Freedom Award
U.S. Capitol Historical Society
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Remarks by Richard A. Baker
U.S. Senate Historian, 1975-2009

1) **Introduction:**

It is my great honor to receive an award named after the Capitol's Statue of Freedom. "Freedom!" What an appropriate name for that 19-foot bronze statue that has stood sentinel over the Capitol since the Civil War's darkest days. When Sculptor Thomas Crawford conceived the statue in the 1850s, it was called by various names. One of them was "Armed Freedom, Triumphant in War and Peace." The passage of time simplified its name to "Freedom." That's probably just as well. Here, tonight, an award with the wordy name "Armed Freedom Triumphant in War and Peace" might stir some confusion.

2) **Senate Historical Office Creation:**

For the past 34 years, I had the privilege of shaping the programs of the U.S. Senate Historical Office. There is one program I came to value above all. It is the one dedicated to preserving the documentary record of the Senate and its members—past and present.

The origins of the Historical Office are directly traceable to the 1972 presidential election campaign. As we recall, this campaign brought us the "Watergate Affair." The resulting legislative and judicial inquiries into abuses of presidential power raised a major question. "Who owns the papers of the president of the United States?" And for that matter, who owns the papers of other public servants including members of Congress and justices of the Supreme Court? At the time of Watergate, there was a simple answer to these questions. Those officials owned their papers. President Nixon was at liberty to destroy any, or all, of his presidential materials.

This realization prompted Congress in 1974 to enact a law that seized former President Nixon's papers. That statute also established a national commission to examine the ownership question for the papers of incumbent presidents, members of Congress, and justices.

This law's provisions relative to the records of Congress members prompted Arthur Schlesinger to write a letter to Senator Mike Mansfield. The noted historian urged the Senate majority leader to create a Senate historical office. Schlesinger reminded

Mansfield that many executive branch agencies already had historical offices. He wrote, "Why should not the Senate have one? I need not add," he continued, "that Congress would be in a much stronger position when it complains about executive secrecy if it at least kept pace with the executive in opening up its own files."

3) **Preservation of Senate records:**

Soon after the Senate Historical Office started work in 1975, we identified the preservation of Senate records as our highest priority. The public documents commission created by Congress subsequently recommended that the papers of all top federal officials, including members of Congress, become public property. Congress, however, in the 1978 Presidential Records Act, chose to provide only for those of the chief executive. This put even greater pressure on the Senate Historical Office to implement a voluntary program for senators. We soon began preparing guidelines for members on what materials to save and where to send them.

For the records of congressional committees, by contrast, ownership questions were never in doubt. Committee records belong to the chamber for whose legislative purposes they are created. By statute, they are to be sent to the National Archives when no longer needed for current legislation.

By the 1970s, however, many committee clerks had grown apathetic. Some bothered to transfer these materials to the Archives only when they ran out of storage space. Under these unfortunate circumstances, many significant committee records were lost, destroyed, or removed by staff and chairmen for their personal use.

In 1981, political control of the Senate changed for the first time in 26 years. Incoming chairmen appointed their own committee clerks. Overnight, long-serving staffers, including those who had neglected to deal with huge backlogs of files, were examining other career options. Among them was the chief clerk of the Senate Armed Services Committee. That staffer apparently believed his committee's records, some dating from the Spanish-American War, were adequately protected in a damp and vermin-infested Russell Building basement storeroom. Fortunately, many of the new chairmen and clerks proved more willing to transfer the records they inherited to the National Archives. This, however, was not pure altruism. Some acted only because they wished to convert the empty storerooms to offices for staff or hide-aways for chairmen.

During the 1980s, increased congressional interest in proper management of Senate and House records inspired the National Archives to create a Center for Legislative Archives. Within a decade, the number of Archives' staffers assigned to the

records of Congress increased from two harried technicians to two dozen well-trained professionals.

This expanded staff went to work to produce finding aids. In compiling those helpful guides, the archivists found valuable records, some of which had lain in obscurity since their transfer from Capitol Hill to the newly opened Archives a half-century earlier.

By the late 1980s, the House of Representatives had created its own historical office and both Senate and House offices had hired professional archivists to advise individual members and committees. This increased attention helped to accelerate the flow of members' personal office files to home-state research institutions and committee records to the National Archives.

National Archives's staff searched not only to figure out what they already had, but what they ought to have had. From the early 19th century, Capitol employees had given away, or sold for the value of their famous-name signatures, documents strewn throughout the building's attic and basements.

One example of a missing treasure from the very First Congress was the Lighthouses Act of 1789. The original House-passed printed version, with hand-written Senate amendments was discovered for sale in an auction catalog. We convinced the owner, as a matter of civic duty, to reduce the price so we could return it to its proper place among the Republic's founding documents.

Over the past 30 years, the Senate and House historical programs, with help from the Capitol Historical Society, have served as magnets for such fugitive records.

In 2002, we discovered in a Capitol basement storeroom—that was within days of being demolished during construction of the Capitol Visitor Center—an abandoned Senate ledger. That single document contained hand-written salary and expense disbursements for the nine decades from 1790 to 1881. Today, by way of a happy ending, you can admire this beautifully restored treasure in the exhibition gallery of the very same visitor center whose construction once jeopardized its existence.

4) **Meigs Project:**

I'll conclude by mentioning one of our most exciting and worthwhile records-related projects. In 1990, we learned that the Manuscript Division at the Library of Congress housed the journals of Montgomery Meigs. Meigs was the 19th-century U.S. Army Corps of Engineers officer who had overseen construction of the Capitol's Senate and House wings, and dome between 1853 and 1861.

That discovery was the good news. The bad news was that Meigs kept his journals in a now-obsolete shorthand. Fortunately, we located a retired Senate Reporter

of Debates named William Mohr. Mr. Mohr knew how to read that shorthand and agreed to translate it for us.

Over the next four years, he produced 2,800 typewritten pages. We published the richest half of that text in 2001 in a 900-page volume entitled *Capitol Builder*. This book offers compelling new detail on the challenges of day-to-day Capitol construction activity—often over budget and behind schedule. It also shines an intense light on the political and social climate of mid-nineteenth-century Washington, DC.

It was Meigs, for instance, who had the foresight to commission painting and sculpture that would harmonize with the new structure's architectural motifs. Fortunately for the Capitol's modern-day splendor, among the artisans he hired was an Italian immigrant fresco painter named Constantino Brumidi.

The information uncovered in Meigs' journals has found its way into recent Capitol Building-related scholarship, including symposium papers sponsored by the Capitol Historical Society. The Historical Society also provided vital funding for Mr. Mohr to complete his translation of the journal's final portions. That volume subsequently won an award from the Society for History in the Federal Government as the best documentary work of its kind published during the year 2001.

5) **Conclusion:**

The index to Meigs' journal contains numerous entries for Thomas Crawford's statue of "Freedom." In 1854, for example, Meigs explained why Secretary of War Jefferson Davis, who oversaw the project, opposed Crawford's plan to place a Liberty Cap on the statue. "[Secretary Davis] says [such a cap] is a sign of a freedman [but] that we [as a nation] were always free, not freedmen—not slaves just released." To our 21st-century ears, that is an amazing statement. In the 1850s, the nation to which Jefferson Davis referred as "always free" included nearly 4 million enslaved residents.

In his journal entry for August 30, 1859, Meigs reports his plan to display, in today's Statuary Hall, Crawford's completed plaster model of "Freedom." That would allow visitors to view the new statue months before its bronze version would be placed atop the dome. Today, that same plaster model stands majestically in the Capitol Visitor Center's Emancipation Hall.

Meigs' published journal is but one documentary source among the vast and now-increasingly better preserved records of the United States Congress. It, along with these other records, enriches our understanding and appreciation of "Freedom" the statue and of "Freedom" as the abiding ideal that sustains our American democratic republic.