

The Roger R. Trask Award and Fund was established by the SHFG to honor the memory and distinguished career of the late SHFG president and longtime federal history pioneer and mentor Roger R. Trask. The award is presented to persons whose careers and achievements reflect a commitment to, and an understanding of, the unique importance of federal history work and the SHFG's mission. Donald A. Ritchie is Historian Emeritus of the Senate, and has served as president of the Oral History Association and a council member for the SHFG and several other historical associations. He delivered the Trask Lecture at the Society's annual conference in Baltimore, MD, on March 16, 2016.

Monuments, Commemorations, and Legacies

Donald A. Ritchie

Having been involved in the Society for History in the Federal Government since its inception, having attended so many of its meetings, and having built strong friendships with so many of its members—including Roger Trask—I greatly appreciate receiving the Society's award named in his memory.

Forty years ago this month I joined the staff of the Senate Historical Office. Back in the 1970s, the history profession was suffering from a job depression, and I was relieved just to be gainfully employed, little realizing how rewarding a career as a Senate historian would become. I had been given the advantage of working for an institution that valued and used its history almost on a daily basis. There was the added advantage of sharing my assignments with a group of fellow historians and archivists who taught me a lot over the years. I especially want to thank my longtime colleague and predecessor Dick Baker, and my longtime colleague and successor Betty Koed, for their consistent support and camaraderie.



Measuring the decades that I spent on the Senate staff, I noted that of the 375 men and women who served as senators during those years, only one's tenure lasted the entire length of my service. Vermont Senator Patrick Leahy was 99th in seniority when I arrived in 1976, and first in seniority when I retired in 2015—in fact, he called to remind me of that when I left. Six other senators of my time will remain

in the Capitol as permanent fixtures: Barry Goldwater stands as a bronze statue in Statuary Hall; Scoop Jackson is a bronze bust in the Russell Senate Office Building; and four others are marble busts in the vice presidential collection—Hubert Humphrey, Walter Mondale, Dan Quayle, and soon, Al Gore.

When Dick Baker became the Senate's first historian in 1975, he asked Senate Majority Leader Mike Mansfield to define the mission of the office. Mansfield summed it up tersely: "Promote the history of the Senate." To accomplish that mission, we sought to educate senators and their staffs, journalists, scholars, and the general public. An important element of promoting the history of an institution is to preserve the legacies of the individuals who served in it, to record their accomplishments, and to keep them from being forgotten. In that regard, one of the unexpected pleasures of our job was working closely with the Senate curators who acquired new art for the Capitol, including those statues I cited.

When the Senate chose to mark the new millennium by adding two new portraits to its collection of significant senators, we historians helped to recommend Arthur Vandenberg and Robert Wagner, in recognition of their distinguished service. Beyond compiling information about their careers, my chief contribution was to suggest to the artist that he not portray Robert Wagner as originally intended as a tired looking man at the end of his long service but from a decade earlier at the height of his legislative prowess, during the enactment of so many "Wagner Acts," from Social Security to labor's right to organize. Now, whenever I enter the Senate Reception Room, I glance up at his jaunty portrait and feel certain that Senator Wagner would have wanted to be remembered that way.

Usually, however, our involvement was less with the person being memorialized than with the senators conducting the dedication. One memorable instance occurred with the installation of a bust of Spiro Agnew in 1995, two decades after his resignation from the vice presidency in disgrace. Agnew's bust had been noticeably absent from the vice-presidential collection until some of his friends rallied to his support. The scheduled unveiling put Senate Majority Leader Bob Dole in an awkward position. Agnew and his family would attend the ceremony, so Senator Dole could not say anything critical, but since he was preparing to run for president he did not want media to deride him for being too effusive. We worked with his speech writers on a talk that focused on the role of the vice president as president of the Senate, explaining that the collection of busts honors the office as well as the officeholders, many of whom had been controver-

sial figures in their time. Agnew was not the only vice president to leave under a cloud. The speech detailed the history of the project and mentioned that the first bust had been installed in the Senate Chamber in 1890. At that point, Senator Dole departed from the script and ad-libbed that Strom Thurmond had assured him it had been a beautiful ceremony. That brought down the House, pleasing Agnew and pacifying the media, much to the senator's relief and his subsequent gratitude to the Historical Office.

Statues suggest historical permanence, but recently a few states have withdrawn those of individuals whose fame has fled and replaced them with more recognizable achievers. No Kansan I ever escorted through the Capitol could identify Samuel Glick (he was the state's first governor), which prompted the state legislature to replace Glick with Dwight D. Eisenhower. California then switched a preacher named Thomas King with Ronald Reagan. And Arizona replaced Rough Rider John Greenway with Barry Goldwater. Getting into the Capitol may be a signal honor, but there is no guarantee that anyone will stay there forever. *Sic transit gloria mundi*.

Beyond marble and bronze, we saw commemorations as another way of promoting the institution's legacy. The National Bicentennial in 1976 provided a boost to many federal historical offices, and an inspiration to the Senate Historical Office to begin planning for the bicentennial of Congress in 1989. In that effort we gained an able ally when the House of Representatives conceded that Congress is bicameral and created its own historical office, headed by Ray Smock. With Dick and Ray in the lead, we planned an assortment of publications, exhibits, conferences, a joint session of Congress, and a documentary film by a young filmmaker named Ken Burns—pre-*Civil War*. The bicentennial offered unique opportunities to engage the members of both houses in their collective history. It also justified a wide variety of projects on our wish list—until 1991 when Senate majority leader George Mitchell finally signed off on the last “bicentennial project.”

The Congressional Bicentennial was a great success in all respects except for one: it had no lasting impact on the public's perception of the institution we were honoring. Congress's standing continued to drop in the opinion polls. Within a few years, the members of both houses, from both parties, whom we had enlisted to participate in bicentennial events because of their ability to grasp and explain the nature of Congress were gone. They had been defeated for reelection, often by candidates who ran against Congress and denounced the legislative practices that

had achieved compromise and consensus in the past. As politics have grown more polarized, and Congress has been deemed dysfunctional, it has become clear that those commemorations had not contributed as much to the historical legacy of the institution as we had hoped.

Fortunately, just as the bicentennial was ending, the digital revolution was erupting. While the new technology initially created some anguish for us—such as having to switch from our old reliable analog tape recorders to less predictable digital recorders—it also offered astonishing rewards. For years we had deposited our oral history transcripts in the Library of Congress and National Archives, where perhaps a handful of researchers read them. When we posted the same transcripts online, the number of “hits” recorded each month shot into the thousands. An office newsletter mailed to a few hundred addresses morphed into a website packed with historical information that reached worldwide audiences. The website became especially popular with students, many of whom would email us for further information. Whenever we offered to mail them publications for free, they invariably declined because their paper was due the next day.

There is another contribution to the Senate’s legacy that deserves notice, and that is the effort to preserve and open the archives of the institution and its members. One of our first endeavors was to locate the papers of every former senator (information that is now largely available through the Biographical Directory on the website). In the past, some senators had built voluminous archives, while others had left virtually nothing behind. Widows and staff had turned deceased senators’ papers into bonfires, and archives stored in barns had been eaten by vermin. It became our mission to advise and encourage all sitting senators to make some provision for their papers well before they leave office.

After all, democracy is an unpredictable employer. Senators who lose an election have just a few weeks to clear their office suites of sometimes decades of accumulated records. In 1980, Ronald Reagan’s landslide swept 13 senior senators out of office, almost none of whom had made plans for their papers. Dick Baker and I divided up the list and made the rounds of the Senate office buildings, knocking on doors to offer help. Their staffs greeted us as if we were undertakers, but we helped most of them make necessary decisions in a hurry. Soon after that, Karen Paul joined the Historical Office as the Senate’s first archivist. She has made it her mission to educate senators, starting at the freshman orientation, on the importance of record keeping, both while in office and for the future.

Until 1980 the Senate lacked a general rule for access for its committee records. At first I made weekly trips to the National Archives to screen records for individual research requests. Once I wrote a tongue-in-cheek letter assuring a committee that opening its records during the chairmanship of Daniel Webster would jeopardize neither personal privacy nor national security.

The election of 1980 saw the first change in the Senate's majority in a quarter of a century. Because the outgoing majority leader, Robert C. Byrd, held a strong personal interest in the Senate's history, Dick Baker was able to convince him to introduce a resolution that would automatically open all but the Senate's most sensitive records after 20 years, and the rest after 50 years. That resolution still stands. It has meant that for most historical research, scholars no longer need to make personal appeals, since the records they want are likely to be already open and available at the Center for Legislative Archives.

The 50-year provision worked to our favor when it came to the long-closed and frequently requested records of Senator Joseph R. McCarthy's anti-Communist investigations. In 1976, the Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations turned down our request to publish the executive sessions of that investigation, worried that it might embarrass some of the witnesses who had testified behind closed doors but not in public. But with the 50th anniversary of the investigation approaching—and with most of the participants by then deceased—the subcommittee authorized us to release the 160 executive sessions transcripts in a five-volume set. That event drew national and international media attention, editorials in major newspapers, and heavy traffic for the online version, as well as howls of protests from a few surviving McCarthyites. Legacies can be historically important, even if not always positive.

Finally, part of our archival effort has been to conduct oral histories to enrich the record. We advised senators on how to establish oral history projects to supplement their archives. In other cases, we interviewed former senators and staff ourselves and made the interviews available for research. As a learning experience, nothing taught me more about how the Senate actually operates than sitting down with the people who had done the operating, especially those who had worked anonymously behind the scenes. Each interview became the equivalent of taking a private seminar with an expert in the field.

Statues and artwork may offer some immortality, and commemorations can focus the attention of busy officials and the general public on an institution's past—at

least momentarily. But the surest and safest way to preserve a legacy is to convince the players to leave their own records of the events, to open those records as soon as feasible, and to make as much information as possible available on the Internet. That body of evidence will give future historians a better chance of understanding the history of the Senate and getting it right. I think Senator Mansfield would likely tap his pipe and nod that this has been an ideal way to “promote the history of the Senate.”