

Kevin Graffagnino – a nomination

By Jeffrey Marshall, Director of The Silver Special Collections Library at UVM

I am pleased to have this opportunity to say a few words about J. Kevin Graffagnino, the 2020 recipient of the Center for Research on Vermont's Lifetime Achievement Award. I have known Kevin since at least 1980, when I was a callow History grad student at UVM and he was Curator of the Wilbur Collection in the UVM Special Collections Department. But I had known about Kevin years before we met, as he had already begun to make his mark in the historiography of Vermont.

Kevin began his first career as a bookseller while still in high school, subsequently mastering Vermont's bibliographical history as a UVM undergraduate and graduate student in the 1970s. He wrote his master's thesis on the prolific nineteenth-century scholar Zadock Thompson, whose wide-ranging interest in Vermont's natural and civil history surely inspired Kevin to great achievements.

Starting his career as a librarian at Special Collections in 1978, Kevin had some rather big shoes to fill: those of the formidable Tom Bassett, a veritable walking encyclopedia of Vermont history and bibliography. Kevin brought great energy to this challenge and a great focus on organizing and cataloging Vermontiana collections, even as he continued to devote himself to scholarship. His service to the Committee for a New England Bibliography and his 1989 *Vermont History* article on Vermont bibliographer Marcus D. Gilman solidified Kevin's credentials as the leading expert on Vermont historical resources. At the same time, Kevin conducted an aggressive program of public speaking, introducing Vermonters to historical topics in communities around the state.

Kevin also spent considerable time introducing UVM students to Vermont history as an instructor and librarian, inspiring many to continue their Vermont studies in greater depth. Working closely with faculty in the History Department—among them Nick Muller in Kevin's graduate student days and Sam Hand for many years afterward—he helped mentor a new generation of Vermont historians. He was also generous with his advice for colleagues. He spent a good amount of time trying to convince me, the manuscripts curator beginning in 1988, why Vermont books mattered, while I tried to tell him the manuscript finding aids he had completed years before weren't up to snuff. Kevin gave me much valuable career advice, and also some tips on household management—such as the proper division of chores—which I wisely ignored.

Our history is full of examples of talented Vermonters who left the Green Mountains to achieve distinction in other places. When Kevin left Vermont in 1995 to become library director at the Wisconsin Historical Society, and later Director of the Kentucky Historical Society, he took with him a number of unfinished projects. Many of those projects have since resulted in major contributions to our understanding and appreciation of Vermont. These include publication of the 2-volume collection of Allen family correspondence, *Ethan Allen and his Kin*, which he edited with the late John Duffy and others; *Vermont Voices...A Documentary History of the Green Mountain State*, edited with Sam Hand and Gene Sessions; *The Vermont Difference: Perspectives from the Green Mountain State*, edited with Nick Muller and others, and *Green Mountain Scholar: Samuel B. Hand, Dean of Vermont Historians*, again edited with Nick Muller and others.

This just goes to show that you can take the woodchuck out of Vermont but you can't take the Vermont out of the woodchuck.

It is noteworthy that most of Kevin's scholarly works over the last twenty years have been collaborations with other historians, for together with such astute editors as Michael Sherman and Kristin Peterson-Ishaq they have raised the standard of scholarship in this small but weighty field to a new and impressive high.

Kevin surrendered to Vermont's gravitational pull in 2003 when he left Kentucky to take the reins of the Vermont Historical Society. For the next five years he guided the VHS through difficult financial waters while maintaining its high standard of public service and scholarship. He tried to escape Vermont again in 2008, this time tempted by the directorship of the Clements Library at the University of Michigan. After eleven years of distinguished service at the head of one of the nation's finest historical research libraries, Kevin retired at the end of 2019. We now have reason to hope that he will come back where he belongs, for good.

Over a career spanning more than forty years Kevin published almost twenty scholarly articles, countless pieces for newsletters and popular magazines, and was involved as author, editor, and co-editor of more than twenty books. Just as important, he has labored to promote Vermont history as a topic open and accessible to all—scholars and non-scholars, young and old, natives and non-natives. Many historians have made lasting contributions to the study of Vermont, through writing, teaching, public lecturing, or the leadership of historical societies. But few have done all of these things, and none have done them quite so well as J. Kevin Graffagnino.