

# Mormon couple on a mission to carefully copy Vermont's records

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By Leslie Wright  
Free Press Staff Writer



Richard and Carolyn Winn of Boise, Idaho, work together using a copy stand and digital camera to make digital images of each page in a record book dating from the 1800s in the probate offices at the Judge Frank Mahady Court House in Middlebury on Friday. The Winns are members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and are digitizing land records in Vermont up to 1900. The Winns volunteered for this 18-month mission through their church. ALISON REDLICH, Free Press

MIDDLEBURY -- When Richard and Carolyn Winn signed up to serve their church on an 18-month mission, they could have been sent anywhere in the world from the Americas to Africa to Asia. A day before they left, the retired couple from Boise, Idaho, found out they'd be coming to Vermont. The Winns came to Vermont to copy the state's land, vital and other records as part of a worldwide effort by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to catalog and preserve any data that helps individuals learn about their ancestry. "It's just something we wanted to do. We knew we were needed and we wanted to give back to the community and the church," Richard Winn said Friday.

The Green Mountain State is the birthplace of Joseph Smith, the founder of the Mormon church, which just celebrated Smith's 200th birthday, but the Winns' presence in Vermont is purely coincidental, said Tim Law, production/operations manager at the Genealogical Society of Utah, the nonprofit funded by

the church that collects the records.

The Winns were at the Judge Frank Mahady Court House on Friday painstakingly aligning and photographing page after page of big books of yellowed probate records under bright spotlights and a camera lens wired to a computer. They had just finished the book from 1840 through 1846, which took about two hours. Setting up their photography operation has been a challenge in some places, where town offices are too small and lighting conditions unsuitable, so they've become creative. In Addison they worked in the kitchen of the fire department across the street during several cold and rainy weeks. Richard Winn ferried record books back and forth from the town clerk's office protecting them under his coat. In Ripton they set up shop in the Community House next door to the town offices.

The Winns' visit to Vermont is part of a project the Mormons started in 1894 when they founded the genealogical society. The society began microfilming and storing records in 1938 and recording digital images in 1998, and has been working in New England for several years. Church members have visited over 100 countries collecting genealogical records. In some places such as Africa, where there are no written records, oral histories are taken, Law said. The records end up outside Salt Lake City, where they are kept in a vault in a canyon wall under 700 feet of solid granite. Visitors come from all over the world to research genealogy at the Family History Library in Salt Lake City, Law said. Collecting these records is an essential part of the Mormons' belief in family, Law said.

"We believe in the importance of families -- that family relationships are eternal, that it's important to link our families together. So we gather these records so people can do that," Law said.

The Winns arrived in Vermont in October and rented an apartment in Middlebury to serve as their home base as they visited town clerks' offices in Addison County. They volunteer their time and cover all of their own expenses. During their 18-month stay, they hope to capture every relevant record they can up to 1900 in every town in Addison County. The church stops at 1900 because it does not want to violate individuals' privacy, Law said. It's taken two to three weeks for each town and they've completed Ripton, Bridport, Addison and Salisbury. They've taken digital pictures of land records, military records and vital records: births, deaths and marriages. A copy of their work is given to the town free of charge after it is audited and cataloged in Utah.

Both Valerie Bourgeois, Bridport town clerk, and Jane Grace, Addison town clerk, said they are happy to have digital copies of land and other records. Both towns have been chipping away at making sure records that date back to the 1700s have been properly preserved. Being able to refer people to the digital record will help with that effort, they said. "We still have a few sheepskin covers," Bourgeois said of the town's older record books. The hardest part of the job, the Winns said, is not stopping to read the records.

Still, they were taken by a book in Addison that listed men from Vermont who served in the Civil War. There were 17 regiments and the document listed which battles they fought, how they died and even gave details about the men's service. "It was hard not to stop and read those," Carolyn Winn said.

Contact Leslie Wright at 660-1841 or [lwright@bfp.burlingtonfreepress.com](mailto:lwright@bfp.burlingtonfreepress.com) Finding family For more information about the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints' genealogical records, see the following Web sites: The Genealogical Society of Utah: [www.gensocietyofutah.org](http://www.gensocietyofutah.org)  
FamilySearch: [www.familysearch.org](http://www.familysearch.org)