



***The Making of a Manual:  
Grass Roots *Advocacy* for  
Managing Congressional  
Papers***

by  
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### **The Lay of the Land**

Congressional papers are an acquired taste. They are not for the weak of heart, nor should they be confused with other large, complex collections. Repositories and archivists beware. **They come with high profiles, higher donor expectations, significant costs, unique obstacles to access and generate a political climate all their own.** Invariably, it falls to the least experienced among us to somehow navigate these troubled waters. Many archivists cut their teeth on these collections vowing never to do it again.

For nearly 200 archivists nationwide, however, these papers draw a passionate following precisely for the challenges. Congressional collections span gender, race, party affiliation, geographical distribution, and media format. The records are at once local, regional, and national in scope. They are ubiquitous, yet unique. They can be found in repositories large and small in every corner of the country. Many languish due to lack of funding. These can be hidden treasures requiring a lot of help.

Congressional collections also epitomize every management problem associated with 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century records. They are huge. (A U.S. Senator is estimated at generating 100 boxes of archival material for each year in office.) They are historically important, yet often remain under-utilized and poorly understood by their donors, researchers, and repositories. What follows is a 30-year odyssey of grass-roots activism by scholars, archivists, librarians, and administrators to improve the management and use of these significant resources.

### **A Long and Winding Road**

- **1978** A conference on the **Research Use and Disposition of Senators' Papers** is attended by historians, archivists, and congressional staff aides who meet to consider "who uses senators' papers and why?" *The American Archivist* (Vol. 41, no. 3) includes three articles on congressional papers discussing their unique characteristics and challenges.
  
- **1983** **Ad Hoc Planning Group on a Manual for Congressional Papers** submits a report to SAA calling for a manual designed to help archivists with the decisions and procedures required to manage congressional collections.

- **1984-Present** Congressional papers emerge as the poster child for the ills associated with twentieth century collections. Six articles in *The American Archivist* cite these papers as **bulky, redundant, and under-utilized; hidden and unprocessed; and competitively solicited yet poorly managed**. They contain every conceivable format and are often the subject of public disputes and tricky donor relations.
- **1984** The first official meeting of the **Congressional Papers Roundtable** is held in Chicago.
- **1985** Nineteen historians, archivists, and administrators convene in Harpers Ferry to examine issues relating to congressional papers. **Barely discussed, and certainly not resolved at Harpers Ferry, were the issues of appraisal, negotiation, acquisition, transfer, processing, and servicing these collections.**
- The first edition of *Records Management Handbook for United States Senators and Their Archival Repositories* is published. Recommendations within the handbook are voluntary and as such, subject to uneven adoption. The handbook becomes the only reference available for repository-based archivists faced with unprecedented backlogs. **Many congressional collections currently held by repositories bear little resemblance to the recommended records management guidelines.**
- **1991** *Guidelines for the Disposition of Members' Papers* by Cynthia Miller is published by the U.S. House of Representatives Historical Office and has been continuously updated.
- **2002** The Congressional Papers Roundtable (now more than 200 members) forms a task force to draft archival guidelines for repositories. Smaller repositories fear the guidelines will favor larger repositories. **The project stalls for lack of funding, consistency, and coordination.**
- **2003** **The Association of Centers for the Study of Congress** is formed. It currently has 39 institutional members. Its focus to date **has not** included basic archival issues of preservation and access to congressional collections, without which no study of Congress is possible.
- **2005** **Greene & Meissner** article "More Product, Less Process: Revamping Traditional Archival Processing" *American Archivist* (Fall/Winter 2005) resonates for those coping with intractable backlogs of twentieth century materials. **There are striking similarities between this article, previous calls for change, and the 1983 Ad Hoc Committee recommendations.** Congressional paper collections are prime subjects for this type of review.

- **2006** The **Congressional Papers Roundtable Steering Committee** resolves to apply for a grant to the NHRPC to support the writing, publication and distribution of a repository-based *Guidelines for Managing Congressional Papers*.
- **2008 H. Con. Res. 307** is passed by the U.S. Senate, stating that Members' Congressional papers (including papers of Delegates and Resident Commissioners to the Congress) should be properly maintained; that each Member of Congress should take all necessary measures to manage and preserve their papers; and that Members of Congress should be encouraged to arrange for the deposit or donation of their papers with a research institution that is properly equipped to care for them and to make these papers available for educational purposes at a time the Member considers appropriate.

### **How We Got It Done**

First, we had to not only sell but fast-track the idea to the SAA Publishing Committee. The biggest obstacle was to overcome the widely-held notion that Congressional collections were no different from other big collections. Which begs the question, **how was this manual going to differ from the previous processing manuals?** Let me list the ways:

- ❖ Incorporates best practices as they relate to these collections
- ❖ Outlines standards for acquisition (hint: take care of these and many donor issues disappear)
- ❖ Includes calculating costs, space, personnel, and budget
- ❖ Offers ideas for sustainability and outside funding sources
- ❖ Proposes cost-saving strategies
- ❖ Discusses access issues of classified, declassified, and reclassified documents
- ❖ Includes FAQs with responses taken from the field
- ❖ Uses clean, no-nonsense prose in an easy to read format

Long distance grant writing under the gun is no small feat. The submission deadlines were short (6 weeks). Miss them and the manual would be delayed for another year. Dan Stokes at NHRPC understood this and was instrumental in paving the way. It pays to call ahead and discuss the project before it's submitted.

Information does not marinate well with time. Thirty years into the making and previous drafts had to be scrapped in favor of new concepts, new formats, new technology, and emerging best practices. It was important that in this election year, the manual would make its debut especially in light of Congress's resolution urging members to save their papers for public use. Note that this move by Congress was also the product of years of grassroots advocacy.

From the NHPRC application to final publication (1 year, 11 months), seven CPR members serving on the Editorial Advisory Board worked with Cynthia Pease Miller, the author. To avoid the previous pitfalls of writing by committee, it was important that the manual have one voice (Cynthia's) with timely input from those working in the trenches. Each individual weighed in at crucial points along the way. Cynthia drafted the product at least six times. We responded. When one faltered, another took over - often without being asked. Needs were anticipated, turn- arounds were short (typically 72 hours), and editing skills were at a premium. But it was Cynthia who had the fortitude and wisdom to knit the whole thing together. Bottom line: This was work bound by a passion for the subject and a commitment to fulfill a promise made 30 years earlier.

### **How YOU Can Get It Done**

For those who may now be persuaded that managing Congressional collections is not routine, add this manual to your resources. For those who remain skeptical, consider the "typical" Congressional artifacts (Norman Rockwell paintings) shown from the Goldwater collection below. For those who know their Congressional delegation and consider them donors, friends, and supporters of archival work, send them a copy. For all those working with administrators, development officers, and department heads, urge them to click on this link:

<https://www.archivists.org/catalog/pubDetail.asp?objectID=2391> There is something here for everyone. Don't acquire or process a Congressional collection without it. Consider the manual a kind of insurance. Are you in good hands?



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