

## Researching Legislative History: Background Documents

In our previous column, we looked at how to find information on US legislative bills that have become law. In this issue, we will look at the many, many volumes of background material that can support the development of these laws, or proposals that never became law. Even if they are not directly connected with the development of binding legislation, they can offer fantastic information and insights. In the next column, we'll look at how one can keep track of legislation that is currently under consideration.

Government reports can be an incredibly valuable tool for learning more about a subject. Immigration, for example, has always been an issue in American political life. From 1907 to 1911, a joint Congressional committee called the **Dillingham Commission** pursued a study of immigration to America. While it operated with a partisan intent at limiting immigration, the 42 (!) volumes of this report brought together an enormous amount of valuable information about that era's immigration experience. The Commission collected reams of statistics and data about who was coming, how much they earned and sent home, what languages they spoke, and where they eventually settled. As part of the research process, several Commission staff members who had emigrated to the United States returned to their native countries, and emigrated again, to create a record of the experience. They traveled in 1908, a year of limited emigration, so the experience in steerage, as depicted in Volume 37, "was seen practically at its best," and readers were reminded "that not extreme but comparatively favorable conditions are here depicted." Nevertheless, it was a harrowing experience for all involved. The Dillingham Commission report can be found through a search for "immigration commission" at <https://archive.org>, or at the **Wikipedia** entry for the United States Congress Joint Immigration Commission.

As with the Dillingham Commission, most significant legislative works have Wikipedia entries that can provide useful information about, and links to, online resources regarding the legislation in question. Publications by the US Government

are automatically without copyright, so they are easily shared and found online.

The **Congressional Record** (<https://www.congress.gov/congressional-record>) provides transcriptions of congressional discussion and debate, as well as extensive additional content added later by members of Congress. The **Library of Congress's American Memory** site, at <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/amlaw/lawhome.html>, includes the first three years of the Congressional Record, along with an enormous collection of founding legislative documents up to 1875. Click on "Search: All Titles" to search this data set; from that page you can limit a search to a specific set of documents or a specific session of Congress, or search the full collection. In some collections, you are searching the full text; in others, you're searching just titles and headings. Contents from 1875–76 to the present are available through <https://www.govinfo.gov>, a **US Government Printing Office** site that provides access to most of the published work of the US government.

As with similar retrospective digitization projects, the analysis of the printed pages can return many unexpected errors; one might be surprised how often the word "modem" appears in the Congressional Record in the 1870s until you realize it is a computerized misreading of "modern" rather than reference to a recent communications device.

The **govinfo** site also allows one to search by committee, which is particularly useful for exploring hearings presented in Congress on subjects covered by the relevant committee. Since 1997, most committees provide hearings, documents, reports, and more. Each entry offers a PDF of the printed report, a text-only version of the report, and metadata about the report. All of the full-text content is also searchable from this site.

Suggestions for other sites worth mentioning are welcome at [peter@shipindex.org](mailto:peter@shipindex.org). See [www.seahistory.org/maritime-history-on-the-internet](http://www.seahistory.org/maritime-history-on-the-internet) for all of Peter McCracken's previous "Maritime History on the Internet" columns, plus a link to <http://shipindex.org>, a free compilation of more than 150,000 ship names from indexes to dozens of books and journals. ⚓

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