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# CU Law Library Launches New Resource for Historical Colorado Statutory Research

by Robert M. Linz

Colorado legal researchers have a new tool for statutory research. The University of Colorado's William A. Wise Law Library (Law Library or CU Law Library) has completed a digitization project of Colorado session laws. The collection contains PDF files of session law volumes from 1861 (when the Territory of Colorado was created) through 1992.<sup>1</sup> The collection is available at [lawlibrary.colorado.edu/colorado-session-laws](http://lawlibrary.colorado.edu/colorado-session-laws). This article describes the need for such a collection, how it was created, and how to search it.

## The Statutory Research Process

Researching Colorado legislative and statutory history can prove quite challenging. Typically, both research tasks start when one is trying to determine the meaning of ambiguous statutory language. One method to determine a statute's meaning is to locate earlier versions of the statute, compare them, and speculate on the meaning behind changes to the superseded text. Another method is to locate legislative committee reports and audio recordings of legislators and others discussing the meaning of the legislation, which may explain the ambiguity. With either method, the Colorado legal researcher usually starts the process with the statutory language found in the Colorado Revised Statutes.

The next step in the process involves reading the statutory source notes that immediately follow the text of the statute. Source notes contain a sequence of abbreviations and numbers. Some of these abbreviations refer to the session of the General Assembly in which the law was created or amended. These session laws are referenced with an "L" and typically a year, followed by the page number or

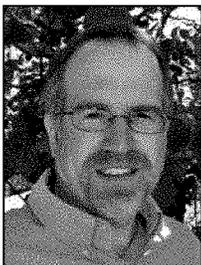
chapter number. Other notations refer to the prior codification where the law may have appeared. Still others refer to action taken on legislation, such as having been "Repealed and Reenacted," denoted as R&RE.<sup>2</sup>

The researcher will almost certainly want to locate the statute as it was enacted by the General Assembly. To do this, the researcher locates the session law published in Colorado's session law publication. In print, this title is published following the closure of each regular and extraordinary session of the General Assembly. For regular sessions, the new volumes of session laws are typically available to subscribers in August. Starting with session laws published in 1998, researchers can also find these laws on the General Assembly's website.

However, for older session laws, researchers previously only had two options. They could visit their local law library, which would likely have the older session laws in print and perhaps even on microfiche. Or they could access a digital copy through HeinOnline ([www.heinonline.org](http://www.heinonline.org)), an online subscription service published by William S. Hein & Co. This excellent product contains PDF copies of the state session laws, plus a great deal of additional primary and secondary materials. While HeinOnline is a wonderful resource, it is expensive. Many legal researchers found both options difficult, and each year the CU Law Library received a large number of requests for older session laws.

## Developing the Session Laws Collection

In 2011, the Law Library purchased a production-quality scanner and software to digitize papers of CU Law's former dean David



### About the Author

Robert M. Linz is the associate director, the head of public services, and an instructor at the University of Colorado Law School William A. Wise Law Library. He has worked in a variety of librarian, technology, and management roles at academic libraries and the Colorado Supreme Court library since becoming a law librarian in 1996. He has authored numerous works on legal research, including *Colorado Legal Research*, published by Carolina Academic Press in 2010. He holds an MLIS from Florida State University and a JD from the University of Florida, and is a member of the Florida Bar—(303) 492-2504, [robert.linz@colorado.edu](mailto:robert.linz@colorado.edu).

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Figure 1.

Getches. After completing this project in 2012, the Law Library targeted the session laws as a need for Colorado legal researchers. The early steps were to ensure the collection was complete and to design a search interface. Using the digitization equipment and a host of student workers, the Law Library began digitizing the collection. The Law Library team decided to start with the territorial session laws and to release these as a completed collection. These volumes were the most difficult to digitize, given the age and print quality of the volumes. However, this approach allowed the team to discuss the collection with an expert group of Colorado legal researchers and to gain invaluable feedback on the interface and other issues before digitizing the rest of the collection.

The other aspect of the project was determining how to tag the session laws with appropriate metadata and build a suitable database of documents. The Law Library team wanted to provide a variety of search capabilities, which meant creating separate files for each document type within every session law volume. The various document types within a session law volume include the title page, certificate, state officers, and of course the acts, resolutions, and memorials. Additionally, each of these document types needed to be associated with the year and session of the General Assembly and had to be tagged with the page number of the print volume. Once this infrastructure was in place, the Law Library team could then build the desired search capabilities.

## Searching the Collection

This first two search capabilities are performed using the Basic Search tab on the collection landing page (see Figure 1). The first

search capability enables those with a session law citation to quickly retrieve the session law as a PDF. The researcher selects the session law year and then enters either the page number or chapter number.

The second search capability enables researchers to browse the collection as it appears in the print publication. Researchers simply select the year of publication from the drop-down menu and click "Search." The resulting list of document types will be ordered by page number as they appeared in print.

The third search capability is performed using the Advanced Search tab (see Figure 2) and enables researchers to search the session laws in unique ways. Because each document type has been captured separately, researchers can retrieve all occurrences of a specific document type throughout the entire history of the session laws. For example, a researcher could use this feature to retrieve the lists of judicial officers as published in the session law volumes.

In addition to document types, the document metadata contains the index subject entry for each act, memorial, and resolution. Thus, when a researcher searches the Index Subject field with keywords, the system will automatically scan through the index list to find matching entries. Using this approach, researchers can find every instance in the Colorado session laws in which that topic was addressed.

Finally, researchers can search through document titles and the index by entering a few keywords in the Title or Index Subject fields on the Advanced Search tab. This search will retrieve documents that contain those keywords in the title or subject index metadata for the document.

Figure 2.

**COLORADO SESSION LAWS**

Basic Search    Advanced Search

Year    - Any -

Document Type    - Any -

Title

Index Subject

university of colorado

Apply    Clear

## Next Steps

The CU Law Library's next major project is digitizing the House and Senate Journals. This too is a large project that will take years to complete. One of the design goals for this project is to link the session laws to the journal entries. The Law Library team is currently exploring different methods to make this possible. If the team is successful, researchers would be able to retrieve both a session law and the entries in the House and Senate Journal where the bill on which the session law is based can be found. In the meantime, the Law Library team has digitized the historical municipal codes in the Law Library's collection as well as a handful of other Colorado historical materials shelved in the Law Library's Rare Book Room.

The Law Library team hopes the session law database proves to be a valuable resource for Colorado legal researchers. Users are encouraged to explore the resource and provide feedback and suggestions through the feedback link on the website.

## Notes

1. The Office of Legislative Legal Services provides access to Colorado session laws after 1993 on its website at [tornado.state.co.us/gov\\_dir/leg\\_dir/olls/session\\_laws\\_of\\_colorado.htm](http://tornado.state.co.us/gov_dir/leg_dir/olls/session_laws_of_colorado.htm).

2. See Lewis and Dawkins, "Researching Legislative History," 44 *The Colorado Lawyer* 33 (March 2015) (for explanation of source notes). See also the explanatory notes published in the front pages of any volume of the official Colorado Revised Statutes, published by LexisNexis® (same). ■



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