Some of you may recognize the title of this month’s column as a famous quote from William Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*. Others, particularly those within the archival profession, may be familiar with this phrase because it is inscribed on the statue known as Future located outside of the National Archives Building in Washington, DC. In fact, the concept of the past being a prelude to the future is synonymous with many efforts within the archival community to illustrate the continuing value of historical records. Vermont’s own *Continuing Issues*, a series of web-based essays written by retired Vermont State Archivist Gregory Sanford, affirms the relevance of Vermont’s past actions, documented through records, to current Vermont matters.

As we look forward to 2015, I find myself also looking at our past. An “investigation of Vermont archives,” initiated in the summer of 1915, remains a key benchmark for measuring the progress we have made over the years when it comes to Vermont public records. Conducted by Augustus Hunt Shearer, Ph.D., between 1915 and 1916, the results of his study were first published in the Annual Report of the American Historical Association for 1915 and later reprinted as separate report in 1917. Following his examination, Shearer informed the State of Vermont, the American Historical Association and various other stakeholders that Vermont was a state where the “care of the public papers has been very varied” and there is “no general law for archives.”

While discussing the “lack of active provision and convenient arrangement” for records, Shearer states that the care of archives is only an incidental part of the planned new addition to the east side of the statehouse building. This causes him to bemoan the fact that records would continue to be “scattered” among state offices throughout the state, therefore placing records at risk of accidental or conscious (unauthorized) destruction. In addition to using wooden filing cases to store records in non-fireproof buildings, he also finds that roles and responsibilities for records varied at any given office or location. In other words, some records custodians were unsure of their recordkeeping duties.

The significance of Shearer’s investigation to the Vermont State and Records Administration (VSARA) is that he identifies the Secretary of State as the state official with the most important and valuable records and papers. Yet, he finds an office with a vault that is far too small and records dispersed among other locations, including a basement vault in the statehouse and the Secretary of State’s office at Essex Junction. While inventorying the records, Shearer also discovers great variations in the completeness and arrangement of the records, but acknowledges efforts made by the Secretary of State’s Office to organize the records in its custody: “[W]hile the classification here may be faulty, it is at least an attempt to bring under the same headings papers scattered in different places.”

Shearer goes on to highlight efforts made in 1900 by then Governor Stickney and State Librarian Huse to “procure” Vermont state papers back from the New York State Library, which acquired early Vermont public papers from Henry Stevens, a private collector. Yet, 15 years after the return of the
records to Vermont, he reports that the Secretary of State’s Office still lacks the help and resources needed to edit and publish these early papers. While looking for other records he expects to find in the custody of Secretary of State, he also learns that several have “disappeared entirely... and no one in Vermont even knows that they are not in existence.”

62,462. Flash forward one hundred years and that is the total number of records-related transactions that the Vermont State Archives and Records Administration (VSARA) completed in Fiscal Year 2014, down from a record high (pun intended) of 80,232 transactions the previous fiscal year. When fully staffed, we are a division comprised of 15 employees divided into four units: Administrative Services; Records Analysis; State Records Center; and State Archives. Due to two vacancies that were very difficult to fill and a position that was primarily grant-funded and therefore limited in scope, we technically were only 12 strong for much of 2014.

VSARA’s FY14 numbers reflect the challenges that we face to provide a wide range of record-related services with such a limited staff. Yet, despite our staffing issues, we were still able to perform, on average, about 100 transactions a day. These transactions range from filing and certifying records; to accessioning and accessing archival records; to transferring and re-filing agency records in off-site storage; to researching and issuing record retention requirements; and training and assisting state and local records officers and custodians.

Looking back at Shearer’s findings from a century ago, the Secretary of State’s Office and State of Vermont have come a long way. I am fairly certain that Shearer could not envision the vast and diverse records that we have today in state and local government. Yet, his vision and recommendations for Vermont public records remain as relevant today as they did in 1915. He argued for a systematic approach with clarity in roles and responsibilities and, most importantly, “provisions” for public records. If you look at the work VSARA did this past year, it is quite an accomplishment. I am proud of our employees and all of their hard work to serve state and local governments as well as citizens when it comes to Vermont public records and I think Shearer, if alive today, would be proud too.

Interested in reading Shearer’s report? You can find a digitized version of it on Google Books.

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I am pleased to announce that VSARA will be heading into 2015 with an almost full staff, although we will be saying goodbye to Susan Swasta at the end December. Susan, who will return to her home in Bennington, has successfully completed a three-year grant-funded project to process and make accessible early court records from more than four counties. Demands on VSARA to accession and centralize archival records currently scattered across the state (sound familiar?) and provide access to them via our Reference Room or remotely have grown leaps and bounds since we were established in 2008. Through Susan’s efforts, these early court records are available for access and research, in many cases (another intentional pun), for the first time. THANK YOU, SUSAN! YOU WILL BE MISSED.