Processing Tips and Summaries

Javits Papers

Mary Boccaccio and David Carmicheal have produced a technical leaflet for the June Mid Atlantic Archivist. Portions of this leaflet, which gives advice on processing congressional collections, are excerpted below:

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.

In theory, processing the records of a Senator or Congressman should be a fairly straightforward task. You should have the packing lists from the Federal Records Center in hand, and the boxes in house. But as you begin to work on such a collection, you will discover various idiosyncrasies of the Congressman and his or her staff that you may not have expected.

Before you begin, make certain that [you] have all the boxes and packing lists. If you are unsure, check with the Congressman's staff or with the Federal Record Center.

The packing lists represent materials sent to the record center, usually once a year. 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. 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.

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 lists, you will discover that
you are continually finding more material to add to series you thought you had finished.

Before you actually begin work on the collection, it will be helpful to develop a staff chronology indicating who was responsible for what areas and when. When all else fails, such lists can help identify series.

Series can be difficult to establish. As tenure increases, so does staff size, complexity of filing systems, areas of the Congressman's interests, and the specializations of the staff. Early files usually cover such topics as public relations (including press releases), legislation, constituent correspondence, committees, and case files. The early records of the Congressman may also include the administrative assistant's files, the home state office files, and the Congressman's "personal" files. These broad categories will be visible throughout the collection, but in later years, as the Congressman's office grows, they may become more difficult to discern. Eventually an entirely new filing system or series of filing systems -- ones which show very little resemblance to the original, simpler categories -- evolve.

One difficulty 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.

Once you are ready for arrangement and description, begin by looking at the formats of the material in the collection. Decide what you will do with monographs and government documents.

Audiovisual materials are another distinct problem. The Congressman's audiovisual materials will probably contain duplicates which are unidentified, negatives with no matching positives, and positives with no matching negatives.

This is a good time to pull audiovisual materials and consolidate them 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.

We decided to standardize the format of the audiovisuals by copying all visual materials onto 3/4" video cassette tape and all audio materials onto reel to reel tape.

Whether or not you copy the audiovisual materials, it will be important for you to establish the copyright holder.

Collections often contain microfilm done by the Senate or House microfilm recording studios. This is likely to be constituent correspondence and press materials, though by the late 1970s name
and topic reports were included. 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 studio uses "K" cartridge microfilm. This precludes the use of "M" cartridge and open-reel readers.

In the late 1970s 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 which their office used.

Mary Boccaccio and David Carmicheal

Magnuson and Jackson Papers

The following is a summary of two recent progress reports that evaluated our work procedures. Those who are interested may obtain the full reports by writing to the University of Washington Congressional Papers Project. In the interest of saving space I have omitted many of the conditional phrases and explanatory notes; the findings discussed below will thus appear more certain than they really are:

Not surprisingly the same rules that apply to other accessions apply to congressional papers: don't be intimidated by volume, work in stages, do the obvious first, don't get bogged down unnecessarily in details, etc.

Stage 1 -- Planning. Planning means sorting cartons into stacks of like material so that, for example, pallet 1 is Departmental Correspondence, pallet 2 is Legislative Correspondence, etc. This planning outlines future processing workloads and prevents the annoyance of later discoveries. Planning cannot be done effectively on paper: The original container lists are often inconsistent, vague or just plain wrong. Even when the lists are accurate, it is too easy to overlook any isolated boxes of a particular series. Doing the job right really takes opening each box, verifying the contents and, if necessary, separating series so that the remaining boxes are homogenous.

Planning is very quick and, if done with two people, not too burdensome. In most cases we averaged less than 1/10 hr./cu.ft. Planning can be done as materials are checked in -- that is, sort the boxes onto appropriate pallets as they arrive. Even when it is done later, as in our case, this work requires little space. We worked in musical pallets fashion, clearing and restacking pallets as we went along.
Stage 2 -- Arranging and Appraising. Before we turn the series over to the students for final processing we review the tentative categories established during the planning. Some categories, such as Personal, include a variety of materials that need to be sorted further. Others, such as Legislative Correspondence, are relatively homogenous and need little more than final alphabetizing. We do any folder level weeding, but leave the item level weeding to the students. We also set the appropriate control level (folder or item), specify the amount of buffering and weeding to be done and give whatever sorting instructions are necessary. We walk all students through their first time with any particular step, but after that supervise mainly by reviewing draft inventories.

Stage 3 -- Sorting and Refoldering. Most of our processing time is spent at this stage. Because the time varies considerably from series to series I will go through some of the major series individually. We processed the Magnuson 1957-68 materials (WGM-4) in two-thirds of the Magnuson 1945-56 (WGM-3) time. Part of this reduction was due to experience, part due to changes in processing instructions. In particular we have been stressing that processors should not handle every item in a folder when working at the folder level. The Jackson 1940-52 materials (HMJ-2) took slightly longer than WGM-4 because HMJ-2 was processed in great detail.

Outgoing Letters (OUT) were purely a refoldering job. The hrs./cu.ft. for both WGM-3 and WGM-4 are relatively constant (see attached) and probably indicate a benchmark for refoldering work. However, any work beyond simple refoldering significantly increases processing time (see below). Although processing was relatively fast, it resulted in miserable access (index terms/cu.ft.).

The General (GC), Departmental (DP) and Legislative (LC) Correspondence series are all examples of refoldering along with some buffering, removal of paperclips and straightening of materials. Most of the materials were originally fat, but homogenous folders with straightforward folder headings. Some of the folder headings in these series did have to be verified, slowing processing. The processing times vary quite a bit, indicating that the processing tasks also varied considerably from accession to accession even though these materials, on the surface, appear quite similar. Access also varies considerable from accession to accession, though for the most part the access increases or decreases in proportion to the time spent processing. This is not the result of conscious processing decisions on our part. It is caused by the original filing plan; whenever the Congressional staff set up more subject files, they provided better access, but left us with more work.
The Personal Correspondence (PC) is an example of item level processing. All the correspondence was alphabetized and correspondents with three or more letters were listed in the inventory (all others went into "Miscellaneous" folders. Surprisingly, this detailed processing took only about twice as long as the folder level work. Magnuson's correspondence was not particularly rich -- it yielded only about as many IT/cu.ft. as did the Departmental -- but Jackson's was very rich.

The Press Releases (PR) most graphically demonstrate the difference between item and folder level processing. The WGM-3 releases were individually foldered and inventoried. This led to great access, but at great cost. The WGM-4 releases were kept in order, but foldered collectively and not inventoried. This allowed for fast processing, but virtually no access (most of the reported access points are to the press secretary's correspondence, not to the press releases).

These work measures have given us some quantitative indications of what we are doing, but their utility as planning tools is still in doubt. There are as yet not enough data to tell which figures are normal and which are not. The numbers also represent work averages rather than specific tasks, since several tasks are often done concurrently in processing a series. This makes it difficult to predict the possible effects of altered work procedures for individual tasks.

Bibliographic Matters

Ben Primer (Johns Hopkins University) reports that he has been unable to gain the needed administrative support to allow him to compile a Congressional Papers Bibliography by himself. He wonders if there are any volunteers willing to work on various sections, such as appraisal, sampling, Senate History, etc.

Lynn Roundtree (Louisiana State University) has volunteered to index this newsletter on an annual basis. If the newsletter continues and if there is a demand for the index Lynn will make it available in machine-readable form (a dBase III file on a diskette).

News Notes

The Russell Long Collection at Louisiana State University is, with several other special collections units, moving into the old Main University Library. The new quarters contain some 45,000 linear feet of shelf space and have state-of-the-art environmental and fire protection controls.
Mary Boccaccio is leaving SUNY - Stony Brook for East Carolina University in Greensville, N.C.

Uli Haller is leaving the University of Washington Congressional Papers Project to work on an MBA degree.

Continuing this Newsletter

The legislative appropriation for the University of Washington Congressional Papers Project has been halved; thus we are unable to fund the newsletter. We might be able to excerpt news, compile comments, prepare copy and maintain the mailing list. Copying and mailing costs are a problem. If contributors/recipients feel a need for this newsletter, a couple solutions are possible:

1) another institution might assume the responsibility
2) SAA might adopt us as a roundtable.

Ann Campbell says that the roundtable format, though not implemented, seems appropriate for us. If Council grants us this status, it would provide postage funds and a mechanism to meet at annual meetings but no maintenance of our mailing list.

The questions of our relationship to a Professional Affinity Group is open. We might consider the Manuscripts PAG.
### MAGNUSON AND JACKSON PROCESSING FIGURES

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<th>Acc.</th>
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**Key:**
- DP = Departmental Correspondence
- GC = General Correspondence
- LC = Legislative Correspondence
- Out = Outgoing Letters
- PC = Personal Correspondence
- PR = Press Releases