



HISTORY CONNECTIONS

Vermont Historical Society News and Notes • Spring 2024



COLLECTIONS





VERMONT HISTORY

VOLUME 18 - Number 2

History Connections is published by the Vermont Historical Society.

Vermont Historical Society believes understanding the past changes lives and builds better communities. Our purpose is to engage Vermonters and Vermonters-at-Heart with outstanding collections, state-wide outreach, and dynamic programming.

Executive Director: Steve Perkins

Vermont History Museum and Store

The Pavilion Building (next to the State House) 109 State Street, Montpelier, VT Tuesday – Saturday 10 am – 4 pm (802) 828-2291

Adults: \$9 / Families: \$25 Seniors, students, children: \$7 Members and children under 6: free. Student school groups: free

Vermont History Center

60 Washington St. Suite 1, Barre, VT (802) 479-8500

Library hours : Tuesday, Thursday, & Friday 9 am – 4 pm Wednesday 9 am – 8 pm Second Saturdays 9 am – 4 pm Appointments are recommended. Please call or e-mail to schedule your visit. library@vermonthistory.org (802) 479-8509

www.vermonthistory.org info@vermonthistory.org

Editing: Andrew Liptak Design: Laughing Bear Associates Printing: Accura Printing Cover image: ????????????????????

In The Galleries

History Museum Special Exhibits

A Stitch in Time

We all know the phrase “History repeats itself.” We hear it applied to politics, wars, and large social movements, but what about the small things? In our new rotating exhibit, *A Stitch in Time*, the Vermont Historical Society will explore how your fashion choices today are informed by the fashions of history.



In the latest rotation of this exhibit, we examine the evolution of nurse’s uniforms by examining ones from 1910, 1950, and 2020.

On view in the National Life Gallery through June 2024.

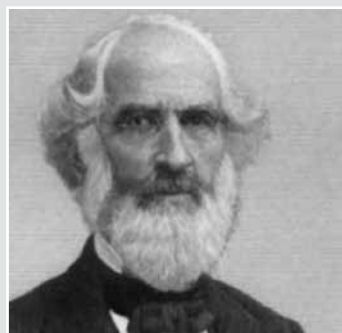
Calvin Coolidge: Vermont’s President

On loan from the Coolidge Foundation, this exhibition presents key episodes and questions from Coolidge’s life with specially-commissioned illustrations and explanatory text. Visitors will also be able to learn about Coolidge’s communications styles through interactives.

On view in the Calder Gallery through June 2024.

Fairbanks Scales: Weighing the World

Produced by the St. Johnsbury History & Heritage Center, *Fairbanks Scales: Weighing the World* is a new exhibit that explores how a large scale produced by the Fairbanks Scales Company of St. Johnsbury led to large-scale changes in how the world does business.



On view in the Local History Gallery through July 2024.

History Center Special Exhibits

Icons and Oddities

Vermonters have always been keen to reuse and recycle. For this newest iteration of *Icons, Oddities, and Wonders*, VHS staff sought items from our collections that show hundreds of years of clever adaptation and thoughtful reinvention. Visit the gallery during Library open hours.

Correction: In our Fall/Winter 2023 issue, we wrote that the nuclear attacks by the United States against Japan took place in July 1945: the attacks occurred in August 1945. We regret the error.

Events Want to learn more about upcoming events and programs? Visit our calendar at vermonthistory.org/calendar and follow us on social media!

Director's Note by Steve Perkins

Great wisdom and forethought

After the Montpelier flood of 1992, the Vermont Historical Society’s board of trustees made the decision to move the society’s administration, collections, and library to a new, less-flood-prone site. The Society purchased the old Spaulding Graded School building in Barre and undertook a lengthy fundraising and renovation campaign, and the Vermont History Center opened to the public in 2002. Looking back on the events of last year, I believe they acted with great wisdom and forethought.

The Vermont History Center was an ambitious project. The original vision included both a spacious library and a facility for researchers and the public to explore the Society’s material or object holdings. We all know and love the library space, but for two decades, we have missed the material culture study center.

Thanks to the efforts of Senator Bernie Sanders, the Vermont Historical Society received funds in 2022 for the long-delayed completion of this facility. Last fall, a team from Donnegan Systems, a specialized museum casework company, installed shelves, drawers, racks, and glass-fronted cases throughout the large gallery in the History Center, using the original planning documents as a guide. This skeleton of a facility now waits for the curatorial touch to bring it alive.

We are excited to open our Research and Exhibition Gallery at the Vermont History Center, which will provide unparalleled access to our museum collections in a relaxing and beautiful setting.

Many museums have experimented with open storage facilities, study centers, and research galleries. We’ve learned from the field and are excited to open the Research and Exhibition Gallery at the Vermont History Center, which will provide unparalleled access to our museum collections in a relaxing and beautiful setting. We will be able to think about our collection in thematic ways that help visitors understand broad swathes of our state’s history. Our first installation of this gallery will focus on the

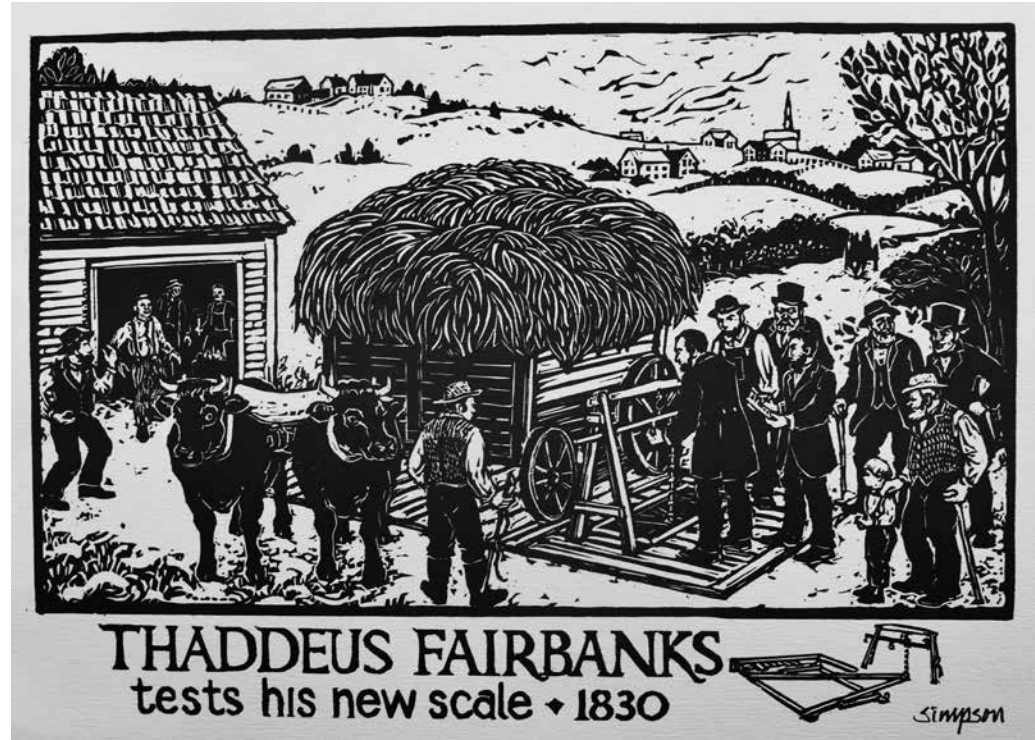
250th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence. Visitors and researchers will be able to explore our rich collections while thinking about Vermont’s role in our country’s founding and how we can continue to shape our future as we strive for a more perfect union. We’re expecting to formally open the gallery in October.

This issue of *History Connections* will give you insight into our new facility and our collections and invite you to some remarkable programs and activities coming up this year.

Steve Perkins, Executive Director

Weighing *the* World

How one family in St. Johnsbury changed the course of history



Wood block print by artist Mary Simpson which shows Thaddeus Fairbanks with his 1830 invention of an accurate platform scale.

By Peggy Pearl

In 19th century Vermont, necessity was often the mother of invention. Isolated from large cities and challenged by a rugged climate, Vermont became a hotbed for inventors solving practical problems. This knack for creative problem-solving helped turn Vermont into a world-leader in a particular industry: scales.

Produced by the St. Johnsbury History & Heritage Center, *Fairbanks Scales: Weighing the World* is a new exhibit on display at the Vermont History Museum's Local History Gallery. It explores how a large scale led to large-scale changes in how the world does business and how one family changed the course of history in St. Johnsbury, VT.

That family was the Fairbanks brothers: Erastus was the businessman, Thaddeus was the inventor, and Joseph was the salesman. In 1815, the brothers built a sawmill, a gristmill, and a wagon shop in St. Johnsbury, and a decade later, Erastus and Thaddeus formed the E.&T. Fairbanks Company to manufacture and sell stoves and plows. They didn't stop there – in 1829, the brothers and their partners founded the Passumpsic Hemp Works. Soon, they began encountering problems, as weighing wagonloads of hemp was difficult and time consuming.

Thaddeus came up with a solution: a scale that used a platform and levers. With the platform at ground level and the levers in a pit underneath, an operator could drive a wagonload of hemp onto the platform to be weighed. Once empty, the wagon would be weighed

again. With the difference subtracted, the operator easily could figure out the weight of their cargo. Almost overnight, the platform scale was a success, and its simplicity and accuracy would lead to the Fairbanks Scale weighing the world.

As the business expanded, up to forty E.&T. Fairbanks buildings stood along the banks of the Sleepers River in St. Johnsbury, with company offices in Boston and New York. The United States Post Office ordered 3,000 postal scales, which the company filled in just eight days. Orders poured in from all over the world, and between 1846 and 1860, Fairbanks scales were reaching customers in China, Cuba, the Caribbean, South America, India, and Russia. At the time of the Civil War, its scales were some of the best-known American made products in the world.

In 1874, the company was incorporated as the Fairbanks Scale Company, and by 1885, the thousand workers in its St. Johnsbury factory were producing 70,000 scales annually. The company held 113 patents for new innovations and advancements in the industry and was producing 2,000 different products, from scales that could weigh pieces of paper to locomotives.

Because of the company, St. Johnsbury played a major role in the Industrial Revolution, while the philanthropy of the Fairbanks family has left its mark on the town. Twelve years after the invention of the platform scale, the brothers established the St. Johnsbury Academy, while their children helped found the Fairbanks Museum and the St. Johnsbury Athenaeum. Their leadership and legacy can still be seen in some of the homes, churches, and other public buildings in the town.

In 1916, Charles Hosmer Morse, a St. Johnsbury native and Fairbanks Scales employee, acquired control of the company. In the decades that followed, the company underwent a series of mergers and acquisitions, before the Norden family acquired it in 1988 and moved its executive offices to Kansas City, Missouri. The company has expanded worldwide, and to this day it still runs a factory in St. Johnsbury.

Fairbanks: Weighing the World will feature a number of scales alongside photographs, documents, and other ephemera that tell the story of St. Johnsbury and the entrepreneurs who transformed it. It is on view at the Vermont History Museum from March 2 through July 27, 2024.



An early Fairbanks Scales Company package scale manufactured for the United States Post Office Department. Fairbanks was one of the main suppliers of scales to the Post Office Department.

About the St. Johnsbury History & Heritage Center

The St. Johnsbury History & Heritage Center was established in 2010 and opened to the public in 2015. It is housed at 421 Summer Street in a beautiful 1850 Italianate house with carriage barn and features five rooms of permanent and rotating exhibits. The carriage barn houses large collection pieces, including horse-drawn vehicles, ice-harvesting tools, and the Fairbanks-Morse Scale exhibit, highlighting the invention and marketing of the platform scale by the Fairbanks family. All exhibits are handicap accessible.

The St. Johnsbury History & Heritage Center is open Monday through Wednesday, October 1st to May 31st, 10:00AM to 4:00PM. It is open Monday through Friday, June 1st to September 30th, 10:00AM to 4:00PM, as well as the first and third Saturday throughout the summer. Admission is by donation. You can visit its website at <https://www.stjhistory.org/>



CHANGING COLLECTIONS

The new VHS Research and Exhibition Gallery shows how much the role of physical objects and museums has changed over the centuries

By Andrew Liptak

In October 2024, the Vermont Historical Society will formally open the Research and Exhibition Gallery in Barre’s Vermont History Center. This gallery will help to showcase a wide range of the Society’s object collections, bringing them out from the basement storage rooms and into the view of the general public. It’s a major new project that is in step with today’s museum practices: increasing accessibility of collections and objects to allow visitors and scholars to view them.

With the space to display thousands of items behind glass at once, this gallery looks similar to the cabinets

loaded with items that were once the centerpiece of collectors and early museums. Indeed, many of the world’s modern museums and institutions evolved from the scientific and anthropological collections of wealthy patrons. But the Research and Exhibition Gallery is a far cry from those early cases, showing just how much the role of physical objects and museums has changed over the centuries.

The United States was undergoing a period of reflection when Vermont’s legislature chartered the Vermont Historical and Antiquarian Society in 1838. The generation that fought in the American Revolution had largely died out, and many worried that as the population

of young Americans moved out west, the country would become unmoored from the foundations and principles upon which it was built. State officials and scholars worked to solve that problem by establishing historical societies and educational programs to preserve the documents and objects that helped tell the country’s story.

The legislature tasked VHS with “collecting and preserving materials for civil and natural history of the State of Vermont,” with its library and cabinet in Barnet, the home of one of the society’s founding members, Henry Stevens. Initially, the Society’s primary focus was on acquiring documents related to the founding of Vermont. In his book *Up & Doing: The Vermont Historical Society, 1838-1970*, former VHS director Weston A. Cate, Jr., notes that there were a few reasons for this: the concept of a museum was still young, collections of objects took up space, and there was already a “State Cabinet” located at the State House.

When a fire tore through the State House on January 6th, 1857, it destroyed not only much of the State Cabinet, but also the items from Stevens’ personal collection that he had stored there and whatever items VHS had stored in the space allotted to it by the legislature. When the building was reconstructed, it included space for a new Cabinet room to house various artifacts and relics from the state’s past.

In the decades that followed, space became a constant concern for the Society. In 1886, it and the Vermont State Library moved into a newly constructed annex behind the State House, and again in 1918 to the new Vermont Supreme Court Building down the hill. There, the Society consolidated the collection that had been stored all over the state. VHS remained there until 1960, when it once again outgrew its space and relocated to the National Life building across the campus, only to move back across in 1970 into the first floor of the reconstructed Pavilion Building.

As VHS hopped from location to location over the 19th and early 20th century, its collection grew. “No longer was the Society interested only in relics,” Cate writes. VHS “broadened its vision to include all kinds of artifacts from buttonhooks to full-sized

buildings such as the Hyde Log Cabin in Grant Isle.” These physical objects brought a new dimension to the types of history and stories that the Society was able to preserve, from items from notable battles to the ephemera of everyday Vermont life.

As the collection grew, so too did the demands on VHS staff, who not only had to catalog and document the collection, but to also provide care to ensure that items would survive for future generations. Cate notes that through the middle of the 20th century, the Society’s librarians oversaw both the library and object collections, and in the years following the Second World War and into the 1960s, the Society and its staff produced numerous exhibits in the Supreme Court and National Life Buildings, writing: “they reflected the then current practice in museum presentations, which contrasts dramatically with today’s [late 1980s].” The move to the “Pavilion Building

offered the first real opportunity to apply modern museum techniques. No longer were exhibits crammed solely into glass cases. Instead, visitors’ attention was focused on a series of modules in which representative exhibits traced the history of the state.”

In addition to applying new practices to preserve the collection, Cate explains that it’s the move to the Pavilion Building that best highlighted the Society’s changing mission: “from a library for the use primarily of scholars, genealogists, and historians with scant attention to a ‘cabinet’ to a greater balance between historical library research and exhibits that help interpret the past.”

In many ways, VHS’s story mirrors that of the museum itself: how disparate collections assembled by enthusiasts transformed into institutions of preservation and learning. While the focus began with books and documents, it has expanded to include photographs and objects held and used by Vermonters. This addition brings new dimensions to Vermont’s stories, bringing about a fuller picture of our past for all to learn.

Facing page: The Vermont Historical Society’s “State Cabinet” at the Vermont State House.

A major new project that is in step with today’s museum practices: increasing accessibility of collections and objects to allow visitors and scholars to view them.



Creating the New Research & Exhibition Gallery

This opening marks years of careful planning and collaboration

By Amanda K. Gustin

In the earliest plans for the conversion of the old Spaulding School to become the home of the Vermont Historical Society, you can see a kernel of an idea for an open storage gallery. Twenty years ago, “open storage” was a new concept, allowing visitors to peek behind the curtain at the work of a history-focused institution. Beautiful new open storage spaces at the Deerfield Museum in Massachusetts and the Brooklyn Museum in New York allowed the public access to collections in different ways than the traditional highly curated and sparser exhibitions usually on display.

The scope of the school conversion narrowed, and ultimately the Vermont History Center ended up without open storage. Until several years ago, an open storage gallery remained only an aspiration. This fall, however, the Research and Exhibition Gallery will come to fruition, giving us greater flexibility and capacity to do the most important work: connecting Vermonters to the stories in their history. This opening marks years of careful planning and collaboration.

We began construction on the gallery in the summer of 2022. Working with Donnegan Systems, a storage solutions company based in Northborough, MA, we came up with some initial plans for the space and

prepared an application to the Congressionally Designated Spending program through the office of Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders.

The Senator’s office saw the promise in our plans to exhibit more of our collection than we had ever been able to before, and they approved our application and advocated for its inclusion in that year’s federal budget.

Once the budget passed in December 2022, we moved forward on our plans. Donnegan Systems helped us refine those initial plans and settled in to wait for production to begin on the shelving units—a process slowed by supply chain limitations. By late October 2023, the shelves were completed, and Donnegan’s technicians arrived in Barre to begin their work installing the glass-fronted shelves and wire racks.

Nearly three weeks later, we cleaned the glass and wiped off the construction dust and began the next phase of upgrading the gallery: installing nearly fifty new lights onto the existing ceiling track. We significantly increased the number of things we’d need to highlight, and the new fixtures will let us control where light and shadow fall in the room with more precision than ever before.

In the winter of 2023, VHS completed the installation of this beautiful new gallery filled with shelving, drawers, and display cases to showcase the objects in our collection. In the time since the original idea appeared on the History Center’s blueprints, we’ve better realized and updated the idea of an open storage gallery to fit the work we are doing now. We can showcase hundreds, if not thousands, of objects while welcoming in groups of visitors and researchers for specialized, hands-on encounters with our collections.

With the shelves and lighting now in place, the next phase of the project can finally begin: filling the gallery with collections objects and archival materials. In the



This beautiful new gallery is filled with shelving, drawers, and display cases to showcase the objects in our collection

years to come, we plan to cycle objects in and out. For this first installation, we will focus on the themes developed by the American Association of State and Local History for the 250th commemoration of the Declaration of Independence. AASLH’s guidance includes broad themes that celebrate the full sweep of American history, such as “Unfinished Revolutions,” “Power of Place,” and “We the People.”

The Collections & Access department (which encompasses both library and museum collections) has already begun conversations about thoughtful selection and presentation. How can we put two items that may be one hundred years apart in history next to each other to help visitors draw conclusions

about the progress of civil rights in Vermont? What can campaign buttons and broadsides tell us about the changing nature of democracy? In what ways can we connect with lives lived at the very beginning of the state of Vermont and in the centuries since?

In addition to selecting items for display, staff are working with VHS’s educators in the Service & Outreach department to make sure that we are inviting diverse groups for more focused learning and research. We have applied for additional funding that would support teacher workshops, outreach to college history departments, and focused work with community groups.

At VHS, we believe fervently that connecting to the history of Vermont builds better communities, and the new Research and Exhibition Gallery provides us with an incredible opportunity to bring Vermonters closer than ever to pieces of the past.

Facing page: VHS volunteers listen as Collections Manager Katie Grant and Librarian Kate Phillips talk about the Research and Exhibition Gallery.

Above: Visitors will be able to view a variety of types of items, from large objects and garments to maps and documents.

TOUCHING HISTORY

What looks like play to many is an introduction to the history of communication and a learning opportunity



By Juls Sundberg

One notable section of the Vermont History Museum's Freedom & Unity exhibit is a railroad post office. It's an interactive environment that features mailboxes stuffed with scans of actual letters written by Vermonters for students to read. After reading these letters, students and visitors are invited to write their own. While there, they can also use a telegraph machine to send their own messages via Morse Code.

What looks like play to many is an introduction to the history of communication and is a learning opportunity. A teacher may inquire: "If you had to urgently deliver a message, would you send it via regular mail or telegram?" and prompt students to think about how the telegram has influenced communication today. Immersive learning environments, where students interact with three-dimensional objects, help move learners from abstract concepts to deeper, concrete understandings of the past.

Objects stoke curiosity in a viewer. We are surrounded by objects everywhere we go, and many of us have assembled personal collections that are near and dear to our hearts. Whether it's a cherished photograph of a beloved person, a postcard from a memorable vacation, or an iridescent pebble scooped up on a walk, objects remind us of specific moments in our own storied life. When viewed as a larger collection, a learner can draw connections between the individual stories they tell and the bigger picture of which they are a part.

The Vermont Historical Society has been collecting and preserving items related to Vermont's story since 1838, and currently holds an estimated 30,000 items in its object collection. It's ripe for educational programming because these items can be used as powerful teaching tools. Each conveys understanding and meaning, providing a glimpse into countless past experiences, values, and identities.

While learning often occurs within a classroom, it's an activity that is not bound to schools alone and museums are fantastic venues for stoking inquisitiveness. Arranged in chronological order, the Freedom & Unity exhibit takes students through Vermont's history across a wide range of topics through which they can witness how events, technologies, and societal changes unfolded.

First-hand encounters with primary source materials and objects offer learners the opportunity to interact with history in a tangible way. By exposing learners to these objects, a door is opened to thoughtful conversation. This is true even when faced with difficult histories, such as coming face-to-face with a mask worn by a Vermont Klu Klux Klan member or a club that was used during a labor strike. In these instances, viewers are invited to grapple with the complex ideas of power and struggle and are encouraged to draw connections in a wider context.

By exploring artifacts, documents, and photographs, learners bear witness to actual remnants of history. VHS's Hands-On History programs were designed



Student Abraham Liptak examines an object in the Vermont History Museum's "Freedom and Unity" exhibit.

for educators who want to provide in-depth exploration into Vermont history with their students. All eight, 45-minute programs prompt students to interact with primary and secondary sources. In the You Be the Historian program, students act as researchers, curators, and archaeologists to discover details about the Wheeler family who lived in Calais in the 1880s. While rotating through stations, students develop their ability to evaluate, interpret, and draw conclusions using historical evidence.

The field of education is always evolving, and in response, educators make every effort to update and reinvent their educational materials to meet these changing needs. At the same time, curators and collections managers have evolved their practices to continue to find new, better ways of preserving and presenting the

Immersive learning environments help move learners from abstract concepts to deeper, concrete understandings of the past

objects that make up a state's heritage. Together, educators and collections specialists join forces to show the value of preserving historical artifacts and in turn, learners begin to grasp the importance of preserving their own cultural identity and heritage for future generations.

The Vermont Historical Society is a collector and keeper of Vermont stories. Just as people experience personal growth through learning,

it's important that VHS continues to evolve its own collection practices to preserve and present a more comprehensive history. A willingness to adapt shows a commitment to the pursuit of an inclusive history. We hope that the use of collections through creative educational programming will inspire a new generation to enjoy Vermont history as much as we do.



Vermont Historical Society
60 Washington St. Suite 1
Barre, Vermont 05641-4209

Nonprofit Org.
U.S. Postage
PAID
Barre, VT
Permit #32



The member event of the season
Opening reception of “For the Love of Vermont”

Save the date for the members-only event of the summer. The much-acclaimed exhibition, “For the Love of Vermont” is opening at the Vermont History Museum, and VHS members are invited for a special opening reception on the evening of June 27th.

Collector Lyman Orton and author Anita Rafael will be on hand to discuss this extraordinary gathering of Vermont art and the stunning book that it inspired. Their presentation and discussion about this unique exhibition are not to be missed, so save the date.