

# REAPPRAISAL OF CONGRESSIONAL RECORDS AT THE MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY: A CASE STUDY

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**ABSTRACT:** In 1994 the Minnesota Historical Society developed a Congressional Papers Appraisal Policy in order to improve the content and reduce the size of the extremely large and complex collections of papers of U.S. Senators and Representatives. A 1994 *Archival Issues* article by Mark Greene detailed the development of that policy and its use by the Historical Society with incoming collections of papers. But the Appraisal Policy was meant to serve as a reappraisal tool as well, and this article serves as a follow-up case study of the Historical Society's successful reappraisal efforts over the last few years.

In 1994 Mark Greene published an article in *Archival Issues* that discussed the Minnesota Historical Society's recently completed Congressional Papers Appraisal Policy. In the intervening years the Society has successfully put that policy to use in evaluating incoming collections of congressional papers. Just as importantly, though, the Society has been able to successfully reappraise several of its existing collections of congressional papers using the same appraisal policy. This article will serve, then, as a follow-up case study showing how the Minnesota Historical Society put policy into practice.

"The Minnesota Historical Society's interest in documenting public affairs has a long history," noted Greene, "beginning with its organization in 1849 by men who were themselves active participants in politics and government. . . . [T]hey and their successors on the Society's governing board, the staff, the state legislature, and the public at large collaborated in bringing together a rich store of information. Among its holdings are the papers of many of the state's Representatives and nearly all of its Senators. These collections have brought the Society prestige, research use, strong documentation of individuals and issues in greater Minnesota, and (not unimportantly) relationships with politically powerful elected officials."<sup>1</sup> They also have brought the Society extraordinary amounts of paper. By 1993 the Society's congressional collections amounted to 6,200 cubic feet (not including the Vice Presidential portions of the

papers of Hubert Humphrey and Walter Mondale). Ninety-five percent of this total documented congressional activity since World War II.<sup>2</sup>

Within this setting, then, the Society created appraisal guidelines that sought “to balance the Society’s resources against the increasing bulk of congressional collections, and to define the most stringent appraisal criteria possible consistent with preserving collections which serve the long-term historical objectives of historians and other researchers.”<sup>3</sup> It is important to note in this regard that the Minnesota Historical Society manuscripts section has obligations far beyond documenting politics and public affairs. It is charged with documenting the whole range of human activity in the state. And while politics is an important component of Minnesota history, it is at least arguable that its importance is not so great as the resources that the Society has devoted to documenting it. Neither the stack space nor the staff time is sufficient to swallow Congressional collections whole and still be able to document business, recreation, family life, etc. appropriately for Minnesota. We had to ask “Do we really need 116 feet of material to document Congressman Tom Hagedorn’s eight years in office when we keep 110 feet for nearly seventy years of the St. Paul Area United Way?”<sup>4</sup>

To pare these congressional collections down the Society’s guidelines specifically relied on the Society’s accomplishments in documenting the state’s entire congressional delegation. A principal reason that the Society views the state’s Representatives and Senators as a delegation is that the institution is interested in them as representatives of Minnesota, not as representatives of congress or necessarily as important people in their own right. Hence, the Society is more concerned about using their records to document politics in the state than in documenting congress, documenting VIPs, or documenting the national political process *per se*. In view of this collecting mission, wrote Greene, “and because there is much redundancy and duplication . . . among members of the delegation in terms of the issues and projects dealt with, as well as with the constituents helped or heard from, the guidelines [sought] to reduce this overlap by treating the collections of Senators differently than the collections of Representatives.”<sup>5</sup> “By choosing to more thoroughly document the activities of Senators,” as Frank Mackaman argued in 1986, “a repository has the assurance of receiving materials documenting concerns of importance from all corners of the state. The papers of Representatives, therefore, can be reduced further (especially such series as constituent correspondence), and focused to provide better documentation of those activities unique to the particular legislator and/or to his/her district.”<sup>6</sup>

The most controversial component of these appraisal guidelines by far—though only within the archival community and not to the Society’s donors or (at least so far) its users—has been the decision not to retain any constituent correspondence for any of the state’s Representatives. In addition to the remark quoted in the 1993 report from a congressional staffer to the effect that most letters from constituents were inane and most answers from the office were equally inane, a further piece of evidence has surfaced to support the decision to take a hard line on issue mail. After reviewing the Society’s guidelines, then Representative Tim Penny’s office assigned an intern to study the role of constituent mail in the evolution of policy and voting decisions. What he found, through talking to Penny’s staff and to the congressman himself, as well as by doing a detailed analysis of his constituent mail over a 10-year period, was that issue

mail was of little consequence in formulating policy or influencing Penny's vote. Rather, "Penny often relied on personal interaction with constituents (including town hall meetings and office meetings) in determining constituent sentiment on legislative issues. . . . In fact, Penny voted on the 'wrong' side of his constituent mail on five of the top ten legislative issues" over an eight-year period.<sup>7</sup> In other words, we found that congressional offices consider issue mail mundane, routine, and uninteresting. This certainly does not obligate archivists to view it the same way. However, without strong evidence that issue mail is used heavily by researchers, and considering that, for Minnesota at least, expression of opinions by citizens will be preserved in the papers of U.S. Senators, we remain completely comfortable with the decision to reject constituent correspondence from the papers of Representatives.

Since 1993 the Society has been applying these guidelines to new congressional collections with real success. Incoming collections have been significantly smaller because of the prior removal of large series, such as case files, and because they contain many fewer extraneous files, such as flag and yearbook requests, thereby reducing the appraisal and organizational work that must be done on the collections once they have arrived. Just as importantly, perhaps, the congressional offices are pleased, and even grateful, to have clear guidance from the Minnesota Historical Society about what has historical value, and even happier that they don't have to worry about keeping track of case files and issue mail any longer than is strictly necessary for their offices to function.

However, it was not until 1995 that the Society was able to begin applying these guidelines to collections already held by the Society. Though it remains a controversial notion, the Society believes—within limits—in applying appraisal criteria retroactively. The most important limit is that the collections being reappraised should be comparable in terms of chronology, content, and provenance as the collections for which the appraisal criteria were developed. Thus the Society's reappraisal included only Representatives serving from the late 1960s to the present. With the assistance of NHPRC Mellon Fellow Sushan Chin, Mark Greene and I began a project to test the applicability of the guidelines on two collections, those of Representatives Arlen Erdahl (who served for eight years) and Albert Quie (who served for 20 years). For reappraisal to make any sense in terms of expenditure of resources, we sought to maximize the space savings at the least cost in staff time. In order to do this we aimed to weed material only at the series level, rather than at the folder level.

Our first discovery in the testing phase was that the filing systems used by Representatives Erdahl and Quie were fairly amorphous and did not match up well with the series outlined in the appraisal guidelines, and found in most congressional offices today. Although there were fairly distinct series, such as newsletters, academy appointments, case files, invitations, speeches, and press releases, the largest portion of both collections consisted of subject files (variously labeled "general," "departmental," "legislative," and "subject"). Upon close examination of representative boxes, these subject files were found to be constituent correspondence on a myriad of issues; a letter or memo with staff or colleagues about policy formulation or legislation would occasionally appear, but represented less than one percent of the items. Generally, it appeared that there was more internal material, and more useful background material, on issues

or projects closely related to the Representative's district or to national issues in which the Representative invested a great deal of his (or his staff's) time. Therefore, in both sets of papers we chose to identify those folders in the subject series that related to the representative's district or to areas of particular concern and expertise. In Quie's case these files related to poverty, education, and agricultural issues in addition to his district concerns. Erdahl, on the other hand, did not particularly distinguish himself on any specific issues and, therefore, his subject files related only to district issues were deemed worth saving.

However, for the reappraisal to be practical in terms of staff time invested versus results obtained, it was not feasible for us to examine the contents of each of the folders in these broad constituent subject files. The alternative was to select files based on the folder titles alone. In order to test the feasibility of this approach we selected 10 random boxes of subject files from each Representative, marked the folders in the box inventories that we believed reflected the choices noted above, then examined the contents of every folder in the 10 boxes. In our examination of the folder contents we did not find any folders that contained materials we wished to save and had not also been selected from our perusal of folder titles. In fact, the opposite was true. There were a significant number of folders that did not merit retention based on their contents, even though we had selected them based on their folder titles. We were content, though, to live with this. The final selection and disposition of the subject files was therefore done by folder title review.

Based on this approach, and the weeding of such series as academy appointments, invitations, unidentified photographs, and the like, we reduced the Arlen Erdahl Papers from 120 to 20 cubic feet, and the Albert Quie Papers from 462 to 176 cubic feet.

Due to the success of this project, the Society's Division of Library and Archives allocated money to hire a project archivist in 1996 to implement further reappraisal. In the first four months the project archivist, Rob Teigrob, was able to reappraise four additional collections resulting in the removal of nearly six hundred cubic feet of material. The collections reappraised by both Chin and Teigrob represent a total of 70 years of congressional service. Before the reappraisal project the collections totaled 1,536 cubic feet. After applying the appraisal guidelines 982 cubic feet—64 percent—of that total was removed and destroyed. For four of the six collections, whose Representatives served an average of eight years, the destruction rate was close to 80 percent; for the two other Representatives, who each served nearly 20 years, the destruction rate was only 50 percent. This difference in percentage of destruction represents, we think, the difference in the stature, clout, and activity of the longer-tenured officeholders.

Although this gain in stack space is significant, one may be tempted to ask what has been lost as a result of our reappraisal. Have relationships with donors been damaged? Has the quality of the collections been compromised? Experience so far tells us that we can safely answer "no" to both of these questions.

Of the six collections that have been reappraised, the two largest did not have donor agreements allowing the Society to dispose of unwanted material. Before we could proceed, therefore, we had to contact the two former congressmen (one of whom was also a former governor and the other a former mayor of Minneapolis) to inform them of

our intentions and to seek permission to destroy the material weeded from their collections. In both cases we sent copies of our appraisal guidelines and told them of our belief that this process would make their collections more accessible to researchers. Both men quickly gave consent to the destruction of unwanted materials and indicated that they completely trusted our judgment in these matters. The thoroughness of the appraisal guidelines conveys competence and thoughtfulness to donors, both past and present.

Although we believe strongly that the Minnesota Historical Society appraisal guidelines and, in particular, our reappraisal of collections using them, have made these collections stronger because of their greater accessibility and higher concentration of historically valuable materials, in the end only researchers will be able to judge this. There are those on the Society's staff who worry about researchers from the past returning to collections to find that what they once used or cited in a publication no longer exists. But, at this admittedly early date, there have been no complaints whatsoever about the new shape of these collections nor has there been any evidence that historians or other researchers depend on having constituent correspondence for every district in Minnesota.

One may be tempted to ask yet a third question: Is the Society undermining the overall documentation of Congress by applying and publishing its guidelines? This can be answered in two ways. First, while the Society believes documenting Congress is important, it does not—and cannot—see it as its principal priority. As stated earlier, there are many other documentary priorities in line ahead of Congress as an institution. Second, I would argue that it is quite possible that the appraisal guidelines—or the even more draconian ones employed by our colleagues at the State Historical Society of Wisconsin—may actually assist in documenting Congress. After all, when a congressional collection is conceived as 20 boxes of political, speech, clippings, and district project files rather than 120 boxes of mostly constituent correspondence, preserving and making the collection publicly accessible become possible for many more repositories. Surely there is some benefit in that.

With all of this “success” under our belts am I then advocating the reappraisal of others' congressional collections too? Well, yes and no. Just as with the guidelines themselves, I do not expect that other repositories will accept without question the Minnesota Historical Society's reappraisal approach. After all, the approach was originally formulated to work solely for the Society. However, the size and depth of its collections, and the fact that its staff has to worry about far more than documenting politics and politicians, offered us an opportunity to thoughtfully explore a process that may be adaptable in other settings as well. The staff at the Society has had contact with several smaller repositories grappling with their first congressional collections. While the first thing said to them is that they may want to make different decisions than the Society made based on their own repository's mission and clientele, generally they have accepted the Society's guidelines if for no other reason than that they did not have the space or other resources to do otherwise. So I do not for a minute presume or assert that the Society's guidelines are “standards” or universally applicable, but I do think they are logical and defensible within certain fairly broad contexts.

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## NOTES

1. Mark A. Greene, "Appraisal of Congressional Records at the Minnesota Historical Society: A Case Study," *Archival Issues* 19:1 (1994): 31-32.
2. Greene, 32.
3. Greene, 34.
4. Todd J. Daniels-Howell, "Appraisal of Congressional Papers," unpublished paper presented at the May 1991 Midwest Archives Conference.
5. Greene, 34.
6. Greene, 34.
7. Ronald A. Mullenbach, "The Role of Constituent Mail in the Legislative Process: A Case Study of Congressman Tim Penny," unpublished paper, 1994.