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New Hampshire State Archives Completes Conservation of “Australian” Ballots from 1900 Presidential Election

CONCORD, NH (July 6, 2022): The New Hampshire Secretary of State’s Archives Division is proud to announce the successful conservation of sample “Australian” ballots from the 1900 US Presidential Election. Former Secretary of State William M. Gardner initiated this project in 2020, which was carried out with the help of State Archivist Brian Nelson Burford.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Australian ballots are aptly named after the style of secret ballots created in 1856 by Australian states. In 1870, Great Britain adopted secret ballots, which became widely used in the United States in the 1880s.

Prior to using Australian ballots, political parties in New Hampshire printed out their own ballots and handed them out to voters. As the parties’ ballots deliberately differed in appearance, public observers at the polls could tell how a person voted, making it easier for political parties to pressure voters and offer them “incentives” like hard cider, or financial bribes. Beginning in 1891, the state government took over as chief operator of elections, officially adopting the Australian ballot to avoid improper influences on the election.

During the 1900 elections in New Hampshire, candidates from four parties were listed on the ballot: Republican, Democrat, Prohibition, and Social Democrat. There was also a column for independent candidates and write-ins.

CONSERVATION PROCESS

The 1900 ballots were printed on paper made from highly acidic wood pulp fibers, which break down and make the paper brittle and fragile overtime.

To slow the degradation of historical ballots, the New Hampshire Secretary of State has been sending the most fragile ones to professional conservators. During the conservation process, fasteners are removed from the ballots and cleaned along with any other debris. After tears in the paper are repaired, each ballot is washed in a special solution to neutralize the acid and then placed in an archival plastic sleeve to support the paper’s fibers.

Following the completion of their conservation, the public can now admire these preserved ballots for many years to come.

Brian Burford: "It's heartbreaking when old records start to flake and fall away. The Archives Division strives to slow this trend and share our ancestors' stories with the New Hampshire public through successful conservation projects like these."