

Vermont Research Facilities, Part 1: The Vermont History Center

By Scott Andrew Bartley

This is the first in a series of articles to explore the various repositories around Vermont that will be of interest to genealogists. I will try to cover facilities from all parts of the state. The obvious one to start with is the new Vermont History Center.

The Vermont History Center is the new home of the [Vermont Historical Society's](#) (VHS) library, [located](#) at 60 Washington Street, Route 302, in Barre. VHS was founded in 1838 by the Vermont legislature as an independent organization (though it also receives state aid). Its new building is the former Spaulding School, a historic building built in 1891 that overlooks the downtown area of Barre. Renovation began on the original structure in 2000 and the library on the second floor opened for business in July 2002. The updating of the interior spaces makes the library handicapped accessible. Some free on-street parking is available next to the building. Entrance is free to Society members while others will be charged a modest \$5.

The Society's library is located on the second floor in spacious quarters – about triple the area the library had in its former home on State Street in Montpelier. The grandeur of days gone by is still apparent in the library rooms, which have many period details such as American chestnut wainscoting, original pressed tin ceiling, and some stained glass windows. They also have an integrated modern feel with functional furniture and working spaces for staff and patrons.

The first room you enter is the access point to all the collections. The reference desk is here so you can reach it easily from any library room. The card catalog can be found in this room as well. This catalog was closed in 2000 and all new acquisitions are only found in the online version of the catalog, found on computer terminals next to the card catalog. The old catalog is still a handy place to start. If you are interested in manuscripts, the Brigham Index contains names and places found in the Brigham "Calendar Sheets," the old finding aids for the manuscript collection. If you elect to use the online catalog, it does include all acquisitions since 1987. The word "online" may be a bit misleading. The electronic catalog is an in-house DOS catalog system, though it will be converted when the funds become available. It contains about 10,000 records. About two percent of the library's manuscripts are found in the statewide online catalog called [ARCCAT](#). The call numbers for the books are classified by Dewey Decimal System, but are modified in the local history section to mimic the Library of Congress alphabetical arrangement of a state's town histories.

The main library stack area is to the left of the reference desk and catalogs. The library has the state's largest collection of genealogies and local New England histories. Besides their own acquisitions, the library hosts the book collections of the Vermont chapters of the Colonial Dames and the Daughters of the American Revolution. Some years back, the Genealogical Society of Vermont (GSV) gave its collections to the library. The review books that GSV receives are routinely donated here. With the additional open space and taller shelves, these various collections have been integrated into one. The first level of oversized books (the old "X" series) is also now intershelved.

This main stack area has tables in the middle of the room. Off to one corner is a small meeting room and next to that are some private research carrels. The patron can find more research space in most every room. Continuing around the exterior of the building is a reference room for non-genealogical material. The vertical and folio files are found here. The comfy stuffed chairs by the windows are especially inviting to sit in and read. Any manuscript material that you request is delivered to this room.

If you leave this room and go by the reference desk to the other side of the building, you will enter another library stack area. All non-New England and non-genealogical periodicals are found here. VHS has started a new collection of town reports from across the state, and they welcome donations. If you have any that you do not need, let the library know. I will be donating my long run of Springfield town reports to the cause. There are a couple of carrels in this room, too. These are envisioned to be used by visiting scholars, as it is a quiet space. VHS is a member of the New England Regional Fellowship Consortium that offers at least nine awards to one of sixteen cultural institutions in New England.

In three rooms behind and to the left of the reference desk, you will find computers with Internet access. The library has a small collection of genealogical CD-ROMs, mostly of census indexes to various states. There are about twenty CD-ROMs of Broderbund data disks and the state's new Historic Preservation – State Register of Historic Places CD-ROMs. Behind this room is another that holds a small collection of microfilm. It may only be one cabinet, but it holds the statewide Barbour Index to Connecticut vital records; the entire published and manuscript Vermont Historical Records Surveys done by the Work Projects Administration in the 1930s and early 1940s; an assortment of various Vermont church records; the Vosburgh Collection of New York church records (that includes some in Vermont); a newspaper clippings file; and many other interesting items. It is a collection that should be browsed. The last in this series of small rooms holds a collection of oral history tapes and the equipment used to hear them.

The room immediately behind the reference desk houses all the graphics materials. VHS is known for its wonderful collection of photographs documenting life in the state since 1850. [The Archival Image](#), a company in Brownsville, has teamed up with VHS to offer a selection of images from the VHS collection for sale to individuals. The library's large collection of stereographs is kept in this room as is an old library card catalog unit containing a collection of postcards arranged geographically. The room also houses a large flat drawer filing system for its maps and broadside collections.

The greatest improvement for VHS is one that patrons do not get to see – the manuscripts storage area. It is in the basement of the building, though this basement is dry and not in a flood plain. The room is kept at a constant 60°F and relative humidity of 30%. As a trained archivist, this is state of the art. The material itself is housed in acid-free boxes of various sizes put on compact shelving. There is ample room in which to grow the collection. There are few historical societies that can make that claim. The manuscript collection includes personal and business papers, account books, diaries, and many other types of material. VHS has a large collection of material that relates to the Civil War. Much of it was identified in 1997 and an index to that work is available [online](#). The more recently processed manuscripts have finding aids, which serve as guides to the contents of each individual collection.

VHS publishes books on many aspects of Vermont history. They also maintain an online [book store](#), which includes many items they do not publish. Their Museum Store at the History Center also sells books and gift items. In an effort to assist researchers who cannot visit the Vermont History Center, the Society provides a [list of researchers](#) that specialize in Vermont. I have not even touched upon the museum run by VHS, located at the Society's former location in Montpelier. It will soon expand to include the old library space and have a satellite space here in the Vermont History Center. That is part of the future plans for the Center.

I have only discussed the things you can find in the original building that currently houses VHS. There was a large addition made to the school in 1914 that is still under renovation. In short, it will include museum space, an auditorium for lectures, and many meeting room spaces that can be used by other groups.

So let's recap here. The Vermont History Center is home to the library of the Vermont Historical Society. Its collection is strong in New England local and family histories, scholarly journals for New England, and a large manuscript collection of original material. To put it in numbers: VHS has more than 42,000 book and serials titles; 1200 linear feet of manuscripts; 30,000 photographic images; 1000 maps; 8700 broadsides; not to mention CD-ROMs, microfilm, audio tapes, and the 20,000 artifacts in the museum collection. The Vermont History Center is a first rate research facility, the best in the state for non-governmental records. A visit here will surely be rewarding.