



Congress as Publisher: The magic of the U.S. Congressional Serial Set

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ABSTRACT

A major part of Congressional publishing, though not the whole conspectus of it, is the U.S. Congressional Serial Set. After a quick review of the history of the Serial Set, the formal categories of publications are discussed with their statistical breakdown followed by salient examples from some of the various genres of Serial Set publications.

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Until the 2nd Session of the 13th Congress, the thousands of printed materials produced by the House of Representatives and the Senate in the course of their daily business were issued without any numbering system, were printed in various sizes, and were consequently difficult to organize for retrieval and reference. Then Timothy Pickering, a representative from Massachusetts, introduced a series of resolutions which began to create order in the printing of the Congressional documents. On Dec. 8, 1813, Congressman Timothy Pickering offered the following simple House resolution:

That henceforward, all messages and communications from the President of the United States; all letters and reports from the several Departments of the government; all notions and resolutions offered for the consideration of the House; all reports of committees of the House; and all other papers which, in the usual course of proceeding, or by special order of the House, shall be printed in octavo fold, and separately from the journals — shall have their pages numbered in one continued series of numbers, commencing and terminating with each session.

Six days later, perhaps at the insistence of printers, Pickering presented another resolution:

That the documents which were the subject of the order of the House of the 8th instant, instead of having their pages numbered in one continued series of numbers from the commencement to the termination of each session, shall be themselves numbered in a regular series in the order of time in which they shall be directed to be printed, the number of each document to be distinctly marked on the top of the title page and of every subsequent page, in addition to the number of each page of such document.¹

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¹ August A. Imholtz, Jr. "The Printing and Distribution of the Serial Set: A Preliminary Contribution to 19th Century Congressional Publishing" *Documents to the People* Vol 31, no. 1. Spring 2003 pp. 8–17.

In the 15th Congress a similar numbering system was applied to Senate as well as House volumes and this is the beginning of the Serial Set. The "Serial Set" then is the name given to the massive compilation of printed publications of the U.S. House of Representatives and the U.S. Senate. Its contents are organized into volumes by class of publication, basically Journals, Reports, and Documents — a division repeated for each session of each Congress. It is called the "Serial Set" because of the serial, or sequential, numbering applied to all the volumes beginning with Serial Set volume number 1 in the 15th Congress through the 15,000 s today. The Serial numbering, which gives the set its present name, was devised by Dr. John G. Ames, who had been the chief of the Document Division of the Department of the Interior, in 1895.

The Serial Set actually has had several names over time. It was called the "Congressional Set" or "Congressional Series" for obvious reasons, then it came to be referred to as the "Sheep Set" because of the sheep leather in which the set was bound through the end of the 59th Congress (March 1907), and after the institution of the Serial numbering scheme it was also unimaginatively called the "Serial Number Set." At the beginning of the 97th Congress in 1981 the collection finally was officially named the "United States Congressional Serial Set."

1. Definition of classes of publications

1.1. Journals

The Constitution (Article I, Section 5, Paragraph 3) requires that each house of Congress keep and publish a journal of their activities from time to time. The Journals of the House and Senate are the minutes, the daily record of the business transacted by each house. They do not contain a transcription of debates although some of the earlier Journals may occasionally contain excerpts from speeches delivered on the floor. Nor do they contain the texts of bills introduced into the two houses, nor reports on them, nor any other matters with but a very few exceptions. The Serial Set contains the House and Senate Journals from the 15th Congress, 1817, through the 82nd

Congress, 1952, when the practice of publishing the printed Journals in the Serial Set was discontinued.

1.2. Reports

Reports are the official communications of the House and Senate Committees to the full House and Senate respectively on matters coming under their particular purview. Reports themselves fall into several classes: Legislative Reports on Public Bills such as appropriations; Legislative Reports on Private Bills such as pension relief for individual Revolutionary War veterans, etc.; and Special Reports, which include investigative reports, reports on specific subjects required by legislation, reports on petitions and memorials, reports on contested election cases, reports on requests of material from or action by the Executive Department, and many other matters. Legislative Reports far outnumber the other types of Reports in the Serial Set and there are considerably more Reports than Documents in the Serial Set.

1.3. Documents

The Documents class represents publications less directly tied to legislative functions than the Reports. Documents include the annual messages from the President and the annual reports of the Secretaries of the Executive Departments, Bureaus, Offices, and Agencies as required by law (they number some 13,000), petitions and memorials from private citizens or businesses, and organizations including local governments, all kinds of investigative reports — sometimes, especially during the 19th Century, including transcripts of hearings, reports to Congress required of certain non-governmental organizations many other materials.²

Statistical Breakdown (15th–103rd Congress, 1817–1994)

	House	Senate	
Journals	159	155 ³	
Reports	158,342	107,817	
Documents	46,245	23,228	
Executive documents	9271	5044	
Miscellaneous documents 6291	5651		
	220,328	141,915	= 362,243

³ The Senate number does not equal the House number of Journals because some sessions were bound together into a single Journal volume.

2. Sample Serial Set publications

2.1. Reports on private bills and on public bills

The Reports on Private bills, like the Memorials in the Documents series, have been somewhat neglected, except for genealogical research, and that is unfortunate because they illuminate aspects of the life of the common man. The men and women submitting claims were exercising their First Amendment right “to petition the Government for a redress of grievances,” which often meant redress of damages or claims of another kind — in thousands of cases, pensions for example.

From Senate Report 530, 55th Congress, 2nd Session, Serial Set Vol. 3620, we find an American Indian's claim on the Federal Government:

² Document Numbering Systems: In the 15th Congress there was only a Documents series. The Senate continued this practice through the 29th Congress. After the Senate adopted a separate Reports series in the 30th Congress, both the Senate and House divided their Documents series into separate subseries: Executive Documents and Miscellaneous Documents. Executive Documents, as their name implies, were from the Executive Branch. Miscellaneous Documents are the non-Executive Branch publications, including special reports, memorials, and the other non-Executive Branch materials previously covered in the Documents series. This distinction was abandoned after the 1895 Printing Act and both the House and Senate returned to a simple Documents series.

“ITEWAYAKA,” or “One-Armed Jim,” being duly sworn, deposes and says: That he is a Sioux Indian of the Sisseton band, and that he entered the military service of the United States as an scout in the military district of Minnesota, on or about the 11th day of April, A.D. 1863...[and] while he was in such service and engaged in action with a party of hostile Indians who had been on a raid and had killed the Jewett family in Blue Earth County, Minn., the barrel of his gun bursted and tore off his left hand and a portion of his left arm, so that his hand had to be amputated, and was amputated by Dr. Farley. That he has always been friendly to the whites, and observed every obligation imposed upon him by treaty and by natural or municipal law. That he is now 63 years of age and unable to support himself with but one single hand and arm; and that he makes this affidavit for the purpose of being placed on the pension roll of the United States at the rate allowed for the loss of a hand and arm to enlisted men in the service. And further deponent saith not.

The Senate Committee on Pensions did indeed recommended passage of a Bill in favor of Itewayaka.

As examples of Legislative Reports on Public Bills, we will look briefly at three 20th century ones. First, here is the clearly stated title of House Report 163, 63rd Congress, 2nd Session from Serial Set Vol. 6591 on the Bill H.R. 7837:

Title: Report of the Committee of Conference of the two houses of Congress on the Bill H.R. 7837 To Provide for the Establishment of Federal Reserve Banks, Furnish an Elastic Currency, To Afford Means of Rediscounting Commercial Paper, To Establish a More Effective Supervision of Banking in the United States, and for Other Purposes. Presented by Mr. Glass. December 22, 1913.

Its author was Carter Glass, who at that time was a Representative from Virginia.

A little more than a year later, the first Annual Report of the Federal Reserve Board was published in the Documents series of the Serial Set. Here is its bibliographic data:

Serial Set Vol. No. 6872
63rd Congress, 3rd Session
H.Doc. 1523

Title: First annual report of the Federal Reserve Board for the period ending December 31, 1914

And like many of the publications in the Documents it contains a map, in this case a “Map showing the location of the twelve Federal Reserve banks and the boundaries of the twelve Federal Reserve districts as determined by the Reserve Bank Organization Committee.”

In spite of the 1913 Federal Reserve Act's goal “to establish a more effective supervision of banking in the United States,” the Congress deemed it necessary during the Great Depression to pass the Banking Act of 1933, popularly called the Glass–Steagall Act after its two sponsors, Senator Carter Glass of Virginia, who as a Congressman had been instrumental in passing the Federal Reserve Act mentioned above, and Representative Henry B. Steagall of Alabama.

Here is the bibliographic data for the House Report on the Banking Act of 1933:

Serial Set Vol. No. 9774
73rd Congress, 1st Session
H.Rpt. 150
Title: Banking Act of 1933. May 19, 1933.
The Bill, as the Report on it reads, provides for:

“...salutary reforms of our banking system and the laws governing it along three important lines. It makes provision for strengthening the restrictions upon banks and bank offers in the making of loans for speculative purposes and in investing bank funds. It makes provision for expediting the liquidation of hundreds of banks now in receivership. But providing for the purchase of the good but not frozen assets belonging to such receivership, or the

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