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## Using Older Documents for Historical Research: Serial Set & Congressional Record

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The idea for this presentation was prompted by reference questions posted to GOVDOC-L over the last few years. With so much of our energy focused on electronic sources and access, it's sometimes easy to forget that almost 200 years' worth of U.S. government publications are still in non-electronic format, and some can only be identified through printed indexes, or in some cases, through the knowledge of the librarian.

In 1986, Steven D. Zink wrote an excellent article discussing the reasons why historians often fail to use United States government documents in their research.

1 Among the possible reasons, he cites: inadequate education in their use; inadequate indexing of the documents themselves; reluctance to ask librarians for help.

2 From my own experience, I would speculate that many librarians, particularly those who don't work with government documents, have precisely the same problems as the historians. I wasn't born a documents librarian. Much of my knowledge was acquired on the job, thanks to the mentoring of more experienced colleagues. With those thoughts in mind, my goals this afternoon are:

1) to provide an overview of the Serial Set and Congressional Record as sources for historical research;

2) to suggest some strategies for getting access to the material.

### **Serial Set**

What is the Serial Set? In simplest terms, it is the cumulation of House and Senate reports and documents, in bound volumes, if your library selects the hard copy version, or divided by those numbered 4x6 plastic guide cards if you select microfiche. For a thorough

description of the Serial Set, including an explanation of serial numbering, I recommend the User Handbook for the Congressional Information Services Serial Set Index.<sup>3</sup>

The Serial Set which depository libraries currently receive is composed of large numbers of House and Senate reports. We also receive a much smaller number of publications with the designation document including treaty documents. The documents, though few in number, are extremely useful--so much so that they are often issued to all depository libraries in hard copy. Two of my favorites are *The Constitution of the United States: Analysis and Interpretation* and the *Biographical Directory of the United States Congress, 1774-1989*.<sup>4</sup>

*The Constitution... Analysis and Interpretation* is an article by article discussion of the Constitution, in the context of landmark Supreme Court cases. Its index of cases has been a life-saver for us when someone has a case name but no U.S. Reports citation. High school students and graduate students alike use it as a starting point for background on Constitutional issues.

The *Biographical Directory* is a convenient, one-volume source of information on all senators and representatives, 11,000 of them, from the Continental Congress (1774) to 1989. Formerly titled *Biographical Directory of the American Congress*, it was first issued in 1949 as a House Document, and is a revision of several earlier biographical directories. The brief biographies take up most of the book, but there's some handy prefatory material, including a list of presidents and their cabinets, Senators and Representatives, by state, for each session of Congress, and delegates to the Continental Congress. The House and Senate documents currently issued are a drop in the bucket compared to what was issued before 1900, the halcyon days of the Serial Set. A gradual decline in the scope of the Serial Set resulted from more stringent regulation of government printing, under the Printing Act of 1895.<sup>5</sup> The Serial Set and the changes it has undergone are described in a recent article by Suzanne DeLong.<sup>6</sup>

In my quick tour of the Serial Set, I'm going to focus on documents issued before 1900 when the Set was quite different from what we see today. During the early twentieth century, it still contained some types of publications rarely found there now, but its real heyday was before 1900. It contains a wealth of information often overlooked by historians, as well as librarians.

### **American State Papers (ASP)**

The American State Papers are that part of the Serial Set encompassing the earliest administrations. It was originally to cover only the 1st through 13th Congresses, but the project was extended to include some publications through the 25th Congress--the Military Affairs class, for example. Systematic numbering of Congressional publications did not begin until the 15th Congress, and the compilation of the ASP was not completed until 1838. That's why the serial numbers of the volumes are always preceded by a 0 to distinguish them from the serial volumes published beginning in 1817.<sup>7</sup>

Here's an example of publications included. Parts of the Lewis and Clark expedition include Historical sketch of tribes, Geographical description of the Red River and adjacent country, and Meteorological observations. Other interesting titles: Troops, including militia, furnished

by the several states during Revolutionary War and Enlisting minors in army, improving condition of rank and file, by establishing schools, retaining whisky ration, and exempting those serving four years from militia duty. Just to show that times haven't changed, there's this one: Complaints by cadets against military academy at West Point.

The American State Papers are not complete. In fact, many documents of the War Department to 1800 are missing. In November, 1800, a fire at the office of Secretary of War Samuel Dexter destroyed all of the department's records. I mention this because East Stroudsburg University is home to a project to restore those records from scattered copies. The goal of the project, entitled Papers of the War Department, 1784-1800, is to produce a searchable CD-ROM with the full text of newly-discovered documents. Dr. Theodore J. Crackel, retired Army officer and history professor, is the project director and editor. He and his assistant editor are thoroughly scouring libraries and archives throughout the United States for pertinent materials, but would like to hear about any documents they might have missed. These would probably be letters to or from one of the secretaries of war--Henry Knox, Timothy Pickering, James McHenry, or Samuel Dexter--and would most likely be in a library's special collections department. I've included the name of the project director and his address in the bibliography.<sup>8</sup>

### **Serial Set, 1817-1900**

As you've seen from the quick exploration of the American State Papers, some fascinating documents are found there. My motto is, If you're looking for an old U.S. document, think Serial Set. A good way to get acquainted is to simply browse the Finding Lists found in the CIS Serial Set Index. If your library doesn't have that, you might use one of the older indexes such as Poore or Ames.<sup>9</sup> You'll see titles as diverse as Contributions to North American Ethnology, Congressional Directory, Report of the American Historical Association, Geological Survey Bulletins, Foreign Relations of the U.S., and Consular Reports published as House or Senate documents. A request recently posted to GOVDOC-L was for the loan of Annual Report of Commerce and Navigation of U.S. from the 1880's, and a quick check showed that they were all included in the Serial Set as House Executive Documents. Monographs on some rather unexpected subjects are included: British Military and Naval Operations in Egypt, 1882; War between Chile, Peru, and Bolivia, 1879-1881; Reports on Labor in America, Asia, Africa, Australasia, and Polynesia; Notes on Reindeer.

Before leaving the Serial Set, I want to discuss two gems: the Rebellion Records and the Census. The Rebellion Records document a tragic episode in our history. My library has many volumes in hard copy, but in the 1970's, some were sent away for rebinding and perished when the bindery was flooded (ironically, they were the Naval Records). It was our acquisitions librarian who told me that the entire series was included in the Serial Set, which we have in Readex Microprint.

The Rebellion Records are a vast compendium which includes a general index and atlas. Each series has multiple volumes and parts, too much to include on the transparency. If you're interested in greater detail, CIS Serial Set Index lists the separate volumes and parts in the subject index under the heading, Rebellion Records.

Last but not least, the Serial Set includes the 7th through 11th Census. These provide statistics on population, transportation, agriculture, manufacturing, and even vital statistics--an enormous resource for charting the growth of our country. Final volumes of the Census for 1880 and 1890 cover some intriguing subjects not found there today.<sup>10</sup> Here are some examples:

1880 (10th, published 1883-85) v. 8 - The newspaper and periodical press; population, industries, and resources of Alaska; seal islands of Alaska; shipbuilding industry in U.S. v. 9 - Report on the forests of North America (exclusive of Mexico) v. 12 - Report on mortality...:Pt. 2, Statistics of deaths, by locality, cause, etc. v.21 - Report on the defective, dependent, and delinquent classes; statistics of the insane, idiotic, blind, deaf and dumb, homeless children, paupers, and criminals.

1890 (11th, published 1891-96) Churches in U.S. 1890; Crime, pauperism, and benevolence; Insane, feeble-minded, deaf and dumb, and blind; Real-estate mortgages in the U.S.

These publications are worth looking at just to see how demographic concepts have changed over the century. For example, in the Population section of the 10th Census (1880), there are tables showing population distribution by drainage basins, mean temperature, and maximum temperature.

Of course these early Census compilations don't contain the Population Schedules, the personal names sought by people doing their family genealogies. Many people are referred to our library because we have The Census and are disappointed to hear that we only have numbers, not names.

### **Subject Indexes to the Serial Set**

If the Harvard Guide to American History is still considered the historian's bible, it's easy to understand why they are so reluctant to tackle government documents, especially in the Serial Set.<sup>11</sup> The current edition of the Guide was published in 1974. It notes that the Serial Set and hearings are available in microform and cites the CIS Index (which only began in 1970). Unfortunately, the CIS Serial Set Index was not published until 1977, so historians-in-the-making must look beyond the Harvard Guide to learn about that great index.

The Serial Set Index is easy to use. Each part covers a range of Congresses, with a 2-volume subject index and one-volume of Finding Lists. The subjects and keyword terms are taken from the publication titles. Once you find your subject, you will also find all of the information you need to locate the publication in the Serial Set.

The Finding Lists include:

1. An Index of Names of Individuals and Organizations which have been the subject of private laws and other Congressional action. These names are not included in the subject volumes;

2. Numerical List of Reports and Documents;

### 3. Schedule of Serial Volumes.

If you get genealogy questions in your library, the Index of Names may be useful if someone knows that an ancestor was the subject of a claim or petition. I was trying to find a genealogy connection for this presentation, and one practically fell into my lap. My stepmother has been working for years on her family genealogy. She's a very experienced researcher, but on rare occasions, I've found sources of use to her. This time, she called to ask me about some citations she didn't understand. As she read Congress numbers, references to Senate bills, and House Journal pages, I really got excited and asked her to send me copies of what she was reading. What I received was from the *Digested Summary and Alphabetical List of private claims presented to the House of Representatives...from the 1st to the 31st Congress*, exhibiting the action of Congress on each claim with references to the journals, reports, bills, etc. This publication, reprinted in 1970, was originally a House document. The Preface to the reprinted edition has some helpful information, including the fact that records relating to the private claims cited are in the National Archives, in the records of the House of Representatives. I needed to find out more about the records of the House. Documents to the rescue again: everything I wanted to know was in a depository publication we'd put in the Reference Department: *Guide to the Records of the United States House of Representatives at the National Archives, 1789-1989*.<sup>12</sup> Chapter one, An introduction to research in the Records of Congress is must reading for anyone doing research in United States history. It has an excellent discussion of how to use the Congressional Record and House and Senate journals to search for petitions or private claims. There's a parallel volume for the Senate, and both of these publications were issued as House and Senate documents.<sup>13</sup>

The Schedule of Serial Volumes is of particular value if you have a citation from a footnote or bibliography and need to find the Serial Set volume number. Of course the citation must include at least the Congress number.

What did we do before the Serial Set Index? What do you do if your library doesn't have it? As you can see, the choice is rather limited. Poore's *Descriptive Catalogue* covers the longest period. It has a subject index (which is defective according to the *Harvard Guide*).<sup>14</sup> What that means, in my experience, is blind references which are not on the page you're sent to. Publications are arranged chronologically, so although there may be reference to many pages under a subject, no subheadings are given. If you don't know the publication year, you have to scan each page, a tedious process. That would not be so bad, but the double columns of fine print are particularly hard on old eyes like mine. There are citations to the *State Papers with the Class* (e.g., Public Lands), volume number, pages, Congress, and session. Congressional documents and reports are cited with numbers, Congress, and session. With that information, you go to the Schedule of Serial Volumes which will give you the Serial Set volume number.

Ames's *Comprehensive Index* is a magnificent work, and it's a shame we don't have anything comparable for the earlier part of the century. Its coverage is said to be complete for the Serial Set during that period, although it does not have complete coverage of departmental documents. Arrangement is by subject, with authors in a column on the left, and House or Senate document or report numbers to the right. An especially useful feature of Ames is that many of the periodicals cited are also analyzed. For example, Grape culture

and wine making in Russia is an article in the Consular Reports, and many other unusual articles can be found. Unfortunately, the CIS Serial Set Index does not index to that level.

The Catalog of the Public Documents...1893-1940 and Monthly Catalog, 1895- are of limited use, simply because they begin so late in the century.

### **A User Education Problem**

In recent years, I find that increasing numbers of undergraduate and graduate students are unable to distinguish between book citations and periodical citations. As you might imagine, something that begins, United States. Congress. Senate and ends with incomprehensible numbers and letters presents real problems. Several years ago, it dawned on me that the jargon of legislation is a foreign language in need of basic translation.<sup>15</sup> A simple guide explaining what the common citation means and the location of the material represented helps demystify government documents and leads students to materials such as the Serial Set. I suspect that some students omit mention of documents they've actually read because they don't know how to cite them in a bibliography. Any time I take students or other researchers to Congressional publications, I give them the call number for the Complete Guide to Citing Government Information Resources.<sup>16</sup>

### **Congressional Record and Its Predecessors**

#### **Congressional Record**

Like the Serial Set, the Congressional Record and its predecessors must be mined to yield their historical treasure. What is the Congressional Record? It's certainly not the verbatim record of the proceedings in Congress some people think it is. Since its earliest years, it has been so heavily edited that newspaper accounts of what was said in Congress are sometimes more accurate than what's printed in the Record.<sup>17</sup> Stories about remarks edited or censored. For a discussion of that problem, I suggest Schmeckebier and Eastin.<sup>18</sup>

As you can see, the Record is only the latest in a succession of serials purporting to report the proceeding in Congress. The Record actually began as a government publication, unlike the earlier titles, which were printed by commercial printers and simply sold to the government. For the century under discussion, we don't have to worry about daily issues and bi-weekly indexes. From its inception, annual indexes of the Record are similar to those we receive today (eventually!).

As you know if you use the Record index, the most detailed subject information is under the names of the legislators. This lack of specific subject headings can be frustrating, but for the subjects that are covered, the Congressional Record can be a useful source of information about contemporary issues and problems. The fact that it has an annual index is a definite advantage. The index to the New York Times for the same period is quarterly or semi-annual through the 19th century, which doubles or quadruples your searching.

Two especially useful sections of the Congressional Record index are the Histories of House Bills and Resolutions and Histories of Senate Bills and Resolutions. These list all

bills introduced and give the histories in concise form, including the date on which the bill was introduced and the committee to which it was referred. If you're doing a legislative history, this is certainly the place to begin.

## **Congressional Globe**

In its early years, the Congressional Globe was (like its predecessors, the Register of Debates and Annals of Congress) more of an abstract than a verbatim report of the proceedings. Each volume has an Appendix which includes materials such as messages of the President and reports of department heads. Beginning in 1853, the text of public laws was included.<sup>19</sup>

There are two indexes: one for the Senate, one for the House. It's not an ideal arrangement, but it works. I was trying to decipher some unpublished letters written from Washington in 1873 by a lobbyist. The handwriting was eye-killing, but a phrase that looked like, Poland bill kept turning up. Checking the Globe indexes, I found Vermont Representative Luke Poland, and a lengthy speech by him on the subject of the bill.

## **Register of Debates**

To quote one authority, The publication...was contemporaneous with the proceedings, but the series does not pretend to be a verbatim account.<sup>20</sup> Our library doesn't have them, I've never used the Register, so I'm not going to waste time pretending that I know something about them.

## **Annals of Congress**

The Annals weren't published until 1834. Their publisher, Gales and Seaton, compiled them from newspapers and other sources, the debates from October 1800 being taken from the National Intelligencer. The text therefore represents abstracts of the proceedings, rather than verbatim accounts. That probably accounts for the fact that, within each session, there are separate running accounts for the Senate and House.

Senate and House have their own indexes, and within those, separate alphabetical listings by session--by modern standards, a rather primitive and tedious arrangement. I've found browsing more fruitful than using the indexes.

## **.Alternative indexes**

The House and Senate Journals, included in the Serial Set for each session of Congress, have subject and bill number indexes. Although the journals don't give detail, they do give dates of action, enabling a researcher to find the information in the Congressional Globe or Record.

## **Practical use**

I wanted this presentation to be something more than an annotated bibliography, and our local newspaper provided an excellent opportunity to illustrate practical application. The

story I'm going to summarize appeared on April 2nd, and since it was from the Associated Press, I assume other newspapers may have run it, as well. The headline was, Trader's kin seek compensation.<sup>21</sup> The trader in question was Jean Louis Legare, a Canadian fur trader who risked his life and nearly bankrupted himself getting Chief Sitting Bull to surrender. Legare's descendants are now trying to get reimbursement from the U.S. and Canadian governments for providing, food, supplies, horses, and wagons to Sitting Bull and his 50 to 60 followers.

When I read the article to my husband, his reaction was, a likely story. Was it? Here was a great way to use what I'd just been writing about. It was the kind of question that could be asked in a public or academic library. I had good search keys: the names Legare and Sitting Bull and a surrender date of 1881. It took me about five minutes to find verification of the basic information with the Serial Set Index and Congressional Record. Ames also has the same information as the Serial Set Index. I'll leave the details to anyone interested in looking further-- or post them on GOVDOC-L.

### **.Access - More Than Just Indexes**

If you want more detail than my sketchy presentation provided, there's no shortage of good books and articles explaining the details of the Serial Set and the Congressional Record. You'll find some of them in the bibliography I've handed out. From the standpoint of service, there are some intangible factors which are also important:

1. Know your library's entire collection, not just what's in government documents. Although your library may only have become a depository in the last decade or two, you probably have lots of U.S. government documents. Case in point: The series U.S. Army in World War II. Although these were issued years before our library became a depository, we still have most of the series, and the commemorative reprints issued in the past year are duplicates. Don't take anything for granted--check your holdings. Our online catalogs make it (potentially) easier to identify government documents in our collections--but you have to remember to check!
2. Know what your library has available in microform. The larger your library--the more departmentalized it is--the more likely you'll overlook these things. Our library became a depository in 1966, but we have the Serial Set, 1789-1969 in Readex Microprint and hearings on microfiche. Work closely with whoever does interlibrary loan: it's an inconvenience to your own library users and an unnecessary burden on the lending library if you request something you already have.
3. Educate your library staff, especially everyone who works at the reference desk, where many history research questions begin. Keep copies of your bibliographic instruction handouts there, and emphasize the availability of documents in microform collections. GOVDOC-L is a fantastic medium for sharing our expertise, but I believe we need to publicize the wealth of information in government documents within our own libraries.
4. Last, know what's available in area libraries. It seems obvious, but libraries which are not depositories may have good documents collections in hard copy or microform. Informal partnership can be helpful: in Pennsylvania's State System of Higher Education (which



includes East Stroudsburg University), DOMA, the Documents and Map Librarians, compiled a directory which includes what libraries have documents collections in microform: Serial Set, hearings, American Statistics Index and Congressional Information Service microfiche. Ten of the fourteen libraries are now depositories, but even those which aren't have some valuable resources. Since our libraries are scattered across the state, we believe we are providing a service to our Congressional districts, not just to the institutions students and faculty.

## Conclusion

In this era of hard times for libraries, we need to make the most of our collections. Older government documents are an untapped resource, not just for scholar-historians, but for students looking for interesting term paper topics, creative writers seeking background information for novels or plays, or sociologists in search of comparative data. Many of the documents on scientific or technical subjects are still useful. Make U.S. history come alive for your library users: introduce them to the Serial Set and Congressional Record.

1. Steven D. Zink, Clio's Blindspot, *Government Publications Review*, 13 (Jan./Feb.1986), 67- 78.
2. Ibid., 73-75.
3. Congressional Information Service. *User Handbook: CIS U.S. Serial Set Index, 1789-1969.* (Bethesda, MD., 1980).
4. United States. *Constitution of the United States of America: analysis and interpretation...* J. H. Killian, ed. (Washington, DC, 1988). 99th Congress, 1st session, S. Doc. no. 99-16 (Y 1.1/3:99-16, Ser. no. 13611); *Biographical directory of the United States Congress, 1774-1989: the Continental Congress, September 5, 1774, to October 21, 1788, and the Congress of the United States, from the First through the One Hundredth Congresses, March 4, 1789, to January 3, 1989, inclusive. Bicentennial ed.* (Washington, DC, 1989). S. Doc. 100-34, 100th Cong., 2nd sess. (Y.1/3:100-34)
5. *Printing Act of 1895, Statutes-at-Large*, 28, Chap. 23, 601-24 (1895).
6. Suzanne DeLong, What Is In the United States Serial Set? *Journal of Government Information*, 23 (1996), 123-135.
7. Congressional Information Service, vi-x.
8. Address inquiries to: Theodore J. Crackel, Papers of the War Department, 1784-1800, McGarry Communication Center, East Stroudsburg University, East Stroudsburg, PA 18301.
9. B. P. Poore, ed. *Descriptive Catalogue of the Government Publications of the United States, 1774-1881* (G.P.O., 1885), S. Misc. Doc. 67, 48th Cong., 2nd sess. ; J.G. Ames, ed. *Comprehensive Index to the Publications of the United States Government, 1881-1893* (Washington, DC, 1905), H. Doc. 754, 58th Cong., 2nd. sess.

10. All published as House Misc. Documents.
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14. Ibid., 1:69.
15. Judith M. Feller, Teaching Legislation as a Second Language, *PLA Bulletin* (October 1993), 9-10.
16. Diane L. Garner and Debora Cheney. Complete Guide to Citing Government Information Resources. (Bethesda, MD, 1994)
17. Harvard Guide, 1:72
18. Laurence F. Schmeckebier & Roy B. Eastin, Government Publications and Their Uses. (Washington, DC, 1969), 139-142.
19. Ibid., 138-139.
20. Ibid., 138.
21. Pocono Record, Apr. 2, 1996, A3.