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Clothes Make the Page: Uniforms in the U.S. Capitol

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This is a work in progress on the evolution House Pages' style of dress, inspired by the House Collection's recent acquisition of an unusual 1906 uniform. A long standing tradition, Pages served in Congress beginning in the early 19th century. The House has recently discontinued its Page program, which had, over the years, evolved from 9 year old boys carrying letters around the Capitol to a short-term boarding school for high school juniors, with students working shifts on the House floor seeing to the needs of the Representatives.

This research deals primarily with object based evidence, following a material culture methodology. Following Jules Prown's benchmark work on material culture, *Art as Evidence*, this approach to historic objects defines material culture as a "study . . . based on the obvious fact that the existence of a man-made object is concrete evidence of the presence of human intelligence operating at the time of fabrication. The underlying premise is that objects made or modified by man reflect, consciously or unconsciously, directly or indirectly, the beliefs of the individuals who made, commissioned, purchased, or used them, and by extension the beliefs of the larger society to which they belonged."¹

Prown goes on to explain why objects are particularly well suited as receptacles of cultural information, due to their status as "the only historical occurrences that continue to exist in the present. They provide an opportunity by which we encounter the past first hand; we have direct sensory experience of surviving historical events. Artifacts may not be historical events, but they are, to the extent that they can be experienced and interpreted as evidence, significant."²

The study of material culture also grows out of linguistic theory, particularly structuralism and semiotics—the significance of sign and signifier. "Signs" represented in objects, illuminate beliefs embodied within the object itself (rather than being mediated by someone's linguistic intervention) and therefore can constitute primary material.

The goal here is to articulate how the material—in this case, uniforms, along with documentation and images where it's available—elucidates the status of Pages in the legislative branch, and how these uniforms signify social meaning more generally. The title of "page" as a child attendant derives from the 12th century English use of the term, which denoted boys who waited on persons of nobility or social rank. It seems that the term was not applied to legislative messengers until it came into common usage in North America in the mid-19th century. Using children for errand running in a lawmaking body (and etymologically equating lawmakers with old-world nobility) was an American invention. The question I am posing with this work is how dress informs the role of these young workers.

The uniform that inspired this endeavor was donated to the House Collection by the grandchildren of 1907 House Page, Roy Tasco Davis (1889-1975). The ensemble is made from navy blue wool, and

¹ Jules Prown, *Art as Evidence: Writings on Material Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 70-71.

² *Ibid.*, 73.

includes trousers, suspenders and a jacket with a “Mandarin” or stand up collar, which was then commonly used in military uniforms (figure 1). The collar clearly labels the job of the wearer - HOUSE PAGE. The jacket would have been worn buttoned, as shown here, with a shirt underneath.



Figure 1. House Page Uniform, c. 1906. Collection of the U.S. House of Representatives, Gift of Todd Lowe, Roger Lowe and Nancy Lowe: Page Uniform Jacket, c. 1906, Collection of the U.S. House of Representatives, Gift of Todd Lowe, Roger Lowe and Nancy Lowe.

This military style sets the Page apart from both the street dress of adolescents and from the men of business that they served.

Contemporaneous photographs of Pages in this particular uniform have not yet been located, only paper documentation of Roy Davis's service in the House—Davis, who hailed from Ewing, MO appears in the Clerk's 1908 annual report in the disbursement record, which states that he was paid \$75 in December of 1907 for his services as a page.

The biographical information provided by his family states that Roy Davis began working as a page in the Missouri State legislature beginning in 1904 to help pay his tuition while attending LaGrange

College.³ Roy Tasco's unpublished memoir, also provided by his family, tells a story of how he came to be a House page. He specifies that in 1906, when he was 17 years old, he decided that he wanted to be a Page in the U.S. House, and came to Washington armed with recommendations "to three or four Missouri Congressmen." He recounts meeting Congressman Ollie James of Kentucky on the train between Cincinnati and D.C., and that they set up a meeting for two days after his arrival.

After learning that the position he was expecting did not materialize, he appealed to James when they met, and a position was secured for him with his help. He stayed on for "about two months" and then returned to Missouri to finish school. These biographical detail fits well into one of the established narratives of page employment—that of the young man in need of money. It was not tremendously common though, at the time, for pages to come from so far afield. Many were local to the Washington area. Also, this sort of independent, unstructured, adventure would have been outside the norm in the years to come.⁴

What, though, did Pages wear prior to this snapshot in time? In the 19th and earlier 20th century, illustrations and photographs indicate that they wore knickers or trousers with single breasted jackets and ties. Pages' style of dress in some ways corresponded with the changes of the program. The first Pages were reportedly the young sons of connected individuals. It is claimed that the very first page in the Capitol was the descendant of a member of the Continental Congress. The early pages were around 9 years old—their most important qualification was that they were small enough to be unobtrusive while dashing about on the House floor.

From early in the program's history, the social demographics also included boys from particularly disadvantaged backgrounds along with the particularly privileged—some Members appointed boys from difficult circumstances, due to the relatively generous salary offered for the job, giving the hiring process a charitable bent. This impulse, though, was not appreciated universally. A report from the mid-19th century Committee on Accounts noted with disapproval that "Members frequently ...have their sympathies awakened by (a boy's) orphan and destitute situation, and press the officer of the House to engage him in service...and in this way, from causes having origin in the best feelings of the human heart, the expenses of the House are unnecessarily augmented."⁵

Pages remained young through the 19th century. Historic images show both knickers and trousers on young House Pages, who would sit around the rostrum, awaiting requests for errand running. Textual documentation details that the boys all wore numbered silver lapel pins, indicating their status as pages. The 1881 wood engraving from Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper includes a number of pages, and exemplifies the type of Page-related image that appeared in the mass-media during the late 19th century. The small boys are included as anecdotal detail to a story about the goings-on in the House Chamber (figure 2).

³ Roy Tasco Davis: *Envoy Extraordinary* (Unpublished, undated), 3. Prior to accepting the uniform into the House Collection, it was verified with the Missouri State legislature that the uniform was not used by Pages in that institution.

⁴ The adventuresome Davis went on to a career as a diplomat in South and Central America

⁵ Select Committee on Contingent Expenses of the House of Representatives, "Report on the Contingent Expenses of the House of Representatives," H. Rep. 30, 27th Congress (5 January 1842)



Figure 2. “The National Legislature –The Sergeant-At-Arms Bringing in Absentee Members,” Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper, 1881 Collection of the U.S. House of Representatives.

The 1886 book *Among the Lawmakers*⁶—a combination of a memoir of a Senate page and children’s textbook on government—provides some insight into the Page’s self-image. The frontispiece shows a photographic image of a Senate Page dressed for duty. Like the House pages from the previous print, he is in a dark jacket and bow tie, but, in the Senate tradition, wears knickers and stockings. The Senate continued to require a knicker suit until the 1940s. (Figure 3).

The author provides detailed descriptions of many of the Page’s quotidian activities, describing how they awaited instruction in the Senate Chamber as follows:

[the pages] were expected to sit in the lower steps of the platform occupied by the Vice-President and Clerks. Whenever a Senator wanted an errand done he would clap his hands or beckon us with a finger, and it was the duty of one of the pages... to go to him and find out what he wished...”⁷

When tasks were no forthcoming, the author includes that “rather than sitting, as we ought, in an erect and dignified position...I have often gone up on the Republican side to where the Vice President sat, as on a throne, and played marbles with a page on the Democratic side, almost under the Vice- president’s chair...it would make many of the Senators angry to see us do this...perhaps because the young ladies in the gallery usually paid more attention to what we did than what the lawmakers were doing.”⁸

⁶ Edmond Alton, *Among the Lawmakers* (New York: Scribner’s Sons, 1886).

⁷ Alton, 31.

⁸ Ibid.



**Figure 3. “A Page on Duty,” *Among the Lawmakers* by Edmund Alton, 1886.
Collection of the U.S. House of Representatives.**

Despite such juvenile musings, this particular Page still thought very highly of his role in the Senate. If there was any doubt that the Senate Pages of the 19th century took great pride in their role, the chapter entitled “Diminutive Dignitaries” from this book puts that idea to rest. Though the author describes very humble duties—being, literally, at the beck and call of Senators to deliver papers—the pages considered themselves emissaries for the Senators: “My duties threw me among people of all grades and conditions, from the President of the United States to the humblest person in the land; but amid all vicissitudes, I vigilantly endeavored to maintain the dignity of my office as a senatorial ambassador.”⁹

On the House side, John Quincy Adams—who was known for, among other things, his whimsical verse—provided a poetic description of the boys in his journal from the 1840s, writing that the young pages were akin to “tripping Mercuries, who bear the resolutions and amendments between the Members and the Chair.” This lovely language picks up themes from *Among the Lawmakers*, lending the simple labor of the boys a picturesque nobility.

⁹ Alton, 38.

Among the Lawmakers suggests that Pages were very much children—based on the expectations placed on them and their reported behavior—and their uniforms correspond with this level of expectation. The knickers and voluminous bowties were the dress of children at the time. Adolescent boys, usually around 12, would wear full length trousers by this date, and this transition was considered a signifier of maturity: as they were required to dress like men, they were expected to begin to behave as the same.

At least in part due to a combination of educational reform and the first forays towards laws restricting child labor, the transition between the 19th and 20th centuries corresponded with a transition in the Page demographic, with the boys skewing older as time went on. The dress correspondingly evolved from childish to quasi-military and professional.

An undated photo of House Pages in the Speaker's Lobby (figure 4), from around 1912, shows a variety of dress. Smaller boys are more likely to wear knickers, while the larger—and presumably older—boys wear trousers. The ensembles are clearly not standardized—color, jacket and tie style, as well as pant length vary.



Figure 4. Pages in the Speaker's Lobby, ca. 1912, Image Courtesy of the House Historian.

The push toward increased organization of the Pages is evident by Davis's time. The military look, though, was of unknown duration, due to lack of yet-identified documentation. The year before Davis worked as a Page—1906—saw the beginnings of child labor reform in the passage of a House bill restricting the employment of children under 14 in the District of Columbia. The Senate killed the bill, not wanting to give up their pre-teen pages. The law was passed in 1908 (the year after Davis served) but was not abided in the Capitol. The Compulsory School Attendance law of 1926, though, truly changed the complexion of the Page program. Parents of the pages arranged for tutors at first, but by 1931, the arrangements were formalized into the privately operated Page School. This chronology

places Mr. Davis and his uniform at the leading edge of the period during which young people were moving towards a place in society that we perceive as modern—in that youth was a time for education and supervision, not necessarily economic productivity—regardless of one’s economic status. It is interesting that at this juncture, a military-inspired look was introduced. Contemporaneous uniforms of a similar style were worn by students, marching bands and the military (figure 5). Perhaps the motivation for dressing the teenage Pages in this manner was to project an air of organization and discipline associated with the style, providing an essence of “uniformity” that was previously absent from the program.



Figure 5. NY Police Department band, c. 1907 Library of Congress; U.S Army (with Teddy Roosevelt), 1901, Library of Congress.

In the coming years, photographic documentation increases, and then, with the advent of the Page School in 1931, we see formalized, documented organization of the program and its participants.

During the years after Davis served but before the Page school was established, news photographs of House Pages began to appear regularly, implying an increase in the public exposure of the program. A photograph of the Pages with Speaker Champ Clark (figure 6), which dates from the 1910s is relatively formal and staid. In a later photo with Speaker Nicholas Longworth (Figure 7 House Pages with Speaker Nicholas Longworth, 1925. Library of Congress), dating from the 1920s, the relationship seems much less formal, and the photo ops more boisterous. This could perhaps indicate a slight cultural shift in both the page program and the press. Rather than being regarded as invisible workers, the boys were students first, in the Capitol for the learning experience rather than the paycheck.

By the 1940s, the Page School began publishing a yearbook, *The Congressional*. These books have been useful sources of documentation on the history of the school and the rules and customs of the school. The 1945 edition provides a brief overview of the Page School and program overall, describing it as private institution with a college prep curriculum, operated under the supervision of the D.C. Board of

Education. They were offering classes for students aged 12 - 17, explaining that the younger students were being admitted specially during war time. Many of the students were local, and they could remain at the school for up to 6 years. The yearbook also proudly states that none of their former students has been a “failure” and many went on to attend college.



Figure 6. House Pages with Speaker Champ Clark, c. 1915, Library of Congress.

They also describe the details of the Pages’ uniforms—the Senate and Supreme Court Pages wore dark blue suits with knickers, black shoes, black stockings, black ties and black shirts. The House Pages were required to wear a “dark suit of their choosing.”

The yearbook from the following year (figure 8) specifically states a correlation between dress and duty for the Pages: “Work in the House is much more varied, democratic and uninhibited, or unrestrained, than in the Senate or Supreme Court... symbolic of this freedom from protocol is the absence of the traditional knickers which adorn the other Pages.”¹⁰

This “freedom from protocol” and the constraints of tradition are possibly what led to the unusual ensemble that Roy Davis wore in 1907, as well as its apparently short duration and the lack of documentation. Drawing from early 20th century photographs, it appears that the Pages wore something like the uniform described for the Senate and Supreme Court, but less regulated in terms of colors and detail. The House may have wanted to try to forge its own way by introducing the military-style uniform in 1907. Perhaps this look was inspired by the Roosevelt administration or a cultural moment of

¹⁰ *The Congressional* (1946), 41.

militarism and outdoorsiness? Was this, with its similarity to band uniforms, an expression of an impulse towards increased organization and discipline among the Pages and within that program? In the surrounding context, in which it seems that the House Pages followed loose guideline for dress, it is certain that something motivated this highly formalized look. It may have been deemed impractical. Being outside the norm for day-to-day wear, a uniform like this would have been a special purchase, and was possible to have raised objections for that reason, particularly due to the financial circumstances of many of the pages. Throughout history, there are several instances of whimsical institutional decision-making within in the House, ideas quickly instigated and just as quickly undone—and this unusual uniform may well have been in that category of action.

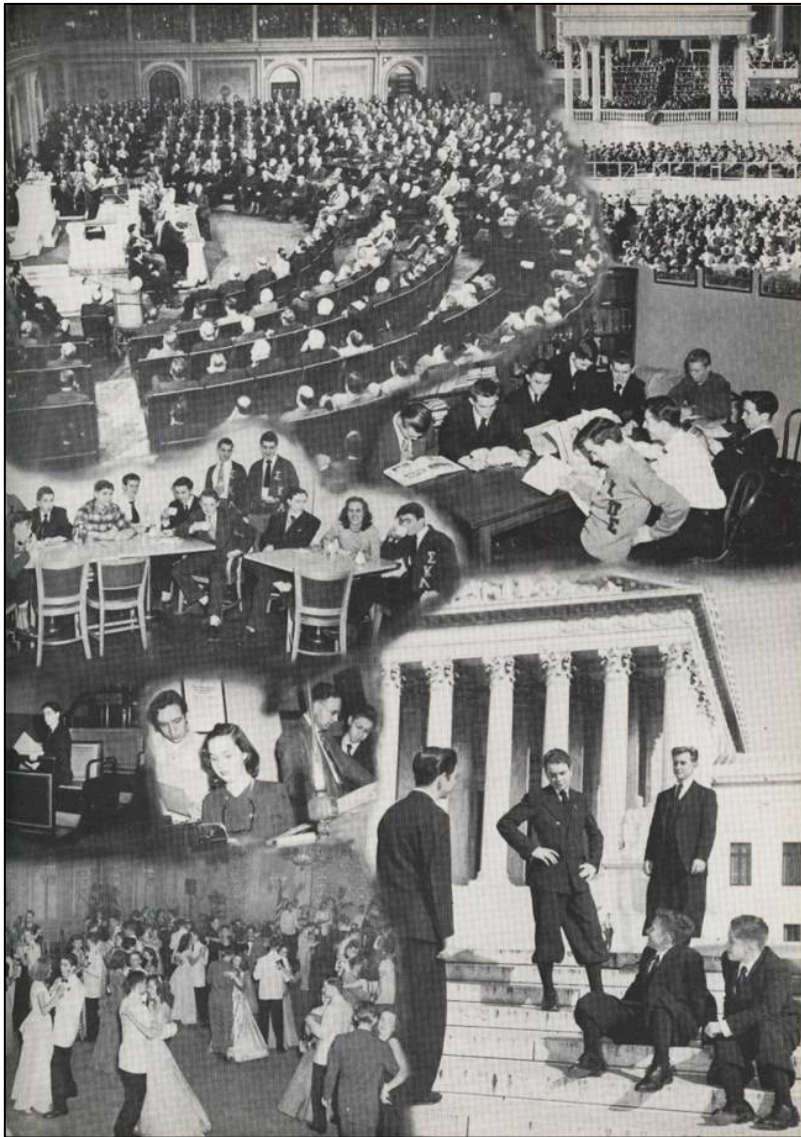


Figure 8. The Congressional, Page School Yearbook, 1946. Collection of the U.S. House of Representatives.

Eventually, all the Pages get a standardized look. According to yearbooks and other page school materials, the Senate abandoned knickers in 1949. The Supreme Court held out, though, keeping their Pages in knickers until the 1960s. Perhaps there is an obvious metaphor for the speed of change within the respective institutions in this relative-knicker timetable.

The Page School eventually became more formalized and national. Eligibility was limited to juniors and seniors in high school. Students applied through their Members of Congress, were considered based on their academic records, and lived in dorms. The student body was no longer mostly local. It also became co-ed in the 1970s. A dress code handbook from 1986 (figure 9) shows a more diverse yet more regulated group. Every student wore a navy blazer, white shirt, black shoes and a tie provided by the Doorkeeper's Office. Boys wore medium grey trousers, while girls could choose a below-the-knee grey skirt or trousers. The Pages not only look like one another, but they also look not terribly different from conservatively dressed young staffers. Lapel pins were their most identifying feature.

With more research, I hope to uncover more solid documentation on how and when the different looks for House Pages came and went over time. The anomaly of the 1907 uniform look for the House Pages, though, for now stands in as transitional experiment in playing with the image of the institution's young workers. Just prior, they were knickered pre-teens. Shortly after, they exercised the same wardrobe choices as the Members they served, picking their own dark suits, a change just preceding the organization of the Page School. Until then, whether the military look was simply a reflection of fashion in a particular culture moment, or an expression of a specific motive within the House, will remain a matter of speculation.

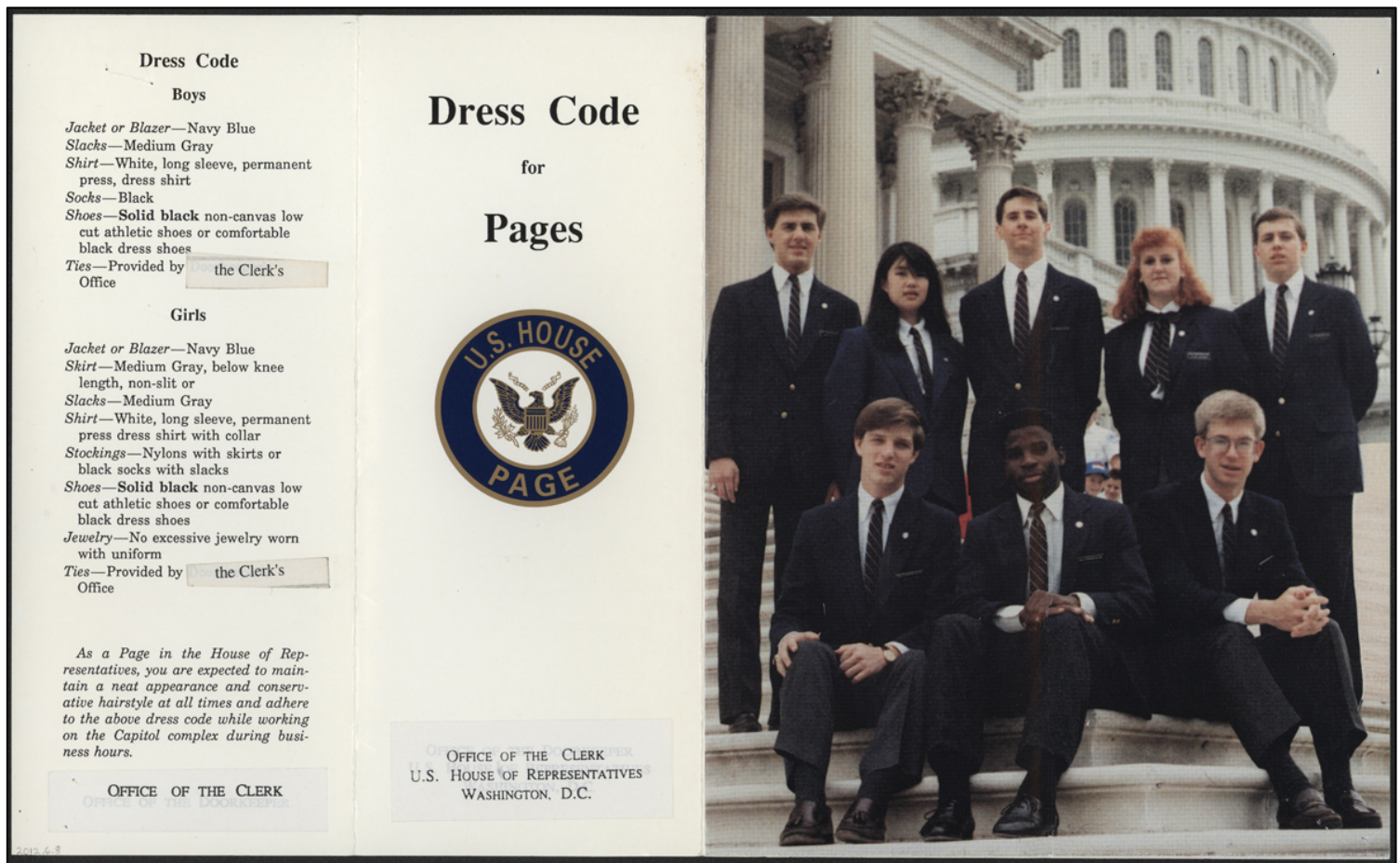


Figure 9. Page School Dress Code booklet, c. 1985. Collection of the U.S. House of Representatives.