



Book Review: *Managing Congressional Collections*

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Abstract

Whether faced with that tractor-trailer of boxes from a congressional office at your institution's loading dock (and a sinking feeling in your stomach) or merely thinking about contacting your state's congressional representatives for potential donations, *Managing Congressional Collections* is for you. This easy read is practical and current, and also provides a succinct overview of the major issues archivists must consider when collecting and administering records generated by members of the United States Congress. The manual additionally provides guidelines for donors who are considering donating their collections to archival repositories. This publication emanates from the efforts of the Society of American Archivists' Congressional Papers Roundtable (CPR), behind author and founding member of CPR, Cynthia Pease Miller. Miller's long career as a Capitol Hill archivist, in addition to the CPR Editorial Advisory Board's backing, endorse this slim volume as the go-to book for handling congressional collections.

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Cynthia Pease Miller. *Managing Congressional Collections*. Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2008. 130 p. Bibliography, appendices, and index.

\$19.95 (nonmember and member).

Whether faced with that tractor-trailer of boxes from a congressional office at your institution's loading dock (and a sinking feeling in your stomach) or merely thinking about contacting your state's congressional representatives for potential donations, *Managing Congressional Collections* is for you. This easy read is practical and current, and also provides a succinct overview of the major issues archivists must consider when collecting and administering records generated by members of the United States Congress. The manual additionally provides guidelines for donors who are considering donating their collections to archival repositories. This publication emanates from the efforts of the Society of American Archivists' Congressional Papers Roundtable (CPR), behind author and founding member of CPR, Cynthia Pease Miller. Miller's long career as a Capitol Hill archivist, in addition to the CPR Editorial Advisory Board's backing, endorse this slim volume as *the* go-to book for handling congressional collections.

Since 1976, scholars and archivists have discussed and published about issues relating to congressional collections. Of primary concern have been topics such as access to and research in these collections, the unique features and the ensuing challenges of congressional collections, and guidelines for managing these collections. *Managing Congressional Collections* is the culmination of many of these discussions at national conferences and their published reports as well as the efforts of interested parties since the idea for a manual germinated in 1983. Two seminal publications in this field initially put ideas on paper for U.S. politicians and archivists: Karen Dawley Paul, Senate archivist in the Senate Historical Office, published the *Records Management Handbook for United States Senators and Their Archival Repositories* in 1985, and in 1986, the National Historical Publications and Records Commission published the *Congressional Papers Project Report* (also known as the Harpers Ferry Report). Paul's publication is still updated and regularly published by the Senate Historical Office to provide guidelines for United States senators and their staffs as well as for archivists receiving these collections. There has long been a need for a similar publication tailored for members of Congress. *Managing Congressional Collections* builds on and incorporates the enduring guidelines laid out in the *Congressional Papers Project Report* and parallels Paul's records management book for the Senate.

Managing Congressional Collections alternately refers to itself as "guidelines" and a "standard." The overall intention of the book is to set a standard for all aspects of managing these collections, ranging from minimum standards to best practices, both in the congressional offices and in the archives (p. 6). The manual acknowledges that the degree to which the recommendations in the book can be followed depends upon how well an archive is equipped with staff and facilities. The guidelines can, however, remain as goals.

The chapters of Miller's publication are straightforward and comprehensive in addressing specific aspects of managing congressional collections. Chapter One, "Soliciting or Donating a Congressional Collection," reflects the dual audience for this manual in its discussion of standards for acquiring collections and the elements of a model congressional collections repository. Often congressional members donate their collections to archives that are unable to adequately handle the size of the donation or allow access in a timely fashion. CPR's recommendations for a "model" repository are an effort to prepare donors and archives for the real challenges of these collections and help eliminate the frustration sometimes experienced on both sides of the agreement.

Chapter 2, "Administering a Congressional Collection," covers factors that need to be considered before (sometimes long before) the donor signs the deed of gift. Issues such as calculating costs, space, personnel, and budget; adequate deeds of gift; access issues, including restrictions and copyright; and donor relations are a sampling of the relevant topics discussed. An ongoing theme of this chapter is the expense associated with these collections, especially as related to processing staff and collection maintenance. Of particular note in this chapter is the clear and helpful discussion on copyright as it relates to congressional papers (p. 38).

Chapter 3, "Transferring the Papers," discusses aspects of the physical transfer of the collection. The reader can perceive the collective years of experience behind the words on the pages interwoven into this description. There are not only tips on how to handle moving the variety of formats such as electronic records and artifacts, but also a list of cost-saving strategies and reminders about the sometimes delicate donor (and congressional office staff) relations involved, for example, when members of Congress have been unexpectedly voted out of office.

Chapter 4, "Processing a Congressional Collection," and Chapter 5, "Reference Services and Outreach," address the most salient issues and challenges of working with congressional collections in these areas. One of the biggest challenges of processing a modern congressional collection is its vast size and, secondarily, its unique characteristics. Chapter 4 covers pre-processing considerations; obtaining physical control, including dealing with irradiated mail; invaluable appraisal checklists; and a discussion of classification, declassification, and reclassification issues. Chapter 5 provides an excellent overview of descriptive practices, access tools, and the basics of reference and outreach needs, including a useful list of outreach initiatives. These chapters do not waste the reader's time with a review of basic professional standards in processing and access, but succinctly cover the most relevant features of congressional collections within these spheres.

Adding to the valuable narrative portion of the book are the equally important appendices. Three appendices merit special note, as the information they summarize is not readily available in many other publications. Appendix D, "Congressional Office Staff List," provides a list of the major positions in a congressional office and the files associated with their work. Appendix E, "Guidelines for File Disposition," is similar in its format to the guidelines supplied in Paul's records management book for the Senate. This appendix provides recommendations for retention, review, or disposition by type of record, including Web sites and electronic records. Appendix F, "Frequently Asked Questions," again culls the collective knowledge of Miller and the CPR manual advisory board in an invaluable question-and-answer format. The other five appendices supplement the text with useful reference information as well.

The presentation of the manual lends itself to easy reading. Miller's written style is clear and succinct. The physical layout of the book complements the ready-reference theme, with best practices easily spotted in gray boxes in each chapter and wide margins throughout for note-taking. The book's index is a necessary and useful feature.

Managing Congressional Collections is an invaluable guide to the various and sundry aspects of handling congressional collections. Practical and laden with seasoned advice, it is a must-read for potential donors, repository administrators, and archivists considering or working with these collections.

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