

HISTORIC ROOTS

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FOR THE LOVE OF HISTORY

By GAINOR B. DAVIS

The Vermont Historical and Antiquarian¹ Society was founded more than 160 years ago, in 1838. Its purpose was to collect and preserve “whatever relates to the material, agricultural, industrial, civil, political, ecclesiastical,² and military history of the State of Vermont.”

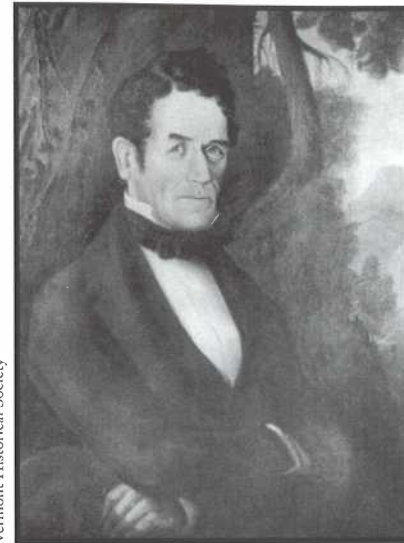
Even so early in Vermont’s history, this was a big job. Henry Stevens of Barnet and Daniel P. Thompson of Montpelier took it very seriously. Stevens served as the Society’s president and librarian for 18 years. During that time, Thompson served as its secretary and took minutes of all the meetings. Both men loved history. Their interest in the Society and their state’s history helped get the organization off to a good start.

Stevens was born in Barnet in 1791, the year Vermont became the 14th state. He was the son of a Vermont Tory³ who fled to Nova

¹ Antiquarians are people interested in studying the past and collecting its artifacts. Artifacts are objects from the past.

² Ecclesiastical means having to do with churches.

³ Tories were colonists who remained loyal to Britain during the American Revolution.



Vermont Historical Society

Daniel Pierce Thompson, first secretary of the Vermont Historical Society.



Vermont Historical Society

Henry Stevens, the Society's first president and librarian.

Scotia during the Revolutionary War. He returned to Vermont and bought land in Barnet. Stevens did many things. He was a sheep farmer, an innkeeper, a toll-road keeper, and the postmaster of his town. He served as a representative to the state legislature. Stevens also collected and bought and sold books and historical documents and papers. For almost 20 years, until 1858, the Society’s headquarters were in his home.

Daniel Pierce Thompson was a native of Massachusetts. He arrived in Vermont in 1800, when he was five years old. His family lived in

Randolph and then in Danville. Thompson graduated from Middlebury College in 1820 and became a lawyer in Montpelier. He, too, was active in public life. He served as clerk of the Vermont House of Representatives, probate judge, and, finally, as Vermont's Secretary of State. He also wrote a history of Montpelier and ten novels.

In 1858, the Society moved out of Stevens' home in Barnet and into space in the newly-built State House in Montpelier. It stayed there for 27 years. It also dropped the word "Antiquarian" from its name and became the Vermont Historical Society.

In the beginning, the Society's collection was made up mostly of documents. But it gradually grew to include many kinds of artifacts as well. The collection now houses more than 20,000 objects. Exhibiting them to the public has become an important part of the Society's purpose.

Today, the Vermont Historical Society's collections reflect every aspect of the history of the state, covering every area and every period, including the present. Its artifacts and archives⁴ contain materials about the domestic life, crafts, trades, and businesses important in Vermont's past and present. Exhibits illustrate the customs and culture of all the people who

⁴ An archive is a collection of historical records, documents, and other material of historical interest.



The first printing press in the state is on display at the Vermont Historical Society in Montpelier.

Vermont Historical Society

have lived within its borders. Smaller exhibits and educational packets bring Vermont's history and heritage into schools and local historical societies and museums. The Society is also the state's major center for research into genealogy, the study of family history.

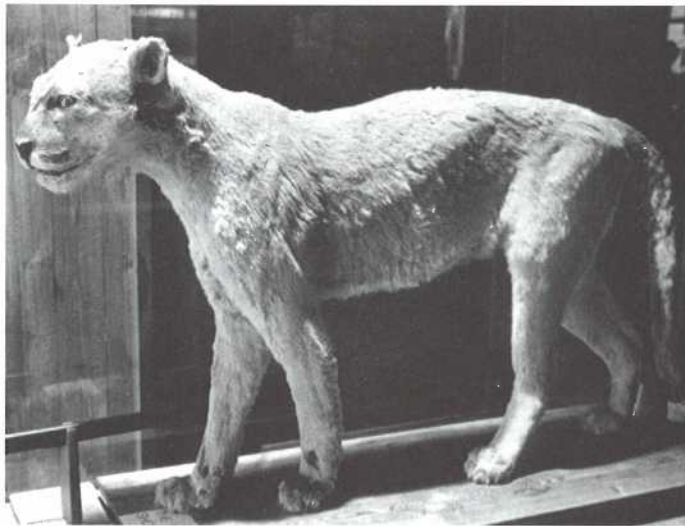
Some of the treasures at the VHS include the state's first printing press, Ethan Allen's shoe buckles, Grace Coolidge's engagement ring⁵, the Civil War photographs of Brattleboro photographer George Houghton. And

⁵ Grace Coolidge was the wife of Calvin Coolidge, who was President of the United States from 1923 until 1929.

the only place we know we can see a catamount in Vermont today is in the lobby of the Society's headquarters in the Pavilion Building in Montpelier.

The Pavilion Building is a reconstruction of a 19th-century hotel, where tourists and legislators once stayed. It now houses government offices as well as the Vermont Historical Society.

The Society's motto is *Non Pro Nobis Laboramus* ("We do not labor for ourselves"). It is a true reflection of the goals of Henry Stevens, Daniel Thompson, and all the others who have worked to preserve a record of Vermont's history. Today and tomorrow, as it



Vermont Historical Society

The last known catamount to be shot in Vermont now stands in the lobby of the Vermont Historical Society.

has in the past, the Vermont Historical Society will "labor" to collect, preserve, and display all aspects of Vermont's history for the enjoyment and education of ourselves and of future generations.



Vermont Historical Society

The Vermont Historical Society makes its home in the Pavilion Building in Montpelier. The building, which also houses government offices, is a reconstruction of an old hotel.

Rooting Around

The Vermont Historical Society is located in the Pavilion Building, 109 State Street, in Montpelier. The Museum is open Tuesday-Friday, 9 a.m. until 4:30 p.m., Saturday from 9 a.m. until 4 p.m., and Sunday afternoons from 1 p.m. until 4 p.m. Call for library hours and expanded summer hours, (802) 828-2291, and for information on membership.

Local historical societies also contain artifacts and archives. They often have exhibitions and other programs about the history of their communities. You might want to learn more about their collections and about the local history collection of your town's library.