

Roll Call

Remini's Tenure Brought House History to Life

July 6, 2010

By Emily Yehle, Roll Call Staff

Christina Jeffrey's tenure as House historian lasted only days. When she was appointed by then-Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.) in early January 1995, reports soon surfaced that she had once opposed a Holocaust course because it did not include "the Nazi point of view."

A few days later, she was fired, and the Office of the House Historian stayed empty and defunct for a decade.

Five years ago, Robert Remini became the third House historian, inheriting an office that had few resources and no staff. When he retires at the end of August, he will leave behind five co-workers who helped him create a robust resource for the obscure questions of Members and constituents alike.

Sitting in his Cannon hideaway last week, the 88-year-old Remini reminisced about his path to the House and his efforts to document the chamber's history. When then-Speaker Dennis Hastert (R-Ill.) appointed him in 2005, Remini began to interview Members about their work and motivations. Those talks, he said, left him "pleasantly surprised."

"The one striking thing is how dedicated the Members are, how intelligent and hardworking they are. That's not what most people think, but it's true!" he said with a laugh. "Oh, there are a few bad apples of course."

But the history of the House is more than just votes and elections. Under Remini's direction, the historian's office has researched everything from Capitol ghost stories to the evolution of committees. Much of that research is prompted by calls from Members and the media, with each new question getting a new report. Last year alone, the office produced 368 of them.

"Every day I find out something new," said Anthony Wallis, the office's research analyst.

"I get posed some of the most bizarre and odd questions about the Capitol." Members will often ask about the past occupants of their office or about how past lawmakers passed certain bills. But news stories also drive inquiries. In 2008, for example, the Capitol Police successfully talked a man off a ledge in the Hart Senate Office Building, and Wallis soon got calls from reporters asking about past suicides in Congressional buildings. He found one: A lawmaker shot himself in his office during the Depression.



House Historian Robert Remini, who is retiring at the end of August, began five years ago with no staff and few resources. He'll leave behind an office known for detailed research.

Interns have also discovered bizarre facts. One wrote a report on George Cassidy, a bootlegger who had an office in the Cannon House Office Building during Prohibition. Also known as “the man in the green hat,” he kept Members stocked with illicit alcohol, dropping off bottles on their desks at night. His profitable business ended when he was arrested on Oct. 31, 1929, and sentenced to nearly two years in prison.

To find such history, the historian’s office turns to the Congressional Research Service, the Library of Congress and online databases. But Wallis said Remini has become the office’s “living history.”

“He knows and has seen so much,” Wallis said. “There’s no historical question that I ask him that he doesn’t know.”

Growing up during the Great Depression, Remini first set out to become a lawyer — a profession that seemed to please his parents. But in World War II, he entered the Navy and found himself drawn to long hours of reading.

“I was put on a ship and I found myself reading nothing but history and loving it,” Remini said. “I thought to myself, ‘Why do I say I want to be a lawyer when I obviously want to be a historian?’”

Remini has spent more than 50 years writing about American history, publishing books on Henry Clay, Daniel Webster, John Quincy Adams and others. He is best known for his three-volume biography “The Life of Andrew Jackson,” which won the National Book Award in 1984. By the time he became House historian, he was already working on a narrative history of the House that Congress commissioned. It was published in 2006. Becoming such a prolific writer was somewhat difficult with three children in the house. But he set up an office in the basement, he said, and rewarded himself for working. “If I could write nine pages a day, I’d give myself a dry martini,” he said. “I always wrote nine pages.”

Remini is still writing, recently publishing “At the Edge of the Precipice: Henry Clay and the Compromise that Saved the Union.” He plans to continue his work in retirement, stopping only “when they put me six feet in the ground.”

But the experience of working in the House, he said, has been unparalleled. “This has been such an extraordinary opportunity. I wouldn’t give it up for the world,” he said. “When you get into the inner workings [of Congress], when you walk in the chamber itself and you talk to people and you learn what they’re doing — you really have a sense of being part of history, not just writing about it. It’s quite unusual. I am very grateful.”