Congressional Archives: A new source for the Vietnam era

by Audrey Coleman and Sarah D’Antonio Gard

“When I look back on my life, I see less and less of myself and more and more a history of this civilization that we have made that is called America.” Senator Robert J. Dole, in his acceptance speech for the 1996 Republican nomination, presaged the transformation of a career of service into a renewable living legacy and a biography into the story of a nation and its people. These big-picture impacts began to materialize when the Robert J. Dole Institute of Politics at the University of Kansas (KU) opened in July 2003. Founded as a place where students of all ages and affiliations can come together in the spirit of bipartisanship to discuss issues across the political spectrum, the Dole Institute’s mission has only increased in relevance in the fifteen years since its founding. The institute is also home to a museum gallery and historical collections: Senator Bob Dole’s personal papers—his “congressional collections” or “working papers”—are all housed on site and are commonly understood to be the foundation of the Dole Institute. The recent gift of Senator Elizabeth Dole’s papers represents a new chapter in programming, exhibits, and research for the institute, although they are pending cataloging and not yet open for research. With the passage of time, the expansive meaning, value, and application of these special collections are only just beginning to be realized.¹

The Nature of Congressional Collections

What is a congressional collection? Frank Mackaman, director of the Everett Dirksen Center in Pekin, Illinois, describes it succinctly as “the artifact of the Congressional office,” a body of records that reflects unique member personalities as well as idiosyncrasies of process and management but with commonalities of function found across collections. In general, modern collections are organized primarily by function (constituent relations, legislative development, administration, communications) and secondarily by format or record type (press releases, subject files, correspondence, photographs, photographs,

¹ Portions of this article appeared previously in Audrey McKanna Coleman, “Legacy, Leadership, & Collections: Programming in a Congressional Archive,” in New Directions for Special Collections: An Anthology of Practice, ed. Lynne M. Thomas and Beth M. Whittaker (ABC-CLIO, 2016), 66-68 and is included here with permission.
Richard A. Baker, U.S. Senate historian emeritus, in his reflection on congressional history, enhanced the understanding of the personal nature, volume, and significance of congressional papers by quoting Vernon Ehlers of Michigan. On March 5, 2008, as House Resolution 307 was passed, Congressman Ehlers contrasted the form of the day’s records—“the scourge of clutter”—with their content: “threads, that, when woven together, create the fabric of our democracy.”

It is through a similar array of documents that the Dole Archives documents the life and career of Bob Dole.

A native of Russell, Kansas, Dole attended KU before enlisting in the U.S. Army and serving in World War II. As a replacement platoon leader, Dole suffered grave injury on a battlefield in Italy on April 14, 1945. Initially paralyzed from the neck down, he persevered through a grueling recovery, including infections that brought him near death. Before the war, he had hoped to become a surgeon, but his acquired disability required him to reassess his career path and, considering the contemporary perception of people with disabilities, prove himself against low societal expectations. During law school, he served one term in the Kansas House of Representatives, and upon graduation he was elected as county attorney in his home county. He served in that role during the 1950s and was encouraged to run for national office by area Republicans. His election to the U.S. House in 1960 led to a thirty-six-year career in Congress, including five terms in the U.S. Senate, that ended when he resigned to pursue the presidency. The collections document Dole’s chairmanship of the Republican National Committee, 1971–1972; his campaigns for both House and Senate; his campaign for the Republican nomination for vice president (1976) as well for the presidential nomination (1980 and 1988); and his 1996 presidential campaign. They also contain the papers of the Dole Foundation for the Employment of People with Disabilities and personal and family papers.

Senator Dole’s legislative career culminated in the 1980s. By that time he had achieved national recognition and seniority in the Senate, serving as majority leader (1985–1987 and 1995–1996) and minority leader (1987–1995). In addition, Dole served on key committees such as Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry; Finance (for which he was chair during 1981–1983); and Judiciary. It was in the 1980s that Dole earned his reputation as a master of bipartisan negotiation—one of the key values upon which the Dole Institute is based.

Congressional collections are maintained in various types of environments. Many political papers are collected in university libraries and special collections departments, where they are administered together with the academic

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research collections or as a subset of them; state historical societies are also likely repositories. There are many centers for politics and public policy with affiliated collections in universities and communities nationwide, some in the form of congressional centers; many of these have administrative affiliations with academic programs.4

In the past, congressional collections, due to both volume and cataloging logistics as well as tradition, have frequently been subject to long-term closures and restrictions imposed by donors. In line with common practice throughout the archival profession, the Dole Institute now resists accepting donations with lengthy or perpetual restrictions. With guidance from the former senior archivist, in the mid-2000s Senator Dole agreed to amend his original deed of gift and allow for the incremental opening of his papers upon completion of their processing (as early as 2004 for House of Representatives papers and 2009 for Senate papers). Owing to intensive processing work on the part of the Dole Archives staff, supported by a grant from the National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC), processing and online finding aids have been completed for 1960–1996, with selected digitized material also available online. About 1,700 linear feet is open for public research. Because the Dole Archives is part of a larger organization that does not identify explicitly as a collecting institution, it has kept a relatively narrow collecting focus, prioritizing materials from Senator Dole and his associates (including staff, colleagues, and constituents) that contribute to the story of Dole’s legacy and emphasizing programming building and awareness.

We as U.S. citizens have a generation of archivists and historians, working together with allied legislators, to thank for the acquisition and ongoing maintenance of congressional collections. While federal laws implemented in the post-Watergate era mandated the preservation and collection of presidential personal papers, the personal records of members of Congress, and the records of their offices, remain the property of the individual members. A member may dispose of working papers at any time; with the closure of an office, records of all types may be dispersed or destroyed. It is only through sustained advocacy that these records of the legislative branch of government are collected and preserved. Many of these professionals are members of the Society of American Archivists Congressional Papers Section (CPS) and/or the Association for Centers of Studies of Congress (ACSC).

Senator Dole, for his part, explicitly desired that the Dole Institute of Politics not become a “personal monument.” The gift of his papers is an expression of his appreciation of and reverence for U.S. history and democracy. During the 100th Congress (1987–1988), Dole delivered nearly three hundred “Bicentennial Minutes,” typically at the beginning of the Senate’s daily session. These minutes focused on “significant people, unusual customs, and memorable events” in the Senate’s first two centuries.5 In this spirit, Dole’s collections document the U.S. Senate and are a window into the behind-the-scenes business of American democracy. But they can also do much more and appeal to a broad constituency of users—such as researchers or other, nontraditional consumers. As Raymond W. Smock, director of the Robert C. Byrd Center for Legislative Studies and former historian of the U.S. House of Representatives, stated of congressional collections in remarks made in April 2014,

We can use the records of Congress to create a portrait of the collective political, social, economic, and cultural situation through the papers of the members who have served. Congress may best be studied by turning the mirror around and not looking for a single face, but the face of this nation at any given time as seen through the records of Congress. . . . Congressional history is not just politics. . . . It has dimensions of every subject imaginable that relate to American history and world history.6


The House of Representatives Papers contain four series of primary interest: Constituent Relations, Legislative, Personal/Political, and Press. An additional series, Office

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4. Repositories holding congressional collections can be identified from an index prepared by the Center for Legislative Archives, which is extensive but not exhaustive: http://www.archives.gov/legislative/repository-collections/. The “Biographical Directory of the United States Congress, 1774–Present,” http://bioguide.congress.gov/biosearch/biosearch.asp, identifies research collections and is searchable by member.


Administration, pertains to the daily management of the congressional office.

As with any archival collection, but especially important for a collection that documents activity at the national level with national and international implications, to meaningfully interpret the documentary evidence, one must situate it within at least a basic knowledge of the historical context and—for a topic such as the Vietnam War—a context that is also political and cultural.

Bob Dole was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives in 1960 (from 1963 to 1969, following a district consolidation, he represented Kansas’s Big First)—and so the earliest dates of the congressional career papers begin the same year. While official combat operations in Vietnam did not start until 1965, the United States had stationed forces there during the era of President Dwight D. Eisenhower as a bulwark against communist threats in the region. Political tensions came to a head in the summer of 1964, when President Lyndon Johnson asserted that the North Vietnamese had, unprovoked, attacked the U.S. destroyers Maddox and Turner Joy in the Gulf of Tonkin.

Congress responded with the near-unanimous support of both chambers (only two senators dissented) for the passage of the Gulf of Tonkin resolution. It granted the president sweeping unilateral power to “take all necessary measures to repel any armed attack against the forces of the United States and to prevent further aggression,” expiring only when “the President shall determine that the peace and security of the area is reasonably assured . . . except that it may be terminated earlier by concurrent resolution of the Congress.” Protests erupted on college campuses, leading to many years of escalating civil unrest.

In the Dole Archives, the House of Representatives Collection offers researchers the perspective of a congressman in his first years in national politics and, as such, is a collection focused on state-specific issues. Regarding Vietnam, for the most part the documentation follows the public reaction to the development of the war, corroborating a narrative that is generally already well known.

One item of interest contained in the House collection is a signed official copy of President Johnson’s July 1965 speech, “Toward Peace with Honor.” It is nestled in one of two folders entitled “Vietnam Situation, 1964–1965,” in the Subject subseries of the Personal/Political series. Because this subseries is organized alphabetically, these folders are adjacent to one other folder, “Vietnam Killed in Action Reports, 1965”—the only three files on the topic in the subseries of approximately seventy folders.

The speech contained ten brief—but pointed—sections that the president used to justify U.S. military intervention in Vietnam (for example, “The Nature of the War” and “The Stakes in Vietnam”). It also sought to answer one of the most urgent questions of its time: “Why must young Americans—born into a land exultant with hope and golden with promise—toil and suffer and sometimes die in such a remote and distant place?”

The voices of Kansans’ response to the Vietnam War through 1968, as directed to Congressman Dole, are found in the Issue Mail subseries of the first series, Constituent Relations, in folders entitled “Vietnam Correspondence.”

Government documents are among the denser and more challenging items found in the archives, and yet represent a fraction of the holdings. Shown here is a copy of the Report to the Congress of the United States, Survey of Internal Audits and Inspections Relating to the United States Activities in Viet Nam. Robert J. Dole House of Representatives Collection, Legislative Series, Box 174, Folder 4. Courtesy of Dole Archives.

This subseries is organized alphabetically and then chronologically, so there is one Vietnam response file for 1965, three for 1966, five for 1967, and two for 1968—eleven files in total. For context, this subseries comprises eighty-six boxes of seven to ten files each—six hundred to eight hundred in total—of which only eleven are devoted to Vietnam responses from constituents. Researchers desiring the most comprehensive search should consider synonyms and related terms that may have been used by congressional offices contemporary to the period; in the case of the Vietnam War, one might examine results for “conflict” or “Southeast Asia.”

Visually scanning entire finding aids is another search strategy that will give researchers the opportunity to either refine their search terms by examining the language staff used in folder labeling, or otherwise define their area of concern, perhaps by year, or by collection.

In the letters, the varying degrees of knowledge about Vietnam among constituents is noteworthy. Some writers followed the war very closely and cited specific sources, dates, locations, and other statistics. Others used no details other than their opinions. Some writers asked Dole to send them information regarding the war. Some constituents urged learning from the legacy of the previous decade’s Korean War, and some writers stated that they did not want the Vietnam War to end without a clear resolution, as the Korean War had. Others felt that the Korean War should serve as a warning for the likely failure in Vietnam. Some constituents were conspiracy theorists, with several letters asking whether the United Nations or the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) was orchestrating the war. Many writers were personally affected by the war: family members, neighbors, and community members were already serving or faced the draft call.

In form, constituent letters came handwritten as personal correspondence, typed on official letterhead and representing the opinion of a larger organization, and even as press editorials released by news outlets. This collection of letters serves as an excellent snapshot in time of Kansans’ thoughts and opinions.

Congressman Dole’s D.C. office was collecting its own information on Vietnam and public opinion related to the war’s escalation to inform the congressman’s position and influence his course of action. This information takes the form of published pamphlets, surveys, studies, and newspaper clippings and can be found in just five folders. Four files entitled “Vietnam Situation, 1965–1966” are contained in the General Legislative Subjects subseries of the Legislative series (of twenty-nine boxes with seven to ten folders each), and just one—labeled “Vietnam War, 1965–1966”—is found in the Newspaper Clippings subseries of the Press series (of ten boxes with eight to ten folders each).

One example that illustrates the rewards derived from exploring beyond a targeted keyword search to a more comprehensive examination of the contemporary files begins in a set of three folders generically titled “Dole Related, 1963–1966,” in the Newspaper Clippings subseries of the Press series. In one of these folders, we find a photograph in a newspaper clipping from the Lawrence Journal-World dated November 1, 1965, captioned “Congressman Visits Campus.” Dole and five University of Kansas students are seen gathered outside on the campus in front of what

Letters from constituents in typed or handwritten formats, expressing a variety of viewpoints, reveal the sentiments of everyday Americans. Image is redacted to obscure identifying information. Robert J. Dole House of Representatives Collection, Constituent Relations Series, Box 111, Folder 4. Courtesy of Dole Archives.
was then a vibrant and fully operational information center near Stauffer-Flint Hall. This date and event leads the researcher to a larger story in the Personal/Political series, which adds itineraries, announcements, and student organizing efforts by the KU Young Republican Club that flesh out Dole’s campus visit. From there, the Digitized Press Releases collection reveals that this campus visit was one of a multicampus tour by Dole, of which he stated, “Meeting young people is always a challenge . . . and I am anxious to hear their comments on anything from Appalachia to Viet-Nam.”

A letter dated April 6, 1966, on the official letterhead of the National Republican Congressional Committee Chairman Bob Wilson (R-CA), upholds this campus outreach tour as a model that should be emulated by Republicans nationwide, a “missionary” approach endorsed in an extensive comment by Congressman Donald Rumsfeld of Illinois. Looking to related sources in KU’s own university archives, we find coverage in the student newspaper of the campus visit and yet further context for its relationship to Vietnam. As we assess Dole’s journey to the chairmanship of the Republican Party, and eventually the Senate Republican leadership, this is an early and important series of events.


One way to note Dole’s increasing engagement with the Vietnam conflict is to assess the number of occurrences of the word, “Vietnam,” in the Digitized Press Releases collections. This is a keyword-searchable database of nearly then thousand press releases issued by his House—and later Senate—office. For this and any other topic, the Digitized Press Releases are an easy and intellectually accessible tool for researchers of all levels. The releases, by definition, are written in clear, concise language—no more than one to two pages—and are a gateway to understanding the chronological evolution of a policy issue in general as well as Dole’s publicly stated position.

The exponentially increasing number of press releases also illustrates a significant phenomenon as a researcher transitions from using the single House of Representatives collection to the multiple finding aids representing the Senate and Senate-era collections. Because the full Senate papers comprise thousands of boxes, the staff who processed the papers divided major series into their own “collections” and finding aids. This improves searchability and accessibility for users but can create confusion when discussing how material is arranged and where it is located. Although intellectually the Senate Papers—

10. National Republican Congressional Committee letter, April 6, 1966, Personal/Political Series, box 271, folder 5, House of Representatives Papers, Robert and Elizabeth Dole Archive and Special Collections, Robert J. Dole Institute of Politics, Lawrence, KS (hereafter Dole Archive and Special Collections).
11. This historical event inspired the public program “Your Story, His Story, the Legacy: Snapshots in Time from the Dole Archives,” which featured a panel of the students depicted in the photo and their recollections. View this Dole Institute of Politics program, May 5, 2014, at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pg4KX90GEQ.
Constituent Relations, Senate Papers—Legislative Relations, Senate Papers—Office Administration, Senate Papers—Personal/Political Files, and Senate Papers—Press Related Materials are all series of one collection, the Robert J. Dole Senate Papers, for the purposes of this article and consistency with our finding aids, they will be referred to as separate collections. Another Senate-era collection that is helpful to researchers studying Vietnam is the Republican National Committee Chairman Papers.

Most of these record groups contain many hundreds of boxes. Because of this volume and the increase in the number of offices and staff (which itself corresponds to the broadening scope of Senator Dole’s interests and influence), the challenge of assessing a full picture of Senator Dole’s activities and impact in any one area becomes the subject of multiyear (if not also multivolume!) projects. Nonetheless, as illustrated in the exploration of the 1965 KU campus visit, we are able to zero in on a few episodes of the Vietnam era documented in our archives that shed light on the bigger picture.

In 1968, as troop levels in Vietnam reached their highest point and American voters responded by electing Republican President Richard Nixon, Bob Dole won a seat in the U.S. Senate. The ambitious junior senator from Kansas wasted little time in making a statement against the Vietnam quagmire, heretofore presided over by a Democratic president. Though the Senate—and the Foreign Relations Committee, chaired by Senator William Fulbright (D-AR)—had been working to repeal the 1964 Gulf of Tonkin resolution, the newly minted Senator Dole broke with Senate protocols and usurped the territory of the committee both in timing and in strategy: on June 22, 1970, he proposed the Gulf of Tonkin repeal not as a concurrent resolution to be adopted by Congress but as an amendment that must both be passed by Congress and then require President Nixon’s signature. This power play gave the president a share of the political high ground and signaled an anticipated change in the management style of the war. This move allowed Dole to distinguish himself among his peers and establish himself as an ally of the president; he would be named chairman of the Republican National Committee one year later. This significant turn both in Vietnam and in Dole’s career is documented in the Legislative series of the Senate Papers—Legislative Relations collection. It appears in a single folder, “Foreign Policy—White—Vietnam, Gulf of Tonkin, 1970,” which notes the subtopic of the series, Foreign Policy, and the last name of the staffer who maintained the file. Researchers will find that the Digitized Press Releases also hold information about this event.

As seen in the House papers, constituent letters in the Senate era (1969–1996) form a significant proportion of the Vietnam-related records in the Senate Papers—Constituent Relations collection. The most relevant correspondence can be found in the Issue Mail series, which is organized primarily alphabetically by subject under both “Subject—Vietnam,” and “Subject—Southeast Asia (Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam),” contemporary labeling that reflects the expansion of the scope of the conflict. An additional folder, “Subject—Army—69th Brigade in Vietnam, 1968–1969,” documents the deployment of the Sixty-Ninth Infantry Brigade, many of whom were members of the Kansas National Guard, reflecting President Johnson’s strategic decision to deploy guardsmen, versus increasing draft calls, after the Tet offensive and the capture of the USS Pueblo by the North Koreans. Dole, along with Kansas Governor Robert Docking, advocated for the Kansans deployed. The saga of this unit and their families is deeply personal, and the governmental response, as documented here, is as convoluted and complex as one might expect. From a single folder comes an entire story.

This group of Vietnam folders represents approximately 30 files out of 242 boxes, each containing 20–40 files, in the Issue Mail series. It is important to note that this collection contains files generated through the length of Dole’s multidecade career in the U.S. Senate, far beyond the Vietnam War era. After 1973, materials related to Vietnam are filed under Veterans, POW/MIA Issues, and other subjects pertinent to the lasting personal and societal legacy of the Vietnam War, including veterans’ compensation, education, and medical care and related legislation on disabilities, foreign policy, and military intervention abroad.

The plight of the Vietnam War’s prisoners of war (POWs) and missing in action (MIA) not only has a long trajectory in the Dole Archives, spanning nearly Dole’s entire Senate tenure, but also has links to a new and unique story only recently reintroduced. In 1969 Senator Dole became acquainted with Sybil Stockdale, wife of Admiral

13. James B. Pearson (1962–1978), a Johnson County Republican, was the state’s senior senator during Dole’s first decade of service in the upper chamber. Senator Pearson’s papers are in the holdings of the Spencer Research Library on the KU campus and would be an interesting collection to study with or in comparison to Dole’s.

14. In 2015 researcher Heath Hardage Lee visited the Dole Archive to research Senator Dole’s advocacy for the women (mostly wives of
James Stockdale, a navy pilot who had been shot down in North Vietnam in 1965. Sybil Stockdale was the leader of POW and MIA wives coast to coast who found themselves, in many cases, all but abandoned by the military and the U.S. government. Instructed to keep silent under the Johnson administration—and thus ignored in the eyes of the general public—these wives organized to incorporate as a nonprofit humanitarian organization, the National League of Families of Prisoners of War and Missing in Southeast Asia, in May 1970. The women transformed themselves from obedient housewives to international diplomats and public spokeswomen—all in the service of bringing their husbands, identified either as prisoners or missing, home. Senator Dole was one of the first members of Congress to support them, organizing a bipartisan congressional cohort (House and Senate, including the Democratic Senate Majority Leader Mike Mansfield) to support the group’s debut on the D.C. public stage in rallies in spring 1970—including the May 1 “May Day” rally attended by thousands at the DAR Constitution Hall. The story of this association begins with a few files in the Senate Papers—Legislative Relations collection, which contain correspondence between the senator and the women, as well as the founding documents of the league.

Dole’s advocacy for these women lasted beyond Operation Homecoming in 1973, which returned over nine hundred POWs but left over two thousand families still awaiting their missing servicemen. Senator Dole championed the MIA cause until the end of his career, and one can readily observe his advocacy in the Digitized Press Releases collection. Dole never rescinded his demand for a full accounting of MIAs by the Vietnam government—even as President Bill Clinton sought the normalization of relations (i.e., the reestablishment of a U.S. Embassy) with Vietnam in the mid-1990s.

Archive Collections as Social Network
Of course, one member’s collections do not exist in a vacuum. There are over five-hundred active congressional offices at any given time, and in addition to interacting with other offices, each office encounters many organizations and individuals through the course of its duties.

Collecting from individuals and organizations that interact with Congress is also vital to documenting our history and democracy. Examples of ancillary collecting are materials related to unsuccessful candidates in significant elections, lobbyists or lobbying groups, congressional office staff, or campaign volunteers. These collections provide additional insight into and angles on the story of congressional members’ time in office, staff members’ careers, or important policy decisions. Each repository can denote the parameters for adding ancillary collections to its holdings, and in recent years the Gold Star Museum (Des Moines, IA). Heath Hardage Lee, The League of Wives: The Untold Story of the Women Who Took on the U.S. Government to Bring Their Husbands Home (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2019).

the Dole Archives has accepted papers from significant staff members, notable opponents, and private citizens that document pivotal periods in Dole’s career.

In an example of museum exhibit outreach also serving as collection development, the Dole Archives recently acquired the Lt. Col. Bruce G. Johnson and Kathleen Johnson Frisbie Collection. Kathleen Johnson Frisbie, a longtime Kansas resident, is a founding board member of the National League of Families of American Prisoners of War and Missing in Southeast Asia. Her husband, Johnson, served in the army and was reported as missing in South Vietnam on June 10, 1965. The collection represents the trajectory of the Johnson family’s Vietnam experience—from Johnson becoming MIA to a program for a memorial service upon the issue of his presumptive finding of death in the late 1970s. Frisbie’s activism is thoroughly documented: first her involvement in Kansas and Midwest POW and MIA groups and then the formation of the league, her many trips to Paris to meet with Vietnamese officials, and her participation in the May Day rally in Washington, D.C., in 1970.

While the Johnson/Frisbie Collection is not yet cataloged and, therefore, not yet open for research, it will in the future provide another layer of information about Kansas wives and families of POWs/MIAs—Dole’s constituents. Contained within the papers is correspondence between Frisbie and Dole, and it would be interesting to further explore the connections to Dole’s congressional collections that undoubtedly exist.

While Vietnam was a dominant topic of broad public concern, it was but one of the numerous national and international political and policy issues addressed by Senator Dole’s office—as well as other congressional members, individuals, and organizations—during this era. Many collections documenting these members and ancillary groups still exist, and through a collaborative look at them, a full picture of the legislative anatomy of the era emerges. Researchers can expect to rediscover rich and complex historical stories such as these about leadership, public life, and everyday America and Americans, and their influence on the national and international political stages, in the Dole Archives and other congressional collections.


17. On-site research at the Dole Archives is open to the public, but by advance appointment only. Contact dolearchives@ku.edu or submit an inquiry via our web form at http://dolearchives.ku.edu/contact. Additional resources can be found online: Dole Archives, finding aids—keyword search box and folder listings, http://dolearchivecollections.ku.edu/; Digital Collections—full text selections from the Dole Archives collections, http://dolearchives.ku.edu/digital; Course and Subject Modules—designed for K–12 and undergraduate courses, http://dolearchives.ku.edu/topics; Congressional Collections—resources nationwide, https://www.archives.gov/legislative/repository-collections/state.html; and Congressional Papers Section of the Society of American Archivists, https://www2.archivists.org/groups/congressional-papers-section.