# A REPOSITORY ARCHIVIST ON CAPITOL HILL

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*ABSTRACT:* The receipt of large twentieth-century political collections can be a crippling experience for a moderately sized archival repository. A proactive approach can, however, soften the blow by permitting the archivist to (1) understand a working congressional office and (2) appraise the papers *en scene* before they are packed. As a result the repository will receive a smaller, more organized collection with a preliminary finding aid, and the archivist will be in a better position to provide service on the papers sooner.

The University of Vermont began its manuscript collecting program in 1962 with the creation of a Special Collections Department.[1] Little collecting was being done in twentieth-century manuscripts in Vermont, so this became the obvious focus for the program. By 1970, the university had acquired over 3,000 feet of manuscripts with approximately 25 percent in political papers. The single largest collection was the Senator Warren R. Austin papers (1877-1962), approximately 100 feet of material covering Austin's fifteen years in the U.S. Senate from 1931 to 1946, and six years as ambassador to the United Nations, 1947-53.

This proportion changed to 50 percent with the receipt of 450 feet of papers in 1972 following the death of Senator Winston L. Prouty, and 800 feet of papers in 1974 following the retirement of Senator George D. Aiken. Together the Prouty and Aiken papers represented 53 years of combined service in Congress. It was reasonable to assume that with files inflation we could expect to receive 1,000 feet or more just from Senator Robert T. Stafford who was scheduled to retire in 1988 after 28 years in Congress.[2]

The manuscript collection was, from the beginning, a Vermont collection; congressional papers were acquired for their Vermont content and for their role in documenting Vermont legislators at the national level rather than for tracking national issues or the functioning of Congress. These subjects are, however, byproducts, and the collections have been used in many ways. Though congressional papers are primarily local in content, they provide much of the source material for national history. Senator Aiken's attempt to improve rural electrification in Vermont resulted in the construction of the St. Lawrence Seaway in 1959, and Senator John J. Williams's clean-up of corruption in Delaware tax collection resulted in the first publication of the Internal Revenue Code in 1954.[3]

### *Planning the Project*

The idea of going to Washington to work in the office of a United States senator occurred to me during the Congressional Papers Project Conference sponsored by the Dirksen Congressional Center and the NHPRC, held in Harper's Ferry, West Virginia, in the summer of 1985.[4] This was my first opportunity to meet with many colleagues who also were responsible for the care of congressional collections. (It was at this time, too, that an SAA Congressional Papers Group was established, and I was asked to be the first chair and to usher the group through the process of becoming an SAA roundtable.)[5] Robert Blesse of the University of Nevada, one of the conference participants, had just returned from a stint in the office of Senator Paul Laxalt where he packed and shipped the senator's papers to the University of Nevada for deposit.[6] Patricia Aronsson recommended this approach in 1984:

> Only by thoroughly understanding the context in which the records are created can the archivist be certain of the validity of his appraisal decisions. The ideal time for an archivist to gain these insights is while the senator or representative is still in office. Then the archivist can observe the operation of the congressional office, learn from congressional staff members what issues are of special importance to the member of Congress, and inquire about the value of particular categories of information.[7]

Blesse had spent five weeks dealing with seven years of Laxalt's papers, but I was looking at a longer stay to handle the accumulation of 28 years for Senator Robert T. Stafford. Time and cost would make such an approach prohibitive for most repository archivists under normal conditions, but the project seemed perfect for a sabbatical. Because Vermont is a small state with only three members of Congress, I had the opportunity to cover the whole delegation —if the members could somehow contribute to my travel and living expenses in Washington.

On my return from Harper's Ferry, I wrote to Senators Stafford and Patrick J. Leahy and Congressman James V. Jeffords to apprise them of my sabbatical plans. I hoped to come to Capitol Hill to learn about the workings of Congress firsthand in order to better understand congressional collections, and to advise staff on the organization and disposition of files. All were interested in the proposition, and I was invited to visit and meet with appropriate staff to flesh-out my ideas. I did this in the summer of 1986. Neal Houston, Senator Stafford's administrative assistant, was most interested in my coming to help because the senator had just announced that he would retire at the end of the 100th Congress and that his papers would go to the university. Houston pretty much hired me on the spot.

Congressman Jeffords' administrative assistant was also interested because her boss was planning to run for Stafford's Senate seat, and Jeffords planned to add the remainder of his House papers to an already considerable collection at the University of Vermont. Senator Leahy's personal assistant was interested in the idea, but the senator did not want to make any commitments regarding his papers that early in his career.

Initially I had planned to spend July through September of 1988 in the Stafford office, spend October through December with Jeffords, and then use

the spring semester to complete the appraisal and description of the papers received by the university. This would have been an ideal scenario, for I would have had Senate experience with Stafford, House and campaign experience with Jeffords, and time to bring this experience to fruition in a purely archival setting. Instead, the Jeffords plan fell through because of a problem with funding, and Leahy asked me to work with his staff for the entire spring semester to review his records management/archival program. This second internship gave me a very valuable point of comparison because Stafford's and Leahy's offices were set up quite differently.

Stafford brought me on as a full staff member for six months, and I agreed to spend nine weeks in Washington doing the same kinds of things done by Blesse: "to inventory, pack, and ship to the library all inactive records in storage; [and] to familiarize myself with the day-to-day operation of the senator's office, particularly regarding the creation and storage of correspondence and other office records."[8] The last year in a member's term is ideal from a budgetary point of view, because other staff leave and funds may be available to hire an archivist. My status as a full staff member with a Senate identification card was helpful. It gave me access to committee rooms, committee staff, Congressional Research Service, and many other offices on Capitol Hill. Negotiations were completed in one visit with a brief exchange of letters, and I began work on 1 July 1988. The amount of time was sufficient to do most of the things I felt were important.

### *Washington Office Functions and Their Records*

Robert T. Stafford was a career politician. Before entering Congress in 1960, he served as Vermont's attorney general, lieutenant governor, and governor. By Vermont standards he was a moderate Republican, strong on defense and a fiscal conservative. He served on the House Committee on Armed Services, supported the concept of the all volunteer army as co-author of *How to End the Draft* (1967), and endorsed the Morse withdrawal plan for Viet Nam in 1968 after a second trip to that war torn country.[9] He also served on the House Ethics Committee, was vice chair of the House Republican Conference, and was on the short list of vice-presidential candidates when Gerald Ford became president. Stafford moved to the Senate following the death of Winston L. Prouty in 1971 and served on the Environment and Public Works Committee, the Labor and Human Resources Committee, and the Committee on Veterans Affairs. He became chair of the Environment Committee and the Subcommittee on Education during the Republican takeover of the Senate in 1980. As a senator, Stafford supported legislation to clean up the air and water, reduce acid rain, prevent global warming, and establish a superfund for toxic wastes. He was also a strong advocate of equal opportunity in education for handicapped and disadvantaged students. Although Stafford was a "good" Republican for most of his career, he fell out with the Reagan administration because of his strong support for environmental regulations and federal aid for education. The papers generated in these years, 1980-86, while he was a committee chair, are the most voluminous and seem to be the most interesting.

I thought I knew what to expect when I arrived for duty in July of 1988, for I had processed a number of congressional collections already. The Stafford papers, like the Aiken and Prouty papers, were really the records of an organiza-

tion rather than an individual, but for the first time I realized that these papers documented the activities of the staff more than those of the senator himself. The staff does the "work"; the senator presents the case in committee, on the floor, and to the public. His role is to persuade other senators and to vote.

I read Karen Paul's *Records Management Handbook for United States Senators and Their Repositories*,[10] visited with her at the Senate Historical Office, and met with the two other archivists who were working on Capitol Hill that summer, all to help me to adjust to the complex world of the U.S. Senate.[11] I reported to Stafford's administrative assistant (AA), the most important person in the office next to the senator. He was Stafford's chief political officer, his "eyes and ears," so to speak, and the "office Republican"—according to Stafford's chief legislative assistant (LA), who styled himself as the "office Democrat." It was important to report directly to the AA because he had the most authority on the staff and could facilitate access to files and people. In Senator Leahy's office I reported to the senator's personal assistant. Although she lacked the power of the AA, she was a strong individual, very close to the senator, and had the senator's full backing in the archival project. She helped me to schedule staff interviews, and she made all of the appointments for me.

In Stafford's office, the AA and the office manager were the only people who backed the archives project from the beginning. I represented the first sign of the end for staff who had an average tenure of fifteen years in the office. The AA explained that, once hired, I worked for the senator and that the expectation was "loyalty" and "integrity." Staff were concerned that a stranger with wide access to the files would not respect the privacy they guarded so carefully, and that the senator's image might be compromised inadvertently. They needed to get to know me, and this would take a little time.

I kept a low profile in the beginning by concentrating on the 350 feet of records in the attic. This work needed to be done, but at the same time I wanted to take advantage of opportunities to learn how the Senate worked, and more particularly, how the senator worked in it to achieve his goals. I followed Stafford as much as time would permit. I attended hearings, committee meetings, press conferences, and floor sessions; interviewed key staff members on the senator's most important committees; and noted that wherever he went, there was an LA at his side to brief or advise him as needed. The LAs helped to write legislation, and they prepared speeches, briefings, and position papers. Each had extensive files, kept up with issues, and studied the positions of friends and foes. Good work on their part strengthened the senator's hand in committee; he always knew how the vote would go before he entered any committee room. The files of the LAs would be an important adjunct to the senator's.

The workings of the typical congressional office and the associated documentation are clearly discussed in Aronsson and Paul.[12] The functions are divided between administrative and legislative.[13] In the Stafford office the administrative staff consisted of the AA, who really functioned on both sides of the aisle, office manager, press officer, secretaries/case workers (nearly all of the secretaries carried some case load), and receptionists. The legislative (or professional) staff included three assistants with responsibilities for Stafford's three committees: Environment and Public Works (EPW), Labor and Human Resources (LHR), and the Subcommittee on the Handicapped.[14] Stafford, as

a Republican, was in the minority for most of his career, but with seniority he achieved the status of ranking member on EPW and the Education Subcommittee of LHR. The minority staff of EPW (14 persons) and Education (3) reported to him. The minority staff director of the Education Subcommittee functioned as Stafford's LA for education, and therefore all of the records relating to education were interfiled with the official records of the subcommittee. This blending of responsibilities is very common in Congress, and senators typically move staff from the personal office to the committee payroll at will. This creates much confusion in the records, and archivists must be aware of this if they wish to find full documentation of their member's activities. The best way to discover this is to interview key personal and committee staff and actually look at the records. Stafford's AA considered all of the records in the minority office of the Education Subcommittee to be part of the senator's personal papers, and so they are.[15] The records of EPW, although not as clearly personal, were available on microfilm, and a copy was ordered to supplement the Stafford papers.

Stafford's office, with a high ratio of administrative to legislative staff, maintained a centralized file system. It was obvious that he inherited most of this from his predecessor, Senator Winston L. Prouty, because many of his file series are exactly the same as Prouty's, but quite different from Aiken's or Leahy's. Nine of Stafford's twelve Washington staff served the administrative functions of the office, handling most of the constituent mail, press relations, and casework.

Leahy, on the other hand, has twelve administrative staff and six legislative assistants to cover the three committees he chairs and the four others on which he also serves. Some key committee staff report directly to him, as they did to Stafford. The main difference in the workload of the two senators relates to the fact that Leahy is in the majority and is a committee chairman. There is also a difference in personality. Stafford preferred to concentrate on the few issues for which he became known while Leahy is active in most of the legislation that comes before the Senate.

According to Aronsson, the files of the AA are potentially the most important files produced in a congressional office because of the political nature of the position and, often, close personal relationships.[16] Members and their AAs usually communicate orally, eyeball to eyeball, and do not tend to write much because of the sensitivity of their positions. Stafford's AA had been with the senator since he was lieutenant governor, and the two had adjoining offices. The AA claimed to have no files except for two cartons of political polls on the floor in the corner of his office, and this proved to be an accurate statement. The AA is usually the chief personnel officer, and I did find some files relating to personnel decisions. It was interesting that the AA was responsible for all of the military academy appointment files as well. Next to the senator himself, this person is probably the best candidate for oral history.

The next single most important person in the Stafford office was the senator's personal secretary because she was the conduit to the senator and because she maintained all of his personal files, including financial disclosure statements, tax returns, appointments, invitations, annotated copies of speeches, photographs, travel records, and memberships. Stafford's secretary maintained the most extensive files in the office, and although most of these became part of

the papers, she was the least forthcoming and the most protective member of the staff. Some of these files were transferred directly to the senator's home in Vermont for use in his retirement. We hope that most of them will eventually be added to his papers at the university.

The files of the office manager included filing guides, procedure manuals, and documentation on office expenditures and routine personnel actions. These files were reviewed and selectively weeded. The press officer was responsible for clippings, tapes, position papers, some speeches, and press releases. Duplicates were weeded, but otherwise these files were kept in their entirety. Other administrative staff did not keep separate files, but helped to maintain the large central office file. This file included series entitled "Blue Slips" (copies of all letters sent, 35 ft.); "Federal Government" (files of contacts with the Executive branch, 56 ft.); "Committees" (83 ft.); "Cases" (51 ft.); "General Subjects" (33 ft.); "Acknowledgments" (7 ft.);"Requests" (20 ft.); "Robos" (form letters, 19 ft.); and "Vermont Issues" (29 ft.). These centralized files were arranged alphabetically by topic for each session of Congress, and they received a preliminary weeding in Washington during the packing process. The "Blue Slips" series had little intrinsic value because it was a duplicate file and because the contents were repetitive. Still, it had some "slice of life" value as a record of every outgoing letter.[17] This file was microfilmed and the originals were destroyed.

Senators have free access to a microfilm service, but it is inadequate to meet demands; there was a forty-day backlog in the summer of 1988. The Microfilm Office uses a rotary camera and 35 mm roll microfilm. The member's office must do all of the preparation, including removing staples and clips, arranging the papers, and providing targets.[18] Stafford provided a full-time intern to help with the project, but the preparation of 35 feet of onionskin copies still took nearly two months. This was not a profitable use of time, so we abandoned earlier plans to film 17 feet of clippings and the large casework file. Members really need to use microfilm as a records management tool over the long term; it is impossible to do much in a few months.

The large "Federal Government" file included mostly constituent correspondence, particularly requests to support municipal and institutional federal grant projects, agency reports, and other documentation of federal programs. The "Committees" file was similar, although it included correspondence from committee chairs, lobbyists, and others seeking the senator's support, as well as constituent correspondence relating to the work of all of the congressional committees. Most of the publications in these large series were removed and shipped separately to the university for addition to the general library collections. Both series may be further weeded, but we do wish to retain documentation of the ways federal funds are expended in Vermont.

Cases remain sealed, but the intention is to sample them heavily and to retain only the flavor of the senator's casework together with a few "fat files" on more important issues that may have consumed a lot of staff time and effort.[19] "General Subjects" and "Vermont Issues" still need to be reviewed. The former will probably be thinned of subjects that were tangential to the Stafford legislative program, but files on environment, education, handicapped, and other issues important to the senator will be preserved. The Vermont file will be retained in its entirety. Form letters, "Robos," will be retained because they

reflect the senator's positions over time. "Requests" and "Acknowledgments" have been discarded because of their low informational value. There was very strong Vermont content in every series in the centralized files, and I found this was also characteristic of similar files in Senator Leahy's office, although to a slightly lesser degree.

The press officer's files included speeches, news clippings (mostly from Vermont newspapers), press releases, newsletters, radio and television scripts, audiotapes, and videotapes. Duplicates, particularly the overlap with state office files, will be discarded, but for the most part these files will be retained in total. Researchers, particularly students, find press files to be very useful.

The three legislative assistants considered themselves professional staff. They maintained the working files on legislation that came before the senator's committees. These files included virtual legislative histories of bills. All three LAs maintained large reference files of printed matter including books, documents, and reports. I considered keeping this material with the collection, but have decided that it would be more useful if added to the general library collections. A list of publications removed will be placed with the files of the LAs.

The LAs shipped some files to the senator's attic in the Russell building, but retained most files as their own property. They were surprised that I was interested in their files as part of the senator's papers, and it took some convincing before they agreed to relinquish them. It took time to build my credibility. I tagged along with the LAs when they accompanied the senator to committee meetings or hearings and showed an interest in their work. Legislative assistants are often subject specialists, and as they move from job to job they want to take their files with them. In some cases they feel that the files are too confidential because they document confidential maneuvering. Stafford's AA was surprised that I wanted the files of the LAs, and warned that their opinions were not necessarily the same as the senator's. I assured him that these files would be maintained as a separate satellite series and clearly identified as advisory. (Many congressional collections arrive at repositories *sans* the files of the legislative assistants.)

I kept a daily journal to mark progress, prepared regular oral and written reports for the AA, and made recommendations for the disposition of retrospective files based on the guidelines outlined in Karen Paul's *Handbook*.[20] I actually copied the section of the handbook that pertained to each staff member and used this as a primer for interviews regarding the person's role in the office and the files produced. This printed authority gave my requests more credence.

### *The Vermont Offices*

Both senators maintained offices in Vermont as well as in Washington, and there I followed the same procedures for file review and staff interviews. Files in Stafford's state offices differed somewhat from Leahy's. Leahy's Vermont staff do all of the Vermont casework, most of the grants and projects, particularly municipal ones, and serve as the frontline in the famous Leahy outreach program. Stafford's state staff did some of these things on a much smaller scale; casework, however, was done by Washington staff. The state staff was very small; it served as an outpost and a campaign base.[21] Staff monitored Vermont issues in detail, collected information on active state politicians, particularly

potential opponents from either party, and served the local community as specialists on the federal government. I identified over 25 feet of historical records from Stafford's Rutland office alone including important papers that document the senator's campaigns for attorney general, lieutenant governor, and governor, all previously thought lost. State office staff act somewhat independently from the main Washington staff, and often there is little accountability in terms of records. Few state office files were deposited with the Prouty and Aiken papers, so we have little idea how these important offices worked for them.

The collection was beginning to take shape. The core would be composed of Stafford's personal files, the central office files, and the press files. These would be flanked by files of the legislative assistants, including some committee records, and the records from the state offices. The operational integrity of each part of the office would be reflected in the integrity of its files. I would not have been as aware of this model if I had not been a member of the senator's staff.

The Stafford and Leahy offices functioned differently because one was more centralized than the other. All important information was funneled to Stafford through his AA, usually orally. The youngest and newest LA prepared written reports for the senator, but the other staff were more informal. Leahy's office was decentralized and the AA was not a crony, so there was more need for written reports and summary documents. The AA, for instance, holds full staff meetings every week, works with each LA to set written goals and objectives, and prepares a strategic plan for each session—and all of these summary documents are maintained in the files of the AA.

## *Conclusion*

The congressional office tends to focus on tomorrow's headline and the next election. From time to time someone with a historical perspective must remind the staff that history is being made—and recorded in the documents produced in the office. The systematic transfer of records to a federal records center or a repository can promote orderliness. Stafford's records were in better shape than Leahy's because of the centralized office and the larger clerical staff. It was more important for me to spend time with each record producer in Leahy's office to encourage them to list files at the end of each session, box them, and transfer them to storage. Most understood the wisdom of such a practice when it was outlined for them.

There were lost chances to preserve history in both offices. Senator Leahy kept an irregular journal that will be very important, but his secretary dismantled his daily briefing book at the end of each briefing session. I hope I persuaded her to copy the contents before the action documents were distributed to staff. These documents were probably preserved in the files of the senator's assistants, but only in the briefing book were they gathered together. Historians would find it invaluable to know how a senator was briefed each day. An archivist *en scene* can advise staff on these important practices.

I think it is important for each records person in a member's office to actually *see* an archivist, so I made it a point to interview as many of them as I possibly could. These interviews gave me an understanding of the office, the kinds of documentation produced, and the recordkeeping problems. I suggested that the member make it official policy that all records produced by staff on the sena-

tor's payroll become part of the senator's papers, and that no records be taken from the office when a staff member leaves unless copies are made. I recommended that committee staff copy the office, within reason, on files that showed the senator's personal involvement, and noted that those committee staff who also serve the LA function were responsible for documenting their activities on both sides of the aisle. I was in the position to stress early and regular microfilming for selected files such as clippings.

The repository gained as well. The more time the archivist spends in the office of the member, the better the archivist will understand the collection. Most of Stafford's papers were in series when they arrived at the university, and this facilitated both processing and use. Less than a year after his retirement the history department was able to take advantage of the availability of the papers, and of the senator himself, for a course on Stafford. This early use of the material helped to familiarize me with the kinds of documentation needed by graduate and undergraduate students. Clippings, briefing documents, and speech files were heavily used, together with published sources such as the *Congressional Record,* Senate and House documents, and the *Congressional Quarterly.*

Both Aronsson and Paul recommend early contact between the member and the repository for all of the reasons described above. Such contact should result in significant reduction in the volume of records received, particularly if the repository has a well-thought-out collecting policy for congressional papers. Aronsson also suggests cooperative collecting based on a subject approach among institutions, and this may work in special circumstances.[22] Karen Paul has recently embarked on a documentation strategy approach to collecting congressional papers, and she is doing a much-needed national survey on the use of these collections. That survey (results to be published in 1992), case studies like this one, and perhaps other research yet unpublished can all contribute to resolution of the twentieth-century dilemma of the "crescendo of volume" in modern congressional records.

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## NOTES

1. J. Kevin Graffagnino, *Vermont Historical Resources: The Manuscript Holdings of the Wilbur Collection, University of Vermont* (Burlington: Special Collections, Bailey/Howe Library, University of Vermont, 1986).
2. Lydia Lucas describes the phenomenal growth ("crescendo of volume") in congressional collections since World War II in "Managing Congressional Papers: A Repository View," *American Archivist* 41 (July 1978): 275-76.
3. L. Rebecca Johnson, *Guide to the Papers of Senator John J. Williams of Delaware* (Newark, Del.: University of Delaware Library, 1990), 27.

4. *Congressional Papers Project Report Sponsored by the Dirksen Congressional Center and the National Historical Publications and Records Commission, July 15-November 15, 1985* (Washington D.C.: NHPRC and Dirksen Congressional Leadership Research Center, 1986). Project director, Frank H. Mackaman.
5. The Society of American Archivists Congressional Papers Roundtable was established in 1986.
6. See Robert E. Blesse, "University of Nevada, Reno Acquires Laxalt Papers," *Senate History* 10 (May 1985): 2.
7. Patricia Aronsson, "Appraisal of Twentieth Century Congressional Collections," in *Archival Choices,* ed. Nancy E. Peace (Lexington, Mass.: D.C. Heath, 1984), 83-84.
8. Blesse, "Laxalt Papers," 2.
9. Robert T. Stafford, et al. *How to End the Draft* (Washington, D.C.: National Press, 1967).
10. Karen Dawley Paul, *Records Management Handbook for United States Senators and Their Repositories* (Washington, D.C.: Secretary of the Senate, 1985). This is the most useful single guide for the appraisal of senatorial papers.
11. Carla Kemp of the University of Florida was helping to close the office of Senator Lawton Chiles (D-Fla.), and Jane Odom was working on the files of Senator Lloyd M. Bentsen (D-Tex.).
12. Aronsson describes the functioning of a typical congressional office and its standard record series, "Appraisal," 84-86. Paul arranges record series by function and presents a guide for appraisal, *Records Management Handbook,* 4-21.
13 Richard Baker describes the division between legislative and constituent service staff in "Managing Congressional Papers: A View of the Senate," *American Archivist* 41 (July 1978): 292.
14. Stafford used the same LA for LHR and Veterans Affairs.
15. Official committee files will be weeded from Stafford's personal education files, and these will be sent to the National Archives.
16. Aronsson, "Appraisal," 87.
17. Leahy maintained an automated file (CMS) for constituent mail that included incoming and outgoing correspondence arranged chronologically and indexed by name, subject and county of origin. Staff could print out summary lists by any of these categories for specified periods of time.
18. The Microfilm Office has one planetary camera, but members must provide staff.
19. "Fat files" are files with extensive correspondence on a particular issue. The assumption is that larger files are more interesting and important because they have consumed more time and effort on the part of the staff. Frank H. Mackaman makes a good case for the preservation of congressional case files in "Managing Case Files in Congressional Collections: the Hazard of Prophecy" *Midwestern Archivist* 4 (1979): 95-104.
20. Paul, *Records Management Handbook,* 4-22.
21. All of Leahy's campaign files were stored in Washington.
22. Aronsson, "Appraisal," 98-99.