

II. PRESERVATION PRIORITIES

II. A. Significant Documents

The Advisory Committee recognizes that one of the most vital functions of the Center is to preserve the documentation of Congress so that it can be made available for study and research by members of Congress and their staffs, as well as by the general public and the educational community. Accordingly, this section reviews major preservation initiatives and projects.

The Center for Legislative Archives holds some of the most valuable documents recording the nation's history. These include the Monroe Doctrine, Washington's First Inaugural Address, the Senate mark-up of the House-passed Bill of Rights, and other national treasures. With the move of many executive branch records to the National Archives in College Park, Maryland (Archives II), the Center can now take advantage of additional vault space that has become available. The staff should add to the relatively small collection of materials already segregated and secured by undertaking a three-year project to identify and segregate systematically other valuable documents that remain in general holdings. Within three years, the Center's vault should hold in one secure area an extensive collection of Congress's documentary treasures. At the time that they are identified, these intrinsically and historically valuable documents must also receive conservation treatment, including cleaning, flattening, stabilization, and mending.

Special collections of records in the Center's holdings also demand conservation attention. Oversize materials have customarily presented a storage problem, which the addition of new space should alleviate. One extraordinary collection of oversize materials, hundreds of nineteenth-century rolled petitions, is currently stored in overcrowded steel trays. In a one-to-two-year project, these remarkable petitions should be cleaned and housed in special boxes prepared by the conservation staff before being stored on shelving devoted to oversize items.

Another collection deserving special conservation treatment comprises thousands of bound volumes in House records, many of which contain valuable original records. Handwritten presidential messages, handwritten state constitutions, and original congressional reports are effectively locked into these bound volumes. The bindings make it difficult to use the documents and also subject the

records to stretching and tearing. For the Thomas Jefferson educational materials project, the conservation staff unbound three volumes, conserved special items, and placed the contents in acid-free folders and boxes. In a three-to-five-year project, Center staff should apply this labor-intensive effort to selected volumes in the House collection to preserve historic documents of great value and remove them to the secure storage area.

In 1991 the Advisory Committee recommended "that at least one GS-12 conservator and a conservator aide should be added to the staff of the Document Preservation Branch and assigned to work exclusively with legislative records." The archives has not yet acted on this recommendation.

II. B. Records of the First Fourteen Congresses

Special treatment of the records of the first fourteen congresses (1789-1817) must be a key preservation priority, so that the original documents may be retired from research. The Center has microfilmed all bound volumes for the period, and holds rolls of preservation microfilm for unbound House and Senate records of the First through the Fourth congresses, as well as for the Seventh Congress. The Center has produced microfilm publications for unbound records of the House and the Senate for the Fifth, Sixth, and Eighth congresses, and has prepared camera-ready copy for the descriptive pamphlets to accompany the unbound House and Senate records for the Ninth through the Fourteenth congresses. The Center has suspended its preservation filming program until it determines whether to continue producing microfilm publications or scan the records as part of an electronic imaging project.

The Center should continue to monitor a project at the Carter Presidential Library whereby the records are digitized from microfilm. (The microfilm then serves as an off-site preservation copy.) If the project proves successful, researchers could access the information in a digitized form that can be searched by key word. In order for the Center to follow this same preservation/access strategy, all previously microfilmed records must be reshot.

Once a determination is made on the effectiveness of the Carter Library technique, the Center should:

- film the remaining congresses (i.e., the Ninth through the Fourteenth congresses) in a manner suitable for automated scanning into digitized publications ("on-line," CD-ROM and/or optical disk) and as microfilm publications;

- refilm those records from the First through the Fourth congresses and the Seventh Congress for which only preservation copies exist; and
- refilm the unbound records of the Fifth, Sixth, and Eighth congresses, as well as bound House and Senate volumes, so that the full set of records can be converted to a form compatible to on-line access.

II. C. Holdings Maintenance and Thermofax Copies:

The basic preservation work conducted by the Center's archival technicians includes unfolding and flattening documents, removing fasteners that will damage paper, and placing the records in acid-free folders and boxes. This routine, known as "holdings maintenance," has proceeded through the records of Congress chronologically and represents an ongoing task that will continue. Holdings maintenance work has been completed for:

- Senate records, First through the Seventy-third congresses (1933-1934, 1587.5 cubic feet)
- House of Representatives records, First through the Sixty-ninth congresses (1925-1927, 2946.41 cubic feet)
- House Select Committee on Assassinations records (240 cubic feet)
- Joint Committees of Congress records, First through the Ninetieth congresses (1967-1968, 271.33 cubic feet) and
- Congressional Hispanic Caucus and the Northeast Northwest Congressional Coalition records.

In order to preserve some of the most vulnerable records produced by the modern congresses, the Center determined that it next should focus attention on the House and Senate records of the 1950s and 1960s. The ca. 12,000 cubic feet of records of the Eighty-fourth through Ninety-first congresses (1955-1971) contain large quantities of Thermofax paper. These records have begun to deteriorate to the point where they will soon be unreadable. Holdings maintenance work has been completed on Senate records for the Eighty-fourth through the Eighty-fifth congresses (1955-1959) and on House records for the Eighty-fourth through the Eighty-seventh congresses (1955-1963), with reproduction of some 100,000 thermofax copies. The Center should continue to focus on this seventeen-year

period until holdings maintenance on the remaining 8,000 cubic feet of records is completed.

II. D. Videotaped Floor Proceedings

Since the mid-1980s, both houses of Congress have been preserving duplicate videotapes of their floor proceedings, sending one set to NARA and the other to the Library of Congress. A recent agreement between those repositories provides that the Library of Congress will dedicate its set to provide public access and duplicate copies, while NARA will treat its holdings as the preservation master set. Yet to be determined is whether the value of preserving this collection justifies the associated costs. At its June 19, 1995, meeting, the Advisory Committee established a task force to examine issues related to reference use and preservation of congressional floor proceedings videotapes.

During the past decade the Senate has transferred 10,700 ninety-minute tapes (12,000 hours, 1986–1995) to each agency; the House has shipped 7,000 ninety-minute tapes (10,000 hours, 1983–1995). Senate tapes accumulate at the rate of 900 per year, while the House sends 650 annually. Within five years, the congressional video collection at each repository will exceed 25,000 cassettes. The tapes, as transferred, are not in a “user-friendly” format and must be converted to VHS tape before being made available to researchers.

Over time, the adhesives and binders on the videotape surface deteriorate, rendering the tape unusable. If properly stored, videotape products in current use have an estimated life span of about twenty-five years. This would place the oldest of the congressional tapes in jeopardy by the year 2010. A NARA estimate of the cost of rerecording older tapes suggests that such an option would be prohibitively expensive. New technologies are appearing, such as barium oxide magnetic tape, the D-3 format that the House is currently using, and optical and laser discs. However, dangers remain of losing data during the process of transfer to another format, and the longevity of these new products remains unpredictable.

Changes in recording technology may make existing tapes unplayable years before they deteriorate. There have been twenty-five distinct videotape formats over the past thirty years. Market and industry considerations, not archival factors, drive the development of videotape technology.

The long-term reference value of videotaped floor proceedings has yet to be established, but their availability in only one location

and their cumbersome format suggest a very limited potential audience for the time being. (The Library of Congress and NARA report only a handful of requests for the tapes over the past decade. New technology coupled with increased attention to marketing suggest a wider audience for video scholarship in future years.) By contrast, the Congressional Record, with its convenient format and useful index, is easily available in research libraries throughout the nation and, for recent years, on-line through the Internet.

Given the low-level of research interest, the lack of immediate threat posed by the collection's deterioration, and the possibility of new solutions provided by emerging technologies, the Advisory Committee recommends monitoring the issue for several years. The congressional videotape collection is growing at the annual rate of more than 1,500 cassettes. By the year 2000, the collection will include 25,000 cassettes and a decade later, the twenty-five-year-old collection would consist of 40,000 cartridges (assuming a continuation of existing technology). Some members of the task force suggest the consideration of a sampling procedure in which a relatively small number of tapes are identified as having enduring value. Examples of such tapes include the debate on authorizing military action in the Persian Gulf in 1990. Those tapes would be given special preservation attention. The Center should explore the feasibility of such an approach and the process by which guidelines could be established and implemented.

II. E. Special Media

The Center's archivists and archives technicians are in the process of identifying special media records (audiotapes, videotapes, photographs, machine-readable records, motion-picture film, and oversized materials) that are interspersed throughout the records of the Congress. Such material requires unique preservation treatment and specially equipped research facilities.

An important part of this effort entails the creation of a special media data base into which basic descriptive information about these items is entered. Researchers will be able to search the data base by subject term, Congress, record group number, committee or subcommittee, or by type of materials, such as photographs, audiotapes, and videotapes.

The Center also ensures that special media items receive the preservation treatment required. For example, when a photograph is located, it is placed in a mylar sleeve and acid-free folder.

Individual photographs are returned to the container where they were located, while photographic collections are transferred to NARA's Still Picture Branch. Oversized materials, after being placed in appropriate housing, are shelved in suitable storage areas.

Audiotapes, videotapes, and motion-picture film are transferred to the Non-Textual Archives Division of NARA for preservation, including the creation of a reference copy for researcher use. Digital or electronic records are likewise transferred to the Center for Electronic Records where reference use copies and data sets are created to facilitate access.

II. F. Limitations of the Building

While the National Archives Building is an impressive historic landmark, the antiquated environmental, mechanical, electrical, and plumbing infrastructure limits the Center's ability to preserve and provide access to the permanently valuable records of the Congress. Recent improvements to the immediate building environment include:

- improvements in the climate control and electrical systems through installation of a new computer system that links and monitors all twenty-three of the building's air handling units
- upgrading of the building's four main electrical vaults to help maintain an uninterrupted power supply
- installation of new computer cable that enables the Center's staff to communicate with other NARA staff via an electronic mail system and also allows the Center to make available on-line selected finding aids that describe the Center's holdings.

Despite these improvements to the facility, the need remains for significant additional structural changes to the interior of the building to support the ongoing mission of the Archives. In 1994 NARA directed the architectural firm of Heery International to reevaluate a 1985 architectural renovation study (Shepley, Bullfinch, Richardson and Abbott, Inc.). Heery International confirmed Shepley-Bullfinch's findings that the environmental systems and public facilities needed major improvements, but also found that the study greatly overestimated the volume of records that could be stored in a renovated building. As a result, Heery developed a new renovation plan whereby all of the records in the National Archives Building, *including the records of Congress*, would be temporarily housed in an extension of the Archives II building while more comprehensive renovations occur in the downtown facility. This reno-

vation would provide for additional storage space while preserving historic and architecturally desirable portions of the building.

A renovated National Archives Building would greatly benefit the Center for Legislative Archives. The Center would have an expanded facility for research services, including appropriate consultation and support spaces, improved archival storage areas, increased exhibit areas, and an improved technological infrastructure. Most important, the records of Congress would benefit from state-of-the-art heating, ventilating, and air conditioning systems providing the optimum environmental conditions necessary to insure their preservation. Such a renovation would ensure that the records of Congress are housed, served, and exhibited in one of the most modern archival institutions in the world that also maintains its historically appropriate location in the heart of the nation's capital.