

An Overview of Genealogical Research in the National Archives

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WHEN MOST WASHINGTON, D.C., visitors glance up from the street and catch a full view of the giant, firm, indestructible National Archives Building, a special feeling stirs within—as when lumpy throats and teary eyes sometimes take over as sounds of our National Anthem or the “Battle Hymn of the Republic” begin to swell. Planted solidly and majestically between the famous Constitution and Pennsylvania Avenues in the nation’s capital, the impressive rows of thick, towering, sturdy, and ornate Corinthian columns on all four sides give the National Archives Building genuine historic and enduring character.

One could hardly believe the United States was among the last of the civilized nations to set up a national archives. Ours was established by an act of Congress in 1934, as recently as the Roosevelt years. Before the building was completed and opened in 1936, records were kept in attics, cellars, warehouses, closets, garages, trunks—you name it. These records were exposed to insects, heat, cold, and humidity. Some documents were still here but showed signs that exciting episodes had threatened their lives by fire. When the great iron doors, each over thirty-eight feet high and weighing six-and-one-half tons, finally opened trucks large and small lined up around the building and down Constitution Avenue waiting a turn to dump their loads of documents. That was almost two generations ago. The National Archives collections had begun to build.

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Over a hundred years earlier, in 1810, a congressional committee had found the public papers “in a state of great disorder and exposure; and in a situation neither safe nor honorable to the nation.”¹ It took Congress just over 125 years to get the corrective job done! But we do have a National Archives—an impressive one. Most Americans still do not know about it, and what it does, and what it can do for them. Librarians can help get that teaching job done.

Background

What does the National Archives do? Its chief purpose is as the ultimate repository of permanently valuable noncurrent records of the federal government. The holdings document American history from the First Continental Congress. Records of all three branches of government are included.

The archives are preserved and made available because of their continuing practical utility for the necessary processes of government, for the protection of public and private rights, and for the uses that can be made of the information contained in them by scholars, students and the general public. Records of lasting value from government agencies are preserved and made available to the general public by the National Archives. They become the stuff researchers use to create books, studies, articles, reports, and dissertations.

The records amount to more than a million cubic feet. They are deposited not only in the National Archives Building in Washington, D.C., but also in the Washington National Records Center in Suitland, Maryland, and in the eleven regional archives branches located in federal archives and records centers around the country. The records are described in the comprehensive *Guide to the National Archives of the United States*.² In each of the National Archives depositories, additional finding aids are available. These include inventories, preliminary inventories, special lists, indexes, and supplemental guides on specific subjects. In recent years, as more and more Americans have been discovering genealogy and family history, the National Archives has become more widely known and more frequently used than ever before.

Archives' Records of Genealogical Value

Since the National Archives doors opened for research, the genealogical researchers have been by far the most numerous of all persons who come to the National Archives to use its records. And now, after all

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the attention to ancestors that the Bicentennial and the two television series *Roots* inspired, the National Archives is doing a "land-office business." The number of researchers has doubled, and the general information and records reproduction mail has tripled.

Normally, about 65 to 70 percent of the in-person researcher traffic is genealogical, and over 90 percent of the mail received by the National Archives has to do with genealogy. Several thousand genealogical inquiries and records reproduction requests arrive every week.

Although the National Archives has no genealogical records in that sense, it does have records of genealogical value. This is to say, the National Archives has no collection of family trees, nor does it house published family genealogies. As pointed out earlier, the National Archives is a federal records depository. However, the federal records, in many cases, contain the four key elements in genealogical research—names, dates, places, and relationships. We consider runs of National Archives records (series) containing this information to be of genealogical value, thus they are commonly termed "the genealogical records in the National Archives."

The National Archives has in its custody millions of records relating to persons who have had dealings with the federal government. These records may contain full information about a person or give little information beyond a name. Among the federal records of the most value, and thus the most extensively used by genealogical researchers, are the federal census, military service and related records (such as applications for pensions and applications for claims to bounty land for military service), records of federal land transactions, and passenger arrival records.

The Federal Census

The most widely used record ever created by the government is the federal census of population. The first census was taken in 1790 for the purpose of apportioning representation to Congress. A population census has been taken every ten years since that time.

The National Archives has the 1790-1870 originals, a microfilm copy of the 1880 census and a microfilm copy of the 1900 and 1910 censuses. The 1890 census burned, with only a few fragments remaining. Censuses later than 1910 are under restriction and have not been released for public use. The 1910 census was released for public use in 1982, according to law, when it became age seventy-two. Recent censuses are withheld from researchers out of respect to the privacy of living individuals who were enumerated.

The 1790-1840 censuses give the names of the free household heads only; other family members are tallied by age and sex but are not named. In 1850 a very great decision was made—at least for the field of genealogy. That year the census takers were instructed to list the names and ages of every free person living in every household. Also listed was the state, territory, or country of birth of each free person. Additional information was included with each succeeding census.

The census records are one of the first records a beginning searcher should seek out. Through their use, families of ancestors living during the period 1850 to 1910 can be entirely or partially reconstituted. Although the 1790 to 1840 censuses do not show whole families, these censuses may provide very good leads and circumstantial data that can help solve genealogical problems.

One of the tremendous things about census records is their unequalled availability. All the available census records held at the National Archives have been microfilmed, and copies of the microfilm have been widely purchased. Many state and local historical and genealogical societies, large public libraries and state and university libraries and archives have purchased microfilm copies of census records.

Numerous local city and county libraries throughout the country have purchased from the National Archives copies of the available census records for their areas. In many cases these libraries have all census records for their entire state and sometimes all nearby states. Local librarians should make it a point to know what census records are available in the nearby area and should make this information readily available to library patrons. Remember, the federal census is the most widely used record ever created by the government. Librarians keen on genuine public service and the filling of real needs should be alert to the importance and value of these records that are in so great demand by “grass roots” America.

Some state libraries will lend their census microfilm via interlibrary loan to local city or county libraries. The North Carolina State Library in Raleigh offers such a program, one that could well be used as a model for other state libraries. The Library of the Genealogical Society of Utah holds a complete set of National Archives census microfilm and lends copies via its vast network of over 400 branch genealogical libraries. Librarians should know the locations and hours of operation of nearby genealogical libraries of the Genealogical Society of Utah. To find out the locations and hours of branches near you, write to: Branch Genealogical Libraries, Genealogical Department, 50 East North Temple Street, Salt Lake City, Utah 84150. Ask for the names, street addresses, telephone numbers, and hours of the nearest branch genea-

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logical libraries. These branch genealogical libraries are run by volunteers; the hours are usually partial days and the hours differ on various days and evenings. The libraries are free and open to the general public. A nominal fee is charged for microfilm loans sent out from the main library in Salt Lake City; the charge is to cover postage and handling, not for profit. Having this information available and disseminating it widely will be a valuable service to your library patrons.

The regional archives branches of the National Archives, located in eleven metropolitan areas around the country, have complete sets of census microfilm, 1790-1910. A list of the regional branches of the National Archives, with hours, addresses and phone numbers can be obtained by writing for the free leaflet on regional branches. Librarians and researchers should write to: Reference Services Branch (NNIR), National Archives, Washington, D.C. 20408. Rentals of microfilmed federal census records can be obtained by mail through libraries or genealogical societies. The National Archives has contracted with a private company to provide this service. At a fee of \$2.25 per roll (some libraries add a nominal handling fee), rentals can be ordered from: D.D.D. Company, Census Microfilm Rental Program, P.O. Box 2940, Hyattsville, Maryland 20784. Rentals are not made directly to individuals.

Passenger Arrival Records

The passenger arrival records in the National Archives list names of passengers who arrived at ports on the Atlantic Ocean or the Gulf of Mexico and a few inland ports. The available records consist of passenger lists, transcripts, abstracts, baggage lists, and manifests. Although there are lists for as early as 1798, most of them are for the years 1820-1945, and for those years there are many gaps. The lists dated before 1819 are primarily baggage lists that are a part of the cargo manifests. The San Francisco passenger lists were destroyed by fires in 1851 and 1940, and lists for other Pacific coast ports, if they exist, have not been transferred to the National Archives. During the nineteenth century the law did not require passenger arrival records as such to be kept for persons entering the United States by land from Mexico and Canada.

Whereas thousands came during the Colonial period, for which the National Archives has no holdings, it was later that the great tidal wave of migration hit the Atlantic coast of this country. A great bulk of immigrants came during the one hundred year period 1815-1914. Some 35 million Europeans immigrated during this period, most of whom

came through the port of New York. Although the passenger arrival records in the National Archives are incomplete, the available lists document a high percentage of nineteenth-century immigration. The voluminous lists are handwritten and are chronologically arranged by port.

The lists consist mainly of customs passenger lists and immigration passenger lists. Customs and immigration passenger lists were received by the collectors of customs and later by the immigration officials at the ports of arrival from the captains or masters of vessels. This was done in compliance with federal law.

There are some indexes to the passenger arrival records but they are not complete. The National Archives will consult an index for patrons by mail and if the name of the ancestor is found will make a photocopy of the corresponding passenger list for a nominal charge. This service can be obtained by use of NATF Form 40, Order for Copies of Passenger Arrival Records. At this writing the charge for copies was \$5, payable in advance. If no record is found, the \$5 is returned.

In some cases, in order for the staff to find the list, the researcher must provide the very information he wants to know. However, in a great many instances the staff is able to locate lists with a minimum of data supplied by the researcher. Librarians may advise researchers to order forms from: Reference Services Branch (NNIR), National Archives, Washington, D.C. 20408.

Librarians should remember that federal passenger lists date no earlier than 1820. These records are of no use in tracing ancestry for the Colonial period. Always refer library patrons to the state archives in the Colonial states when they are researching ancestry in the Colonial period. The passenger arrival records are available on microfilm only in the National Archives Building in Washington, D.C. Copies of the microfilm are *not* housed in the regional archives branches.

Military Service and Related Records

Beginning with the Revolutionary War, the National Archives has records relating to military service (army, navy, marine corps, coast guard, air force) of individuals and their units and records of veterans' benefits, including pension, bounty land, and other benefits. These records are often rich in genealogical information or can be helpful in providing clues as to the identity of veterans or their heirs.

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Compiled Military Service Records

One type of record available is the compiled military service record. These compiled service records are files that include data compiled from various records created during a soldier's service. It must be remembered that in the early days detailed records were not made as they are today. Using what records were available, the War Department made compilations of soldiers' service information before the records themselves were retired to the National Archives. Normally there is not in the files much personal data about a soldier or his family. Often you find his age at enlistment and the place of enlistment, which can be valuable information. Occasionally a death date is in the file, particularly when the soldier died in service.

The military service records of volunteers (persons who served during an emergency) 1775-1902 relate to service during the Revolutionary War, immediately after the Revolutionary War 1784-1811, the War of 1812, the Indian Wars 1816-1860, the Mexican War 1846-48, the Civil War, the Spanish-American War, and Philippine Insurrection. The records relate to persons who freely enlisted as well as to those who were induced to serve. Included are records relating to activities involving the quelling of disturbances by Indians and American citizens or residents and service in settling disputes with Canada and Mexico.

The military service records of volunteer soldiers and sometimes sailors and marines who served beginning with the Revolutionary War through 1902 were abstracted onto cards from original documents in the various War Department office records and from documents received by those offices from federal, state and private sources. The information was gathered from muster and pay rolls, rank rolls, returns, hospital records, prison records, accounts for subsistence, and such other records likely to contain information about the military service of individuals.

The abstracts for each individual soldier were placed into a jacket-envelope bearing the soldier's name, rank and military unit. The record resulting was called a *compiled military service record*. The compiled military service records were arranged by period of service, thereunder by state or other military unit designation, thereunder by unit, and thereunder alphabetically by surname of the soldier. They were prepared under a War Department program begun some years after the Civil War to permit more rapid and efficient checking of military and medical records in connection with claims for pensions and other veterans' benefits.

A compiled military service record is as complete as are the records relating to the individual soldier's or his unit's activities. Typically they

show the soldier's rank, military unit, entry into service, discharge or separation by desertion, death or dismissal, and may also include age, place of birth and residence at enlistment. The abstracts were so carefully prepared that no need exists to consult the original records from which they were made, which is good because it would be a difficult and time-consuming task to do so.

Pension Application Files

The National Archives has millions of pension application files and also pension payment records for veterans, their widows, and other heirs. The records relate to military, naval and marine service performed between 1775 and 1916, generally excluding Confederate service. Pensions were granted by Congress to invalid or disabled veterans; to widows and orphans of men who were killed or died in service; to veterans who served a minimum period of time and were generally disabled and living at an advanced age; to widows of veterans who served a minimum period of time if the widows were living at an advanced age; and, in some instances, to other heirs.

The acts of Congress under which applications for pensions were made are numerous. They include public acts which affected large groups of persons and private acts which affected specific individuals. Each claim for a pension was normally based upon a single act of Congress. A claims file consists of the application of the claimant, supporting documents of identity and service, and evidence of the action taken on the claim. There were often two or more claims relating to the service of the same veteran in the same war, which records are filed together. For example, a veteran might apply for a pension and, after his death, his widow might apply for a pension on the basis of the same service. A file showing that a surviving widow applied for a pension normally contains more information than a veteran's file.

Because of the applications of surviving widows, the pension application files are known as the most valuable genealogical records relating to military service. These files often are rich in genealogical data. In order to start receiving the pension, the widow had to prove she married the soldier. It is normal to find in the files the marriage date and place, the name of the minister who performed the ceremony, the maiden name of the wife, and often other good information. Sometimes pages from the family Bible were sent to Washington as the only available written proof of marriage or age. These old family Bible pages are still in many of the pension application files.

Initially the documents relating to an individual claim were folded

and placed in an annotated jacket. Later these documents were flattened and filed with the jacket in one or more large envelopes. The envelopes with their contents are called pension application files. Consolidated with the documents relating to an original claim and in the same envelope or envelopes are the documents, if any, relating to later pension claims based on the same service. In addition, for Revolutionary War and War of 1812 service, some bounty land warrant application files (discussed later) and some final payment vouchers have been consolidated with the related pension application files. The number and nature of documents in a file vary considerably. The records in all series except those for the Civil War and later series are arranged alphabetically by name of veteran. This excepted series is arranged numerically by application, certificate or file number. All series of pension application files have alphabetical name indexes.

Bounty Land Warrant Application Files

Before 1855 the government gave away bounty land for military service. The bounty land warrant application files also often contain information of genealogical value. Normally you at least find the veteran's age at the time of application and his then current county and state of residence, both of which are good genealogical information.

A bounty land warrant was a right to free land on the public domain. Bounty land warrants were granted to veterans or their heirs on the basis of wartime military service performed during the period 1775-1855. Congress authorized special privileges to Union veterans of the Civil War who applied for homesteads but did not authorize the granting of bounty land warrants.

The documents in a bounty land warrant application file include an application for a warrant and/or discharge certificate surrendered by the veteran or his heir to substantiate his claim, and jackets containing notations as to whether the claim was approved or disapproved. A file shows such information as name, age, residence, rank, military or naval unit, and period of service of the veteran. If the applicant was an heir, it shows such information as the date and place of death of the veteran, the name of the heir or heirs, and the degree of relationship. If the application was approved, it also shows the number of the warrant, the number of acres granted, and the year of the act under which the warrant was granted.

A file containing an approved bounty land warrant application file is identified by a number made up as follows: the number of the warrant, the number of acres granted and the year (last two digits of the year of the

act under which the claim was adjudicated)—e.g., BLWT 66415-160-55. This number is sufficient to identify the related land-entry papers, which are part of another separate series of records (land records) in the National Archives.

Ordering Copies of Military and Related Records by Mail

Researchers can fill out a government form and send it to Washington. For a nominal charge the National Archives will supply photocopies of the documents it has on individuals who fought in any of the early wars. The three types of military and related records described earlier begin with the Revolutionary War. The records of men who fought in the War of Independence are not complete, as there were two fires that caused some losses. An office fire in 1800 was followed by more losses when the British burned Washington during the War of 1812. Nonetheless, the National Archives has a good collection of Revolutionary War military service records, pension application files, and bounty land warrant application files. The records of later wars are more complete.

There are files at the National Archives on men who fought in all the wars up to World War I. The records on men who fought in World War I and later wars are at the Military Personnel Records Center (MPRC), GSA, 9700 Page Boulevard, St. Louis, MO 63132. Requests by mail for records housed at the Military Personnel Records Center should be made on Standard Form 180, Request Pertaining to Military Personnel Records. Certain criteria must be satisfied before copies of these more recent records can be released.

Ordering copies of veterans' records of the early wars is much less complicated. Researchers simply fill out NATF Form 26, Order for Copies of Veterans' Records. Minimum identifying data required are the veteran's name, the war, and the state from which the soldier served. Blank forms are available by writing to: Reference Services Branch (NNIR), National Archives, Washington, D.C. 20408. Libraries need not stock this form. It is better to advise researchers to write personally to the National Archives, requesting the specific forms needed and at the same time asking for a set of the free genealogical information leaflets.

Librarians should always advise researchers to use the services available from the National Archives by mail. The services are largely subsidized by tax dollars. Whenever it is known that an ancestor fought in one of the early wars, or even when such service is only suspected, it is wise for researchers to order copies of any available files that may relate to an ancestor's military service, any pension his or her heirs may have

received, or any available bounty land application relating to the service.

Land Records

The land records in the National Archives are dated chiefly 1800-1950 and include bounty land warrant files, donation land entry files, homestead application files, and private land claim files relating to the entry of individual settlers on land in the public land states. There are no federal land records for the thirteen original states and Maine, Vermont, West Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee, Texas, and Hawaii. Records for these states are maintained by state officials, usually in the state archives or offices of secretaries of state, or other state offices in the state capital.

The donation land entry files and homestead application files show, in addition to the name of the applicant, the location of the land and the date he acquired it, his residence or post office address, his age or date and place of birth, his marital status, and, if applicable, the given name of his wife or the size of his family. If an applicant for homestead land was of foreign birth, his application file contains evidence of his naturalization or of his intention to become a citizen. Supporting documents show the immigrant's country of birth and sometimes the date and port of arrival. Genealogical information in records relating to private land claims varies from the mention of the claimant's name and location of the land to such additional information as the claimant's place of residence when he made the claim and the names of his relatives, both living and dead.

Most of the federal land records are housed at the Washington National Records Center in Suitland, Maryland, which is just outside the District of Columbia, and is accessed by shuttle from the National Archives Building in downtown Washington. A mail service is also available for these records. The National Archives will search the land records for Alabama, Alaska, Arizona, Florida, Louisiana, Nevada, or Utah for the period 1800 to 1 July 1908, if the full name of the applicant and the name of the state or territory in which the land was located are given. The search can be made because of existing indexes to the records that came with the records when they became a part of the National Archives.

A search of the records for all other public land states and territories, 1800-1950, requires, in addition to the applicant's name (1) the number of the land entry file or a description of the land by township, range, section, and fraction of section or (2) the name of the land office

and either the date when the original application was filed or the date of the final certificate. Researchers may be able to obtain the legal description of land by writing to the county recorder of deeds in the county seat of the county in which the land was located.

The federal land records verify the transaction when ownership of land in the federal domain was transferred to an individual. Once transferred, the next transfer of title when that land changed hands was recorded in the county of jurisdiction and is a part of the deed records in that county. No form is available for ordering copies of federal land records. To order by mail, send all the known information regarding a land transaction in a letter and address it to: Land Records, National Archives, Washington, D.C. 20409.

Other Records of Genealogical Value

The three high-volume records used most because they are of the most help to the most people are mentioned in the preceding—census, passenger arrival, and military and related records. But, as discussed, there are also records relating to land, affecting only persons who received land directly from the federal government. There are also other records—relating to passports, Indians, claims against the government, and others that can be genealogically useful.

Passport Applications

The National Archives has passport applications and related papers, 1791-1905, of U.S. citizens who intended to travel abroad. Passports were not required during the nineteenth century, but many people took the time to get them because of their convenience in getting about from country to country without delays. The National Archives will make limited searches for age and citizenship information in any of these records that are at least seventy-five years old. The name of the person who applied for a passport and the place and approximate date of application should be supplied. Write to: Passport Applications, National Archives, Washington, D.C. 20408 (send a letter; no form is required). Requests for information from passport records after 1905 should be addressed to the Passport Office, Department of State, Washington, D.C. 20520.

Records about Indians

There are many records in the National Archives relating to Indians who kept their tribal status. The records, arranged by tribes, are dated chiefly 1830-1940. They include lists of Indians (mainly Cherokee,

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Chickasaw, Choctaw, and Creek) who moved west during the period 1830-46; annuity pay rolls, 1841-1949; annual census rolls, 1885-1940 (available on microfilm); and Eastern Cherokee claim files, 1902-10. The regional archives branches, particularly those in the western states, also contain valuable holdings of Indian records.

Guide to Genealogical Records in the National Archives

This year the National Archives published the first revision to the 1964 edition of *Guide to Genealogical Records in the National Archives*.³ The second edition, entitled *Guide to Genealogical Research in the National Archives*, has been in the works since late 1976 and is a great improvement over the earlier edition.

Additional Helps and Tips on Research in the Nation's Capital

The National Archives has "sister" institutions in Washington, D.C., which have good collections of genealogical materials. Among them are the Library of the National Society, Daughters of the American Revolution; the Library of Congress; and the Library of the National Genealogical Society. The DAR and LC do not circulate books to genealogical users, but loan service is available to members of the National Genealogical Society (NGS). Librarians should advise researchers of the valuable by-mail genealogical book circulation service available to them through membership in the National Genealogical Society. Membership applications and materials concerning NGS can be obtained from: National Genealogical Society, 1921 Sunderland Place, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036. The NGS also sponsors educational programs and national conferences and has a correspondence course available to help people become adept at the pursuit of American ancestry.

National Institute on Genealogical Research

An in-depth course of genealogical instruction known as the National Institute on Genealogical Research has been going on at the National Archives for over thirty years. At present the institute is sponsored by a coalition of the major genealogical organizations in the United States in cooperation with the National Archives. Information regarding this course, normally held in July each year (one or two weeks, with classes held in the National Archives Building), can be obtained by writing the Institute at P.O. Box 4970, Washington, D.C. 20008. This course is designed for persons who have had experience in the field of genealogy and is not intended for beginners. Over the years

the graduates of this intensive course have eventually emerged as the leaders in the genealogical field in this country.

Genealogical Tour to the Nation's Capital

A week-long "Washington Orientation Week" ("WOW!" as one participant labeled it) is sponsored in October each year by Washington area genealogists and myself—all former affiliates of the National Archives and of the National Institute on Genealogical Research. The week tour is open to everyone and includes orientation and research time at the National Archives, the Library of Congress, the D.A.R. Library, and the National Genealogical Society Library, plus added social attractions, such as a night out at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts. Information is available from: Genealogy in the Nation's Capital, c/o Bill R. Linder, 6129 Leesburg Pike, No. 415, Falls Church, Va. 22041.

It Ain't Always Easy Always Bein' Nice

Admittedly, it is not easy for librarians and depository attendants to continue to be courteous and helpful to all the everyday Americans who get interested in their ancestry and come in for help. Sometimes we want to duck and hide when they arrive armed with all their ignorance, inexperience, emptiness, and unpredictable questions. But we should try to be patient and understanding. We should try to help genealogist users get underway, in the right way. The pursuit of genealogy is enjoyed by millions and is recognized as one of the world's most popular indoor hobbies. Those who get into it have a great time, meet many interesting people, take trips, write letters, get mail, find lost cousins, and much more. Best of all their lives are enriched. Librarians can make a magnificent contribution by steering America's everyday researchers easily and correctly, overseeing them gently until they experience their own first "thrill of discovery."

References

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3. National Archives Trust Fund. *Guide to Genealogical Research in the National Archives*. Washington, D.C.: National Archives, 1983. (Send check or money order to: National Archives, Box 122, Washington, D.C. 20408. Cost of the edition is \$21 for hard cover and \$17 for soft cover.)