Researching Legislative History: Bills That Became Law

Much of American maritime history is bound up in federal legislation. The Jones Act (officially, The Merchant Marine Act of 1920), which aims to promote American merchant maritime trade by requiring—among other things—that seaborne trade between American ports be carried by American-built and -flagged ships, is perhaps the best known. The Act has had immeasurable impact on American maritime history in the past century, and its impacts remain a constant issue. Members of Congress continue to argue for amendment or repeal.

Tracking legislative information can be a real challenge. Though everything that the US Government publishes is available in the public domain, not all of that content is yet available online. And because tracking the ways in which a bill becomes law can be incredibly confusing, subscription databases that bring some form of order to this complexity can be quite valuable. Nevertheless, there are ways of finding relevant information online, and we'll explore a few of these over the next few columns.

This column will focus on how one can conduct (mostly free) online research regarding bills that have become laws. The next column will look at the background information that's available to support those laws—that is, the reports, the documents, and the hearings that provide the support for eventual legislation. Finally, the third column will investigate how we can track and research actively considered legislation.

The best source for online information about past laws is Congress itself, at **https://www.congress.gov**. (**Congress.gov** replaces **THOMAS.gov**, the original Congressional information database that provided content from the mid-1990s to 2016.) The site provides information about legislation from 1973 to present, though its full-text content doesn't start until 1989; for laws passed before that, the database contains just descriptions and citations about bills and legislation.

To find the text of specific public laws, you can start at **https://www.congress.gov/public-laws/**, where laws are listed by the Congress in which they were initially enacted. Usually, about 600 bills become law per year, though partisanship in the past few years has seen that number nearly cut in half. Many of those are just a paragraph or two, and focus on naming a Post Office, a mountain peak, or another site, after someone. The **Law Library of Congress** provides a valuable overview—especially of more meaningful legislation—at **https://www.loc.gov/law/help/statutes.php**. The country's laws, known as **Statutes at Large**, are available at the **Government Printing Office** site; search "**statutes at large gpo**" to avoid its cumbersome URL. This site holds PDFs of statutes going back to 1951, though they are not full-text searchable. The full current **US Code** can be found at **http://uscode.house.gov/**.

The **Library of Congress** offers digitized versions of many early documents on their pages about the first century of the country, covering US Congressional Documents and Debates from 1774 to 1875, at **http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/amlaw/lawhome.html**. This project was completed by 2003, and its age shows. Alas, some documents only have indexes and no full text.

Unfortunately, the space between 1875 and 1973 is not well represented in free online resources. Online databases like **Lexis**, **Westlaw**, and **ProQuest Congressional** do provide excellent access to these resources, however, and you likely have access to at least one of these through a local public, academic, or state library. In ProQuest Congressional, a search for "life saving service," narrowed to just "Statutes at Large" Document Type, found numerous laws relating to the Life Saving Service through its history. (Also, see **http://proquest.libguides.com/pq_congressional/** for a useful guide to using the ProQuest Congressional database.)

This is a necessarily brief overview of an incredibly complex topic. In our next column, we'll look at researching the documents that describe the development of specific laws.

Suggestions for other sites worth mentioning are welcome at peter@shipindex.org. See **http://shipindex.org** for a free compilation of over 150,000 ship names from indexes to dozens of books and journals. ⚓