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CONGRESSIONAL PAPERS NEWSLETTER

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Scheduling of Federal agency case files

We have received the following response from NARS to our questions about case files:

Federal agency records related to Congressional case files generally consist of two types of files: 1) general Congressional correspondence files consisting of communications from Congress relating to non-policy matters, requests for information or action and 2) case files or other non-correspondence series relating to the specific activity, such as military academy appointments.

Generally speaking, records of this nature in agency custody are scheduled for disposal. General Congressional correspondence files relating to non-policy matters usually are destroyed when they are a few years old. Case files, on the other hand, are often retained for 50 years or more, to ensure that the rights of the individuals involved are adequately protected. These types of case files are protected by the Privacy Act from unauthorized release to persons other than the subject of the files. Some case files, such as the FBI investigation case files, have been appraised and scheduled for selective retention in the National Archives because their informational values suggest a high research potential. These selections of case files for archival retention are made through a combination of objective and subjective criteria, such as case files larger than a certain size and files relating to cases of notoriety or precedential importance to the agency.

Jean Keeting,
Deputy Dir., Records Appraisal
and Disposition Division, NARS

It looks like each repository will still have to make its own decisions on federal case materials. The "general Congressional correspondence" Jean describes appears to be the Departmental Correspondence in the Magnuson and Jackson papers. Unfortunately this Departmental Correspondence also includes case materials and substantive policy correspondence with agency directors. These Senators, unlike the agencies, made little distinction between policy discussions, information requests and case assistance. We have segregated the individual case file folders from the other Departmental Correspondence and will retain significant individual cases (e.g., Dave Beck, Teamsters) or sets of cases (e.g., post-WWII immigration).

There also seems to be a need to clarify some terminology in this area. I would not have considered academy appointments cases. We need to develop some clearer series definitions. Any volunteers to work on a Series Element Dictionary?

Uli Haller,
University of Washington

Processing Problems

Constituent Correspondence

I would appreciate hearing about how others have handled another problem I have with constituent correspondence (pre-CSM). I really have two series -- one that the office called Legislative Mail or "pinks" (which generally received a hand-typed letter with pink carbon) and a second termed "robo" or "dura" in honor of the machines that cranked out form letters. The latter are filed by number of the form letter received and of course are massive. One might suppose one could save the "pinks" as a representative sample of the mail, but in later years many of these letters are simply multi-issue letters for which there was no "robo" reply. The "pinks" do tend to include the more insightful letters that warranted the time of the legislative assistants, but they are hardly representative of the common man. I am tempted to eliminate (or sample) the multi-issue "pinks" and sample "robos" except for certain significant issues (such as Watergate) which warrant a more complete record. The problems with sampling of course are with method and time.

Ben Primer,
Johns Hopkins University

Filing Inconsistency

Mary Boccaccio and Uli Haller have accurately described a most permanent characteristic of congressional collections, namely the lack of consistency over time in file series in a congressional office. Unfortunately, from my perspective, I do not foresee an improvement in the situation. In fact, the problem will most likely grow worse with the advent of office automation. For example, I have seen an office recently where almost everything was filed chronologically under broad headings for the 97th Congress. When retrieval difficulties became apparent, the office switched in the 98th Congress to automated indexing of every item that was filed. Retrieval did not become easier as the documents are arranged numerically: easy enough, but no two staff think enough alike to use the complex subject index successfully.

During the "centralized systems" era at the Senate (we are now in the mature phase,) procedures gradually evolved whereby it became possible for repositories to acquire index tapes, that is, if the

tapes were still available. What archivists now face, is similar to the early stages of centralized systems in the Senate, every office will be doing things their own way on systems tailored to their own needs. Two possibilities for the future exist: some offices will be better organized as a result of the discipline imposed by these systems, others will be erasing permanently valuable material and creating gaps in the historical record.

Our office will be issuing guidelines, but this will not ensure that all offices will even read them much less implement and follow them. Chances that they will do so will be greatly enhanced if congressional collection archivists would contact these offices periodically and encourage them to establish and maintain procedures whereby historically valuable documents are transferred from these systems to an archival storage medium.

Three other strategies come to mind. Congressional collections archivists should encourage offices to break their files, at least at the end of each Congress, if not more frequently. In many offices this simply is not done. Offices should be encouraged to create and save documentation that explains their filing system. Many offices will toss this material, not realizing its value to archivists. Thirdly, congressional archivists should stress the value of retaining indexes, both manual and automated, permanently.

Whether or not a repository has been selected as the sitting senator's repository, each archivist has a duty, I think, to promote the preservation of congressional collections for his/her state. Early contact with the member's office and periodic follow-ups are one way archivists can contribute to improving the quality of congressional collections.

Karen Paul,
Senate Historical Office

Legislative Assistants Files

My biggest headache has been the records of the legislative assistants (of Sen. Mathias). These records originally were the files of a single legislative assistant. When the congressman went to the Senate, various parts of the legislative assistant's files were scattered among the other, newly hired LA's. Eventually, the assistants divided issues along fairly clear lines (often committee lines), but often issues and files continued to transfer at the end of a Congress or when a staff member departed. To deal with this chaos, I adopted an arrangement that utilizes the various branches of what Mathias called his Legislative Department. Thus I have the records of the Office of Minority Staff Director, Senate D.C. Committee, which includes the records of a number of assistants who worked in that office, including the LA who had originally come over from the House.

In sum, I have subseries organized by divisions within the legislative department. I do not know if other offices have this type of bureaucratic arrangement in their legislative departments, but the size of current offices suggests that this office approach may be preferable to the individual ones as the number of staff increases. I would be curious to learn how others have handled this knotty problem.

Ben Primer

Shipping Congressional Collections

Lobbying

Those of us who work directly with sitting Representatives and Senators should begin some sort of lobbying effort (with the help of the history offices in the House and Senate) to produce a more orderly transfer of records once the end comes. This might include professional moving, a staff allowance for retiring members to hire professional archivists from host institutions or elsewhere to oversee the inventorying and packing of records (to include some travel and perhaps to extend a month or so beyond the member's term) and perhaps some warehouse space to accomplish all this (given the urgent need to clear offices on Capitol Hill). The best approach is to do all this well in advance, as Dick Baker preaches, but many members do not, and there is always the surprise electoral defeat.

Ben Primer

As Ben notes, many members do not plan in advance for disposition of their papers. I'm convinced they are not inclined to think of life beyond the Congress; most often their administrative assistants with a sense of history deserve our thanks. From what little I know about the requirements, I believe the time allowed to clear offices and actually ship materials at federal expense is too short, especially following a death in office. Ben's suggestion of a lobbying effort appeals to me; I'd like the opinion of the history offices about it: its feasibility and how it might be done.

Karyl Winn,
University of Washington

Instructions

Karen Paul has sent us the shipping instructions put out by the Senate Historical Office. A copy of these instructions is attached to the Newsletter.

Bibliography

Ben Primer has volunteered to compile a congressional papers bibliography. Anyone interested in contributing to the project should contact Ben at the Eisenhower Library, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore MD 21218.

News Notes

Emory University

Our fourth district Congressman, Elliot Levitas, a five-term veteran and an alumnus of Emory, was defeated in the November elections. Although we had been in contact with him and his staff concerning the disposition of his papers, no decision had been made formally at the time of the election. Things moved into high gear since then. Papers have begun to arrive at the repository from Washington, and all district files have been transferred.

One of Congressman Levitas' predecessors, the late James C. Davis, had many years ago designated Emory as repository for his papers. Many files had been received in the 1960's, but only in the late 1970's were we able to begin unpacking and sorting the papers. In December the staff completed series sorting, moderate arranging, reboxing, and listing of the collection. Davis served from 1949-61, was involved in several very interesting Georgia campaigns, and was a member of the District of Columbia Committee when the D.C. schools were desegregated.

Ginger Cain,
Emory University

Editorial Notes

In order to speed communication, this issue is being sent to every person on our list of interested colleagues. We will continue this practice until we face budget cuts or until our list grows beyond manageable proportions. If you have any questions or comments, please direct them to Karyl Winn or me at the University of Washington Libraries, FM-25, Seattle, WA 98195.

Yes, the UW Congressional Papers Project has a new toy, an IBM PC/XT. We hope our letter quality printer will arrive before the next issue goes out. We are using Samna Word III for word processing and inventory preparation and Nutshell Information Manager for miscellaneous databases. I will report on some of our computer applications in a later issue and look forward to hearing about what others are up to in this area.

Uli Haller