



Thomas M. Cooley Law Libraries' Research Guide Series

FEDERAL LEGISLATIVE HISTORIES

A legislative history is made up two components. The first is the chronology of events for the legislation in question: when the bill was introduced, when it was voted on, when it was signed into law, etc. The second component is the documents produced during the course of the chronology.

To find out about these two components, it is necessary to understand the legislative process. There are a number of secondary sources through which the chronology and documents can be identified and located. One of the most useful is Nancy P. Johnson's *Sources of Compiled Legislative Histories* (KF42.2). Check this source to see if someone has already compiled a legislative history for the statute in which you are interested.

The foundation of a legislative history is the bill. Bills are numbered sequentially in the order that they are introduced. The numbering begins over with each new congress. House bills are designated "H.R.", Senate bills are designated "S." As a bill progresses through the legislative process, it generates several different kinds of documents: Committee Prints, Committee Documents, Committee Hearings, and Committee Reports.

Committee Prints are compiled by the administrative staff of the congressional committees as background for the committee members. They contain statistical and historical data and may be reproduced from such sources as the Congressional Research Service. Committee Documents are sent to the committee by administrative agencies or the White House.

There are two kinds of hearings: Legislative Hearings in support of bills currently before the House of Representatives or Senate and Investigative Hearings in support of bills not currently being considered, but which may lead to legislation in the future. Finally, a Committee Report is issued. This document is written by the members of the committee. It includes the committee's recommendation and reasoning regarding passage of the bill. The Committee Report is regarded as the most important document in establishing legislative intent.

After the committee has finished an investigation and issued a report, the bill is sent back to the appropriate chamber for consideration. Floor debates, along with amendments and votes, are contained in the *Congressional Record*. Floor debates are the other major source of direct evidence of legislative intent recognized by the courts. After each chamber of Congress has agreed upon the final version of a bill, called the enrolled bill, it is sent to the President for signature.

Chronology of Events

In developing a chronology of events, status tables and secondary source materials will prove most useful.



The status of House of Senate bills is conveniently tracked through the *Congressional Index* (KF49.C6). Begun in 1965 by Commerce Clearing House, it is a complete status table of bills, showing all Congressional activity. The index to the *Congressional Record* also contains notices of bill activity (KF35.U5).

Since 1941 the West Publishing Company has produced *United States Code Congressional and Administrative News* (KF48.W45). USCCAN reprints the committee report and references to other legislative history information. As a print source it is a little easier to use and is worth checking before moving to the *CIS Annual*. The Congressional Information Service (CIS) publishes the *CIS Annual* (KF49.C62) which allows a researcher to locate congressional publications like committee reports or transcripts of legislative hearings. Consult the Reference Librarian on duty for help using the *CIS Annual*.

Two other useful sources are *Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report* (JK1.C15) and the *Congressional Quarterly Almanac* (JK1.C66) which is an annual compilation of Weekly Report articles.

The Congressional Information Service produces an electronic service called Congressional Universe. This service allows electronic searching and retrieval of the same documents found through the *CIS Annual*. The Library subscribes to this service and it is accessible through CoolCat, our online catalog terminals, under the Electronic Services link. Finally, a free great online source is Thomas produced by the Library of Congress at: <http://thomas.loc.gov/>

