WILL YOU STILL NEED ME, WILL YOU STILL READ ME, WHEN I AM 164?

One hundred and sixty-four years ago, in his annual message to “Fellow Citizens of the Senate, and House of Representative” (Executive Document, No. 1, October Session, 1851), Governor Charles K. Williams, who had served as Chief Judge from 1834-1845, drew attention to the criminal code. In offering his recommendations for legislative change on the “power of pardon” vested in the governor, the confinement of “common drunkards” in the house of corrections, and other sections of the code, Governor Williams also expressed displeasure in the Legislature’s decision to create the Circuit Court in 1849.

By 1851, Stephen Royce, Jr., was the Chief Judge of the Vermont Supreme Court. The Vermont court system, particularly the Supreme Court, was three years into a reorganization that had established the Circuit Court and reduced the number of Supreme Court judges from six to three. Supreme Court judges no longer presided over county courts or “rode the circuit.” Instead, each of the four Superior Court judges was assigned a circuit of county courts. The “pronouncing by the county court” of criminal sentences, Governor Williams stated, left “to the supreme court only to fix the time for the commencement or the executive of the sentence.”

The creation of the Circuit Court, which was abolished shortly thereafter, in 1857, and other early and regular changes of Vermont Supreme Court and the Vermont judicial branch are now highlighted in a new web exhibit called “150 Years of Vermont Court Records.” Thanks to a grant from the National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC) to preserve and improve access to archival court records and an agreement between the Vermont Court Administrator’s Office and the Vermont State Archives and Records Administration (VSARA), 650 cubic feet of records from the Caledonia, Lamoille, Orleans, and Franklin county courts, covering the years 1794 to 1945, now in the Vermont State Archives and open to the public. Additional records from Essex, Rutland, Windsor, and Windham counties have also been transferred to VSARA and are available for researchers.

The “150 Years of Vermont Court Records” online exhibit, viewable through http://tinyurl.com/VTCourtRecords, presents images of documents found in the records, along with the stories of individual Vermonters as told through their court cases, and contextual information about Vermont’s court system. Based on initial feedback from those researching court records, we think is safe to “Yes, we still need you! Yes, we will still read you! When you are 164 … or even 64 for that matter!”