other media also give us enormous insight and information about our past. Our museums have by and large abandoned the old ways of exhibiting objects as static relics from the past and most installations now present objects in relationship to each other, in an interpretive context, and in a way that encourages and assists the visitor in constructing a story or approach to understanding an event, period, or society. As the twentieth century came to a close the *Rutland Herald* and *Barre-Montpelier Times Argus* published a visual history of the 1900s drawn from the collections of the Vermont Historical Society and the newspapers' own photo archives.²⁷ Several local historical societies have also produced photo histories of their communities and photographs play an important role in establishing context or providing historical information in many museum exhibits. The historic preservation movement has saved, documented, and by promoting adaptive reuse of buildings, allowed us to experience as well as see many important examples of the built environment of our past. Oral histories, radio, television, and film documentaries give us the opportunity to see and hear Vermont as earlier generations heard and saw it and to hear the authentic voices of individuals from the past reflecting on their experiences. Although more expensive than print, and presenting some formidable methodological and conceptual problems for historians that I will discuss further on in this essay, these formats have great appeal because they give to their audiences a keen sense of the reality and immediacy of the past. Similarly, the World Wide Web is breaking new intellectual ground in making documents, images, and voices from the past widely available in ways that were only dimly perceptible twenty years ago when Bassett proposed his agenda for Vermont history.

Another area that was just emerging two decades ago is environmental history. In 1985 historian David Ludlum, the author forty years earlier of a classic work in Vermont history—*Social Ferment in Vermont, 1791–1850*—published an altogether different study. His *Vermont Weather Book* became one of the best selling volumes ever published by the Vermont Historical Society and, exploiting a topic dear to every Vermonter's heart, opened a window onto environmental history. In 1986 geographer Harold Meeks published *Time and Change in Vermont* and *Vermont's Land and Resources*, two volumes that looked at Vermont history from the perspective of the land, its resources, and the human use and impact on those natural features. In the past few years we have seen the publication of *The Story of Vermont: A Natural and Cultural History* by Christopher McGrory Klyza and Stephen C. Trombulak (1999), and *Hands on the Land: A History of the Vermont Landscape* by Jan Albers (2000), two large-scale histories of the state written

from the perspective of natural history, land use, and ecology. The emergence of a field of environmental history also inspired David Lowenthal's new version of his biography of George Perkins Marsh, a collection of Marsh's writings, edited by Klyza and Trombulak, and Kevin Dann's wide-ranging book, *Lewis Creek Lost and Found* (2001). The convergence of science and history also informs Nancy Gallagher's important book, *Breeding Better Vermonters: The Eugenics Project in the Green Mountain State* (1999). All of these suggest ways that Vermont history can expand and become deeper by moving in tandem—in this case, even reconnecting—with studies in other academic disciplines.²⁸

Bassett in 1981 called for a revisioning of Vermont's politics and political tradition. The work, already underway with articles such as Lyman Jay Gould and Samuel B. Hand's classic article on the Mountain Rule (1970) and Frank Bryan's monograph *Yankee Politics in Rural Vermont* (1975), has moved forward in several directions. For several years Bryan and Clark Bensen published statistical analyses of Vermont elections. In 1985 Hand, Jeffrey Marshall, and Gregory Sanford published an article on the tension between local control—"The Little Republics"—and the growth of centralized state authority that has since become another anchor point for discussion of Vermont's political tradition. We also now have a few political memoirs and reports—George Aiken's *Senate Diary*, a volume of essays and recollections on Aiken's political heritage and legacy, Stephen Terry's articles on "the Hoff years," Deane Davis's autobiography, Madeleine Kunin's political autobiography, Ralph Wright's memoirs of his years in the Vermont House, Jim Jeffords's brief memoir of his recent political odyssey, and books about Bernie Sanders's years as mayor of Burlington—to guide us through an examination of a period of major change in the political environment of Vermont. Almost twenty years ago, William Doyle published *The Vermont Political Tradition*, an introduction to Vermont political history which he has updated periodically. Samuel B. Hand's recent book, *The Star that Set: The Vermont Republican Party, 1854–1974*, looks at the rise and decline of one of the defining political traditions in Vermont and examines the waning importance of party in the state and in American political life in recent years. The more systematic collecting of governors' papers and some legislators' papers by the State Archives, and the private and public papers of other political figures by the University of Vermont, Vermont Historical Society, and other repositories suggests that we could be on the edge of a new boom in writing about politics and political figures.²⁹

Bassett also called for renewed interest in the history of religion in Vermont. His own final work, *The Gods of the Hills: Piety and Society*

in Nineteenth-Century Vermont (2000), is an encyclopedic survey of the topic but, as the title indicates, carries the story only as far as about 1900. Bassett was an indefatigable collector of information about church history and religion in the twentieth century and he reviewed church histories regularly for *Vermont History* and other publications. The historian of religion in Vermont who wishes to continue the story will have a large number of these recent monographs to draw upon for writing the supplement to Bassett's book. For the period that Bassett himself covered, other studies, such as Jeffrey Potash's history of the Second Great Awakening in Addison County, Erik Barnouw's story of the early Mormon congregation in Benson, Randolph Roth's work on religious institutions as a factor in creating the democratic society of early Vermont, and Robert Shalhope's study of Bennington, which includes church polity, and the many articles on religion and piety that have appeared in *Vermont History* since 1981, including several articles from the first VHS symposium on Vermont from 1820 to 1850, give us examples and models for future studies of congregations, church polity, and the intersection of religious, political, and social history.³⁰

I do not share Bassett's enthusiasm for sectarian history or for the history of religion, although it is clear that religion had a very important role to play in the founding of the state and in shaping the politics of the eighteenth through mid-nineteenth centuries. It is also clear that the combination of the increasing tendency toward secularizing society in the twentieth century and the diversification of Vermont society in the years after 1970, presents a host of new challenges for historians interested in tracing the role of religion and spirituality and their relationships to democratic institutions in late-twentieth-century state and local history. We may also find through the examination of this topic in contemporary Vermont some ways to understand the tensions and dynamics of religion in democratic society generally. Moreover, the recent interjection and clash of specifically religious commitments into the debates over public policy issues such as abortion, civil unions, and public funding of sectarian education, demonstrate the need for a new look at religion in Vermont's history for the last hundred years.

The topic of religion in society leads almost inevitably to a discussion of race and ethnicity in Vermont. We are a society that continues to be seen from the outside, and in many ways continues to present itself to the world, as homogeneous: white, predominantly Protestant, mostly Anglo-Saxon. Internally, perhaps, we may see some change taking place to revise this image, but it is happening at glacial speed and is miniscule in scope. The 2000 census reported only 3 percent of Vermont's

population in the five categories officially counted as racial or ethnic minorities: Black or African American, American Indian, Asian, Hispanic or Latino, or “some other race.” That is an increase of only 1 percent since the 1990 census, whereas Vermont’s population as a whole grew by slightly over 8 percent in the ten-year period. We are still “the whitest state” in the nation and very likely among the least ethnically diverse.

Some research in the two decades since Bassett’s foreword has provided more information about the other ethnic and racial groups that have lived here for many generations, and in the case of the Abenakis, for many centuries. This is one area that needs much more work, and historians at the local level as well as in academic settings have begun to lay a good foundation for further study. The *Rutland Historical Society Quarterly* published between 1983 and 1985 a series of sketches of the many ethnic and national groups living in the Rutland and Proctor area and working in the marble industry. Barre historians have written about the Italian, Scottish, Spanish, and French-Canadian immigrants who came to work at the granite quarries and in the sheds. Gwilym Roberts’s recent book on the Welsh in the slate producing area of Fair Haven and Poultney fills in details from earlier studies of that area. Gene Sessions provided important insights into the social mobility of the Irish in Northfield, and R. D. Eno provided information about Jewish residents in Vermont’s Northeast Kingdom which he published in *Kfari*. An article by William Wolkovich-Valkavicius in *Vermont History* in 1986 gave us some information about a short-lived Lithuanian community in Arlington. We have yet to see a study of the Swedish farmers recruited in the late nineteenth century, some of whom moved down to Brattleboro, nor on some of the other smaller ethnic groups from eastern and Baltic Europe who worked in the Rutland area. The recent arrival of new immigrants from the former Soviet Union, the former Yugoslavia, and Africa give some indication that many communities in Vermont will soon have a much more ethnically diverse population than they had in the past.³¹

Vermont’s largest ethnic group, FrancoAmericans, has received some, but still inadequate attention, with studies by Betsy Beattie and Anne Pease McConnell, Peter Woolfson and André Senécal’s brief but important occasional paper for the Center for Research on Vermont, *The French in Vermont: Some Current Views* (1983), Woolfson’s study on FrancoAmericans done for the Vermont Advisory Committee to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights (1983), and Gerard Brault’s book, *The French Canadian Heritage in New England* (1986). Bassett discussed the early history of French Catholics and St. Joseph Parish, and Robert

Keenan and Rev. Francis Privé produced a study on the history of that parish from 1830 to 1987.³²

There is a very small body of material on African Americans in Vermont and this needs to grow. Ray Zirblis wrote an important study in 1996 for the Vermont Division of Historic Preservation on the Underground Railroad in Vermont that substantially revises the myth of Vermont's participation in antislavery and abolitionist activity in the period 1830 to 1850. Elise Guyette has been studying census data to understand the working lives of African Americans in the mid-nineteenth century. Don Wickman traced the lives and careers of African Americans from the Rutland area who fought in the Massachusetts 54th Regiment, and James Fuller has done remarkably detailed research on African American soldiers from Vermont in the Civil War that adds substantially to the lists that appear in the official roster. His research points to a larger and more widespread population of African Americans in the state than we have identified up to now. The oral history interviews with Daisy Turner of Grafton, conducted by Jane Beck, give us one view into the lives of African Americans in rural Vermont from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.³³

For more recent history, Vermonters' participation in the Civil Rights Movement, the end of Kake Walk at the University of Vermont, and the Irasburg Affair in 1968, have already drawn the attention of historians and journalists. Stephen Wrinn's book, *Civil Rights in the Whitest State*, brings all this together in the only comprehensive look at the topic so far.³⁴

Without question, the most dramatic revision of ethnic history in Vermont has concerned itself with rewriting the history of the Abenakis. Until the 1970s, the historiographical tradition portrayed Vermont as a "no-man's land" for the native people, who were thought to have used this area only as hunting and fishing grounds and as a pass-through, with no established or permanently settled communities, and virtually no presence after the end of the American Revolution. Gordon Day's work from 1945 until his death in 1993 on the language and identity of the native people in this area helped preserve and rekindle interest in Western Abenaki spoken and material culture. The Abenaki-English dictionary that he left unfinished came to fruition in 1995, along with a small phrase book and tape for pronunciation. His scholarly studies (some of which have been republished in a 1998 compilation) encouraged scholars in related fields to reexamine the assumptions and evidence of Abenaki presence after the late eighteenth century.³⁵

Fueled by the American Indian movement and the work of other

scholars such as Francis Jennings and James Axtell, studies of native history began to reframe the context, documents, and interpretation of information about Abenaki history in Vermont. In 1981, just in time to be included in Bassett's Vermont bibliography, William Haviland and Marjory Power published *The Original Vermonters: Native Inhabitants, Past and Present*, summarizing and synthesizing archaeological, anthropological, and historical evidence to suggest a continuous presence of Abenaki people in Vermont. John Moody's essay, "The Native American Legacy," in *Always In Season*, a catalog of essays and images edited by Jane Beck to accompany an exhibit with that title that traveled the state in 1982, helped strengthen the case for a continuous presence of Abenakis in Vermont with documentary and material evidence. Historian Colin Calloway published a series of articles in *Vermont History* in 1984, 1985, and 1986 that presented more evidence of Abenaki presence in this area from 1600 to 1800, and his book, *The Western Abenakis of Vermont, 1600–1800* (1990), brought together his research on the early period, with an epilogue that discussed the continuity and survival of Abenaki society into the twentieth century. Renewed efforts to examine and analyze archaeological sites reinforced the conclusions of continuous and permanent Abenaki settlements in the Champlain and Connecticut valleys, and by the time Haviland and Power brought out the revised edition of their groundbreaking book in 1994, the myth of a Vermont "empty" of permanently settled native people was in serious doubt, if not completely discredited. In his recent book of history and memoir, *The Voice of the Dawn: An Autohistory of the Abenaki Nation* (2001), Frederick Wiseman has challenged scholars to move beyond the prehistoric (i.e., pre-1609) and early historic periods to recognize the continued and continuous presence of Abenakis in Vermont. This represents one of the next major issues and challenges in Vermont historiography. The recent report of the attorney general of Vermont, challenging the Abenaki petition for recognition as a tribe by the federal government, emphasizes the ambiguity and indeed the lack of documentary evidence to substantiate Abenaki claims of community and continuity. This reliance on and use of written documentation as the only credible source for historical research will either compete with or have to be examined with care and subtlety against the Abenakis' use of and reliance upon tradition, folklore, material culture, and oral history to demonstrate that they have been here all along.³⁶

Bassett concluded his list of research and writing needs with an admonition, to borrow the famous quotation from Abigail Adams, to "remember the ladies." He listed a total of sixty-three items related to women's studies in the bibliography, and remarking on Faith Pepe's

important article, “Toward a History of Women in Vermont: An Essay and Bibliography” published in 1977, he urged continued research. The two update volumes of the New England Bibliography show a steady, if still inadequate, increase in women’s studies: forty-two new items in the 1988 update and an additional forty-four in the 1994 volume. A few of the landmark works published since Bassett’s bibliography include several oral histories compiled and published as, *Those Intriguing, Indomitable Vermont Women* (1980); *My Mama Rolled out of the Sleigh* (1988), and *A Diversity of Gifts: Vermont Women at Work* (1989); Deborah Clifford’s two articles in *Vermont History*, “The Drive for Women’s Municipal Suffrage in Vermont, 1883–1917” and “The Women’s War against Rum”; and an entire issue of *Vermont History* in 1988 devoted to women’s studies, including Constance McGovern’s summary, “Women’s History: The State of the Art,” and Marilyn Blackwell’s update of Pepe’s bibliography, which added almost 100 new manuscript sources, almost 50 new series of association records, and almost 250 new books and articles.³⁷ Other highlights of Vermont women’s history include Mark J. Madigan’s *Keeping Fires Night and Day: Selected Letters of Dorothy Canfield Fisher* (1993); *Roxana’s Children* (1995), an astounding and rich collection of letters exchanged between Roxana Brown Walbridge Watts and her eleven children, compiled by Lynn A. Bonfield and Mary C. Morrison; and Deborah Clifford’s recent biography of Abby Maria Hemenway, which, in addition to showing us many details of women in education, women and religion, and women and the arts, reflects on the tradition of Vermont historiography itself.³⁸

I have, I know, neglected many important contributions to Vermont historiography in this summary. Just one of those, for example, the writings about Vermont and Vermonter in the Civil War, would by itself double the size of this essay. As I turned each page of the New England Bibliography update volumes, and reviewed each issue of *Vermont History* since 1994—both articles and book reviews—I came across items that deserve mention and topics that one could easily argue should be inserted into this summary. But those items I have mentioned and the many I have had to leave behind adequately demonstrate, I hope, the depth and breadth of Vermont historical writing over the past two decades. They demonstrate as well the many ways writers of history in Vermont have fulfilled the promise outlined in Bassett’s retrospective and projective essay.

THE FUTURE OF VERMONT’S PAST: RUMMAGING IN THE BRICKYARDS OF HISTORY

The third part of my assignment was to discuss the future directions of Vermont historiography. The problem with my summary up to now is

that it has been filling in the blanks of Bassett's agenda for Vermont history. In twenty years, however, the historical profession and our audiences have moved into other areas of interest, adopted and added to the agenda new intellectual models, methods, and questions, and left behind some that appeared as new stars on the horizon when Bassett wrote his foreword.

I have already mentioned a few areas where historians are taking us and where there are obvious needs and opportunities. My own hobby horse is the need and possibilities for more work in the history of ideas and in cultural history. We have much to learn about ourselves and our past by looking more closely at our literature and creative nonfiction, the flourishing of the fine arts and performing arts in Vermont, especially in the last half century, and the popular culture of our own and earlier times. In many cases these cultural landmarks provide paths toward a larger understanding of local places, landmarks, and events in the lives of communities. The stories of their origins, production, and use give us glimpses of both the cultural and economic life of small towns and villages as well as the larger urban communities that dot the Vermont landscape. They can help us see the processes and effects of rural communities becoming increasingly connected to a wider world through the movement—via railroad and then of automobiles—of people and ideas, popular entertainment, fads and fashions, and changes in commerce and technology. We can extend the inventorying and analysis of art, architecture, music, and literature, to learn more deeply about the workings of communities and the ideas, activities, tastes, and texts that have shaped them, are shaped by them, unite, and divide them.

Much remains to do to tell the stories of the non-White, non-Protestant, non-Yankee groups who have called or who now call Vermont their home. And much remains to do to tell the stories of the women, whose voices and history have only recently emerged from the silence of earlier generations of historical writing.

We are only beginning to get a history of nonagricultural work and workers in Vermont. We have very little information about or analysis of small business owners and operators, the many small manufacturers of the pre-Civil War period into the 1890s. We should be looking at the revival and flourishing phenomenon of small businesses and craft businesses in the past few decades as one aspect of the impact on Vermont's economy of the "global marketplace" and cyberspace marketing. We have not yet adequately explored the lives and patterns of organized labor, and we know much less about hired and itinerant farm workers from the earliest times to the present.

We know a lot about Civil War soldiers, less about those who went to

war at other times, far less about those who stayed behind to mind the home front, and almost nothing about those who chose not to fight.

Those are just a few of the commonplace deficiencies of our historiography. While we are conducting this discussion of the future of Vermont historiography, we need to note and think about the resources for future historical research. The electronic media, museums, and the whole realm of “public history” are obvious landmarks on the current horizon. They provide new and wider access to information, to be sure, and they offer us new audiences for our work. But they also point to new hazards for collecting, interpreting, and disseminating information about our past. With the adoption and adaptation of new technologies for communicating, we are, for example, rapidly losing some of the most relied upon resources for historical research and writing: private correspondence and private reflections in letters and diaries. The dominance of electronic communication in our society, by telephone and email, means that most communication between individuals has become ephemeral and the record, indeed any trace of those exchanges either ceases to exist or never comes into existence. Curiously, in an age when we complain that the private has become public, the only documents we will have in the future for reflecting on the past will be public ones. The unguarded statements and reflections that used to pass from person to person in letters or find their way into the coded language and format of diaries are rapidly disappearing. Oral history, homemade films (already a *passee* medium), videos (a passing medium), and digital imagery have already made the written word *passee* except for a few who stubbornly cling to the tradition. Where in the future will we find anything like Dorman Kent’s fifty years of diary keeping, or the diaries kept by three or four children that I had a student read for her study of childhood in nineteenth-century Vermont, or the hundreds of shorter, smaller diaries I once counted in the VHS collections, the boxes of letters kept by nineteenth-century medium Achsha Sprague, the two volumes of letters that passed among the Allen family, boxes of letters written and kept by James P. Taylor, or the uncountable volume of letters from Civil War soldiers that have informed us of every detail of camp and campaign life? I don’t write such letters to anyone in my immediate or extended family, and I do not know of many people who do. More commonly, I think, we will have to look into the published (sometimes self-published) works of memoir, personal essay, and journalism—including letters to the editor, op-ed pieces, and gossip column filler items in our daily papers.

One sign of the changing times arrived on my desk recently when I received for review in *Vermont History* a volume of commentaries

prepared for Vermont Public Radio.³⁹ However varied such commentaries are, and however much they may give us some insight into events and the culture of contemporary Vermont, they are the views and voices of a select, gregarious, articulate, opinionated, and self-confident few among us. Moreover, however personal and revealing they may be on the surface, all such items (except, perhaps, those produced as vanity publications) come to us mediated by their authors' own editing and revision and the additional editing and polishing that is the work of editors and publishers. In that process we lose much of the uniqueness of a voice—even as it is expressed in the eccentric spelling, punctuation, grammar, and vocabulary that so captivates us and puzzles us as we read the unmediated words of letter and diary writers from the past.

Over the past thirty or forty years historians have grown used to thinking of their work as uncovering and telling or retelling the stories of the ordinary lives of ordinary people to give context to the extraordinary events that pop up over the horizon. We are going to have to learn where to find the sources for those stories and how to use and interpret new kinds of sources if we intend to keep that task in our repertory.

This brings me to my final task: trying to see how some of the pieces of our current writing about the past might fit together to make a coherent whole.

To prepare for this challenge, I spent some time reading the addresses of the presidents of the Organization of American Historians and the American Historical Society for the past twenty years. Here, I thought, I might find a map of how leaders in the historical profession have been assessing current work, projecting needs for future work, and articulating a purpose for historical study. There are some interesting possibilities here, even for the small field of Vermont history.

Our generation of historians faces an unusual and interesting problem. Under the stimulus of the breakup of some old models of national and consequently of state and local history, and armed with a panoply of new methods and models for dissecting our past, we have assembled a brickyard of small studies, many of which reveal small gems of new insight about the lives of individuals, the look of communities, the operation of institutions in our immediate neighborhood or region. It is, as I hope I have demonstrated in the previous section of my talk, a fertile but also a bewildering brickyard. It's clear that some new ideas about Vermont's history lie among the bricks or are waiting to be assembled with them, but we may lack any common agreement on what the final product is supposed to look like. Finding our way to that agreement seems, in this era of diversity, globalization, deconstructionist thinking, and postmodern antisythesisism, an almost impossible task. I wish, six

years ago, instead of agreeing to try to write a one-volume history of Vermont, I had thought of the project that John Duffy invented and has since completed: an encyclopedia of Vermont history, to be published in 2003.⁴⁰ I do not mean to diminish the accomplishment or intellectual rigor that has gone into planning, executing, and assembling that formidable work, which started after I embarked on my task and will see light of day before the work I have done with my two colleagues will go into galley proofs. And I must acknowledge that Duffy had already written a one-volume history of Vermont in 1985, which he and Vincent Feeney revised for republication in 2000.⁴¹ But as I began my work, and especially as I have struggled to complete the final two chapters—from 1945 to the present (whenever that will be by the time I am truly finished)—I, too, looked around the brickyard of historical studies and wondered how to construct a coherent, convincing, and useful narrative out of the large and small elements so readily and abundantly available. Is it symbolic of our time, I wonder (or just my own failing as a historian, I may have to admit), that it seems easier and has certainly taken less time to assemble an encyclopedia of Vermont history than to write a history of Vermont? Would it have been easier to write such a history before the 1970s—before Vietnam, OPEC, and AIDS; before the Civil Rights Movement, Women’s liberation, the American Indian Movement, and civil unions?

In the novel, *Herzog*, Saul Bellow puts into the mind of his main character the sardonic aphorism—delivered as much to himself as to the students he is supposed to be lecturing—“what this nation needs is a good five-cent synthesis.” When I began working six years ago on a one-volume history of Vermont, I got a note from one commentator who urged me to “take the measure of Vermont.” Nothing in these six long years of reading and writing has frightened me as much as that one brief sentence. Why is it, I have pondered, that it seems so hard to “take the measure of Vermont”? Reading the comments of the stellar performers in my profession has at least helped me understand.

What are we trying to do when we write history? In her 1982 address to the Organization of American Historians Gerda Lerner, a pioneer in writing and teaching the history of women, asserted that “Making history means form-giving and meaning-giving.” We are called upon in this effort, not only to recall and record data and events; that is the important work of what the ancient and medieval world called “chroniclers” and what we now call journalists. Historians are expected to take one more step in the intellectual process because history, as Lerner notes, satisfies a variety of human needs:

1. History as memory and as a source of personal identity. As memory it keeps alive the experiences, deeds, and ideas of people of the past. By locating each individual life as a link between generations and by allowing us to transform the dead into heroes and role models for emulation, history connects past and future and becomes a source of personal identity.
2. History as collective immortality. By rooting human beings on a continuum of human enterprise, history provides each man and woman with a sense of immortality through the creation of a structure in the mind, which extends human life beyond its span.
3. History as cultural tradition. A shared body of ideas, values, and experiences, which has a coherent shape, becomes a cultural tradition, be it national, ethnic, religious, or racial. Such a “symbolic universe” unites diverse groups. It also legitimates those holding power, by rooting its source in a distant past.
4. History as explanation. Through an order of the past into some larger connectedness and pattern, historical events become “illustrations” of philosophies and of broader interpretative frameworks. Depending on the system of thought represented, the past becomes evidence, model, contrast to the present, symbol, or challenge.⁴²

I would make only two additions to this summary. In the discussion of “history as memory,” we should be sure to include the studies of anti-heroes and destroyers as examples to avoid emulating. And in the discussion of “history as cultural tradition” it is important—especially in the present context—to include among the traditions that we wish to study those that are local, that reside in our communities, for there is where we begin the process of building up a sense of our history as a state.

For my current purposes, I am going to set aside the issue of history as collective immortality, for, like Thomas Jefferson, I sometimes worry about society being caught in the grip of the dead hand of the past. As a historian and as a citizen living in contemporary Vermont, I often see the value of understanding the lives and conditions of those who preceded me in this place, but sometimes I see the necessity to let go of or move beyond some attitudes, values, and ways of doing things that were useful and valuable to Vermonters one hundred or two hundred years ago, but that may serve us less well precisely because our world, indeed our Vermont, is in some ways unlike theirs.

History as memory and as a source of personal identity. These days, historians are particularly interested in the problem of memory and how it sometimes confirms, sometimes supplements, sometimes deviates from, what we can document in a systematic way. Memory of course is selective and we can choose to forget as well as remember, so one task the historian faces is to reconstruct the past by using memories but

also by correcting them. More important, perhaps, is the observation of Charles S. Maier that “unlike history, memories do not assign causes or explain the past, but merely bear witness.” In this way memories can become the seedbed for myth (which can, but does not always, have explanatory power) and public rituals, which attempt to recreate a version or group conception of the past, often out of context of that past and, curiously, out of context of the present time in which the ritual itself is performed. Memory, in short is malleable, and as historian David Thelen argues, is “not reproduced, but constructed, and . . . this construction is made not in isolation, but as part of an individual’s interaction, both politically and socially, within the context of community.” While memory thus becomes a powerful medium for building and sustaining communities and identity within communities, we have to continue to be aware of the gaps between memory and history, even as we honor and use individual and communal memories as gateways to the past. Moreover, we have to be careful not to be trapped into making memory the only basis for using history. “The excessive involvement with memory” Maier argues, “reflects not a healthy concern for history but a cultural insecurity about the future and a loss of faith in transformative political action.”⁴³

History as cultural tradition. This item on Gerda Lerner’s list represents a particularly powerful strain in Vermont’s historical consciousness. In the past few years, as Vermonters have struggled with and sometimes over difficult public policy directions and specific laws—I’m thinking, of course, of Act 60 and the civil unions bill, but we could add Act 250, Act 200, or the current West Mountain reserve lands controversy—advocates on both sides have invoked a version of the past and individuals from the past to support their positions. When Senator Jim Jeffords abandoned the Republican Party in 2002, he invoked a pantheon of his predecessors who represented Vermont in the Senate and claimed a tradition of independence from party that encouraged his supporters, dismayed those who disagreed with his action, and probably would have astonished the very individuals whose ghosts he summoned up at his press conference.

We must be careful about how we use history to create and perpetuate cultural traditions. And I would argue that we have to be careful sometimes to pit history against tradition, which, as Lerner says, sometimes serves only to “legitimate those holding power, by rooting its source in a distant past,” and which I would argue has the potential of flattening the complexity and destroying the context of actions, ideas, and the perceptions of reality. For me, history demonstrates also, perhaps most of all, the possibilities of choice—a very modernist and

Western position, to be sure—the possibility of moving beyond what has been by acknowledging the past and assessing the benefits and harm we have inherited from it. Lerner, too, argued this point in her presidential address when she said, “We learn from our construction of the past what possibilities and choices once existed. Assuming . . . that the actions of the living and those of the dead are comparable, we then draw conclusions about the consequences of our present-day choices.”⁴⁴

History as explanation. It is that very construction of the past that turns the recitation of mere events, mere data, into a body of knowledge that is usable because it is coherent. And that, finally, brings me to a discussion of what we ought to be talking about. What are the topics or themes that will serve as an adequate medium for explaining our history, that might be the intellectual glue that will allow us reassemble the shattered Humpty-Dumpty of historical tidbits, or to return to my other metaphor, the frameworks that will allow us to use the bricks in our intellectual brickyard? The presidential addresses I read suggest some possibilities. Recognizing that each age, each generation, has its own questions and issues, I found in three addresses topics that seem to me important here and now.

In his presidential address to the Organization of American Historians in 1986, William E. Leuchtenburg astonished his audience by stating “that the historian’s next frontier is political history.” Writing barely a generation after Watergate and the Vietnam war era, which discredited politicians and led the historical profession into the examination of those groups who had been for so long excluded from and were thought to be the victims of local, national, and state political processes, Leuchtenburg astutely suggested that having abandoned political history, we had abandoned the one narrative thread that allowed us to see the interaction of the private and public lives of people in the past. Political history, he argued, provides the way to see and understand how group identity becomes ideology and how ideology becomes the agent of change that gives new groups power to effect change—directly or indirectly. While Leuchtenburg acknowledged an expanding definition of political history among his colleagues, he was clear in stating that for him, political history is “the history of the American state. . . . In truth, I do not see how we can conceivably write a credible history of this country and ignore the state.”⁴⁵

This analysis translates well to state history and to the history of Vermont. I am myself a reluctant convert to this position, but in my work on the history of Vermont I have come to understand and appreciate the complicated relationship, one might even say the dialogue, between political and social history. Bassett claimed to be surprised by the deep

historical tradition in a place where, here he quoted Charles T. Morrissey, “practically nothing of national importance ever happened.” I think one could argue convincingly, however, that precisely because Vermont was not in the forefront, examining its political history gives us insight into the dynamics and relationships between social and political identity, the role of ideology in shaping political institutions, and the processes by which those excluded from political power gain a voice and sometimes even get the opportunity to exercise power.

Moreover, as Leuchtenburg notes, “The force of the state has been especially manifest in our own century,”⁴⁶ and if there is one place where the clash of tradition with history in at least the last half of the twentieth century is obvious, it is the steady growth of government in Vermont, sometimes accepted reluctantly on the part of those who govern, often resisted, always debated and disputed.

Closely related to Leuchtenburg’s admonition to reexamine political history is Linda K. Kerber’s discussion of “The Meanings of Citizenship” in her 1997 presidential address to the OAH.⁴⁷ Who have been considered citizens, and who has been excluded from exercising the role, receiving the benefits, accepting the obligations of citizenship? What did citizenship mean in an earlier period and what does it mean today? “All over the globe,” Kerber writes, “individuals’ rights as citizens are being recast. The status of citizen, which in stable times we tend to assume is permanent and fixed, has become contested, variable, fluid.”⁴⁸ Is that not as true for our state, indeed for any state, as it is for our nation? Indeed, understanding the definitions, limitations, and roles of citizenship in our towns and state opens up precisely those significant questions about the relationships between social and cultural identity and institutions, political institutions, and political power.

The first Vermont constitution (1777) included a Declaration of the Rights of the Inhabitants of the State of Vermont, which included this limiting clause in section III: “nor can any *man* who professes the *protestant religion* be justly deprived or abridged of any civil right as a citizen on account of his religious sentiment, or peculiar mode of worship [emphasis added].” Section I of that Declaration of Rights stated “That all men are born equally free and independent, and have certain natural, inherent and unalienable rights, amongst which are the enjoying and defending life and liberty; acquiring, possessing and protecting property, and pursuing and obtaining happiness and safety.” Nonetheless, in the years after 1777, the Vermont General Assembly confiscated the lands of those of its citizens who remained loyal to George III and fled to Canada. And what of those who had little or no property to speak of? In 1779 the General Assembly adopted “An Act for the

Ordering and Disposing of Transient Persons,” thereby establishing in state law the practice of “warning out” that continued until 1818, and not until 1978 did the state legislature eliminate a poll tax.⁴⁹ Vermont reluctantly gave women who paid taxes the right to vote in school elections in 1880, but declined to ratify the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution in 1920. In 1998 the Vermont Supreme Court articulated the rights of children to equal education opportunities, thereby expanding one area in the definition of citizenship; and in 1999 the Supreme Court ruled that same-sex couples have the right to enjoy the benefits of marriage granted to heterosexual couples under the common benefits clause that applies to all citizens of the state.⁵⁰ The expanding and contracting definitions of citizenship constitute an important but underrecognized theme in our history.

Moreover, if we fear that state history can become too parochial in its outlook, examining Vermont history through the lens of the meanings of citizenship can give us a framework for thinking about the relationship of Vermont to the nation. In the War of 1812, the Vermont militia, ordered to return home from Plattsburgh by Federalist Governor Martin Chittenden, refused, stating that “when we are ordered into the service of the United States, it becomes our duty, when required, to march to the defense of any section of the Union. We are not of that class who believe that our duties as citizens and soldiers are circumscribed within the narrow limits of the Town or State in which we reside, but that we are under a paramount obligation to our common country, to the great confederation of the States.”⁵¹ By contrast, in 1850 the Vermont General Assembly went on record in opposition to the Fugitive Slave Act, which it characterized as both an offense to civil liberties and a violation of state sovereignty, then went a step further by passing the Habeas Corpus bill to impede the execution of the new federal law.⁵² How Vermonters defined citizenship and the obligations of citizenship in the context of the state and nation reveals some aspects of the complex, fluid, sometimes troubled relationship of states to nation.

Was Vermont unusual in these intrastate and interstate disputes? Can we use a history of the shifting meanings and applications of citizenship to gain better insight into our present controversies, where opponents of legislation like Act 60 and civil unions call upon their fellow citizens to “Take Back Vermont”? Those citizens claim to be the bearers of the true Vermont tradition. But which tradition do they claim? And how different is this tradition and the attitudes it represents or claims to represent from those of other states, indeed from our national history seen as a whole?

This brings me to the final theme I have gleaned from my reading in OAH presidential addresses: the theme of exceptionalism.

Vermonters like to think of their state as a last bastion of independent thinking, rural living, and old-time American republican virtue—as a holdout, in short, against the downward drift of national culture and politics. The theme of Vermont exceptionalism is part of the Vermont tradition that is revered and embedded in popular ideas of our history. In a curious way, however, Vermont has inherited and adapted this way of thinking from our national history and historiography. In her presidential address to the OAH in 1992, Joyce Appleby examined this theme in American history and discoursed on the meanings, implications, and dangers of a historiography of exceptionalism. “Exceptional does not mean different. All nations are different; and almost all national sentiments exploit those differences. Exceptionalism does more; it projects onto a nation . . . qualities that are envied because they represent deliverance from a common lot. There are no exceptions without well-understood generalizations or norms in contrast to which the exception commands attention.”⁵³ Maintaining a myth of exceptionalism as the core myth of American history, Appleby asserted, means forgetting some of the details and less attractive episodes from our past. For American history, it means forgetting slavery, the oppression and near destruction of the native people, the exclusion of groups from immigration, the long period of marginalizing women. It means focusing on some aspects of our ideology and history at the expense of others, selective memory (we’ve come round to that again) and selective forgetting. “Our sense of worth, of well-being, even our unity depends upon our remembering. But, alas, our sense of worth, our well-being, our sanity also depend upon our forgetting. Remembering and forgetting determine the history we tell.”⁵⁴

Vermont can make some good and valid claims to exceptionalism in the context of American history. We were, indeed, the first state to write into its constitution a ban on adult slavery, followed soon thereafter, however—as soon as they were sure they had won the war of independence and were free to rewrite their old colonial charters—by many northern states. The fact that Vermont never had a colonial charter, that it made itself, doubtless helped it win the accolade for pioneering antislavery.

The fact that Vermont made itself also set it apart from the colonies and all the states that followed because, according to Peter Onuf, Vermont forced the hand of the Constitutional Convention of 1787 in drafting section 3 of Article IV, then forced the hand of Congress in brokering an arrangement with New York State.⁵⁵ Vermont remains exceptional—or at least unusual—among the United States in its small population, its high proportion of rural population, its direct democ-

racism in town meetings, its close supervision of elected officials and representatives through the two-year term for all statewide officers and all legislators. Other states have some of these characteristics in different combinations; we may claim exceptionalism—for what it's worth in this instance, and that is the important question—for having them all.

But is Vermont exceptional in some of the other qualities it claims for itself? In 1990, on the eve of the bicentennial anniversary of statehood, Vermonters enjoyed the spectacle of a series of debates over whether Vermont should exercise a supposed “escape clause”: an agreement, according to the folklore, that Vermont could exercise once every 100 years an option to secede from the Union. This is part of the Vermont myth, part of its tradition. In all but one of the debates, Frank Bryan, professor of political science at the University of Vermont, argued for secession, and John Dooley, associate justice of the Vermont Supreme Court, argued for staying in the Union. For one debate they exchanged sides. And on that occasion Bryan argued that “Vermont has done more to create the United States than any other state.” The idea of secession, he insisted, violates Vermont’s culture, which includes the principle of having the courage to fix what’s wrong. “Vermont nationalism is a nationalism of orneriness and that’s the best kind of nationalism. . . . America needs us,” he concluded, “because we are its conscience and its heart; we are its homeland.”⁵⁶ I know of no better expression of Vermont exceptionalism and no more succinct distillation of the Vermont myth.

As is the case with examination of American exceptionalism, claiming that distinction for Vermont means remembering and emphasizing some details from our past and of our present, and forgetting or ignoring others. It means claiming isolation from and immunization against the deleterious influences of a wider national history, making Vermont a frontier territory in the Turnerian tradition rather than a porous border area as described by Bassett. It means using the small townscape of Peacham as the poster image for tourism rather than the city skyline of Burlington. It means celebrating stubborn, self-conscious resistance to change, as Dorothy Canfield Fisher commented in the 1937 Vermont volume of the American Guide Series, “it is perhaps safe to tell you visitors to our State that if you will think of us as representing the American past, you may have a better understanding of what you see in Vermont,”⁵⁷ and ignoring the 1993 designation by the National Trust for Historic Preservation of Vermont as one of the eleven most endangered historic places in the nation.

The exceptionalism theme is powerful and important for understanding and writing our history, for it challenges us to place our research and

writing in the larger context of American history and now, in global history. It is powerful, too, as a historiographical tradition, for we should try to discover when Vermont writers began to make those claims and what they saw in the state and in the nation that led them to that conclusion. And it is powerful, as Joyce Appleby reminds us, because it points to “the historian’s inescapable role as moralist. What we attend to in the past will form that restructured memory that we call history, the reservoir of knowledge about human experience that informs our ideas about suffering and crimes, virtues and vices, recordable accomplishments and unworthy happenings. No scientifically based, objective model exists to guide our curiosity. We and the cultural milieus in which we think determine historical significance.”⁵⁸

This comment suggests that as we read, write, and talk about the past we need to be mindful of an audience for our labors. Academic historians in our day have been justly chided for writing only for each other; public historians have been chided by some of their academic colleagues for allowing their work to be shaped by and for popular conceptions; state and local historians are frequently chided for being mere antiquarians and for not casting their glance beyond the boundaries of their community or state. All of these criticisms are true and not true, useful and merely mean spirited. If we want our work as historians to fulfill the functions that Gerder Lerner outlined—of entertainment, perpetuating tradition, creating or reinforcing identity, expanding knowledge, and providing explanations—we have to think hard about how and how widely we communicate what we ourselves discover, know, learn, and think about. We have to think about the forums we create and, more important, the ones that exist where we can have a voice; and we have to think about the way we present the fruits of our labors so that the language of the past can become part of the political, social, and cultural discourse in the present.

NOTES

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² Bassett, *Vermont: A Bibliography of Its History*, “Foreword,” xix.

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⁴ Elin Anderson, *We Americans: A Study of Cleavage in an American City* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1937; reprint, New York: Russell & Russell, 1967).

⁵ Bassett, *Vermont: A Bibliography of Its History*, xx.

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⁹ Bassett, *Vermont: A Bibliography of Its History*, xx.

¹⁰ See Michael Sherman, "Ethan Allen and the History that Lives in Our Hearts," *Oracle* [newsletter of the Ethan Allen Homestead] (Fall 1999): 1, 3–5.

¹¹ Bassett, *Vermont: A Bibliography of Its History*, xxi.

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¹⁴ For all these questions and recommendations, see *ibid.*, xxii–xxiv.

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⁴² Gerda Lerner, "The Necessity of History and the Professional Historian," *Journal of American History* 69:1 (June 1982): 10.

⁴³ Charles S. Maier, "A Surfeit of Memory? Reflections on History, Melancholy and Denial," *History & Memory*, 5 (2) (1993): 136–152. See abstract by E. Margolis, *America: History and Life* <http://sb2.qbc-clio.com:81>, entry 32:10969; David Thelen, "Memory and American History," *Journal of American History* 75 (4) (1989): 1117–1129. See abstract by R. V. Larabee, *America: History and Life*, entry 27:7353.

⁴⁴ Lerner, "The Necessity of History," 11.

⁴⁵ William E. Leuchtenburg, "The Pertinence of Political History: Reflection on the Significance of the State in America," *Journal of American History* 73 (1) (1986): 589–590.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 590.

⁴⁷ Linda K. Kerber, "The Meanings of Citizenship," *Journal of American History* 84 (3) (December 1997): 833–854.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 833.

⁴⁹ See Alden M. Rollins, *Vermont Warnings Out*, 2 vols. (Camden, Me.: Picton Press, 1995, 1997), 1: 1–24, 2: ix–xiii. According to Andrew and Edith Nuquist, the poll tax initially had an egalitarian rationale: "It has always been the belief in Vermont that no citizen should cast a vote which calls for spending a neighbor's money unless that citizen himself has a financial stake in the matter. This clearly means that every individual should pay some taxes, and since many do not own real estate, some other tax is required." Andrew and Edith Nuquist, *Vermont State Government and Administration* (Burlington: University of Vermont, 1966), 65–66. See also, Judith P. Rosenstreich, "Public Welfare," in Sherman, ed., *Vermont State Government Since 1965*, 389–390.

⁵⁰ *Amanda Brigham et al. v. State of Vermont* (166 Vt. 246); *Baker et al. v. State of Vermont* (170 Vt. 194).

⁵¹ Quoted in Paul S. Gillies, "Adjusting to Union: An Assessment of Statehood, 1791–1816," in Sherman, ed., *A More Perfect Union*, 140.

⁵² *Laws of Vermont, 1850*, No 16: "An Act Relating to the Writ of Habeas Corpus to Persons Claimed as Fugitive Slaves and the Right of Trial by Jury"; Joint Resolution No. 78: "Resolution on so Much of the Governor's Message as Relates to Slaves &c."

⁵³ Joyce Appleby, "Recovering America's Historic Diversity: Beyond Exceptionalism," *Journal of American History* 79 (2) (September 1992): 419–420.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 429.

⁵⁵ Peter S. Onuf, "Vermont and the Union," in Sherman, ed. *A More Perfect Union*, 150–169.

⁵⁶ See press report clippings in the "Bicentennial debates" folder, records of the Vermont Statehood Bicentennial Commission, Vermont State Archives, Montpelier, Vermont.

⁵⁷ Dorothy Canfield Fisher, "Vermonters," in *Vermont: A Guide to the Green Mountain State*, American Guide Series (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1937), 9.

⁵⁸ Appleby, "Recovering America's Historic Diversity," 430.

