

THE STATE OF CONGRESSIONAL HISTORY

Periodic assessments of the state of congressional history and the work of federal and archival offices that promote it are of great value to scholars and their work. Fortunately, a panel on this topic at the 2014 annual meeting of the Society for History in the Federal Government on April 5, 2014, brought together three individuals who collectively have over four decades of experience leading the House and Senate history offices. Their remarks are provided here. The session was introduced by Richard McCulley, Historian at the Center for Legislative Archives, National Archives and Records Administration (NARA).

Panelists:

Richard McCulley, Historian, Center for Legislative Archives, NARA

Donald A. Ritchie, Historian, U.S. Senate

Raymond W. Smock, Director, Robert C. Byrd Center for Legislative Studies

Matt Wasniewski, Historian, U.S. House of Representatives

Introductory Remarks

Richard McCulley

Good morning and thank you for attending this discussion on the state of congressional history. I am Richard McCulley, Historian at the Center for Legislative Archives at the National Archives and moderator of this panel discussion. The Trask Lecture that Charlene Bickford delivered yesterday and this panel are part of the Society for History in the Federal Government's commemoration of the 225th anniversary of Congress.

The survival of the national institution of representative government—for all of its up and downs—for 225 years is certainly cause for celebration. But this morning we will also consider if we have good reason to celebrate the state of congressional history as well.



Last summer, Julian Zelizer, one of the nation's top congressional historians, wrote an important, highly visible article in *The Chronicle of Higher*

Education. Left to right: Raymond W. Smock, Matt Wasniewski, Donald A. Ritchie, and Richard McCulley.

Education under the title “Congress is Back.” That forceful declaration naturally raised the question: Back from what?

To answer that question a good reference point might be the commemoration of the 200th anniversary of Congress in 1987, when there was decidedly less to celebrate concerning the state of congressional history. During the 1980s two of our panelists were intimately involved in those commemorative events that engaged the energies of the Senate Historical Office and that led to the creation of the House History Office. Those two history offices and repositories of members’ papers such as the Robert Byrd Center—and dozens like it around the country—have played a vital role in reviving the study of the history of Congress. Our panelists will discuss what those offices and institutions have done, are currently doing, and need to do in order to sustain the progress made over the last couple of decades.

Promoting the History of the Senate

Donald A. Ritchie

This year marks Congress’s 225th anniversary, which means that it’s also the 25th anniversary of the congressional bicentennial—one of the biggest projects undertaken jointly by the Senate and House historical offices. Commemorations included a joint session of Congress and a research conference co-sponsored with the Congressional Research Service on “Understanding Congress.”

The keynote speaker back then was David McCullough, who talked about the historical figures who populated Congress over the years and then lamented how so few of them had first-rate biographies written about their lives and careers. In some cases there had been no new biographies in a half-century or more. In other cases there were no books at all. There have been a few scholarly biographies that have appeared since then, including Gilbert Fite’s life of Richard Russell and LeRoy Ashby’s biography of Frank Church. But many of the towering figures McCullough cited continue to go unrecorded. He also hoped to see a history of Congress during the New Deal, which he called “a great book waiting to be written.” It still is. “The plain fact is we historians have neglected Congress,” he asserted. “Two hundred years after the creation of Congress, we have only begun to tell the story of Congress.”

The truth is that Congress is the most difficult branch of the federal government to weave into a historical narrative. Presidential administrations are self-contained

and dominated by a single figure. Judicial histories can be written around individual cases and justices. By contrast, Congress is an ever-changing mass of individuals in seemingly perpetual disagreement with each other, and between chambers. The records of its individual members are scattered across the country. When Robert Dallek was beginning his research on a biography of LBJ, he called the Senate Historical Office with a list of prominent former senators, asking where their papers were located. The repositories stretched from Alabama to Alaska. Dallek sighed and said, “Well, I guess I’ll get to see America.”

It also does not help that Congress registers as the least popular branch of the federal government. Even at its highest levels, right after Watergate, Congress was well regarded by only 40 percent of the population. In recent years that approval rate has dipped below 10 percent—down below used car salesmen and just ahead of telemarketers. But this is nothing new. Back in 1925, Representative Nicholas Longworth—for whom one of the three House office buildings was named—commented that during the 20 years he had served, members of Congress had been “attacked, denounced, despised, hunted, harried, blamed, looked down upon, excoriated, and flayed. I refuse to take it personally,” he said. “I have looked into history. . . . We were unpopular when John Quincy Adams was a congressman. We were unpopular when Henry Clay was a congressman. We have always been unpopular. From the beginning of the Republic, it has been the duty of every free-born voter to look down upon us, and the duty of every free-born humorist to make jokes at us.”

This is the stream that we congressional historians have been swimming against for many years. When Senators Mike Mansfield and Hugh Scott created the office in 1975 and hired Dick Baker as the first historian, the only marching order they gave him was to “promote the history of the Senate.” We decided early on that it should not be our role to write the history of the Senate ourselves. The Senate Historical Office is nonpartisan. The very act of analyzing and criticizing any aspect of the Senate’s history would involve taking sides, and not criticizing would leave us open to the charge of being court historians.

Instead, we have encouraged independent scholars to write that history and have tried to make their work easier for them. Before there was a Historical Office there was no uniform access rule to the records of the Senate. Researchers had to approach the current chairs of the standing committees for access to records, no matter how recent or remote. I recall reviewing the records of the Finance Committee for a request from the papers of Daniel Webster and writing a tongue-in-cheek memo assuring that no personal privacy or national security matters

would be violated by opening Webster's records. Since 1980, thanks to Dick Baker and Senator Robert C. Byrd, the Senate opens most of its records after 20 years, and even its most sensitive records after 50 years.

Sometimes we have helped move the process along by getting declassified and editing for publication some highly sought-after closed records. The office has been preparing the executive sessions of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee for release in its "Historical Series," and it also published all of Joe McCarthy's closed hearings—an event that made worldwide news. (It turned out that many nations know and use the expression "McCarthyism" without knowing much about McCarthy.)

Before the Senate Historical Office existed, many senators' papers went directly from their offices to the rubbish pile, sometimes burned by a widow or a secretary trying to protect their historical reputations, and obliterating them instead. Some senators' papers were stored in family barns where vermin fed on them. The preservation of historically valuable manuscripts was hit or miss. Now we have three Senate archivists who help senators open their offices and set up files when they arrive and close their offices and find a suitable repository when they leave. We keep track of where those records are, whether they are open or closed, and whether they are on paper or stored electronically. The archivists are currently working hard to make sure that senators and Senate committees preserve their email, social media, and other electronic files for future research.

Recognizing that not everything gets written down, we have also been conducting oral histories with former senators and former staff, everyone from the parliamentarians and chief clerks down to the staff who run the mail rooms and handle telecommunications, to understand how the institution really operates and what goes on behind all those closed doors.

We deposit those interviews in the Library of Congress, National Archives, and other appropriate repositories. For years they sat on the shelves with minimal research use, showing up in an occasional footnote. Today, more than 40 full transcripts are posted on the Senate's website, some with audio clips, and they are getting thousands of "hits" each month. Researchers, reporters, obituary writers, students, and genealogists have been making extensive use of the oral histories.

The Historical Office has now posted thousands of pages of interviews, statistics, biographies, bibliographies, historical minutes, and any number of other

background information on the history of the Senate and its functioning—everything from filibusters to bean soup. This information is available worldwide, and we have noted increasing use of the material—and related research requests—from scholars outside of the United States. For instance, there are very active historical seminars on American political history at Oxford and Cambridge Universities, where graduates are producing some of the biographies that David McCullough called for 25 years ago.

American historians still lag behind, having largely abandoned political history for the history of race, class, and gender—ironically just as women and minorities have moved into positions of seniority and power in both houses of Congress. There are occasional signs of renewed interest in political history: we see more sessions at history conferences, more books on display in the exhibit halls, and more research requests, especially from graduate students. We are still perplexed whenever new books appear on subjects related to the Senate and the authors have not bothered to contact us, not realizing that we are here to help them.

We appreciate the difficulties that historians face when they write about Congress. We understand the reasons why they slight the legislative branch in favor of the executive and the judiciary. But we also believe that this has produced a skewed history, and that the role of Congress has been more important and more substantive in every era of American history than historians have been willing to give credit.

That view was also held by the namesake of the center for legislative studies where we are meeting. Robert C. Byrd believed it was fundamentally important not only for historians and the general public to know about the history of the Senate but for his fellow senators to know as well. Throughout the 1980s, leading up to the bicentennial, he delivered a series of speeches, usually on quiet afternoons, about the history of the Senate from 1789 to 1989. It helped that he served as majority leader and minority leader during those years, which meant that people read his speeches in the *Congressional Record* or watched them on C-SPAN. Senator Byrd talked about the creative tension between the president and Congress, which has been going on since the administration of George Washington. He said that it was the tension between power divided and power shared that gave American democracy its distinctive nature. Telling the story from only one side of the ongoing struggle loses its real flavor.

Since the Bicentennial we have been trying to help right that balance. We've seen advancements in scholarship, from Robert Caro's magisterial best-seller *Master of the*

Senate to Dick Baker and Neil MacNeill's *The American Senate: An Insider's History*. We've seen massive amounts of Senate records become available at the Center for Legislative Archives, for which online finding aids are being developed. And we've seen steadily rising statistics on the number of users of historical information on the Senate's website, helped along by our Twitter account @SenateHistory. It's a trend we intend to keep pursuing so that by the 250th anniversary, no one will be able to say that the history of the Senate, and the history of Congress, have been neglected.

Engaging the Public in the History of the U.S. House of Representatives

Matt Wasniewski

Two hundred and twenty-five years ago this past April 1, the House finally established a quorum after nearly a month of waiting, thus beginning a grand legislative experiment that has lasted to this day. For some people, the quorum happened not a moment too soon. As members-elect slowly trickled into New York City, Fisher Ames of Massachusetts called the wait “a very mortifying situation.” Ames fretted, “We lose credit, spirit, every thing. The public will forget the government before it is born.”¹

Waiting for the Senate is a familiar story to so many who have served throughout the decades on the south side of the modern Capitol. And in 1789, Ames and his House counterparts watched with some bemusement as the other body failed to attain a quorum until nearly a week later. Without the Senate around to certify the Electoral College results, George Washington and John Adams—“their majesties elect,” Ames called them—had to wait a little while longer as mere citizens.

Ames spent his spare time surveying his House colleagues and sizing up their qualifications. “Though I am rather less awed and terrified at the sight of the members than I expected to be, I assure you I like them very well,” he judged. “There are few shining geniuses; there are many who have experience, the virtues of the heart, and the habits of business. It will be quite a republican assembly. It looks like one.”

¹ *Works of Fisher Ames, As Published by Seth Ames, Volume I*, W.B. Allen, ed. (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1983). The following page citations are from this volume: pp. 560–61, “mortifying situation”—Ames to George Richards Minot, March 25, 1789; p. 562, “majesties elect”—Ames to William Tudor, April 1, 1789; “few shining geniuses”—Ames to George Richards Minot, April 4, 1789.

Because of the work of 2014 Trask Award winner Charlene Bickford and her colleagues at the First Federal Congress Project, we know in remarkable detail the extraordinary achievements of that first group of 65 legislators in the House. Along with their Senate counterparts, they filled in the Constitution's skeletal framework (including the Bill of Rights), created the federal architecture, assumed state Revolutionary War debts, and decided the location of the future capital.

Over the course of the following two centuries, another 11,000 individuals were elected to the House. The sheer breadth of personalities, stories, and events that compose the rich tapestry of the House's history is one of the institution's greatest strengths. To echo Ames's words, the ranks of these citizen legislators have included a few "shining geniuses" and the occasional scoundrel. But the vast majority were men and, more recently women, who have more-or-less represented a cross-section of American society—lawyers, businesspersons, bankers and financiers, yes, but also farmers, journalists, educators, doctors and nurses, religious ministers, actors and entertainers, athletes, social activists, and civil reformers.

Consistent reapportionment and geographical expansion of the nation added another layer of unique influences and interests: from 18th-century bedrock New Englanders like Ames, to Virginia's slave-owning founders like James Madison, to early 19th-century Westerners, such as Henry Clay of Kentucky. Others came to serve in the chamber as American society slowly admitted new groups into the body politic, representing constituencies that literally and figuratively lay at democracy's frontiers. In the 1850s, these included the *nuevo mexicano* territorial delegates who served after the War with Mexico and later, as the United States acquired an overseas empire at the turn of the 20th century, the resident commissioners from Puerto Rico and the Philippines. Other pioneering representatives included the African Americans who served during Reconstruction until the turn of the 20th century, led by Joseph Rainey of South Carolina in 1870; or Jeannette Rankin of Montana who, in April 1917, became the first woman to serve in Congress.²

In many respects, the House remains what the founders envisioned: the chamber most closely linked to the people. It does this through biennial elections that routinely refresh both its priorities and, frequently, the composition of the body

² For more on Rainey and his contemporaries, see <http://history.house.gov/Exhibitions-and-Publications/BAIC/Black-Americans-in-Congress/>. Rankin, and the nearly 300 women who have followed her into Congress, are profiled here: <http://history.house.gov/Exhibition-and-Publications/WIC/Women-in-Congress/>.

itself. We're conditioned to believe that Congress is a rather static place in terms of its membership—the media constantly tells us that incumbents get reelected more than 90 percent of the time. But while this is indicative of how well the parties retain seats in the modern House, the changing face of the membership tells a different story. I've been with the House since May 2002, during the 107th Congress. When the 113th Congress (2013–15) draws to an end late this year, nearly 75 percent of the 435 representatives who were in office when I started—will no longer be serving. This includes those planning to retire at the end of this Congress; so far this is a fairly typical year in that regard, although we have a number of very senior members—hence institutional memory—leaving. The House will lose roughly 900 years of institutional experience at the conclusion of the 113th Congress, in terms of the combined years of service of those who've announced their departures, been unsuccessful candidates for re-nomination, have already resigned, or passed away in this Congress.³

A public historian telling the history of the House draws upon an embarrassment of riches—outsized personalities and compelling human interest stories, rich data, legislative exploits with national consequences, and centuries of precedent. This presents some challenges, too. As public historians, we have to make sense of this complex institution that has been populated by rather complex individuals, and we have to do it for general audiences. Additionally, in an institution such as ours—where there is a lot of turnover among the members and their legislative staffs—we are the institutional memory. Our work requires constant outreach to the Capitol Hill community.

In both instances, with the general public and the Hill community, we try to put a human face on what can otherwise be a large, difficult-to-understand institution. By telling an anecdote or a brief biography, or the history behind an object, image, or document, we try to give people a toehold to connect with and engage in a much bigger story.

Current Projects of the House History Office

Highlighting three of our projects will provide a sense of how the House History Office presents and communicates institutional history to representatives, their staffs, and—just as importantly—teachers, students, the press, and the public.

Our biggest endeavor since late 2012 has been the website “History, Art & Archives of the U.S. House of Representatives”: <http://history.house.gov>. This is a

³ This figure reflects known departures as of July 1, 2014.

collaborative project between the Historian's Office and the Clerk of the House's Office of Art & Archives. It is an integrated source for 225 years of House heritage, featuring all of our history publications; a database of all House members back to 1789, pulling from the online *Biographical Directory of Congress* (which our office jointly maintains with the Senate Historical Office); an interactive map; video and audio clips from our oral histories; a searchable database of art and artifacts in the House Collection; and online finding aids for House Records at the National Archives. The Historian's social media presence, led by our Blog, YouTube page, Twitter and RSS feeds, is also growing. Recently, between 150,000 and 200,000 users per month have visited the website. Given the seasonal traffic patterns, many of our users are clearly teachers and students.

Another growth area for our office in recent years has been our oral history program. We created the program in 2004, patterned after the Senate Historical Office's successful model. We initially conducted interviews with long-serving staff, but have broadened our focus to encompass event-based interviews and oral histories with former representatives. These interviews collect memories that might otherwise be lost or invisible within the official record, and they provide key primary source material for future researchers.

Two oral history projects are of particular note. First, in March 2012, the House passed H. Res. 562 directing the Historian's Office to collect oral histories related to the Selma marches of 1965, the subsequent congressional pilgrimages to Selma, and the House's relationship to the wider Civil Rights movement. The language of that resolution pleased our oral historians because the House put it on record "that the collection of oral memories . . . is essential to the preservation of the history of the institution."⁴ To date, we've launched exhibitions on the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and are in the process of conducting interviews to add to the collection.⁵

Another significant undertaking has involved initiating oral histories with former House leaders. Remarkably, very few have ever been done, and in those instances where they have, they tend to be with presidential libraries (and thus presidentially focused). In 2013 we commenced an oral history with former Speaker of the House Dennis Hastert that we hope will be a model for our future efforts to correct that imbalance.

⁴ H. Res 562, 112th Cong., 2nd sess. (March 1, 2012).

⁵ See, for example, the Web exhibition on the House and civil rights: <http://history.house.gov/Exhibitions-and-Publications/Civil-Rights/Civil-Rights/>.

The Historian's Office also continues to research and write the House's major historical reference works, including, most recently, *Hispanic Americans in Congress, 1822–2012*, which was published this April. This 764-page volume provides biographies and contextual essays about the 91 Hispanic Americans who served in the House and Senate through the end of the 112th Congress. It's part of a series of books, first championed by the late Lindy Boggs of Louisiana—a great proponent of House history—about women and minorities who have served in the House. The story begins with Joseph Marion Hernández, Florida's first territorial delegate and a complicated individual: a slave-owning, Indian-fighting, Jacksonian Democrat who straddled the transition in Florida from Spanish to U.S. rule. The story becomes more interesting from there: the first century is dominated by statutory representatives—delegates and resident commissioners from the periphery of the United States, who represented majority Hispanic constituencies. The accompanying Web exhibit is up-to-date, so it includes the additional 11 Hispanic members who have come into Congress since the start of the 113th Congress. It also features lesson plans for teachers and art and artifacts not included in the book. An e-book version is forthcoming later this year.

The Importance of Congress's Public History Offices

The House History Office, like its Senate counterpart, not only serves as the institutional memory for our chamber, but provides the raw materials (oral history, biography, and the compilation of data and precedents) and the research guidance that many academic, public, and independent historians require for their work. Frankly, I wish they'd use our help more often—particularly the academics. There are some congressionally focused historians doing excellent work, including Robert David “KC” Johnson, Nancy Beck Young, Julian Zelizer, and Joanne Freeman.⁶ But if we're being honest with ourselves, we have to admit that the current academic environment devalues “traditional” fields like political history or foreign policy and often has only a dim awareness of what it is that we public historians do. That's unfortunate for both parties. Those of us who do political history in a public history setting—federal or otherwise—have an added responsibility to help fill the gap.

⁶ These are among a small group of historians actively working in the field of congressional studies, and they have produced some outstanding monographs in the last decade: Robert David Johnson, *Congress and the Cold War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Julian Zelizer, *On Capitol Hill: The Struggle to Reform Congress and Its Consequences, 1948–2000* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Nancy Beck Young, *Why We Fight: Congress and the Politics of World War II* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2013); and Joanne Freeman, *Affairs of Honor: National Politics in the New Republic* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002).

And if there is one thing to report from the front lines of public history, it's that Fisher Ames had nothing to fear, so far: history has not yet forgotten the government. There is an informed and eager public curiosity about the history of Congress. That is due to the expanded role of government, which in ways that Ames and his contemporaries never imagined, has played an ever-more immediate part in the lives of everyday Americans: from public works to civil rights. Sometimes Congress has played a leading part in such developments; sometimes it's played second fiddle. Sometimes it's been a catalyst for change, at other times an inhibitor. But it's always been part of the dialectic of American governance.

And that is something worth remembering.

Resources and Perspectives

Raymond W. Smock

Twenty-five years ago my esteemed friend and colleague Dick Baker, the Senate Historian, and I organized a major conference on the study of Congress with the help of the Library of Congress. It was called "Understanding Congress: Research Perspectives," and the proceedings were published. We brought together biographers, historians, political scientists, journalists, current and former members of the House and Senate, and we had at it for two days exploring the same topic we are discussing today.

We have come a long way toward improving access to research materials on Congress in the past quarter-century, but I would state without equivocation that we have not yet reached the "Promised Land." Congressional studies, especially historical works and biographies, still lag far behind the mountains of books, articles, and analysis related to the Executive Branch. Congress may be a coequal branch of government under the Constitution but it has never been studied in a coequal manner.

At the conference 25 years ago, Robert Caro spoke, and his topic was "On the Trail of Lyndon Johnson." He is still on that trail and has written some of the most compelling and fascinating history of the Senate as well as a masterful biography of Johnson. It has been his life's work.

David McCullough gave a keynote address at that conference that so impressed Dick Baker and I that we invited him to deliver it again before a joint meeting of

Congress to commemorate the 200th anniversary of Congress. McCullough spoke of the need for us to dig deep into the many biographies of the fascinating characters who have populated the House and Senate over 200 years. He said we had only begun to tell the story. He talked about other perspectives too, such as the need to study the influence of party, the histories of major committees, and the Capitol itself.

McCullough read from a journal entry of John Quincy Adams describing the House floor.

The forms and proceedings of the house this call of the States for petitions, the colossal emblem of the Union over the speaker's chair, this historic Muse at the clock, the echoing pillars of the hall, the tripping Mercuries who bear the resolutions and amendments between the members and the chair, the calls of ayes and noes, with the different intonations of the answers, from different voices, the gobbling manner of the clerk in reading over the names, the tone of the Speaker in announcing the vote, and the varied shades of pleasure and pain [in] the countenances of the members on hearing it, would form a fine subject for a descriptive poem.

Well, we may not get too many members today to see the awe and the poetry of the rhythms and actions of the House chamber, and there are no longer any House pages to be referred to in such poetic language as “tripping Mercuries,” but the United States Congress is every bit as vital to this nation now as it was when Adams wrote about it more than a century-and-a-half ago.

At that same conference, I spoke on the “Future of the History of Congress: Reflections on Documentary Research.” I saw a huge gap between the documentary resources available to study Congress and the actual amount of research being done. This is how I put it 25 years ago:

There is a paradox in congressional research that can be stated this way: The United States Congress makes available to the public voluminous quantities of information about its operation, it saves large quantities of records that are eventually available to researchers, but little is known about the 200 year history of this institution.

The federal government, its three branches, and the many departments of the executive branch are *institutions*, and it is hard to write compelling *institutional* history that can reach a larger public. Congress is the most difficult branch to characterize for the very reason that it has no single public face. We write our histories of this nation from the perspective of our presidents. Only 43 individuals

have held this office. To some extent, we do the same thing with the Supreme Court and tell its story from the perspective of the 17 individuals in the last 225 years who have been Chief Justice. Only 112 individuals have served on the Supreme Court in 225 years—a remarkably small number.

Then there is Congress. Over 11,200 persons have served in the House, 1,950 in the Senate, with an overlapping of over 600 persons who have served in both chambers. How do you put a face on this? Congress is a two-headed institution, so which perspective do you take? Using Speakers as the face leaves out the Senate. Using Senate Majority Leaders, as Dick Baker explains in his excellent new book on the U.S. Senate, is a 20th-century invention. What face would you put on the 19th-century Senate, which had leaders but not formal leadership offices?

Sometimes committee chairmen have been far more powerful than speakers or Senate leaders. And leadership often depends on the great issues before Congress at any given time. James Madison in the First House of Representatives gave us the Bill of Rights. Now *there* is a story with a face and an outcome. This was more significant than anything he did later as president.

Much of the history of Congress has been told anecdotally and from newspapers and the *Congressional Record*. Only one Congress out of 113 has ever been studied systematically from documentary sources. Charlene Bickford, editor of the First Federal Congress papers, whom we honored last night with the Roger Trask Award, has devoted her professional career to a serious documentary study of that First Congress, now stretching to over 20 volumes.

We need something similar for the remaining 112 Congresses, but there is no way that Congress would foot the bill to now launch a study that might take several generations of scholars to complete. We seem incapable of thinking on that big a scale. If the United States is going to be around in another 100 years, or 200 years, or longer, what are we waiting for? When will be the right time to tell this story in the way it should be told? The worst enemy of congressional history has been Congress itself, which does not tend enough to the proper care and feeding of its own records. It does not appropriate funds for the systematic documentary history of the House and Senate. And while encouraging members of the House and Senate to preserve their private office papers for future research, Congress provides no regular funds for this effort.

The kind of scholarship that it takes to create multivolume documentary histories becomes the bedrock for histories that can be written by future generations of scholars.

Systematic documentary histories become the stuff of biographies, documentary films, even books for children. They become future Pulitzer Prize–winning studies. Right now, and more so in the future, we can make these resources available digitally to be used and explored in new ways that reach diverse audiences from specialists to school teachers and school kids. And the greatest beneficiary of such systematic documentary studies will be those who work for and serve in the House and Senate. The history of the House and Senate are not something you automatically know just by being elected.

The other neglected aspect of congressional documentary history is contained in the papers of the individual members who have served. Here at the Byrd Center we have three such overlapping collections, the main one being the papers of the longest-serving senator in history, Robert C. Byrd, and we also have two House collections of the papers of Harley Staggers, Sr., and Harley Staggers, Jr., who represented West Virginia in the House during Byrd's service in the Senate.

Eleven years ago here at the Byrd Center, the directors of a number of similar centers across the country and a group of political scientists and historians formed the Association of Centers for the Study of Congress. We came together to see what we could do to pool our resources, to work on common problems related to congressional archives, and to form a network to encourage the use of our collections. Congress only saves its official committee records by law. The papers of a congressional office are the property of the members. When they leave office they can save them or destroy them. We see great value in these records, including the voluminous constituent correspondence, of letters written to members of Congress. They tell us how a member of Congress dealt with his or her constituents, but they also tell us the stories of districts and states from firsthand accounts.

So if we cannot put a face on Congress the way we put a face on the presidency or the Supreme Court, maybe the best face we can put on Congress is the face of the American people at any given time. We can use the records of Congress to create a portrait of the collective political, social, economic, and cultural situation through the papers of the members who have served.

Congress may best be studied by turning the mirror around and not looking for a single face, but the face of this nation at any given time as seen through the records of Congress. Virtually every aspect of American history has a congressional story to it. Congressional history is not just politics; it contains rich veins of social and economic history too. It has dimensions of every subject imaginable that relate to American history and world history.

The story of the United States can be told from many perspectives, all of which can yield important insights. I am suggesting one of those ways is through the official records and the private papers of individual members of Congress. Every issue; every law, good or bad; every dime spent by the federal government in 225 years; every war fought; every struggle this nation has had on any topic, all flowed through Congress. We have the records in abundance, but we do not have yet the will or the human resources to fully exploit them. I would love to live long enough to see Congress take a greater interest in fostering its own history. We don't need to do it on the scale of the Presidential Library System, although that would be nice. Congress does not do itself justice or serve well the people of this country by failing to provide for the telling of its own story—which is nothing less than the story of the American people.

I applaud the work that has been done by my colleagues in the House and Senate historical offices and in the important work being done at the Center for Legislative Archives at the National Archives, where the voluminous committee records of Congress reside. And I am proud too of the work done in archives and study centers scattered around the country that hold collections of former members of the House and Senate. And I am grateful for and encouraged by the small band of congressional historians and political scientists who are taking a fresh look at Congress and using the records of Congress to add new perspectives to their studies of the other aspects of government.

Photo credit: Robert C. Byrd Center for Legislative Studies