

The Fourteenth State

Bill Doyle's 'Vermont political tradition'

By Tyler Resch

It's curious that Vermont doesn't have more books devoted to its history of politics. The classic in this sparse field is Senator William Doyle's "The Vermont Political Tradition: And Those Who Helped Make It," published in 1984. Senator Doyle is a kind of classic himself, having served in the Vermont Senate from Washington County since 1969. He is best known statewide as author of the Doyle Poll, which is circulated at town meetings every March asking citizens for their opinions on current state issues.

As a book, it was casually put together, lacks a title page, and has no publisher of record – just a printer, Northlight Studio Press in Barre. But those details do not mar its significance. I often use it as a reference because of its appendices. You can find Vermont's original declaration of independence, signed in Westminster by clerk Ira Allen on January 15, 1777; the Vermont Constitution of 1777; a five-page chronology of leading events in the state's history; and the political affiliation of governors since 1778.

The most useful appendix may be the one that contains listings of all the state's governors, U. S congressmen and senators – up to 1984 (yes, it needs to be updated). In these lists you can discover that Vermont had six congressmen between 1812 and 1822; some years there were six separate congressional districts and sometimes elections were at-large. The number was gradually reduced as Vermont's population held steady while other states were admitted during the nineteenth century and the nation's population soared. By 1932 Vermont became the single "at-large district" it is today.

Doyle's text is useful too, covering the basic story of the state's history. Several distinct eras of politics are described, starting with the 1791 visit to the new state by Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson and Congressman James Madison, ostensibly on a botanizing mission. Doyle attributes a more political motive. They were eager to cultivate Anti-Federalist support for Jefferson, who was emerging as leader of an opposition party to President Washington. The two future presidents were hosted in Bennington by two of their partisans: Moses Robinson, the

governor, and Anthony Haswell, printer-editor of the weekly Vermont Gazette. They stayed overnight at Dewey's Tavern, later to be known as the Walloomsac Inn.

Doyle examines a series of political eras: The time of hot-headed Congressman Matthew Lyon, who violated the hated Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798 and was re-elected while in a cold jail cell in Vergennes; Federalists Martin Chittenden and Isaac Tichenor, who were defeated by the repeated elections of Jonas Galusha; the rise of the Whigs in opposition to Andrew Jackson and marked by anti-slavery figures William Slade and Hiland Hall; the long century of Republican domination; and the dawn of more progressive times with the 1962 election of Philip Hoff, the first Democratic governor since Bennington's John S. Robinson in 1853.

There are dozens of photographs and broadsides, some really amusing. Looking back on this book, a flaw is the failure to offer any interpretation of the 1966 reapportionment of the Vermont House. This event was arguably the most significant statewide political influence of the twentieth century because it enhanced the power of the more liberal cities at the expense of many conservative smaller towns.