President John F. Kennedy: His Lasting Legacy at Seton Hall University

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To me, as a senior student majoring in history and art history at Seton Hall University, the research process often felt like second nature. It is imperative that a history scholar at any level not only understand the research process but also, more importantly, be aware of the research tools and sources available and how to access them. However, there is always more to discover and learn. Most historians will agree that the research process is never complete—that there is a vast quantity of new sources and materials to be found, recorded and analyzed in any subject. More so, for history students it is never enough to rely solely on a secondary source, and more importantly it is essential to question and understand the historical context of any primary source. The deeper one delves into history the more important primary research becomes. One of the most valuable resources available to Seton Hall University students are the archives. Last year, when I was a student beginning an internship in the archives, the sources seemed expansive and overwhelming. Yet, learning to navigate through the materials was essential to my project: an investigation of and research about President John F. Kennedy’s connection to Newark and to Seton Hall University.

It was difficult to enter the assignment with minimal knowledge of John F. Kennedy’s history in New Jersey. It was unclear what would be uncovered. How closely tied was Kennedy to New Jersey politics, education and culture? Was he active before his election to the presidency and was he a continual voice in New Jersey politics? How did his death resonate with Seton Hall and New Jersey residents as a whole? At the end of the research, what was most compelling was not only the variety of resources available but also the connections that were made through the different sources. By looking at photographs, reading newspapers and correspondence, and interviewing an individual who had met Kennedy and acquired one of his collections, the conclusions of the research flourished naturally. President John F. Kennedy in fact had connections to New Jersey politicians and corresponded with them on key issues. Yet, what was most intriguing was to observe the press’s reaction to Kennedy, both from Catholic newspapers and student body. How did these two groups perceive Kennedy and how were they affected by his untimely death? Through all the research a clear image began to appear. Though the final research may not be complete, a more solidified image of John F. Kennedy’s persona and legacy from a New Jersey perspective emerged. He was a president who faced controversy, particularly with the Catholic Church, but was also admired and watched, notably by the student body of Seton Hall.

Looking at photographs, particularly negatives, of Kennedy and his family was a helpful and interesting way to begin the project. It provided a way to become familiar with the faces and subjects that would be under further observation. Inside the Ace Alagna photograph box are several series of negative images. In the box labeled 00180202-0018029, 80 photographs of Kennedy and Jackie are available. More negative images show cardinals as well as Richard J. Hughes, who was governor of New Jersey from 1962-1970. Other photographs are available in black and white and occasionally color. Some, located in Richard J. Hughes Papers box number 108, range all the way until 1966 when President Johnson was in office. There are also many black and white candid profile pictures of Kennedy campaigning in Spring Lake in Box 34. Many of these photographs provide insight into John F. Kennedy’s early career, and it was interesting to see the progression of his career in this form. In Box 31 of the Ace Alagna photographs there are several negatives of President Kennedy at a podium in Newark. Additionally, there are 12 photographs of Kennedy and Johnson at the Presidential Inauguration. In the same box, under 008182272, negatives show Governor Hughes and Kennedy and in Box 00182278 the
photographs are titled “Newark Welcomes Kennedy.” This collection of negatives shows Kennedy sitting with other New Jersey officials, who at the time of writing could not be identified. After Kennedy’s assassination, Governor Hughes and President Johnson were photographed together. One photograph in particular was located in the Richard J. Hughes photo albums box 107 Box 2. In Box 7 labeled 00185422, several negatives showed Robert Kennedy, Governor Hughes and Dennis Carey. A color photograph from December 19, 1970, showed Hughes and Johnson together. This shows the deep connection built between the New Jersey Democrats and the White House. Frequently Hughes corresponded with Kennedy himself prior to 1963.

One of the most enlightening groups of sources were the newspapers available in the archives. I read 1956 through 1970 issues of the Setonian, Seton Hall’s student newspaper, in the attempt to observe student reactions to Senator Kennedy’s election and how well the student press covered his presidency. Surprisingly, the Setonian published more articles on John F. Kennedy and his political policies than did the Advocate. One such Setonian article reflected negative criticism from the Republican Party on Kennedy’s presidential campaign. The article from the Setonian was featured on November 3, 1960, and titled “Kennedy Lacks Leadership Ability.” The article went on to compare Kennedy to Eisenhower and claimed that because of his youth he lacked luster and maturity. On October 20, 1960, Seton Hall held a mock election, and on November 3, 1960, the front page of the Setonian featured an article that stated “Kennedy Top Ace over Nixon.” Kennedy had won the Seton Hall mock election by 71.5%. From this, it was clear that Kennedy was popular with American youth, and specifically, youth at a Catholic university. After his death, the Setonian also featured numerous articles in memory of Kennedy. On Thursday, November 18, 1964, the publication featured an article “The Real Tragedy” reflecting not only the nation’s loss but the collective loss of hope felt among the youth of campuses across the country, after Kennedy’s assassination. On Wednesday, February 17, 1965, the Setonian featured an article titled “JFK Memorial Week Highlighted at SHU” which was an exhibit lasting one week, highlighting the ideals and message of Kennedy. Further research showed how committed the student body of Seton Hall was to Kennedy’s legacy. The National Student Committee for the John Fitzgerald Kennedy Memorial Library campaigned to have an extension added to the library in his name. Furthermore, student representatives were featured in an article from February 27, 1964, titled “JFK ‘Living Memorial Presented to Johnson”’ This was an incredible show of support from the student body by presenting President Johnson with a plaque in commemoration of Kennedy after his death.

The Advocate provided a different perspective on Kennedy’s presidency, particularly from the Catholic Church. In 1960, the Advocate published several articles concerning Senator Kennedy’s campaign. Many of them asked readers to consider what they would want from a Catholic president. Other articles focused on Kennedy’s outreach to the Catholic community. One article in particular, from July 21, 1960, titled “Sen. Kennedy: Don’t Vote For, Against Me on Religious Grounds” quoted Kennedy as saying, “My decisions on every public policy will be my own-as an American, a Democrat and a free man.” This provides some insight into Kennedy’s perspective and relationship with the Catholic Church. A variety of articles were written before his election. One such article was titled “Kennedy and Conscience” published on January 7, 1960. The article reflected concern over whether the presidential nominee would fulfill expected roles of a Catholic. One of the major conflicts Kennedy faced with the Catholic Church dealt with government funding of private education institutions, particularly Catholic schools and universities. The Advocate heavily covered this topic and rarely focused on other aspects of his presidency. Kennedy refused to give government funds to private schools and, in turn, many Catholic officials publicly objected to his stance.
Several other types of sources available in the archives were helpful to me in my research process. There are boxes with newspapers and magazines, but the most compelling and extensive collection was by Monsignor Seymour of Seton Hall. Inside are several facsimile documents, including White House invitations from the Kennedy Library National Archives and Records Services. There are also several copies of Kennedy’s handwriting and notes. Also available are letters of condolences to the Very Reverend Monsignor John J. Cassele at the Immaculate Conception Seminary in Darlington, Ramsey, New Jersey. Several newspapers, including a TIME magazine and MAD magazine, feature Kennedy on the cover after his election. Also available are the New York Times, Newark Evening News, Bayonne Times and Newsweek from November 1960, honoring the election of Kennedy on the front pages. These are significant, not only because they show the importance of his election on a national and global scale, but in accordance with this research, they exhibit the reaction in New Jersey to Kennedy’s election.

In the Richard J. Hughes Papers Collection from January 1962-June 1962, several correspondence letters are present between President Kennedy and Governor Hughes. One in particular is a telegram from the Office of the Governor to John F. Kennedy dated Friday A.M. May 18, 1962. The telegram is a correspondence showing Governor Hughes’ support of President Kennedy’s program of foreign trade activity. Similarly there is a letter from President Kennedy to Hughes on May 10, 1962. Often Governor Hughes would mention Kennedy in his speeches.

One of my most insightful experiences in the archives involved the opportunity to have a one-on-one interview with Monsignor Seymour. During the interview Monsignor Seymour recalled when he met Kennedy while he was a senator in 1957. They had a brief encounter in the U.S. Capitol Building. Msgr. Seymour was able to confirm and clarify the previous research that I had done on Kennedy before conducting the interview. Moreover, he provided in-depth and firsthand knowledge of the Catholic Church’s view of Kennedy before and during his presidency. He commented on the conflict over Kennedy’s refusal to fund private schools with government funds. At the time, Seymour was attending seminary. He provided details as to his political views and how this affected how he voted. (He admitted to voting for Nixon.) However, he could not deny the great impact Kennedy’s presidency had on the nation and he was able to provide a firsthand account of how Kennedy’s assassination affected his generation.

It is a difficult task to accumulate, research, and document every source available on one topic as broad as Kennedy and New Jersey and specifically his connection to Seton Hall. One paper alone cannot sufficiently illustrate the array of documents and resources available on the subject. Therefore the research is not complete. It would be very fulfilling to continue this research in order to come to a more precise and distinct thesis. There are more letters and documents to analyze that could add to a more in-depth essay. However, from the research accumulated, it is possible to make conclusions about the perception of Kennedy in different aspects of New Jersey life. Some residents favored him and some were more critical. It was surprising to find that the Advocate chose to primarily cover financial controversies with Kennedy. Likewise, the student body at Seton Hall supported Kennedy throughout his campaign and presidency as well as Governor Hughes. Moreover, learning the research process within the archives is a valuable asset to any person wanting to advance in a historical field. For me, this process included learning how to handle photographs and delicate papers with gloves, how to use the reel for the newspaper, and how to navigate the stacks and files in the archive room. Overall, working in the archives was an educational and fulfilling experience that enabled me to research a personal project and expand research skills.
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Interview

Part of the exhibit at the Seton Hall University Archives and Special Collections Center, featuring Jousset’s research on Kennedy’s legacy at Seton Hall. Image courtesy of the Seton Hall University Archives and Special Collections Center.