

## Voice from the Vault

By Gregory Sanford, State Archivist

### **What is Past is Prologue**

Inscribed on the National Archives and Records Administration building in Washington, D.C. is the quote, "What is Past is Prologue," taken from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. Regular readers realize that the quote is often applicable to this column's examination of "current" events within the context of historical antecedents.

The current event, actually events, that occasion this month's column directly touch on the Archives. The legislature just appropriated \$1.7 million for site preparation for a new archives and research facility. In addition the Senate Government Operations Committee approved a measure uniting the records management program, currently within the Department of Buildings and General Services, with the Archives. Voted too late in the session for further action, the proposal will be discussed and voted when the legislature reconvenes in January.



An appropriate archives facility in Montpelier has long been a dream of Vermont researchers. In his 1846 address, "Deficiencies in our history," James Davie Butler lamented, "The fruits of our historical harvests and gleanings ought also to be garnered up in a chief place of concourse, instead of in the corner [of the State House] where they are now secluded." Butler was referring to the Vermont Historical Society and perhaps the Archives since both were housed in the state house.

What recently caught my attention, however, was a 1967 proposal to create a department of archives and libraries to be housed in a \$15 million addition to the state house. The proposal is in the records of the Advisory Committee on Administrative Coordination formed in 1966 to help Governor Philip Hoff restructure government (the two boxes of Committee records, identified as record series PRA-150, are referred to in our online record series database at: <http://vermont-archives.org/research/database/series.asp>). The committee's charge was to create, where possible, super agencies organized along functional lines and to enhance the governor's control over dozens of independent boards and commissions.

The proposal came from the Subcommittee on Archives and Records chaired by Aeronautics Commissioner Edward F. Knapp. Whatever conflation of thought between aeronautics and archives led Governor Hoff to appoint Mr. Knapp proved fortuitous. The subcommittee took its charge seriously and gathered extensive professional input on archival management and libraries.

Their proposed department would be under a commissioner appointed by the governor. It would consist of a library and an archives division. The library division would be created by combining the state library, minus the law library which would be moved under the supreme court, with various independent public library services and boards. The archives division would be formed from the archives under the secretary of state, the public records commission, a micrographics program for town records, and birth, death and marriage records that would be transferred from the department of health once they were 70 years old.

Olney Hill, the public records director, supported the merger as long as the archives and library divisions had equal status. He lamented that researchers had to visit three different sites to study government archival records and thought the proposed new building was essential given the lack of space for records. The commission also discussed whether to recommend a single advisory board for working with agencies on recordkeeping or to create advisory boards within each branch of government.

The library community was split on the proposal, opponents noting that they had already studied the department of libraries' needs and had a bill pending to implement their recommendations. The Vermont Historical Society was initially included in the scope of the new department, but the VHS's director, Charles Morrissey, demurred. He noted that the VHS was not a state agency, but, he added, the state was statutorily required to provide it with space. He recommended a space for the VHS near the new archives and library building. The health department had concerns about control of the birth, death and marriage records.

Ultimately the subcommittee's recommendation was not acted on, primarily because the new building was not funded. Without a building, consolidation would not work. Many of the issues identified by the archives and records subcommittee persisted, or worsened. Now, forty years later, some of that vision—an adequate archives and research facility and a consolidated records program—are moving toward realization.

I would be remiss in not noting that the work of the other subcommittees also has currency. One proposed superagency was a natural resources agency, which just announced its own restructuring initiative. Another proposal was for a human services agency, including discussion about the role of the mental health commissioner within that agency. The proposal to close birth, death and marriage records for 70 years is back under discussion because of recent national security legislation. And this does not exhaust the parallels between the commission's work 40 years ago and today. While most of Hoff's proposals failed they were subsequently enacted during the administration of Deane C. Davis.

For students of Vermont state government, the records of the Committee on Administrative Commission are worth a squint. I hope in a few years those students can view those records in a new archives facility that reflects the benefits of a consolidated archives and records management program. Sometimes it is true: what is past is, indeed, prologue.