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A Case Study: U.S. House of Representatives' History, Art & Archives Website

[History, Art & Archives](#) is the public-facing website of the U.S. House of Representatives devoted to “discover[ing] the rich heritage of ‘the People’s House’ and its central role in U.S. history since 1789.”¹ That mission, stated succinctly on the homepage, prompts users to “explore its unique story and the men and women who have shaped it. Browse its collections. Access historical data and other research resources.” Though straightforward in intent, the path that led to this statement and the website’s subsequent formation was more complex. History, Art & Archives (HAA) is the result of a collaboration between the House’s Office of the Historian and the Clerk of the House’ Office of Art and Archives. These two offices work in tandem to serve as the House’s institutional memory, and the website has become their primary means of fulfilling this mission. HAA contains a wealth of historical information generated from the Historian’s Office as well as the audiovisual output of the Oral History Program. Through its Collections Search and Records Search functions, it provides the only online access to the House Collection of art and artifacts and House records from its committees and officers. In essence, the work of three distinct groups—historians, curators, and archivists—are housed collectively in one website. This paper will explore the relationship between the two offices and how that dynamic informed the development of the site. It will identify the website project’s organizational, structural, and technical obstacles and describe how these were

¹ Office of the Historian and Office of Art and Archives, Office of the Clerk, “Homepage,” *History, Art & Archives*, 2018, history.house.gov.

overcome. It will examine the site’s original objectives of illuminating Congress’s inner-workings to the public, media, and Members of Congress and evaluate whether the goals were achieved. Lastly, it will reveal how the site has impacted departmental workflows.²

Supporting the House Through Documenting and Preserving its History

The Office of the Clerk and the House Historian are part of a broader organization that supports the legislative work of the House. This includes the House Officers—who are elected at the beginning of each Congress with the Speaker per Article I, section 2 of the U.S. Constitution—and the appointed House officials, whose duties are determined both by law and House Rules.³ As the primary record-keeper of the House, the Clerk handles its day-to-day legislative operations, including preparing and printing the House Journal, tracking questions of order, and operating the electronic voting system and recording votes.⁴ In addition to these legislative duties, the Clerk also serves as “custodian of all noncurrent House records” and administers, maintains, and displays the “works of fine art and other similar property of the Congress” located “in the House wing of the Capitol, the House Office Buildings, or any other location under House control.”⁵ The position of House Historian, created in 1983, studied and documented the House’s past mainly through writing and hosting educators at yearly conferences at the Capitol. In 2002, the Office of History and Preservation was created under the Clerk’s

² To research this paper, I conducted first-person interviews with three key members of the website development team: Erin Hromada, director of the Office of the Historian Staff and HAA project manager, on April 18, 2018; Karen McKinstry, manager of collections, on April 19, 2018; and Robin Reeder, House archivist and deputy chief of OAA, on April 19, 2018.

³ House Officers include the Clerk, the Chaplain, the Chief Administrative Officer, and the Sergeant-at-Arms. House officials include the Historian, the Parliamentarian, the General Counsel, and the Inspector General. More information can be found [here](#).

⁴ “The Office of Legislative Operations,” *Office of the Clerk, U.S. House of Representatives*, 2018, clerk.house.gov/about/offices_legis.aspx.

⁵ “Duties of the Clerk,” *Office of the Clerk, U.S. House of Representatives*, 2018, clerk.house.gov/about/duties.aspx.

jurisdiction to provide a variety of research and preservative functions, including writing historical publications and recording oral histories; curating the House Collection of fine arts and artifacts; and processing House records for eventual transfer to the National Archives.^{6,7} History and Preservation employed historians, archivists, and curators, who worked together as one unit. But to confuse matters, the Clerk’s historical publications team was totally separate from the Speaker-appointed House Historian. This was rectified in October 2010, when the bi-partisan House Historian Search Committee recommended that all of the historians should be merged into one office, the Office of the Historian “to reduce duplication, improve efficiency, and cut costs.”⁸ The committee also promoted Matthew Wasniewski, the Clerk’s Historian and deputy chief of History and Preservation, to fill the vacant House Historian’s post.⁹ This resulted in a unique reporting structure where the Historian staff reported to the Clerk with a dotted line to the Historian, who still reported directly to the Speaker. It also created the sibling Office of Art and Archives (OAA), which now contained just the curators and archivists.

Conditions That Led to the HAA Website Project

The reorganization of History and Preservation into the Office of Art and Archives and the Office of the Historian ultimately served as the catalyst for the History, Art & Archives Website Project. As Director of the Office of the Historian Staff and HAA Project Manager Erin Hromada explained in an interview, when the historians, archivists, and curators were divided

⁶ “Offices & Services,” *Office of the Clerk, U.S. House of Representatives*, 2018, clerk.house.gov/about/offices.aspx.

⁷ Chris Hale, “This Old House: Meet the House Historian,” *Roll Call*, May 20, 2014, rollcall.com/news/this_old_house_meet_the_house_historian-233139-1.html.

⁸ Office of the Historian and Office of Art and Archives, Office of the Clerk “About-History,” *History, Art & Archives*, 2018, history.house.gov/About/History/.

and “Pelosi Appoints Dr. Matthew Wasniewski as New House Historian,” *Office of the Speaker-Designate*, October 20, 2010, democraticleader.gov/newsroom/pelosi-appoints-dr-matthew-wasniewski-new-house-historian/.

⁹ “This Old House: Meet the House Historian,” *Roll Call*, May 20, 2014, and “Pelosi Appoints Dr. Matthew Wasniewski as New House Historian,” October 20, 2010.

into two offices, “there wasn’t a natural split there because we’re so interwoven.”¹⁰ However administrative and structural changes needed to be made, which included an evaluation of the various history websites. Prior to HAA, the situation had become unmanageable. There was some content on the Clerk’s site under the “Art and History” tab. Individual companion sites for the congressionally-mandated *Women in Congress, 1917-2006* and *Black Americans in Congress, 1870-2007* print publications had also been launched as well as a separate site for the Oral History program. Then there was [Bioguide](#), the online version of *Biographical Directory of the United States Congress*, maintained in conjunction with the Senate. The House Historian also had a pre-merger website. All total, including the various content management interfaces for both live and staging sites, there were seven different URLs to wrangle and maintain. Hyperlinking between them was difficult while editorial changes required the involvement of the Clerk’s IT division.

The new Office of Art and Archives had no online digital presence whatsoever apart from a brief write-up on the Clerk’s website. Neither the House Collection nor any House records were web-accessible with the possible exception of a few art objects located on the *Kids in the House* site and a few documents previously digitized and posted online by NARA. There was no way for House Members or the public to view the House Collection unless they were visiting the Capitol Complex. House records could only be perused onsite in the Center for Legislative Archives’ research room. An additional consideration was the House Historian’s mandate to conduct public outreach, which had been satisfied by the yearly conferences. The realization that this could be accomplished through a new website—that also served the needs of all three units—prompted the reallocation of the conference funds towards creating History, Art &

¹⁰ Interview with Hromada.

Archives. HAA would combine all sorts of educational materials, such as documents, historical essays, and artifacts, in an effort to teach the public basic civics and the “nuts and bolts” of the House.

Because of the soundness of the idea, it was not difficult to secure buy-in for the website proposal from the Clerk and House Leadership. According to Hromada, “Everyone agreed it had to happen. It was a good use of funds, and it would fulfill the mandate to do outreach.”¹¹ Since they had the money, the process to select a website design firm proceeded quickly. Only a few bidders responded to the RFP, and the vendor ultimately chosen did so more to expand their business than turn a profit.¹² Overall the project was concluded in under two years from the merger in October 2010 to HAA’s soft launch in December 2012. During that time, the development team devoted one solid year to working exclusively on the project and were left to their own devices for much of it. As a courtesy they did show the Clerk and the House Leaders, but not for their approval. It turned out that the harder approval to gain was internal as Hromada described: “The harder approval process was within the office, to make sure each group felt represented in the site. And perhaps our own worst critic / best critic. We weren’t going to create something that we didn’t think was amazing.”¹³ That process triggered a departmental existential crisis as OAA and the Historian’s Office wrestled with identifying their respective missions.

Departmental Missions Defined

One byproduct of the departmental re-organization was that the historians, curators, and archivists had not yet determined their new working arrangement when they embarked on the

¹¹ Interview with Hromada.

¹² The name of the vendor has been withheld per request from the Erin. However, that company is still in business and under different ownership. Erin’s speculated at the vendor’s motive for bidding on the project.

¹³ Interview with Hromada.

website project. Under the previous setup they were one unit that worked collectively on projects. Hromada articulated this interdependency: “If you think about it, the disciplines rely on each other. Historians are nothing without the research, without archives. We need documents and original papers and information. And then the curators are just the other part of that.”¹⁴ For example, when working on the Minorities in Congress book series, the historians used archival research, Member papers, and objects and artifacts, such as historical photos, to create the different profiles. House Archivist and OAA Deputy Chief Robin Reeder confirmed this working relationship, explaining how the archivists recommended different records for research and helped the historians locate individual Member papers. The curators assisted the research process by pulling relevant photos from the House Collection. Hromada concluded that “the three disciplines rely so much on each other it’s just natural that we would be together.”¹⁵

But with the separation, both offices needed to revisit their core functions in order to determine how the new website would further those objectives. As the development team began working with the vendor to figure out structural and technical issues, larger questions of identity and purpose arose. “Who are we, and what is our mission? What do we want people to find?” Suddenly the planning meetings turned into existential thinking sessions about office mission statements. Hromada described the process:

There was a lot of soul searching that occurred there. A lot of these meetings about higher ideals that occurred, where someone was taking us down a path and trying to come up with, ‘What are three words about your office?’ And some of us rolled

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ Interview with Hromada.

our eyes . . . but they were very helpful in terms of making us understand who we are and what we want to do.¹⁶

Not only did the vendor take them down the path, but another Clerk employee outside the HAA team helped conduct these “harder conversations” about identity and purpose. The result was the three-sentence homepage mission statement, quoted in the intro of this paper, and the “About” section that briefly describes the “collaborative project” between the two offices and how “the offices serve as the House’s institutional memory, a resource for Members, staff, and the general public.”¹⁷

More broadly, each unit defined its primary mission beyond the website. For the Historian’s Office, it is three-fold: to study the institution of the House of Representatives and look at it from a legislative perspective; to look at the individuals that have helped shaped the House; and to preserve and research the institution.¹⁸ For OAA, it’s about the House Collection and House records. Specifically, the curators care for the material culture of the House by curating the collection of approximately 12,000 objects and making them accessible to the Members and the public. Manager of Collections Karen McKinstry emphasized that “number one the reason why we’re here is because of the Members, but number two is to serve the objects . . . in order to preserve them for years to come as long as their intrinsic material lives will allow them to exist.”¹⁹ The archivists’ main responsibility, per House Rules, is to process the unpublished Records of the House at the end of each Congress and oversee their eventual safe

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Office of the Historian and Office of Art and Archives, Office of the Clerk, “About,” *History, Art & Archives*, 2018, history.house.gov/About/.

¹⁸ Interview with Hromada.

¹⁹ Interview with McKinstry.

transfer to the National Archives. The official records consist mainly of committee records and some officer records.²⁰ They are stored onsite at the Capitol for four years before relocation to Center for Legislative Archives, where they are preserved and eventually opened to researchers after either 30 or 50 years (investigative material).²¹ The archivists, therefore, work closely with the committees to prepare records by providing instructions and supplies. They also field internal committee requests and retrieve records back for ongoing business from NARA.

Organizing and Building the Website

These identity issues weren't the only problems that had to be solved. There were technical and structural matters that had to be decided upon. Selecting the right content management system (CMS) was critical. Complicating matters was the federal government requirement that the product be American-made, which limited the CMS platforms from which they could choose. But even more important was a CMS with that gave the historians direct editorial control over content, a departure from the previous workflow where the historians sent their edits to the IT department, which then logged into the CMS to make the actual edits. Both units desired a change to this cumbersome process. The new CMS needed to be one where the historians could "edit to their hearts delight" and tweak away at their work.²² The new platform also needed to be robust enough to handle videos and import data from two separate databases, the one feeding Bioguide and OAA's collection management system, TMS (The Museum

²⁰ Per House Rules, Member records are considered personal property. Archives staff provides guidance to Members on what to keep long-term and what repositories they can donate their papers to at the end of their House service.

²¹ It is worth noting that even after transfer to NARA, Congress retains ownership of its records. This differs from executive branch records which become NARA's property post transfer. Additionally, FOIA requests only pertain to the executive branch and not the legislative branch.

²² Interview with Hromada.

System). The choice was Ektron, a product used mostly in the retail industry.²³ Since it was not designed for fueling an encyclopedic, content-heavy website, the vendor had to perform numerous customizations to this “out of the box” product to make Ektron work for History, Art & Archives’ purposes. One of the biggest modifications involved writing code to would allow Ektron to interface with the TMS object records.

Since the [Collections](#) Tab was the primary location where the art and artifacts from the House Collection would be displayed, this part of the project fell heavily on the curators to work through with the vendor. This required making changes on TMS’ backend that utilized more of its functionality. McKinstry identified the six different fields—date, dimensions, accession number, title, artist/publisher, and label—that Ektron would extract from TMS for display on the website. This also required that the metadata be reviewed and “cleaned up” to improve consistency. In addition, the controlled and customized vocabulary being used inside TMS had to be restyled for web use. Ultimately fields were added into TMS, such as “web title” to not conflict with the object record title. Another key consideration was that the website not dictate to the curators how they performed data entry when coding objects into TMS. Since that system and that process predated the website—and “serves the collection first”—it was critical that Ektron not disrupt the curators’ own workflow.²⁴ From a content perspective, the curators also had to determine how to display the objects on the page and what additional information, besides the six fields, would be presented. In some cases, this required the TMS inventory snapshot to either be rescanned at a higher resolution or created from scratch by a professional photographer. Images also had to be verified for accuracy to ensure the correct image was appearing. They also

²³ Ektron merged with Episerver in 2015, meaning that HAA will have to migrate over to Epicenter platform sometime in the near future.

²⁴ Interview with McKinstry.

had to create a policy regarding rights and reproductions i.e. should users be allowed to download high resolution images without obtaining the proper permissions? Should images be watermarked and, if so, when?²⁵ Additionally, the curators wanted to include contextual descriptions, which required original labels to be researched and written.

The Collections tab is one of seven main tabs that provide the overall information structure to HAA. These organizational “buckets”—Institution, People, Exhibitions & Publications, Collections, Oral History, Education, and Records & Research—attempted to merge the disparate history websites with the content on the Clerk’s site while adding new access to art and archival content. This required combining educational materials, archival documents, historical essays, lists and charts, and art and artifacts with one objective in mind: to create a single resource for understanding 200-plus years of House history that serves the House community, the media, and the public. To attack this information challenge, HAA Project Manager Erin Hromada drew on her research librarian training. She considers herself “a reference librarian at heart” who loves helping people find information. Guided by that information scientist mindset, she asked these questions:

- What is most useful?
- How are we going to answer the most questions?
- What makes the most sense?
- Are we presenting the information the best way so that it’s not too buried or unclear?²⁶

²⁵ Information about the website’s formal photo request process can be accessed [here](#).

²⁶ Interview with Hromada.

Though the seven buckets concept was suggested by the vendor, Hromada as project lead had to champion the idea behind-the-scenes to gain departmental buy-in. One of the biggest hurdles for her and the historians to accept was the idea that the Women in Congress (WIC) and Black Americans in Congress (BAIC) sections would be folded under the [Exhibitions & Publications](#) tab. In order to get the others on board, she had to fully endorse that the seven buckets approach made “100 percent sense.” And because some sections of the website were considered blended, the differing writing styles between the historians and OAA also had to be blended.

Understanding how “territorial” people can be over their material, this compromise was not easy to achieve.²⁷ For six weeks in 2011, the members of both offices were “generally unhappy with each other” over differences of opinion over “how things were done.”²⁸ As Hromada described: “It wasn’t a full kumbaya transition. It took a lot of just sitting down . . . with people one-on-one to make sure that everyone ultimately was happy. A lot of listening to what people want and then trying to get everyone to where things should be.”²⁹ Ultimately it boiled down to making sure that each unit felt represented on the website.

Content Creation

Once the hurdle was cleared, the individual buckets then had to be filled. The pre-existing content on the Clerk’s site—mostly charts and graphs on congressional facts and figures—was moved under the [Institution](#) tab. But some material had to be created for the launch, such as the “Origins & Development” subsection which addressed the question “what does the Constitution say about the House’s function?” The “Congressional Profiles” subsection, which contain 100-

²⁷ Ibid

²⁸ Ibid

²⁹ Interview with Hromada.

word summaries about each Congress along with a few basic statistics, also had to carefully constructed for 111 congresses.³⁰ The [People](#) tab contained profiles on individual Members, and, for the launch, these were generated from either the WIC and BAIC essays or the bios imported from the Bioguide database. Generating original material on House Leaders, Officers, and Officials was tabled to after the launch. Over time, longer essays have replaced some of the Bioguide entries though this remains a continual work in progress. The Oral History site was folded into the [Oral History](#) tab, but it too was challenging to fit into its bucket. And all the educational materials, including lesson plans, a glossary of legislative terms, a House history timeline, and facts sheets, were now consolidated in one place under the [Education](#) tab.

For the curators, they had to decide which objects from the 11,700 items in the House Collection to feature for the launch. This sparked robust discussions around identifying the “main objects” in the collection. The greatest hits, such as the [Mace](#) and the [Inkstand](#), were obvious choices, along with the [major paintings](#). This was followed by art and artifacts belonging to certain groups or collections such as the committee chairman portraits and the Speaker busts. But they also wanted to make sure the breadth of the collection was well-represented, so a sampling of historic prints, postcards, and Floor passes were also selected. All total, 875 object records populated the Collections tab in time for the launch. For the archivists, just having a bucket of their own on this public-facing website was a first. The Clerk’s website contained no information about House records at all. That oversight was corrected with the [Records & Research](#) tab, which not only identified what an official record was, but also explained how to conduct research and how to access these records. To that end, the archivists repurposed old

³⁰ It should be noted here that one of the mandates of the Clerk’s office and the Historian’s office is to be neutral and non-partisan when discussing House history. As Hromada shared, “They are not putting their opinion on things.” Therefore, they try to avoid putting their spin on certain historical eras. They also tread carefully when covering anything from 1980-present. This approach is also embraced by OAA.

NARA finding aids to help guide researchers where to find material before visiting the Center for Legislative Archives.

Goals and Workflows

With its launch in December 2012, History, Art & Archives achieved the initial goals of the website development team. For the historians, they had a primary medium with which to conduct outreach to the public, educators, and the House community. Now housed under one URL, all their content about “the rich heritage of ‘the People’s House’ and its central role in U.S. history” could be easily perused, accessed, and further promoted via Twitter. For Hromada, the website checked all the reference librarian boxes: “Everything I am looking for is generally here on the site. . . . I can easily navigate and help someone navigate to find the material they’re looking for. It’s held up to what we needed it do, and it’s all on one URL. . . . It’s all here.”³¹ They created a robust site that serves as a “jumping off point” for people to learn about House and congressional history. For the curators and archivists, they had an online presence enabling the public to view the House Collection and locate House records (or at least where to find them at NARA) for the first time. As McKinstry noted: “The website is great because we don’t have a regular exhibition space. The website is the only way that the public can really see the collection, and what types of things we have in the collection.”³²

But like any large project, concessions were made due to the limits of time, money, and resources. In order to get content ready for the launch, some things were done “down and dirty,” such as using less than optimal quality photos when converting the TMS object records.

Arrangement of content in some of the buckets “did not thrill” Hromada, but she accepted that

³¹ Interview with Hromada.

³² Interview with McKinstry.

“this is the best we can do at this time.”³³ Some items were tabled for later, such as expanding the site’s multimedia content with historic newsreel footage of congressional firsts.³⁴ For the archivists, they immediately noticed a void in their section—the absence of any actual documents or research. Though the Records & Research Tab discussed how to do research and where to find materials, it did not contain any archival documents that could be viewed digitally. This gap ultimately spurred the created of [Records Search](#), the archival equivalent of [Collections Search](#). NARA created 163 high-resolution scans of formerly unpublished House committee records, which the House archivists selected, researched, and described.³⁵

Perhaps the larger impact of the new website has been its effect on the workflows of both offices and the inspiration of a new sense of collaboration. Before the History and Preservation Office was separated, the curators and archivists either worked on their own projects or supported the publications team with archival research and photos. But they had no direct stake in any of the history websites, and thus their daily tasks had little to do with the online world. As McKinstry mentioned several times, her main task concerns the physical preservation of objects. Similarly, the archivists spend much of their time dealing with the House committees or instructing Members on what papers to save for posterity. However, once HAA came online, OAA had two distinct areas on the “Historian’s website” that they were responsible for maintaining and populating. Both the Collections tab and the Records & Research tab provided avenues for deeper dives into their holdings and initiated new projects. Since the launch, the curators have set yearly internal goals to post new items from the collection on the web. In 2018,

³³ Interview with Hromada.

³⁴ Hromada shared an interesting anecdote about how the purchase of a panoramic image of the 65th Congress sparked a much larger research project. See the results [here](#) and [here](#).

³⁵ One additional purpose for Records Search was as a means of showing the House committees the value in supplying unpublished records, the collection of which to date has always been a struggle.

that total was 175, with an average of 15-20 objects per month. This ongoing task also drives the list of objects to be photographed and researched for that year. The website has also inspired [blog](#) posts about the collection along with curated online exhibitions (usually as components of larger historical essays about a topic). None of these things would have happened if HAA didn't exist. McKinstry admitted, "The website push[es] us to catalog, to get a deeper understanding of our objects because we want to make sure the Members and the public see them too."³⁶ As was described previously, the archivists created Records Search precisely to unearth archival documents and make them web-accessible.

By creating space for the curators and archivists to contribute unique content, HAA ensures continued departmental participation in and enthusiasm for the website. This in turn drives collaboration between the two offices. Because the historians have de facto editorial oversight over web content, the situation with OAA could easily turn into one of resentment or rivalry. But the historians strive to keep things "as mutual as they can" because "everybody is playing for the same team."³⁷ Much of the credit for this goes to the long-lasting working relationships between the members of both offices. Many of these people, including the House Historian, worked together in History and Preservation, when it was one combined group. The reorganization did not really disrupt that in part because the website project. It can be argued that the soul-searching and mission-statement exercises helped foster a new sense of team. Because all three units have a public piece of History, Art & Archives, they share a common purpose. Both McKinstry and Reeder spoke about relying on the historians to fact check their research when building object descriptions. And when the historians ask for visuals to supplement a blog

³⁶ Interview with McKinstry.

³⁷ Interview with Hromada.

post or historical essay, OAA always tries to fulfill the request even if they have to amend their own to-do lists.

In conclusion, History, Art & Archives is truly the product of a successful collaboration between the Clerk of the House's Office of Art and Archives and the Office of the Historian. By working in tandem they fulfill their overall mission to serve as the House's institutional memory and illuminate Congress's inner-workings to the public and the membership. By embracing information science principles, the website presents historical and archival material in an organized and cohesive way while also serving as the online portal to the House's collection of art and artifacts.

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