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## "Neither Fish Nor Fowl": The Thurmond Collection as Both Repository and Records Center and its Effect on the Appraisal Process

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## **"Neither Fish nor Fowl": The Thurmond Collection as Both Repository and Records Center**

**James Cross**

An exhibition entitled "The Age of the Marvelous,"<sup>1</sup> sought to explain the fascination of sixteenth and seventeenth century European culture with the unusual, rare, and exotic—whether natural or man-made. Among the paintings, natural specimens, rare books, maps, and manuscripts were displayed illustrations of wondrous animals. One common characteristic of these illustrations, whether of mythical or freshly discovered animals from the

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<sup>1</sup> Organized by the Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, the exhibition appeared as well in Raleigh, NC, Houston, TX, and Atlanta GA, between 1991 and 1993. The exhibition catalog was Joy Kenseth, ed., *Age of the Marvelous* (Hanover, NH: Trustees of Dartmouth College, 1991).

New World, was that the creature illustrated was often depicted as made up of parts from several different animals.

The Thurmond Collection at Clemson University is similar to these multi-part beasts in its dual role as both a records center and an archival repository for the records of an active member congress. This duality has a variety of effects on appraisal, including on decisions about when and what to appraise, the completeness of the records being appraised, and how the appraisal process is carried out.

The decisions on when and what to appraise are significantly affected by the need to act as a records center to the senator. The bulk of the collection (nearly 1500 cubic feet) consists of constituent mail and case files arranged according to file numbers assigned by the Correspondence Management System (CMS). Using the appraisal guidelines in the *Records Management Handbook*,<sup>2</sup> most of this material should be disposed of as routine, or sampled, with only important constituent issues and cases kept in their entirety. Yet all of these files still sit on the shelves.

These files continue to take up space in the stacks for a very simple reason: in an average year, the senator's office makes between twenty and thirty requests for CMS files from the collection. While most of these requests are for files that are only one to three years old, requests for files that are ten or even fifteen years old are not unheard of. Case files are especially unpredictable; supposedly

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<sup>2</sup> Karen Dawley Paul, *Records Management Handbook for United States Senators and Their Repositories*, 2nd ed. (Washington, DC: GPO; S. Pub. 102-17, 1992).

"dead" cases come back to life with alarming regularity. Since its not possible to retrieve what isn't there, simple practicality demands that appraisal decisions on these files be deferred until their usefulness has finally ceased. This means that most of the CMS files will not be appraised until Senator Thurmond leaves office.

But the decision to defer appraisal is not just a practical one; what the Boles and Young "black box"<sup>3</sup> model of appraisal would call "political" considerations comes into play here. To a large degree, the quality of the collection depends on the relationship that the archival staff has with the senator and his staff. The more reliable and efficient the archivist is in his or her records management role, the more confidence the senator's staff will have in his or her ability to handle the offices non-current records, making it more likely that they will continue to send all of their material.

The active nature of the office has its effects on the accessions received from them as well. Certain files will be deemed necessary for the continued functioning of the office, while other related files will be sent to the collection. This results in gaps in the records received, which complicates the appraisal process. Is there missing documentation, and will it show up someday? How does it fit into the material already housed? Will it duplicate or even supersede records already kept?

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<sup>3</sup> Frank Boles and Julia Marks Young, "Exploring the Black Box: The Appraisal of University Administrative Records," *American Archivist* 48 (1985): 121-140.

Closely akin to the problem of "missing" files is the piecemeal nature of accessions. Each functional area in the senator's office only sends part of its records at any one time. This makes it difficult to analyze the contents of the entire collection and how various areas fit together, which is vital for the appraisal process. For example, it is difficult to determine the amount of duplication among the files of various functional areas of the office, which could lead to preservation of more than necessary. In addition, changes in arrangement or documentation become clear only after the change happens, usually after a significant length of time. This is unlike the situation of the office archivist, who will either be involved in the change or be aware of it shortly thereafter, or of the repository archivist who received the entire collection at one time and can look at the changes historically. Both of these situations also allow the archivists involved to develop a better overall view of their collection, which helps in the value-of-information portion of the appraisal process.

In light of these factors, the appraisal process for the collection is an ongoing one that relies heavily on detailed descriptions of the various series in the collection and a concerted effort to track appraisal decisions through time. The descriptions identify types of records in the series, the reasons why they were created, and, most importantly, interrelationships already identified among the series described and others. Knowing the types of records in each series helps in identifying records that can be sampled or duplicates that can be weeded. A case in point is speeches; not only do they have a series of their own, but

they reside in other series as well. These extra speeches are weeded routinely from the other parts of the collection after verification that there is a copy in the speeches series. If there is not, it is added to that series. The only exceptions to this are copies with significant annotations or corrections and drafts.

One very important appraisal advantage that a repository with a growing collection has is that at least some appraisal decisions can be tested against the use researchers make of the open series. A user survey of researchers who use congressional collections shows a higher than expected use of constituent mail files. This is a pattern that had already been noticed in the use of the Thurmond Collection, and appraisal decisions on constituent mail files take this into account by sampling only those portions of a file that contain form letters or postcards, while leaving the more substantive issue mail in the file intact.

These are just some of the effects the records management duties that the repository staff provides to the senator's office have on the appraisal process from both practical and political standpoints. Ongoing accessions, if piecemeal and incomplete, can create difficulties for appraisal, but these may be overcome by detailed descriptions and careful tracking of appraisal decisions. Ongoing accessions can, however, also assist the appraisal process by allowing those decisions to be tested against actual use of the collection by researchers.

The exhibit, "The Age of the Marvelous," noted that the wonder caused by the marvelous stimulated curiosity and

learning. The Thurmond Collection marvel, like the exotic animals illustrated by those sixteenth and seventeenth century naturalists, might serve the same purpose.

**James Cross** has been the Thurmond Archivist at Clemson University since August 1987.