

Understanding Archives

What They Are and How to Use Them

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Most historical sources have not been published. Genealogists who want to conduct a thorough search for their ancestors must eventually turn to original records housed in archives. This lecture shows how archives differ from libraries and manuscript collections. It describes archival organization and the finding aids researchers use to access materials. Private archives, state archives and the National Archives in Washington, D.C., are all discussed. Web sites are examined as the major portal to archives of all kinds, but guides and manuals published in paper format are also discussed. This lecture takes the trepidation and mystery out of graduating from using published materials to using original sources.

INTRODUCTION: THE VALUE OF ARCHIVES

Most Historical Sources Have Not Been Published

I. HOW DO ARCHIVES DIFFER FROM OTHER REPOSITORIES?

1. Archives: A repository that keeps original records (original sources) exactly as they were maintained by the creating agency.
2. Library: A repository that keeps published materials (derivative sources) arranged for users.
3. Manuscript Collection: A collection of original papers (original sources) of people, families, businesses or organizations arranged for users.
4. Public Record Office: An agency that creates public records (original sources) that later may be archived.
5. Public Archives
 - A. National Archives
 - B. State Archives
 - C. County Archives
 - D. City Archives
6. Private Archives
 - A. Religious Organizations
 - B. Businesses
 - C. Associations and Societies
 - D. Educational Institutions

II. HOW IS AN ARCHIVES ORGANIZED?

1. Record Group (RG): the records of a major agency
2. Record Series: the records of a subgroup of a major agency

III. HOW DO YOU USE AN ARCHIVES?

- 1. Search by *Agency* Rather Than by *Individual*
- 2. Consult Finding Aids, such as:
 - A. Website of the agency
 - B. Catalogs of microfilm publications
 - C. Preliminary inventories
 - D. Descriptive pamphlets
 - E. Genealogy guides and manuals.
 - F. Guides and directories of specific topics
- 3. Consult with the archivist (curator)

IV. WHERE ARE ARCHIVES LOCATED?

- 1. In the custody of the creating agency, or
- 2. In the custody of a successor agency, or
- 3. In a separate, dedicated facility, or
- 4. In university libraries, or
- 5. In historical societies, or
- 6. In museums, or
- 7. In the hands of private collectors, or
- 8. In other places!

V. HOW DO YOU FIND THE ARCHIVES YOU NEED?

- 1. Internet Websites: browse by subject or the name of a particular agency
- 2. Guides and Manuals
- 3. Footnotes Found in History Books

VI. SAMPLE RESEARCH CASES

- 1. National Archives
- 2. State Archives
- 3. Private Archives

**CONCLUSION: ARCHIVES HOLD PRINTS, PHOTOGRAPHS AND MAPS, TOO.—
Unique illustrations for your family history**

Examples of Finding Aids Discussed in the Lecture

INTERNET WEBSITES

The American Jewish Archives: www.huc.edu/aja/home.html.
Brethren in Christ Historical Library and Archives: www.bic-church.org/about.html.

Archives of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America:

www.elca.org/os/archives/intro.html.

Illinois State Archives: www.sos.state.il.us/departments/archives/archives.html.

The National Archives of the United States: www.archives.gov.

Oregon State University Archives:

<http://osulibrary.oregonstate.edu/archives/index.html>.

The Steamship Historical Society of America Collection: www.sshsa.net/index.html.

Utah State Archives and Records Service: www.archives.state.ut.us.

Wells Fargo Corporate Archives: www.wellsfargohistory.com/archives.

EXAMPLES OF GUIDES TO SPECIFIC ARCHIVAL REPOSITORIES

Guide to Federal Records in the National Archives of the United States, 3 vols.

Washington, DC: National Archives and Records Administration, 1995.

Describes the NA's holdings. On line at www.archives.gov.

Huges, Christine Human, comp. *Guide to St. Louis Catholic Archdiocese Parish*

Records. St. Louis: St. Louis Public Library, 2001.

Moody, Suzanna, and Joel Wurl, comps. and eds. *The Immigration History Research*

Center: A Guide to Collections. New York: Greenwood Press, 1991.

Describes materials available at the University of Minnesota, St. Paul.

EXAMPLES OF GUIDES FOR SPECIFIC SUBJECTS

Beers, Henry Putney. *The Confederacy: A Guide to the Archives of the Confederate*

States of America. Washington, DC: National Archives and Records

Administration, 1968. (Reprinted 1986)

Describes records housed in many repositories nationwide.

Bolino, August C. *The Ellis Island Source Book*. Washington, DC: Kensington

Historical Press, 1985.

Bibliography, original and published sources for Ellis Island and its history.

Colletta, John Philip. *They Came in Ships: A Guide to Finding Your Immigrant*

Ancestor's Arrival Record, 3rd ed. Orem, Utah: Ancestry, Inc., 2002.

Describes available records and indexes, colonial times to mid-twentieth century, and explains how to find one passenger among the millions.

Hansen, Holly T. *The Directory of North American Railroads, Associations, Societies,*

Archives, Libraries, Museums and Their Collections. Croydon, Utah: the author,

1999.

Munden, Kenneth W., and Henry Putney Beers. *The Union: A Guide to Federal Archives Relating to the Civil War*. Washington, DC: National Archives and Records Administration, 1962. (Reprinted 1986)

Describes the records in the NA, regional archives, other federal agencies and non-governmental repositories. Extensive bibliography.

SAMPLE MICROFILM CATALOGS

American Indians: A Select Catalog of National Archives Microfilm Publications.

Washington, DC: National Archives Trust Fund Board, 1984.

Contains roll-by-roll description of tribal enumerations, Dawes Rolls, Eastern Cherokee records, Indian School records, and others.

Microfilm Resources for Research: A Comprehensive Catalog. Washington, DC: National Archives Trust Fund Board, 1996.

Latest edition of the complete list of National Archives microfilm available.

SAMPLE DESCRIPTIVE PAMPHLETS (DPs)

Registers and Indexes for Passport Applications, 1810-1906. Washington, DC:

National Archives Trust Fund Board, 1986.

Five-page DP for microfilm M1371.

Revolutionary War Pension and Bounty Land Warrant Application Files, 1800-1900.

Washington, DC: National Archives Trust Fund Board, 1966.

Fourteen-page DP for microfilm M805.

SAMPLE INVENTORIES AND PRELIMINARY INVENTORIES (PIs)

Davidson, Katherine H., and Charlotte M. Ashby, comps. *Records of the Bureau of the Census*. Preliminary Inventory No. 161. Washington, DC: National Archives and Records Service, 1964.

Rhoads, James B., and Charlotte M. Ashby, comps. *Cartographic Records of the Bureau of the Census*. Preliminary Inventory No. 103. Washington, DC:

National Archives and Records Service, 1958.

Describes enumeration district maps, 1880 to 1960, and much more.

SAMPLE SPECIAL LISTS AND CHECKLISTS

Fishbein, Meyer H. *The Censuses of Manufacturers, 1810-1890*. Reference Information Paper No. 50. Washington, DC: National Archives and Records

Service, 1973.

Newman, Debra L., comp. *List of Free Black Heads of Families in the First Federal Census, 1790*, rev. ed. Special List No. 34. Washington, DC: National Archives and Records Service, 1974.

SAMPLE CATALOGS AND INVENTORIES OF SPECIFIC COLLECTIONS

Andreozzi, John, comp. *Guide to the Records of the Order Sons of Italy*. St. Paul: University of Minnesota Press, 1989.

Fire Insurance Maps in the Library of Congress: Plans of North American Cities and Towns Produced by the Sanborn Map Company. Washington, DC: Library of Congress, 1981.

Sanborn Maps listed by state, then city, then chronologically.

SAMPLE CATALOGS AND INDEXES TO MANUSCRIPT COLLECTIONS

Harper, Josephine L. *Guide to the Draper Manuscripts*. Madison: The State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1983.

Huge collection of materials relating to families that settled the trans-Appalachian frontier, late 18th to early 19th century.

National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections. Washington, DC: Library of Congress, 1959-1986/87. Multi-volume, on-going set. On-line since 1986/87 at <http://lcweb.loc.gov/coll/nucmc>.

Catalogs collections in U.S. and Canadian libraries reported to the LC.

SAMPLE GENEALOGY GUIDES AND MANUALS

Greenwood, Val D. *The Researcher's Guide to American Genealogy*, 3rd ed. Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Co., 2000.

Lipscomb, Anne S., and Kathleen S. Hutchison. *Tracing Your Mississippi Ancestors*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994.

Szucs, Loretto Dennis, and Sandra Hargreaves Luebking, eds. *The Source, A Guidebook of American Genealogy*, 3rd ed. Provo, Utah: Ancestry, 2006.

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