For one interested in acquiring Congressional papers it might be called an archivist's dream. A call came through to my office one morning in October 1985 from the chief administrative aide of Congresswoman Marjorie S. Holt, at that time a U.S. Representative from the State of Maryland who was planning to retire in 1986. The assistant asked these questions: we are looking for a repository for Representative Holt's papers. Are you interested? Could you give us some advice on what types of material in our office are worth assembling for transfer to your repository? Can you work up a gift agreement for us to review? When can you come down to Washington in order to discuss this proposed donation and to review our files?¹

The person I was speaking with is one of the more enlightened administrative aides that I have encountered during my visits to Congressional offices on the Hill. Not all Congressional staff members can be expected to have an informed idea of the research potential of the papers of a representative or senator. Nor does a typical staff assistant in fact have any particular interest in meeting with an archivist who is interested in working out a deposit agreement with a Congressional office. Fortunately the U.S. Senate Historical Office and the Office for the Bicentennial of the House of Representatives are accomplishing a great deal on a daily basis in educating Congressional staffs on the Hill regarding the historical worth and proper handling of Congressional papers.²

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The experience I have had with Marjorie Holt and her staff, by and large a cordial and productive one, was not however entirely free of worries, difficulties, and disappointments. My observations are intended to convey a sense of this and to suggest what might be done to ensure that a Congressional collection being accessioned has at least the prospect of containing documentation that is desirable and is free of boxes of unwanted material.

A few facts are needed to set the scene of my work with members of Representative Holt’s staff. The University of Maryland College Park has been involved in collecting the papers of Maryland political leaders for at least several decades. Previous years have witnessed the collecting of papers relating to Maryland governors from the late nineteenth century to the present era. A number of important mid-twentieth century Maryland politicians such as Senator Millard Tydings (who served prominently on the Senate Foreign Relations and Armed Services Committees during the 1930s and 1940s) and Spiro Agnew (who resigned the Vice-Presidency under what might be called a cloud of suspicion regarding his conduct as Governor of Maryland during the 1967–68 period) have deposited their papers at College Park. The Historical Manuscripts and Archives Department administers the files of five former representatives to the U.S. House and four U.S. senators. Collections dealing with regional political concerns, such as the archives of the Maryland League of Women Voters, the Maryland Municipal League and the Chesapeake Bay Foundation, serve to complement the papers of political leaders. The University of Maryland has an ongoing interest in this area, even to the point of occasionally collecting papers relating to state or county officials and political activists. This interest is tempered, however, with an acute awareness of the difficulty in adequately documenting political activity merely by the collecting of twentieth-century paper files. We are also very much aware of the danger of being swamped in a mountain of record center cartons during a time when the University Libraries can ill afford to house massive collections needlessly.

Marjorie S. Holt, representing the 4th Congressional district in Maryland, was a formidable candidate who enjoyed increased margins of victory in elections from her first campaign in 1972 until her decision to retire after being re-elected for the sixth time in 1984. She served on the House Armed Services Committee, was involved in a number of important Chesapeake Bay initiatives, and in 1978 proposed the so-called Holt substitute budget amendment calling for reduced spending and a cut in taxes. The Holt amendment, while not passed by Congress that year, became the model for Republican alternatives in the budget conflicts of ensuing years. Holt was not known to be at the top level of the U.S. House leadership but her longevity in office and her long-time involvement in federal government projects relating to the Chesapeake Bay made the acquisition of her Congressional papers a desirable objective for the University of Mary-
land. It can be difficult at times to carry out an appraisal of Congressional papers created by a very junior member of the U.S. House who has served only one term; that particular problem did not apply in this instance.

I enjoyed the advantage when working in Representative Holt's office of being a person who would be listened to and who was in a position to guide Holt and her senior staff in making proper appraisal decisions. This is not always possible—another member of the Maryland delegation to the U.S. Congress, with whom I made no headway, seemed to be concerned only with the creation of a permanent exhibit of his memorabilia at a small college while another wanted to take most of his files home in order to assist himself in writing a book. I was fortunate to have the cooperation of Representative Holt's staff as there was little I could say about making the office operation more efficient or effective from a records management standpoint. The office was closing down and, if anything, I was probably going to make that work more complicated than it might be otherwise.

In this office environment, where I could be expected to receive some measure of attention and cooperation, it became clear that my strategy should incorporate several basic features. One of these was whenever possible to remind the chief administrative assistant and others that they should be congratulated for their enlightened decision to offer Congressional papers to a repository and that this activity was in support of a larger enterprise—the world of historical research—and that they should be justly proud of making a contribution to that enterprise. It was even more important to demonstrate from the first phone conversation that I was familiar with the way a typical Congressional office operates, with the varieties of files that are generated there, such as legislative assistants' files or military academy files, and with the prevailing opinions expressed in the archival literature on how those files are appraised. Fortunately in recent years there has been a dramatic growth in the literature regarding appraisal of Congressional collections; I found it very helpful to share this printed information with staff members rather than forcing the staff, somewhat unrealistically, to remember what I was telling them verbally. I found especially useful the employment of a triad of publications of increasing complexity that served this need: 1) a six-page handout issued by Raymond Smock of the U.S. House Office for the Bicentennial of the Congress; 2) a publication written by Judy Carlile in 1981 entitled "Closing a Congressional Office: A Brief Overview"; and 3) Patricia Aronsson's article entitled "Appraisal of Twentieth-Century Congressional Collections," which appeared in Archival Choices: Managing the Historical Record in an Age of Abundance (an anthology of archival writings edited by Nancy Peace). I might also add that the U.S. Senate Historical Office's records management manual, written by Karen Paul, was very helpful in clarifying certain appraisal issues and in providing information on the handling of machine-readable records in Congressional offices.
I soon discovered that appraisal decisions needed to be clearly resolved and documented and that this work needed to be completed as soon as possible. Time passes quickly in the last year of a Congressional office; and a harried staff, which is busily wrapping up its work and looking for employment elsewhere, cannot always be expected to remember agreements reached or to follow through on them. My biggest fear was that the senior member of Representative Holt’s office staff would leave for another position before all the arrangements for appraising and accessioning the Holt papers were made. For these reasons, I created a log-book which contained a record of appraisal decisions and indicated what files were involved, with whom I had consulted about these decisions, on what dates the decisions were made, and when any follow-up work was scheduled to be completed.

In the case of the Holt Papers acquisition, it was a matter of enlisting the staff’s cooperation in surveying the contents of the files and resolving sticky issues that inevitably developed. One of the first of these issues that I broached with the staff was that of case files generated from constituent concerns and requests. It became clear that Representative Holt had made up her mind to return non-current files back to her constituents and, as is commonly done, to forward active files on to her successor. I decided that the fate of these massive files was likely to be resolved according to her line of thinking, partly because I was ambivalent myself about the research potential of these files, and partly because it was clear that the reservoir of goodwill I enjoyed with the staff could be far better expended on other issues. We came to an amicable agreement that the University of Maryland would not receive these case files and that I did not have any particular concern about their disposition.

The issue of constituent mail, especially mail coming into the office on particular political issues and Representative Holt’s response to this mail, was explored in some depth. In this instance the Congresswoman had for better or worse failed to preserve most of the documentation in this area. I was able to ask for and received a printout of the one hundred and fifty-odd standard responses to issue mail that had been prepared by Representative Holt’s staff and located in a computer database—but it was too late to capture the actual flavor of the correspondence itself due to previous disposition decisions. In this instance, as with other groupings of material, one often comes into a Congressional office prepared to deal with a number of complicated appraisal decisions, only to discover that major decisions have been made by the staff before your arrival and at times all you are able to do is to pick up off the table the remaining crumbs of documentation.

Another decision was reached—one that no doubt will horrify some manuscript collectors but also one I’m convinced was a satisfactory arrangement for future researchers using the Holt Papers. Marjorie Holt had assembled over the
years a separate collection of letters and notes written by U.S. Presidents, by Secretaries of State and Defense, and by notable political leaders around the world. She was reluctant to surrender these items to the University of Maryland due to the interest expressed by her children and grandchildren in keeping these papers in the family. After some negotiation, a decision was made to present a full set of the letters and notes in facsimile to the University and to have the Holt family retain those originals that they prized most highly. To some extent, this policy was followed in the acquisition of original political cartoons involving Holt and with photographic material. The University received a substantial portion of original material and in all cases obtained in the form of photocopies the informational value contained in these items.

Political memorabilia in collections present a host of housing and access problems. Although I don’t want to suggest that the acquisition of memorabilia should be ruled out altogether, I would not recommend devoting substantial archival storage space to this type of material unless one’s repository has a formal policy of active collecting in this area. I was consequently delighted with the senior administrative assistant’s most generous offer: to place all of Representative Holt’s framed documents, plaques, statues, paper weights, etc., on a number of large tables and to let the University of Maryland take away those items that were considered desirable but without being obliged to accept anything. (As an archivist I recommend this procedure to all Congressional staffs.) As it turned out this “exhibition” did not actually occur; I toured the various areas of the office complex with an administrative aide and a very limited number of items were set aside for the University of Maryland. Photocopies were taken of citations and plaques that were not scheduled to come to College Park in the Holt Papers.

It proved easier to find files that were not needed for the permanent collection than to locate desirable records that were possibly located in some unknown area of the office. A good example of this was my attempt, often unsuccessful, to find adequate documentation on the work of key legislative and administrative assistants on Representative Holt’s staff.

As the year 1986 progressed a deed of gift was drafted, approved with some modifications by the campus legal office, and endorsed by Representative Holt after review by her own legal counsel. During the same time files selected for permanent retention were transferred into record center cartons by Holt’s staff. After the gift agreement was signed by both parties, the collection, consisting of 28 boxes, was shipped to the University of Maryland at College Park. The collection included speeches by Representative Holt, copies of bills sponsored or cosponsored by her in the U.S. Congress, legislative files, project files, public relations files, her appointment books, and photographs. The University of Maryland Libraries’ non-print media department assisted in augmenting the
collection by recording onto videotape a Baltimore public television program which dealt with Marjorie Holt's life and political career. Plans were made for a series of oral history interviews with Holt and her colleagues.

In terms of bulk the Holt Papers take on the appearance of a very trim collection compared to several earlier accessions of political papers in the Historical Manuscripts and Archives Department. The collections of U.S. House members at the University of Maryland range from 60 to 350 linear feet. Several of these previously acquired accessions are slated for review, as it is obvious in some cases that no significant appraisal work was done at the time the papers were acquired.

My story does not have an entirely happy ending. A reception and exhibit honoring Marjorie Holt and celebrating the acquisition of her papers at College Park was held in December 1986. I was responsible for mounting the exhibit, and it was at this time that I was able to inspect in depth the nature of the material that had been assembled and shipped out by the Holt office staff as the result of the appraisal decisions mentioned earlier.

Opening and reviewing the boxes was not a completely enjoyable experience. One source of irritation was that the overall integrity of the series that were established seemed to be in place but the numbering of the boxes, or even the way the material was placed in the boxes, was done in a very haphazard fashion. One was forced to hop around from box to box in order to obtain a full view of the files on political campaigns, or project files on the Chesapeake Bay, or to locate photographic material. But even more serious was the fact that expected documentation was deficient in some areas. For example, legislative files covered a smaller span of years than expected and Holt newsletters for the early years were scarce. One of the bright spots perhaps was the absence (as expected) of any committee files that might be considered to be alienated from the National Archives' grouping of Congressional committee records.

By this time the Holt office had been completely vacated. In my search for answers to these puzzling holes in documentation I investigated the possibility of additional boxes being located at the Washington National Records Center at Suitland. Previously I had relied on Representative Holt's office to tell me about the nature of her shipments to the Center and what was being brought back to the office from the Center as Holt's tenure on the Hill was ending in late 1986. I had two conversations with a member of the Records Center staff who was able to give me a far clearer idea of what was obviously a Congressional papers holocaust. In December 1982 Representative Holt authorized the destruction of thirteen early accessions into the Records Center. Also in December 1982, files described as personal records created before April 1979 were destroyed. In April 1984 parts of seven other accessions were destroyed. During May 1986 older case files that were previously maintained in Representative Holt's regional offices, amounting to forty-six linear feet, were also tossed.
Interestingly enough, there was clear evidence that Holt had ordered boxes to be brought back to her office in the spring of 1986 and some of this material was placed in the shipment slated for the University of Maryland. The most important aspect of this grouping, now part of the permanent collection, are her schedule books, dating from her first four years in Congress (1973–77). I was at least partially reassured that my suggestions to her office staff had been carried out. However, it was also very disheartening to realize that possibly a large number of files of high research value had been permanently lost.

In retrospect I can think of two aspects of the appraisal and accessioning process that I would have handled differently given the insights that I now have. One would be to devote more attention to hands on work with the Congressional files in the office at the time they were being assembled for transfer to College Park. Although I did devote a significant time in discussing appraisal decisions with the staff, in surveying files in the office, and in helping to assemble several file series, it would have paid off in the long run to have spent more time with the staff in supervising the actual physical work involved in packing the boxes. I should have spent more time also in investigating the full history of the disposition of the files created by Holt’s office throughout her career as a member of the U.S. House. In this case the damage of previous dispositions had already occurred before I arrived. However, gaining complete and in-depth knowledge as soon as possible of what exactly had happened to boxes sent to the off-site storage facility could have sharpened documentation and appraisal strategies.

There are obvious advantages in being in an active mode rather than agreeing to accept a Congressional collection and then passively waiting to see what arrives at your archival doorstep. By securing access to the office and actively assembling the collection on the Hill you are assured that the accession will have a low ratio of dross material. You have an opportunity to get acquainted with the staff that has created the files you are collecting. Questions about holes in the documentation can be addressed to that staff, and series within the collection can be well established and defined by the time the boxes arrive at your repository. Arrangements can be made for acquiring supplementary information through oral history interviews with the representative or senator and his or her staff. And it is also quite certain that the archivist should attempt to secure a deposit agreement as early in the career of a member of Congress as possible—in order to ensure that any paper holocausts are those of your own choosing.

NOTES

1. Phone conversation with Keith Berger, Representative Holt’s administrative assistant, on October 23, 1985.
2. Those interested in the work of these offices can contact Dr. Richard A. Baker, Histot-

