



MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

REPORT OF
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APPRAISAL COMMITTEE

Minnesota Historical Society
Division of Library & Archives

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The Purpose of Collecting Congressional Papers

To understand Congress, or the reasons for documenting it, “one must first recognize its duality. One Congress is the lawmaking institution, the Congress of the textbooks. The second Congress is the representative assemblage of ... men and women of diverse backgrounds ... and personal and political beliefs. Their electoral fortunes depend ... not upon what Congress produces collectively, but how well they individually cultivate the support and goodwill of voters ... miles from the Nation's Capitol” (Davidson, 10-11). Hence the importance of documenting Congress and its members has both a national and a local/personal component. On the one hand the records of Congress are essential for understanding the nation's political history; on the other hand “all politics is local” and each individual Senator and Representative (shaped by his or her own background and beliefs) represents and shapes state or district concerns. The personal papers of individual Congresspeople are one key component to documenting this duality.

The History of Collecting Congressional Papers at the Minnesota Historical Society (MHS)

The Minnesota Historical Society's interest in documenting public affairs has a long history, beginning with its organization in 1849 by men who were themselves active participants in politics and government. For more than a century before this emphasis was defined in a Public Affairs Center (1967), they and their successors on the Society's governing board, the staff, the state legislature, and the public at large collaborated in bringing together a rich store of information. Among its holdings are the papers of many of the state's Representatives and nearly all of its Senators. These collections have brought the Society prestige, research use, strong documentation of individuals and issues in greater Minnesota, and (not unimportantly) relationships with politically powerful elected officials.

The Society has implicitly made a commitment to document its Congressional delegation, not simply to document individual Congresspeople. Unlike many other repositories of Congressional papers in other states, it has embraced the idea that the group of individuals representing the state in Washington is more than the sum of its parts. These collections are important both as pieces of a national collection documenting Congress as a whole, and as resources for more local study: the lives and attitudes of individual elected officials; the interaction (political and personal) of the state delegation; the local (district, state, and regional) issues and concerns that formed the crucible of national action.

The breadth and depth of the Society's holdings of Congressional papers places it in a unique position nationally as the single largest repository of such material outside the Federal Government. To date, these collections total nearly 6200 cubic feet (this does not include the Vice Presidential portions of the papers of Walter Mondale and Hubert Humphrey), or approximately 16 % of the Society's total manuscript collection. A full 95 % of this volume documents Congressional activity since World War II; 82 % (5000 cubic feet) since 1960 alone. The size and scope of these holdings both demand of and offer to the Society an important role in the appraisal of Congressional papers.

The Need for Appraisal Guidelines for Congressional Papers

The demand is created because the Society does not (and will not) have the resources to acquire, arrange, and store Congressional papers at the rate it has done in the last decades. The explosion of bulk in storage is testament both to the creation of vast files by the Congressional offices, and also to the necessity for the Society to revise its appraisal criteria as the nature of the records changes. Past practice has been to accept virtually all the papers created by a Congressional office, whereas only a small portion of the records created by a business or other organization are accepted. Historians and other users of Congressional papers have admitted (often against their will) that the size of modern Congressional collections – and especially the ever diminishing ratio between content and quantity – make them difficult and frustrating to use. At the same time, many researchers are becoming increasingly adept at using the wide range of other sources that document Congress in less bulky form. In the words of one scholar,

“Congressional collections are far larger than they need to be in order to reflect the important issues and activities that they document,” and “only by paring down these collections to their unique elements will archivists succeed in making them useful to researchers and manageable for archives” (Aronsson, pp. 82, 83).

The extent of the Society's holdings offers the opportunity to develop thoughtful appraisal guidelines that will make Congressional papers less bulky and more useful (and useable). “Because of the growth in the size and complexity of these collections, congressional staff and archivists need to improve their understanding of what constitutes archival material and to develop the management skills to ensure its preservation” (*Documentation*, p. 3).

Even as a leader, the Society must be cognizant of the work and opinions of others. The appraisal guidelines proposed in this report benefited by careful analysis of many sources, especially: Karen Dawley Paul, project director, *The Documentation of Congress* (Washington, 1992); Roger H. Davidson and Richard C. Sachs, editors, *Understanding Congress: Research Perspectives* (Washington, 1991); Richard A. Baker, editor, *Proceedings of the Conference on Research Use and Disposition of Senators' Papers* (Washington, 1978); Frank Mackaman, editor, *Congressional Papers Project Report* (Washington, 1986); Karen Dawley Paul, *Records Management Handbook for United States Senators and Their Repositories* (Washington, 1991); Patricia Aronsson, “Appraisal of Twentieth-Century Congressional Collections,” *Archival Choices*, ed. by Nancy Peace (Lexington, MA, 1984), 81-104. Moreover, the guidelines have been informed by conversations with and reports by archival colleagues at the Senate Historical Office, the House Historical Office, the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, the University of Delaware, and the University of South Carolina. Finally, and in many instances most importantly, the guidelines have benefited from conversations with the staffs of several members of the Minnesota Congressional delegation. While these sources are important, they can only inform and not direct the Society's appraisal guidelines.

For on many appraisal issues, consensus does not exist and cannot exist, because of the multifaceted character of the institutions and groups of individuals involved in or concerned with documenting Congress. Individuals include historians, who use the papers, and the Congresspeople themselves, who create the material. Institutions range from the House and

Senate historians' offices, to Congressional Research Centers (such as the Dirksen Center in Illinois), to university special collections (many of which hold the papers of only one or two Congresspeople), to state historical societies, and even to county historical societies. Each of these groups of individuals and repositories has a distinct purpose or mission, and a distinct perspective on appraisal. On the other hand, some consensus does exist, although as one archivist remarked, even where there is agreement on appraisal standards there has often been an unwillingness or inability to actually apply them. The Society cannot expect that the guidelines it develops will be accepted by other repositories, but the size and depth of its collections, along with the concentrated study afforded by its internal deliberations, again holds both the offer of and demand for leadership.

Goals of Proposed MHS Congressional Papers Appraisal Guidelines

The central goal of these proposed guidelines is to balance the Society's resources against the increasing bulk of Congressional collections, and to define the most stringent appraisal criteria possible consistent with preserving collections that serve the long-term historical objectives of historians and other researchers. To accomplish this, the guidelines specifically rely on the Society's accomplishments in documenting the state's entire Congressional delegation. Because there is much redundancy and duplication among members of the delegation in terms of the issues and projects dealt with (Aronsson, 83), as well as with the constituents helped or heard from, the guidelines seek to reduce this overlap by treating the collections of Senators differently than the collections of Representatives. As Frank Mackaman has argued (p. 158), by choosing to more thoroughly document the activities of Senators a repository has the assurance of receiving materials documenting concerns of importance from all corners of the state. The papers of Representatives, therefore, can be reduced further (especially such series as constituent correspondence), and focused to provide better documentation of those activities unique to the particular legislator and/or to his/her district. Also, the guidelines will make serious use of the assessment of records – especially constituent correspondence and case files – provided by Congressional staff.

The guidelines also have as their goal the improved communication between the Society and the Minnesota Congressional delegation, by enabling Society staff to explain from the beginning which series they wish to preserve and why. And the guidelines must reflect a realistic assessment of the needs/demands of the Congresspeople themselves and the needs of their offices. While the Society does not preserve Congressional collections principally as biographical icons to the elected official, part of what motivates a politician to donate his/her papers is the desire to have their personal accomplishments preserved for posterity. The proposed guidelines ensure that those portions of a Congressperson's papers most likely to reflect his/her personality and accomplishments – speech files, clippings files, files of bills authored – will be retained. Fortunately, these series are also generally considered useful by researchers, and so their preservation benefits not only the Society's relationship with its donors but also the historical record.

Explanation of Appraisal of Specific Series

Invitations. These files are not only bulky, but redundant. The principal information contained in them relates to where the Congressperson was at a particular time and doing what, and this information is available in much more condensed form in the schedule files. It should be noted, too, that Invitation files are among the least used according to a recent user survey (*Documentation*, p. 138). Only if the Speech Files were integrated into the Accepted Invitations files would they be considered for retention.

Academy Files. There is virtual unanimity in the archival world that these bulky files do not have long-term historical value. Moreover, the contents of the files raise serious questions concerning third-party privacy rights, and access to them prior to the death of the applicants probably violates Federal privacy legislation (*Documentation*, p. 42). Summary lists, if any are compiled by the Congressional office, will be maintained, as well as memos and/or form letters that illustrate the office's policy in responding to academy applications or queries.

Routine Requests (for flags, tours, etc). Again, there is no one in the historical or archival community recommending retention of even a sample of these bulky records. The fact that these requests must be dealt with by the Congressperson's staff is documented in the office manuals and other administrative records, which will be retained.

Issue Mail. Issue mail receives moderate research use. However, several factors mitigate against the wisdom of retaining the huge bulk represented by this series of records. First, even the most dedicated historians admit that no one can or wants to read all the letters received on a specific issue; most scholars use this series to find quotable examples. Second, neither historians nor the Congressional offices themselves rely on issue mail as an indication of the strength of popular opinion on a specific issue: district and statewide polls, not mail or phone calls, are how offices judge voter opinion. The chief of staff of one of Minnesota's Congressmen noted that while their mail ran 60-40 against gun control, polls in their district consistently showed 70% voter approval of gun control. In addition, he added, "most of the letters we receive are inane, and so are most of the responses we send out." One Senate office stopped microfilming or preserving issue mail five years ago, and relies instead on summaries and analyses as well as polling data. Furthermore, the system used to film and index this mail often makes it impossible to find letters either by topic or by constituent name (once the film is separated from the Congressional services facilities). By preserving a random sample of randomly microfilmed issue mail of the Senate offices, a selection of letters on most issues of importance to Minnesota will be preserved for illustrative purposes. Summaries and analyses of issue mail, when created by any Congressional office, would be preserved.

Case Files. Conversations with the House and Senate historians' offices, and the staffs of two Minnesota Congressional delegates, indicates a growing realization that these files pose a privacy concern that has not heretofore been recognized. Most of the material in these case files is protected by Federal privacy legislation. At least three of Minnesota's Congressional offices have expressed reluctance even to donate these records; others (and the Senate Historical Office) have indicated that any case files accepted and retained by a

repository will have to be sealed for 75 years from date of closing. A staff member of one of the congressional historical offices was blunt about the fact that “those [case] files aren't worth the papers they're printed on” in terms of long-term historical value. Indeed, the Veterans Affairs Committee of the Senate schedules its casework files for destruction after 10 years, a reflection both of privacy concerns and of appraisal of research potential. The Senate and House Historical Office documentation group also reported at the Society of American Archivists' 1991 annual meeting that “projects and casework files are duplicated in many places [e.g., Executive agency files], use was complicated by privacy laws,” and there was in any event virtually no use of these files by researchers.

The one element of longer-term historical value that may inhere in case files is a pattern of public interaction (mostly problems) with the federal government that in turn reflects aspects of public policy, especially as it may concern current events or governmental policy or philosophy (e.g., draft issues during Vietnam, shifts in immigration policy). In most instances, however, the responsibility for preserving evidence of the interaction of government and individual citizens should fall on the National Archives; to attempt this through the papers of congresspeople insures nothing if not inconsistency and redundancy. Most cases are not geographically specific (veteran's benefits case files are the same in California as in Minnesota). The appraisal guidelines for the Society permit, where feasible, the sampling of case files which a) illustrate the “personal” aspects of governmental policy and b) relate specifically to Minnesota. For example, Vin Weber's district office kept the “agriculture and economic development” case files separate, and these were sampled to give a picture of the impact that the farm crisis and wetlands legislation had on southwestern Minnesota farmers. In addition, summary lists and statistical reports regarding casework would be retained for all offices. This appraisal approach mirrors that now suggested by the House Historical Office. Given the extraordinary bulk of these records, their low research rate, and the fact that personal case files will be inaccessible for nearly a century after creation, broader retention strategies are not defensible.

Other Files. By reducing the amount of time and storage space the Society spends dealing with series such as case files and constituent correspondence, the acquisition staff will be in a better position to focus energy on the files of administrative and legislative assistants, and on electronic records in the Congressional offices – records of indisputable long-term historical value but which have heretofore been acquired only sporadically if at all. Congressional staff tend to view their files as personal, and to overcome this tendency the Society must take pains to highlight these records and speak specifically to the respective staff members. Electronic records in Congressional offices, as in so many other places, are rapidly evolving, and efforts to both understand these systems and to appraise the data contained in them should take precedence over arrangements for the sampling, shipping, and acquisition of hundreds of cubic feet of case and issue files. Other series the acquisition staff will be seeking to highlight with Congressional staffs are those dealing with the member's party activities and his/her involvement with Congressional Membership Organizations.

Proposed Appraisal Policy, by Series

KEY: S and D - Selection and Disposition; series probably needs to be appraised folder by folder.

Retain - Probably will be retained intact, except for duplicates or if inspection suggests that value is minimal.

Dispose - Normally will not be retained (and should not be sent to Society), unless inspection or information from the Congressional office indicates value sufficient to warrant S and D or sampling.

PERSONAL/POLITICAL PAPERS

Appointment Books	Retain
Biographical Files	Retain
Campaign Committee Records	S and D
Chronological File	S and D
Congressional Membership Organizations	Retain
Control File	S and D
Correspondence w/other members, White House, other dignitaries	Retain
Correspondence w/family, friends, colleagues	S and D
Daily Schedules	Retain
Desk Calendars	Dispose
Diaries or Personal Journals	Retain
Financial Disclosure Reports	Retain
Invitations (accepted and rejected), unless interfiled w/appearance files	Dispose
Job Recommendations/Patronage	
VIP appointments, Judgeships	S and D
All Others	Dispose
Memorabilia, Plaques, etc.	Dispose
Party Leadership Files	S and D
Political Party Files (state and national)	S and D
Polling Data	Retain
Scrapbooks or Clippings notebooks (only articles about the Member and only if well organized, identified, and in good physical condition)	Retain

Telephone Conversations	
Summary reports	Retain
Message slips	Dispose
Logs	S and D
Trip Files	
Investigative/Policy related trips	S and D
Speeches, routine appearances, campaign stops	Discard
VIP Correspondence	Retain (photocopies ok)

LEGISLATIVE RECORDS

Agency/Department Files	S and D
Bill Files	
Bills authored/coauthored by the Congressperson	Retain
All Others	Dispose
Briefing Books	Retain
Committee and Subcommittee Files (n.b.: Official committee and subcommittee records are the property of the Senate or House)	
Correspondence and Memos	S and D
Lists, Calendars/Agendas, Background, Minutes, Reports (those reflecting substantive activity by the member should be retained)	S and D
Congressional Record Inserts	Retain
Congressional Record (bound sets)	Dispose
Legislative Assistants' Files	S and D
Legislative Subject Files	S and D
Other Staff Project Files	S and D
Publications of State and Federal Agencies	Dispose
Voting Attendance Records	Retain

CONSTITUENT SERVICE RECORDS

Administrative Assistant's Files	S and D
Case Files	
If filed by type	S and D
If not filed by type and not microfilmed	Dispose
If microfilmed	S and D
Casework Reports and Indexes	Retain

Congrats/Condolences/Greetings	Dispose
Grants and Projects	S and D
Grants and Projects Reports and Indexes	Retain
Issue Mail	
Senators: If filmed and indexed	S and D
Senators: If not filmed	Sample if feasible
Representatives	Dispose
Issue Mail Master Library or Library of Form Paragraphs	Retain
Issue Mail Indexes and Reports	Retain
Letters from School Children	
Senators, if not filmed	S and D
Representatives	Discard
Military Academy Appointment Files	Dispose, except for summary lists
Petitions	Discard
Reference Files	Dispose
Requests for Material (flags, passes, etc.)	Dispose
PRESS RELATIONS/MEDIA ACTIVITIES RECORDS	
Constituent Mailings	Retain
Editorials written by the Senator	Retain
Newsletters, updates, and other mailings to constituents	Retain
Newspaper Clippings (background)	Dispose
Photographs, Slides, Negatives	
Identified events and activities	S and D
Unidentified	Dispose
Duplicates	Dispose
Press Mailing Lists	Dispose
Press Releases	Retain
Speeches	Retain final drafts
TV and Radio Files (audio and video tapes, transcripts; may include campaign spots and interviews)	S and D

OFFICE ADMINISTRATION RECORDS

Office Administrator's files	S and D
Office Operations and Procedures	
Operations Manuals	Retain
Staff Directives	S and D
Staff Meeting Minutes	Retain
Records Management Manual	Retain
Form Letters, Master Library and Cumulated Indexes	Retain
Personnel	
Personnel Manuals	Retain
Annual Lists of Staff Members	Retain
Applications	Dispose
Personnel Files	Dispose
Security Clearances	Dispose
Office Equipment (inventories, purchase orders, etc)	Dispose
Office Funds: Payroll, accounts, vouchers	Dispose
Travel	
Expenses, vouchers, etc.	Dispose
Itineraries and trip reports	S and D

Policy on First-term Representatives

Members of the U.S. House of Representatives who serve only one term are usually less historically important than those who serve several terms. Therefore, normally it will be Society policy not to seek donor contracts with Representatives until after their first re-election. In the case of a Representative who is defeated after one term, the acquisition staff will contact his/her office after the election, and request donation of a very limited number of series: mass mailings to constituents; biographical files; VIP correspondence; speech files; press releases; well organized newspaper clippings, and in some instances selected campaign files.

Conclusion

If not for the massive railroad collections in our holdings, the papers of Congresspeople would comprise fully one third of the manuscript collection. Add to this the Vice Presidential papers of Hubert Humphrey and Walter Mondale, and the papers of state senators and representatives, and of governors, and close to half the manuscript collections are comprised of the papers of

elected officials. Without disputing the importance of these people to the history of Minnesota, it is surely debatable whether their importance is equivalent to the space and other resources they have traditionally occupied in the repository. If the Society is to have the ability to aggressively document communities of color, major Minnesota industries, women's groups, and all the other aspects of Minnesota history it wishes to see represented in the manuscript collections, it must be willing to revise the traditional "take anything" approach to congressional papers. Moreover, this reassessment by the Society is part of a larger, inexorable reassessment by the archival and historical communities at large. The Minnesota Historical Society must not wait for others to decide what it should be preserving, but must step forward and exercise leadership not only over its own collections but over the evolving professional consensus as well.

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