CAPITOL TELECOMMUNICATIONS
Oral History Interviews with
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Oral History Interviews
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Preface

The Senate installed its first telephone switchboard in its Reception Room on December 2, 1897, with a capacity of 100 lines. They served 90 senators and some 200 staff who worked either out of the Capitol or a nearby apartment house that had been converted into offices for some of the senators. Young male pages were assigned as the first switchboard operators. In July 1898 the House of Representatives received a similar exchange switchboard. By then the experiment of using adolescents as operators had proved a failure and its first operators were more mature women. By 1901 the Senate and House had merged their services into a single Capitol switchboard to serve both bodies. (An additional switchboard served the Supreme Court, which operated out of the Capitol until it moved into it own building 1935.)

Initially, operators handled all of the calls. When rotary dials were introduced in 1930, some of the senators objected that the new manual system was difficult to use. They won passage of a resolution giving Capitol phone users the option of either dialing for themselves or using operators. The operators also handled a growing number of calls from the public at a time when government functions and services were growing dramatically.

By the time the Senate entered the 21st Century, its staff had grown to 6,500, working out of the Capitol and three Senate office buildings, with an additional 454 offices in the senators' home states. Technology had evolved to meet the multiple communications needs of the expanding institution. Moving from switchboards to computers, Capitol operators continued to field incoming calls ranging from the White House to agitated constituents. The telephone exchange had by then moved first to the Dirksen Senate Office Building and then to the Postal Square Building near the Capitol. Operators helped to set up weekly teleconferences between senators' staff in Washington and their home states. They also handled members' telephone press conferences and town meetings. They coped with organized "call-ins" by protestors, and helped track down employees to take calls from their children. They also dealt with the extreme demands on the communications system on September 11, 2001.

In order to capture the development of congressional communications technology, the Senate Historical Office convened these two roundtable interviews with Capitol operators and information technology managers, each with long experience on Capitol Hill.

About the Interviewer: Donald A. Ritchie is Historian of the Senate. A graduate of the City College of New York, he received his Ph.D. in history from the University of Maryland. His books include *James M. Landis: Dean of the Regulators* (Harvard University Press, 1980)*, Press Gallery: Congress and the Washington Correspondents* (Harvard University Press, 1991), *The Oxford Guide to the United States Government* (Oxford University Press, 2001), and *Reporting from Washington: The History of the Washington Press Corps* (Oxford University Press, 2005). He served as president of the Oral History Association and of Oral History in the Mid-Atlantic Region (OHMAR), and received OHMAR's Forrest C. Pogue Award for distinguished contributions to the field of oral history.