Processing Congressional Collections

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Editor's Note: The idea for a technical leaflet series originated with the New York Caucus of MARAC. The series, as developed by the Caucus, is intended to provide brief, practical information about selected archival topics suitable especially for beginners in the profession.

The series editor welcomes proposals for future publications and comments from readers.

Technical Leaflet Series

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by Mary Boccaccio and David W. Carmicheal

At first glance, a congressional collection offered to your repository may appear overwhelming in size and impossible to process. However, we prefer to believe that congressional collections, though large, are manageable when approached in the proper way. Therefore, in this Technical Leaflet we offer some advice on processing congressional collections based upon our experience with the Jacob Javits Collection at the State University of New York at Stony Brook.

Appraisal considerations for congressional collections. In appraising a congressional collection prior to accessioning, an archivist will want to consider several points. Does the collection fit into your collections development policy and, if so, do you really want it?

* What aspects of the legislator's career make this an interesting and valuable addition to your collection?

* From the standpoint of other congressional collections in your state, does this fill a gap or is it redundant?

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* If you are not able to accept the collection, is there another archives in the state that could?

* Do you have adequate archives staff to complete the project?

* Do you have funding resources to process the collection or will you have to secure outside support?

* How large is your storage area? The collection will certainly decrease in size, but do you have space to store it in its present form?

* Will the repository accept all memorabilia or only selected items for exhibit?

* Will the legislator let the archives staff discard duplicates, publications, routine non-issue files, etc.?

* Are the case files to be saved or destroyed? If they are to be kept, how long will they be closed?

Many of these questions, especially the last few, are best resolved in a formal deed of gift or deposit agreement prior to the transfer of custody.

The nature of congressional collections. When a Senator or Representative leaves office, the records of his or her tenure most frequently are offered to a college or university in the legislator's own state, though occasionally to a university he or she attended in another state. If the records are contemporary, the collection surely will be large, and if it spans the period from the 1960's through the 1980's it will be affected by the House and Senate microfilm, audiovisual, and computer indexing

programs. You can count on finding the same kinds of materials in each collection: legislative files, press releases, district or state office files, case files, constituent correspondence, departmental files, committee files, background materials, and so on.

The differences between any two collections often depend on the Member's length of time in office and the era during which he or she served. Collections from an earlier period will not be complicated by technological innovations, and collections from a shorter term in office will benefit from fewer staff and, thus, from fewer filing systems. On the other hand, a longer term in office often means more committee involvement and this gives a more specific focus to the collection. Depending on the rate of staff turnover and the ability of the office manager, such long term collections either will reflect a well organized office or will contain noncontiguous series that create extremely complex filing systems.

Processing congressional collections. In theory, processing these records should be a fairly straightforward task. You should have the packing lists from the Federal Records Centers in hand and the boxes in house. But as you begin to work on such a collection, you will undoubtedly discover a variety of idiosyncracies. As stated previously, congressional collections have built-in problems which will vary according to the Member's tenure in office, the size of the staff, and even the time period of service. The following points provide some steps to take and illustrate some of the problems you may encounter while processing a congressional collection.

1. **Check the boxes sent against the packing list.** Before you begin, make certain that you have all the boxes and packing lists. If you are unsure, check with the Member's staff or with the Federal Records Center. Material may arrive from courtesy storage in the records center, from the congressional office and on-site storage, from state or district office storage areas, and from other offices within

Congress, such as the micrographics lab or photography studios. Committee Offices may have some personal papers of Members. However, remember that Committee records remain the property of Congress and title to them cannot be transferred to a repository.[2]

2. **Study the packing lists.** The packing lists represent materials sent to the records center, usually once a year. The lists are compiled by the legislator's administrative aides; naturally some lists are more informative than others. Because filing systems tend to become more complex with the passage of time, earlier box lists (reflecting earlier, more simple filing systems) are likely to be more helpful than later ones. It is important to remember that secretaries and office managers do not think in terms of series, but in terms of responsibilities. As an office "matures," staff tend to develop areas of specialization and this is reflected in the files. Thus, box lists, rather than indicating file content, may indicate the name of the responsible staff member or the general subject emphasis of the files.

The helpfulness of these lists will depend in large part on how carefully the boxes were packed. Packing is often done by people who are more concerned about full boxes than consistent file groups. In many instances, a single box will contain two, or even several, series. Also, in the event of a sudden defeat or death, packing is done in a hurry to vacate the office. Finally, the materials in some boxes may have been discarded and the boxes reused while the box numbers and content lists remain unchanged. So, while you may have a box for every list and a list for every box, you should be wary of depending too heavily on container lists until you have verified their accuracy yourself. If you do not take the time to verify container

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[2] For a detailed discussion of what constitutes committee records, see *Records Management Handbook for United States Senate Committee* by Karen D. Paul, Senate Historical Office, Washington, DC 20510.

lists, you will discover that you are continually finding more material to add to series you thought you had finished. Undoubtedly, this will happen anyway. But, instead of having to add to a series 42 cubic feet that the packing lists did not show, you may only have to add 10 or 15 folders that can fit into the existing processed boxes. Keeping this in mind, you may want to pack the manuscript boxes somewhat loosely as you process.

Some boxes may arrive without record center numbers showing. If these boxes have Post Office tape on them they probably have been damaged in transit and their contents "refiled" by the Post Office. You may end up with all the original material, but it most likely will be out of sequence, out of folder, and very often difficult to identify.

If you are responsible for directing the packing and shipping of a large quantity of materials from Senate, special instructions and a checklist is available from the Senate Historical Office. As procedures frequently change, it is wise to inquire about the most current instructions.

3. **Develop a staff chronology**. Before you actually begin work on the collection, it will be helpful (and if the collection is large, essential) to develop a staff chronology indicating staff, their dates of service and area of responsibility. When all else fails, such lists can help identify series. Most offices prepare and circulate such lists on occasion. Although you may find these lists in the collection, it is best to get copies directly from the Member's office before you start going through the collection. The *Congressional Staff Directory* provides, for each member, a list of staff and their title, as well as the Member's committee and subcommittee assignments. These are published shortly after the beginning of each Congress.

4. **Establish series of records**. Series can be difficult to establish. Certainly the emphasis of the collection will change throughout the Member's tenure. As tenure increases, so does staff size, complexity of filing systems, areas of interest, and the specializations of the staff. In its earlier years, the collection will reflect certain broad series that are common to most legislative offices. Early files usually cover such topics as public relations (including press releases), legislation (which usually contains both bills and the background preparatory material used by the staff), constituent correspondence, committees, and case files. The early records of the Member may also include the administrative assistant's files, the home state or district office files, and the Member's "personal files" (which actually consist of day-to-day correspondence receiving the Member's personal attention). These broad categories will be visible throughout the collection, but in later years, as the Member's office grows, they may become more difficult to discern. Also, the interests of individual staff members may not fall neatly into these broad categories. As the staff grows and changes, the files begin to reflect individual tastes and approaches. Eventually, entirely new filing or series of filing systems -- ones which show very little resemblance to the original simpler categories -- evolve. The problem for the archivist is to organize these later, more complex filing systems into comprehensible series. Extremely detailed series descriptions may be the most useful solution to this problem. The use of an automated indexing system is another way to provide subject access across seemingly disjointed series.

The changing makeup of staff can raise some difficult processing questions. In areas where staff turnover is frequent, specializations are less stable and interests which are reflected in series are fragmented. In offices where the staff members' interests are well-defined and personalized, however, files often become duplicated as each staff member maintains personal files to complement

the central office files or the Member's personal files. As a staff member's tenure lengthens, responsibility often increases and accountability to the general office filing system decreases. One difficulty, then, is how to weed such a collection. Given the size of most congressional collections, it is impossible to refile originals and discard all duplicates. The only solution appears to be to discard all duplicates within any given folder. Even this process can be too time-consuming.

5. **Dealing with monographs and government documents**. Once you are ready for arrangement and description, begin by looking at the formats of the materials in the collection. Decide what you will do with monographs and government documents. We offered appropriate and unmarked materials to the Government Documents section of our library. They kept some to fill gaps in their holdings and offered the rest to other libraries in the state. Gift books were offered to Special Collections and the general library collection. Occasionally, runs of local publications, such as labor newsletters or special interest group releases, can have documentary value for the collection.

6. **Handling audiovisual materials**. Audiovisual materials are another distinct problem. Aside from the purchase of document boxes and file folders, audiovisual materials may pose the single largest expense in processing. The Member's audiovisual material will probably contain duplicates which are unidentified, negatives with no matching positives, and positives with no matching negatives.

This is a good time to consolidate audiovisual materials by format so that you can deal with them as a group. Grouping these at the beginning also saves you from having to move materials more often than necessary. Your record center lists and amended lists should indicate where to find most of these materials.

It is likely that you will find photographs grouped together and also dispersed throughout the collection in individual folders. Photographs that are filed in bulk tend to be unidentified, while those found in folders within the collection are usually attached to some piece of correspondence which helps identify the photograph.

United States politicians and statesmen often can be identified through the *Congressional Pictorial Directory*, published every two years by the Government Printing Office. World leaders can be identified through newspaper photos and clippings of the time. Often, the identification of photographs is left to researchers due to limitations on processing resources. You will need to decide whether you will make negatives if they do not already exist, whether you will photocopy the prints for research use, who owns the copyright, and how you will handle requests for reproduction.

The most difficult problem with audiovisuals is dealing with multiple formats. You may discover a dozen or more formats, each of which requires a separate piece of equipment for access. You may find both 8mm and 16mm movie films, video tapes, video cassettes, audio cassettes, miniature audio tapes, dictaphone belts, dictaphone records, and 16" radio-station-size records to name just a few. To further complicate matters, some manufacturers of miniature audio tapes construct the tapes so that they can only be played on machines manufactured by the same company. We decided to standardize the format of the audiovisuals by copying all visual materials onto 3/4" video cassette tape and all audio material onto reel-to-reel tape. Such a approach eliminates at least two difficulties: if the materials are standardized, the archives needs fewer pieces of equipment to meet any researcher's request; and copying preserves the original recordings. This approach also presents some problems, however. Since you probably will want to retain the originals after they are copied onto the standardized format, such an approach will require almost twice the

storage space for audiovisuals. In addition, you will have to decide whether to merge several shorter originals onto a single, longer tape or to copy each original on a separate tape. Once a format is chosen, preservation is a major consideration with video tapes. It is recommended that tapes be copied every six years.

Copying is not only expensive and time-consuming, it also can be technically difficult. Many universities, however, have radio stations with several different kinds of equipment and may allow the materials to be copied by the archives staff or the station staff at cost. If you discover a tape that does not seem playable on any known piece of equipment, you can contact the manufacturer for help.

Whether or not you copy the audiovisual materials, it will be important for you to establish the copyright holder. In some instances the House and Senate recording studios will be able to provide information about materials they produced, but only a fraction of the material in any collection is likely to have been produced by them. For programs that were paid for or produced by an organization or network for information, it may turn out that your repository holds most of the copyrights through default. In any case, you will want to determine how you will handle requests for copies, how much you will copy and in what formats, and what fees you will charge.

7. **Processing microfilm created by the Senate and House microfilm recording studios.** Collections often contain microfilm done by the Senate microfilm recording studio[3]. This is likely to be constituent correspondence and press materials, though by the late 1970's name and topic reports (indexes) were included. While the quality of such film is usually good, there are some problems of which the

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[3] The House does not have a microfilm recording studio.

archivist should be aware. The microfilm will be a copy of a complete file only if the film studio was given a complete file to film. While this may appear obvious, in our experience the microfilms were seldom complete. If, for example, the office did not maintain a complete file of press releases, the microfilmed press releases will have gaps. After two years of processing, we finally have a reasonably complete set of press releases in one series. Even so, in some instances a press release was issued and no copy was retained. As a general rule, you should assume that most congressional offices do not have sufficient control over their materials to insure that complete files were microfilmed.

A second difficulty may arise from the fact that the Senate microfilm studios use "K" cartridge microfilm for diazo copies. This precludes the use of "M" cartridge, or open-reel, readers. If you do not own, and do not want to purchase, a "K" cartridge reader, you will have to transfer all of the microfilm to open reels. However, you should check with your microfilm vendor to see if there are "K" adaptors for your present reader/printers. (Master negatives are stored on open reels.)

8. Coping with computer indexing systems. In the late 1970's, computers came to the House and Senate. While a single computer indexing system was recommended to Senators, it was not required and each office was free to devise its own system. You will want to question the staff closely as to the details of the indexing system that their office used.

Materials (mainly incoming correspondence) that are indexed by computer are not filed by topic or correspondent's name. Items arriving in the Member's office are numbered consecutively and filed numerically. Microfilm name and topic indexes, called Correspondent Management Systems (CMS) indexes, are generated periodically. These arrange the numbered items according to topics and the correspondents' names. Without these

indexes, the computerized materials are practically useless. One of the first things you should do when you receive a congressional collection is to be certain that these microfilmed and/or hardcopy indexes are included. They are available from the Sergeant-at-Arms, but they must be requested by the legislator, and the indexes to each Member's files are erased shortly after he or she leaves office. If you do not get copies before they are erased, you are out of luck.

The Senate centralized system is continually in the process of updates and enhancements as is the office automation system (OA). The *Senate Computer Center Update* notes enhancements for all Senate systems. With each of the enhancements, the Member's computer staff should be keeping a paper trail of what files are created, how they are set up, means of access and coding system changes as they occur. CMS tapes and software can be made available to the archives as can the OA systems on the request of the Member. Some of the OA systems are available in ASCII format. OA systems generally are used for internal documents and can provide drafts of memos and position statements. Karen Paul's books on records management for Senators and their repositories and Senate Committees discuss automation currently in use and give many exhibits throughout both volumes. The Senate Historical Office is a good place to start with automation questions because they are familiar with systems currently in use and often with the Member's system.

The House systems are decentralized so it is particularly important for archives to know how the Member's system is set up, what files are kept and for how long, what hard copy reports are generated and how the Member's system has changed over time. The House Historical Office is the best place to begin with automation questions and they will be able to direct you as appropriate.

9.   **Processing restricted materials.**   Throughout the processing you are likely to encounter restricted materials. How these are handled depends largely on the type of material.   Basically there are three kinds of restricted documents. The first type is any document produced by the State Department or any other government office and stamped 'Classified', 'Secret', etc.   If you have any question about when these materials may be opened for research, call the Senate Historical Office or the National Archives Declassification Office.

The second type is any material produced by the Member that either is labeled 'Confidential' or is likely to be considered sensitive. This includes the Member's office memos labeled 'Eyes Only' and any sensitive personal or family materials.   A discussion with the Member will indicate how to handle this material.   Often the disposition of items in this second category is left to the discretion of the archivist, but sometimes the Member will want to personally review each item or certain kinds of materials.

The last kind of confidential material is found among the constituent correspondence or case files. Case files document the efforts of the Member (or the Member's staff) to solve constituent problems. Constituents often divulge private matters especially when their problems concern   Social   Security,   the   IRS,   or   some   other government agency. These materials should be closed at the discretion of the archivist. In our case, the files were discarded before the collection was transferred to the archives, but we did have an incomplete series of "bucked" (i.e. referred to various government departments for investigation) correspondence which was problem oriented. Some of this material will be closed for 20 years with the stipulation that thereafter the constituent names will not be used.

10. **Dealing with preservation problems**. A final word about the physical condition of the collection is in order. The boxes, and even the folders in them, will be dusty. If the boxes have been stored for a long time they will be extremely dusty. We have discovered that our staff members develop rashes on any part of their skin exposed to the boxes. The irritation clears up as soon as the skin is washed, but the problem has continued. The staff at the records center confirm that they, too, have experienced such problems. A further problem occurred when we were forced to move a large number of boxes within a close area. Several staff members developed bronchitis. If your materials arrive from records center and you are storing and working with them in a closed or poorly ventilated area, you would be well advised to keep your arms covered and to use some sort of purification system. Even room-sized air purifiers are helpful. Dust masks are available at hardware and discount stores.

The collection will contain the normal amounts of newspaper clippings and deteriorating photocopies. Some of the audiovisual materials will probably have deteriorated beyond recovery, since different formats require different storage environments. Of course, the ultimate question of what kind of environment you will be able to create for the collection and your staff will hinge on your budget. However, there are some things that you can do that are not terribly expensive. Our storage and processing areas are dry in winter and humid in summer, so we have purchased room-size humidifiers and dehumidifiers in an effort to make the environment more stable. Air purifiers, some with built-in humidifiers, make it possible for the staff to work more comfortably and safely.

Conclusion. If your collection is large and you are going to process it as fully as you would any other collection, you will discover that it can be a long-term project. On the other hand, the collection will be reduced in size as folders are weeded and nonmanuscript sections are separated. The latter can be handled by student assistants or volunteers with some guidance. While a large Congressional collection looks overwhelming at the beginning, with a measure of patience and common-sense archival practice, it can be brought under control.

Sources of Information and Assistance

If you have a processing problem and you want to talk to someone about the various options available, there are several sources of information, including:

Congressional Papers Roundtable Newsletter
Cynthia Miller, *editor*
U.S. House Historical Office
Washington, DC 20515

National Archives and Records Administration
Washington, DC 20408

Records Declassification Division
(202) 523-3165

Center for Legislative Archives
(202) 523-4185

Washington National Records Center
(202) 523-7633

Regional Federal Records Centers:

Boston	(617) 839-7745
New York	(201) 858-7161
Philadelphia	(215) 951-5588
Atlanta	(404) 763-7438
Chicago	(312) 353-0164
Dayton	(513) 225-2878
Kansas City	(816) 926-7271
Fort Worth	(817) 334-5515
Denver	(303) 234-5271
Los Angeles	(415) 876-9003
San Francisco	(714) 831-4220
Seattle	(206) 526-6501

United States House of Representatives
Washington DC 20515

Office for the Bicentennial of the
House of Representatives
(House Historical Office)
138 Cannon Office Building
(202) 225-1153

Clerk of the House   (202) 225-7000

United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510
Historical Office   (202) 224-3351
Micrographics Center   (202) 224-3647
Audiovisual Center   (202) 224-4977
Computer Center   (202) 224-1305
Photographic Studio   (202) 224-0184

Suggested Readings

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