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The Appraisal of Senator John Williams's Papers

L. Rebecca Johnson Melvin

Traditionally, appraisal decisions for a congressional collection have been made after the arrival of the collection at a repository. In this case, the collection was the papers of Senator John J. Williams of Delaware. Williams represented Delaware in the United States Senate from 1947 until 1970, and was known as "the Conscience of the Senate" for his honest pursuit of integrity in government while serving on both the finance and foreign relations committees. Processing the Williams papers was a dedicated two-year project. A project archivist was hired in 1988 and, shortly afterwards, a technician assistant. The project archivist made all of the appraisal decisions, and the technician followed guidelines to assist with sampling selected files. Processing was done in a year and a half; a

finding aid, summary guide, and an exhibition were completed by the end of the project in September 1990.

From the outset, appraisal was an obvious issue for this collection. It was clear that its final size was a concern for the Special Collections department with its limited space, and the University of Delaware had deliberately obtained in the deed of gift from the Williams family the right to dispose of the collection according to archival principles. Records of the original extent of the filing series from a survey of the collection and press releases about the collection's arrival at the University set the original bulk at 600 linear feet. Figure 1, "Appraisal Summary," provides a series outline for the collection with ratios of original extent to retained extent (in linear feet) for each series. The total of 480.5 linear feet recorded as the original extent in the appraisal summary does not include the Senator's library of bound *Congressional Record* volumes and other government publications, crates of framed photographs and memorabilia, or scrapbooks. Not quite a "twenty-percenter,"¹ in the end closer to thirty percent of the original files from the collection were preserved.

It might be valuable to review a few obvious things about appraisal and congressional collections. Congressional collections of the twentieth century are classic examples of the bulk records which beg "archival choices." In 1983, Richard Berner wrote, "a body of

¹ This is a sobriquet for twentieth-century collections, used by Thomas Powers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

appraisal theory is perhaps the most pressing need in the archival field today."² Patricia Aronsson's seminal 1984 chapter in *Archival Choices*³ still provides important guidelines for appraisal of congressional collections. She emphasizes the dual nature of such material as both public records and private papers, and the need to weigh the sameness of the record types that appear in all congressional collections against the uniqueness of the collections as they reflect the individual office holder and the state or district represented.

Karen Paul's *Records Management Handbook for United States Senators and Their Archival Repositories*⁴ details the kinds of records found in senate offices and suggests retention schedules. These guidelines are just as useful to archivists at repositories and are helpful in answering the question of what is unique about the particular senator's collection. Paul's *Handbook* and the report of the Task

² Richard C. Berner, *Archival Theory and Practice in the United States: A Historical Analysis* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1983), 7.

³ Patricia Aronsson, "Appraisal of Twentieth-Century Congressional Collections," in Nancy E. Peace, ed., *Archival Choices* (Lexington, Mass.: Lexington Books, 1984), 81-104.

⁴ Karen Dawley Paul, *Records Management Handbook for United States Senators and Their Archival Repositories*, 2nd ed. (Washington, D.C.: GPO; S. Pub. 102-17, 1992).

Force on the Documentation of Congress⁵ emphasize the need to make appraisal decisions with a broader understanding of the scope of sources available to support congressional research.

In processing the Williams papers, a dull impression hovered in the background: there were ninety-nine other senators who served with Williams at any given time, and there were conceivably ninety-nine collections that paralleled Williams's papers. The evidential value of the collection in documenting the functions of his senatorial office was probably fairly well-covered in similar collections around the country. But this was the first twentieth-century congressional collection at the University of Delaware, and the evidential value of the papers as a source for students to research a senatorial office was not overlooked. Evidential value drove the arrangement scheme for the collection, with four subgroups reflecting functions of Williams's office: legislative, investigative, and committee work; the representative work for constituents; administrative details; and personal papers.

Appraisal decisions became more interesting when considering the informational value of the collection. Aronsson's advice is consistent with any informational guidelines: what does the collection tell us about the individual senator and his interests, the issues of the home

⁵ Karen Dawley Paul, *The Documentation of Congress: Report of the Congressional Archivists Roundtable Task Force on Congressional Documentation* (Washington, D.C.: GPO; S. Pub. 102-20, 1992).

state, the issues of his times, and the achievements of Congress during his terms.⁶

And then there are the basic appraisal guidelines which Nancy Peace summarized in *Archival Choices*⁷: importance, uniqueness, usability, reliability, completeness, comparability, cost of preservation, and density. Several of these are clearly subjective factors. With this acknowledgement of the inevitable subjectivity of some of the decisions to come, and after conscientiously contacting of colleagues and exploring appraisal decisions for other congressional collections, it was time to plunge into the processing of the Williams papers—a project that took one and a half years.

The luxury of having time dedicated to item-level processing as done with the Williams papers is one that comes infrequently. As summarized in Figure 2, "Outline of Series with Appraisal Notes," there were broad appraisal guidelines for the papers and different appraisal methods for the various series in the collection. There were those wonderfully straightforward discards: duplicates, carbons, envelopes, interim correspondence, and secondary printed sources such as government publications. These are obvious, but worth mentioning in a review of what was discarded from the collection because their bulk was considerable.

⁶ Aronsson, *Archival Choices*.

⁷ Nancy E. Peace, "Deciding What to Save: Fifty Years of Theory and Practice," in *Archival Choices* (Lexington, Mass.: Lexington Books, 1984), 1-18.

The standard office filing procedure in Senator Williams's office was to assemble related correspondence in this manner: incoming letter stapled to accompanying envelope; carbon of interim response stapled to that (interim means "thank you for your letter, a response is forthcoming"); attached carbons of outgoing and incoming follow-up correspondence to appropriate individual or agency; final answer from agency; carbon of outgoing answer to original letter; and, of course, any related clippings, reports, or attachments. Each bundle of correspondence was a colorful cluster of stationery, yellow and white carbons, with an average of five staples and a paper clip or two. Much of this was discarded--all that was needed was the original correspondence, evidence of the office's action, and the final answer.

Other guidelines were applied generally to the correspondence, especially the constituent correspondence. With the luxury of processing at the item level, it was possible to look for things to save: prominent correspondents, first-name basis correspondents, and regular correspondents. Also saved was correspondence representing views of corporate bodies such as civic, trade, labor, and fraternal organizations; ethnic and religious groups; and special interest lobbies. The geographical range of constituents was considered before making appraisal decisions. Was the issue important to Delawareans or to the nation as a whole? Senator Williams's papers were unusual in the volume of correspondence he received from Americans nationwide. Another factor considered was retaining the proportion of

respondents by sex when the issue was gender-related. For example, a large number of women wrote to the Senator to protest the coloring of margarine in the early 1950s, and the appraised files had to represent fairly the original proportion of his correspondents of this issue. And, of course, it was important to save more of the material documenting issues specific to Delaware.

Sometimes the appearance of a letter was enough to warrant its retention. Lengthy replies from the Senator, as opposed to non-committal responses of "thank you for your opinion," generally contained details of his stand on a particular issue. Letters from some constituents were lengthy and, at a glance, appeared to represent an educated point of view. On the other hand, some handwriting and spelling were quick clues that the author was elderly or uneducated, and it was interesting to have these represented as well. Return addresses were used to identify economically depressed areas (such as Appalachia) or other notable regions. And then a few things were saved for purely serendipitous reasons: correspondence on interesting letterhead or postcards, a few token pieces of crank mail, and for aesthetic appeal or to demonstrate the subjectivity of appraisal, letters written in green ink.

Different appraisal methods were used for various series in the collection. There were simple discards for the topically specific files such as the JJW:ERL Subject Files. These files typically included correspondence, office memos and notes, and background materials. There were instances where retention of representative files documented routine functions of the Senator's office. In

these cases, a single representative file or several files at random chronological intervals were selected and the others were discarded, with the original extent of the files recorded. For example, only three files from the original requests for agricultural year books found in the series Miscellaneous Office Files were saved. The first folder of the appraised files includes a sheet with the statement, "These three folders are representative sample files from five linear feet of requests for agricultural yearbooks in the original office files spanning the dates 1947-1970." This was also done for other routine files such as arrangements for school group tours.

In some cases, totally random samples of unimportant files were saved to document their substantial but insignificant existence. A small file of unanswered mail in the Miscellaneous Office Files was preserved because there was originally so much of it. The folder retained included this statement: "Sample of correspondence received but unanswered by Senator Williams's office for various reasons: insufficient address, no reply requested, illegible, or incoherent contents. Original files included almost three linear feet of unanswered mail, including four linear inches of unintelligible mail from a character known as 'D.M.'"

Small amounts of some series were saved merely to document the Senator's handling of certain types of requests or cases. In the case of academy recommendations, purely subjective criteria were used and the few "fat" files from each of the academies were pulled. As it turned out, these "fat" files represented young men who gained the Senator's recommendation, had successful

military careers, and kept in touch with the Senator. A general file was retained for each academy, and a summary list was compiled of the number of applicants recommended and not recommended by Williams. An explanation of this appraisal process was included with the series description.

Issue mail in this collection was primarily in the Legislative Correspondence and Executive Correspondence series. In some cases, indiscriminate samples of material in generic topical files were selected. These files addressed a wide range of concerns, often within an agency's jurisdiction, and often not requiring any significant action or comment from the senator. An example of such files to be sampled were those under "Executive Correspondence—Post Office—Mail Delivery Service."

In general, a quantitative sample of constituent correspondence from voluminous single issue files was saved. Files often contained a single copy of the robo or dura (form letter) response sent by the office and all constituent mail, sometimes including petitions. Twenty to twenty-five percent of this type of correspondence was saved. If a subject was deemed to have significant research potential, such as, for example, mail concerning the censure of Senator Joseph McCarthy, a greater portion of the correspondence was saved. The sample was sometimes taken by random selection, sometimes by closer inspection of groups of items, and sometimes by actually counting off two or three letters from every group of ten. Petitions were noted by saving the first page with text and one page of signatures. A close approximation of the number of signers

was then pencilled onto the petition. The original volume of mail was documented on a reference sheet added to the file. A measure of one inch being equivalent to eighty to one hundred pieces of correspondence was used (thickness of paper, length of letters, and presence of post cards were considered). For example, the file "Legislative Correspondence—ExecutiveOffice—Nominations—Haynsworth—Robo to Supporters—1969" includes the statement "October-November 1969 robo sent in response to ca. 1,150 pieces of general correspondence. Samples follow."

More of a qualitative sample of constituent correspondence from lengthy issue-focused files were saved. These files usually contained individual replies, rather than robos, from the Senator's office. A combination of random and subjective criteria was used to select approximately thirty to fifty percent of the material for retention. For example, one third of the file contents were saved from the "Legislative Correspondence—Agriculture—Humane Slaughter" file, a popular cause in Delaware, for some reason, between 1957 and 1962.

Each agency or topical subdivision in the Executive Correspondence and Legislative Correspondence series included "miscellaneous" files. These contained a wide variety of issues within a subject or jurisdiction over many years, and most correspondence received individual responses from Senator Williams's office. A fair-to-moderate-sized portion of material, evenly selected from the files, was saved. For example, the fourteen files of "Legislative Correspondence—Agriculture—Miscellaneous"

were reduced from an original extent of two linear feet to ten linear inches.

There were several key series retained in their entirety. Other than simple discards such as envelopes or duplicates, the original extent of those series remained. Only one series, the Correspondence Master File, was entirely discarded.

It is important to note, in closing, that the appraisal decisions were duly recorded for this collection. There is an explanation about appraisal following the scope and content note in the finding aid, there are appropriate explanations in the series descriptions, and, in many cases, reference sheets explaining appraisal for specific files were added to individual file folders. These explanations were readily provided for the researchers, because in many ways (space savings for the repository aside), the decisions were made for the researcher. Enough can be enough, and it seemed wise to let the researcher know what was chosen to document Senator Williams's career.

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Figure 1.

PAPERS OF SENATOR JOHN J. WILLIAMS OF DELAWARE
1947 - 1970
APPRAISAL SUMMARY

	original	:	retained
	(in linear feet)		
I. LEGISLATIVE STAFF/OFFICE FILES			
A. JJW:ERL subject files	35	:	11
B. Committee files	6.5	:	6.5
C. Projects/investigations			
1. Bureau of Internal Revenue	14	:	14
2. Bobby Baker	9	:	9
3. Medicare	1.5	:	1.5
D. Legislative reference material	3.5	:	3.5
E. Bills of legislation	16	:	8.25
F. Congressional Record office index	40	:	2.5
G. Voting Records	4	:	4
II. CONSTITUENT CORRESPONDENCE AND CASES			
A. Executive correspondence	60	:	25
B. Legislative correspondence	120	:	43
C. Congratulations (received and sent)	5	:	1
D. Academy recommendations	7	:	.3
E. Correspondence master file	80	:	0
III. ADMINISTRATIVE AND PERSONAL OFFICE FILE			
A. Miscellaneous office files	46	:	3
B. Datebooks	1.5	:	1.5
C. Appointments correspondence	1.5	:	.5
D. Invitations	17.5	:	.75
IV. PERSONAL			
A. Campaigns	1.5	:	1.25
B. Speeches	11	:	6
C. Scrapbooks			
D. Biographical information			
E. Periodicals			
F. Cartoons			
G. Citations and awards			
H. Photographs			
I. Audio-visual			
J. Books			
	480.5	:	142.55
			30 %

Figure 2.

PAPERS OF SENATOR JOHN J. WILLIAMS OF DELAWARE
1947-1970
OUTLINE OF SERIES WITH APPRAISAL NOTES

I. LEGISLATIVE STAFF/OFFICE FILES -- this is the key subgroup and most of the material in these files was saved. General appraisal guidelines were used to remove duplicates, carbons, interim correspondence, envelopes, secondary sources such as government reports and hearings, etc.

A. JJW:ERL subject files -- this series was the main office reference file maintained by "ERL," Senator Williams's executive secretary throughout his entire senate career. It is arranged topically under department and agency names. This structure parallels the department and agency arrangement of the Executive Correspondence and Legislative Correspondence series. Chief discards from this series were voluminous reports and financial charts, many used for reference and many reprinted at Williams's request in the Congressional Record. 30 lin. ft. reduced to 11 lin. ft. An additional 5 lin. ft. of ERL's stenographer's notebooks were completely discarded.

B. Committee files -- this series pulled together scattered files of Senator Williams's committee work. The files are not very complete even though almost everything found was saved. They include 1.5 lin. ft. of hearing transcripts from the Committee to Investigate the National Defense. 3.5. lin. ft.

C. Projects/investigations -- these files are expected to be the primary research interest of the collection so the entire contents of files were retained.

1. Bureau of Internal Revenue -- 14 lin. ft.
2. Bobby Baker -- 9 lin. ft.
3. Medicare -- 1.5 lin. ft.

D. Legislative reference material -- these files included material supporting preparation of legislation but also contained information of an investigative nature about Senator Williams's colleagues. All 3.5 lin. ft. retained.

E. Bills of legislation -- this series was mainly an office reference file of duplicate bills but some folders did include supporting documentation of

legislative work. The series was extensively weeded of duplicate bills. 16 lin. ft. reduced to 8.25 lin. ft.

F. *Congressional Record* office index -- only the office index was saved. Originally, this series included the full paper issues of the *Congressional Record* containing Senator Williams's comments in the Senate. The tear sheets from these speeches are available in the speech file and there is a complete set of the *Congressional Record* available elsewhere in the library. 38 lin. ft. reduced to .5 lin. ft.

G. Voting Records -- this useful voting analysis was retained in its entirety. 4 lin. ft.

II. CONSTITUENT CORRESPONDENCE AND CASES -- this subgroup contains series of material generated in response to constituent concerns. The bulk and repetitiveness of the file contents called for heavy sampling and appraisal.

A. Executive correspondence -- this series contains correspondence and reference material from executive departments and agencies, initiated by Senator Williams's office on behalf of constituent concerns. This series also includes casework. The structure of this series parallels the JJW:ERL series and the legislative correspondence series: it is arranged by executive department and agency subseries with topical sub-subseries. Within each subseries is a miscellaneous sub-series which received the heaviest appraisal. Some groups of files such as passport and visa application cases within the State Department were completely discarded. 60 lin. ft. reduced to 25 lin. ft.

B. Legislative correspondence -- this series contains constituent correspondence on general or legislative issues. It parallels the Executive correspondence and the JJW:ERL files with arrangement by department or agency and sub-subseries issues. Each subseries contains a miscellaneous group which received heavy appraisal. This series also contained many "robo" or "dura" letters, form letters sent in response to voluminous mail received about a single issue. Approximately 20 - 25 % of robo correspondence was saved with the office robo; a sheet of paper was inserted in each folder documenting the original volume of the correspondence. 120 lin. ft. reduced to 43 lin. ft.

C. Congratulations (received and sent) -- this series was correspondence both received and sent by the Senator. Appraisal was pretty casual because of the overall insignificance of the files. Letters of congratulation saved included many to and from colleagues, and typical constituent congratulations were from election years or in response to the Senator's stand on certain issues. 5 lin. ft. reduced to 1 lin. ft.

D. Academy recommendations -- original files contained a general information folder for each academy and then folders for each individual applicant arranged alphabetically by year. The folders were marked with a "check" or an "x" indicating whether the applicant gained Senator Williams's recommendation. We were able to do a quick tally of how many individuals sought nominations to which academies each year, and how many of them were recommended. We saved the general information file for each academy and a few files that demonstrated either the typical paperwork for such recommendations or the maintained files of a few servicemen with successful careers. 7 lin. ft. reduced to .3 lin. ft.

E. Correspondence master file -- yellow carbons of all correspondence sent to constituents, arranged alphabetically and chronologically. Because the constituent correspondence was so heavily appraised, this was not saved. 80 lin. ft. completely discarded.

III. ADMINISTRATIVE AND PERSONAL OFFICE-FILE -- this subgroup of office files documents general staff duties as well as the personal schedule of Senator Williams. Most office duties were deemed of little permanent value.

A. Miscellaneous office files -- this series contains administrative details and personal office management information as well as miscellaneous requests from constituents for publications, tours, and other courtesies. All specific information about Williams was saved. Only samples of the miscellaneous office details and request files were saved with each file including a statement of the original volume of each subseries. 46 lin. ft. reduced to 3 lin. ft.

B. Datebooks -- all saved. 1.5 lin. ft.

C. Appointment correspondence -- this series is arranged chronologically and includes requests from constituents for appointments. A sample was taken from each year. 1.5 lin. ft. reduced to .5 lin. ft.

D. Invitations -- this series is arranged chronologically and includes invitations both accepted and declined. This series was appraised by sampling invitations from random months at five year intervals. Special files for the Delmarva Chicken Festival and "Dinner with Ike" and as many accepted invitations as noticed within the random months were saved. Williams generally accepted invitations to Delaware fraternal organizations, church groups, and Republican Party functions. 17.5 lin. ft. reduced to .75 lin. ft.

IV. PERSONAL -- this subgroup of material documents Senator Williams's personal activities and thus most was saved.

A. Campaigns -- 1.25 lin. ft.

B. Speeches -- this series was weeded by discarding duplicates. 9 lin. ft. reduced to 5 lin. ft.

etc.