



Federal Records Relating to Rivers and Canals

Pamela Boyer Sayre, CG, FUGA
14724 S. Evening Side Dr.
Herriman, Utah 84096
E-mail: Pam@SayreandSayre.com

Rivers and canals were the equivalent of interstate highways in our ancestors' times. Americans re-engineered and improved rivers to accommodate faster travel and built canals to facilitate transportation of passengers and goods by more convenient routes. Federal records documenting these activities and describing the waterways in great detail can be found in many sources.

This session explains the relevance of and provides examples of some of the rich resources that can be found at the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) and its regional facilities, the Library of Congress, contemporary federal agencies such as the Corps of Engineers, and applicable websites with indexes or digitized images.

Examples

A Map

The map shown here, a portion of one found in the *U.S. Serial Set*, highlights proposed improvement on the Kentucky Peninsula near Evansville, Indiana, and it also details landowners at the time (1925) along the Ohio River. Modern flood control and recreation projects have drastically changed rivers and adjacent lands throughout the United States; finding older records and maps documenting pre-twentieth-century or earlier environs and people is a boon for historians.

A Report

An 1808 report to the Senate discusses construction of a canal in Massachusetts to enable “vessels from sea to proceed in winter from Martha’s Vineyard to Boston, without sailing around Cape Cod,” or the \$850,000 expense of a proposed Delaware and Chesapeake Canal. The report goes on to describe the Ohio River’s flow as having a much gentler current than the Atlantic rivers, and mentions a 1793 schooner voyage on inland waterways from its building place on the Monongahela to New Orleans.¹

This 1808 report mentions New England’s wooden bridges over its broadest, deepest rivers and describes stone bridges in the lower counties of Pennsylvania, especially one over the Schuylkill near Philadelphia erected at a cost of \$300,000. The lack of bridges south of Pennsylvania is noted, “even on the main post road,” excepting “one lately thrown across the Potomac, three miles above the city of Washington, and which, without any intervening piers, is wholly suspended to iron chains, extending from bank to bank... ”²



Map 1, Ohio River, in vicinity of Evansville, Indiana, proposed improvement of Kentucky Peninsula, within H.R. Doc. No. 409, 69th Cong., 1st Sess. (1926).

¹ U.S. Congress, *American State Papers: Documents Legislative and Executive of the Congress of the United States*, 38 vols.; Class 10, Miscellaneous, 2 vols. (Washington, D.C.: Gales and Seaton, 1834), 1:725–732; digital images, ProQuest, *ProQuest Congressional* (access through participating libraries : 2017).

² *Ibid.*, pp. 738–739.

Not only do records such as these describe the development of infrastructure, but they provide a verbal picture of communities. For example, a committee tasked with surveying the waters of the Assanpink, Stonybrook, Millstone, and Raritan waters in New Jersey described the waterways in relation to the house of James Ewing, Esquire, and others, and provided a table of distances from the tide waters of the Delaware to the tide waters of the Raritan that named landmarks in the area such as Coleman's bridge, S. Brearley's and J. Stout's places, Rowley's mill race, and the mills of Major Gulick, Cruzer, Vandoren, Merser, and Bayard.³

General Search Phrases

When searching for records about waterways, whether in an online index or print publication or search engine, use specific phrases to obtain relevant results. Notice cataloging or indexing terms used within the search results in an online source, and search again using those terms plus a location or a person's name. Some possible terms include: transportation, rivers, canals, inland waterways, ferries, navigation, steamboats, and the like. For example, if you're researching someone who worked or traveled on a steamboat, try a search similar to *steamboat* and *Mississippi River* and *Illinois*. For a more specific search for a person and steamboat, try something like "*John Jingleheimer*" and "*Delta Queen*." Just be careful not to narrow the search so much that no results are found.

Ready to Research?

Federal records do hold a treasure trove of information about communities and individuals involved in the construction or improvement of rivers and canals. One simple place to begin the search is Google, or specifically, Google Books, where numerous government publications are available free. However this is only the tip of the iceberg, and serious researchers are well advised to dig in to more obscure or less easily available records found in the National Archives, Library of Congress, or contemporary government agencies.

National Archives and Records Administration (NARA)

Guide to Federal Records in the National Archives of the United States

This three-volume set is an entry point to NARA research. The free online version (<https://www.archives.gov/research/guide-fed-records>) is updated regularly and contains descriptive information about federal records acquired by NARA after the 1995 print version was published. Follow the steps below to use the *Guide*.

- 1. Topic**
Search for a subject or use the alphabetical index.
- 2. Record Group (RG)**
Then drill down to the type of record and the appropriate record group (RG).
- 3. History**
Don't just look up a record group in this reference set—read the brief history of the type of record you're seeking to understand how and when it was created as well as its final disposition. Look also at predecessor agencies for the records.
- 4. Textual Records, Microfilm, Photographs, Maps, etc.**
Read the description of the records to understand which ones are widely available and which are accessible only in Washington, DC. This section may lead to a catalog or resource with more detailed information about the record you need.
- 5. Related Records**
Finally, before moving on to find a manuscript or microfilm, browse the "Related Records" section in the *Guide to Federal Records* to learn about other record groups that may be associated with the record you are seeking.

³ Ibid., p. 750.

A search for *steamboat* finds potential records of interest in seven different NARA Record Groups, including correspondence, lists of officers licensed, owners and agents, boiler explosions and investigations, logbooks, and more, at NARA facilities nationwide. Further searches in the National Archives Catalog or microfilm catalog will probably be necessary to find the exact types of records needed and their locations. If they are held by one of NARA's regional facilities, a search of that region's website and finding aids may also be in order.

The National Archives Catalog

According to NARA's Using the Catalog web page (<https://www.archives.gov/research/catalog/help/using.html>), the National Archives Catalog (<https://catalog.archives.gov/advancedsearch>) "searches across multiple National Archives resources at once, including archival descriptions, digitized and electronic records, authority records, and web pages from Archives.gov and the Presidential Libraries."

The National Archives Catalog is a complicated search tool. Before you even begin to use it, study the "Using the Catalog" web page mentioned above. The advanced search contains many filters that can effectively narrow your results. But be careful—it's also easy to filter out everything.

Although most NARA records are not identified by individuals' names, more are becoming available through researchers' scanning of specific documents in the Innovation Hub and more digitization by NARA. Also, as embargoes end on records digitized by NARA partners such as Ancestry.com, hundreds of thousands of new names become available in the NARA catalog. The NARA website does provide "National Archives Catalog Guide for Genealogists and Family Historians" (<https://www.archives.gov/research/genealogy/catalog-guide>) to help with search strategies and phrases for records relating to individuals.

Using NARA Online Finding Aids

Many finding aids are instantly available and searchable online at NARA's website. See <https://www.archives.gov/publications/select-list> for access to publications, including various guides, General Information Leaflets (GILs), microfilm catalogs, Reference Information Pamphlets (RIPs), Special Lists (SLs), and Select Audiovisual Lists. Allen County (Indiana) Public Library's Genealogy Center also provides numerous digitized NARA finding aids at <https://www.genealogycenter.info/nara>.

Online Microfilm Catalog

Use NARA's Online Microfilm Catalog (<https://eservices.archives.gov>) to access Descriptive Pamphlets (DPs) and determine the appropriate roll number and archives location of microfilm needed for research.

Inventories and Preliminary Inventories in ARC

NARA Inventories and PIs can be very large publications. For the most part, the electronic versions at NARA's website are not digitized as clones of their print versions. However, National Archives Catalog can be used to view the same information.

Library of Congress

Online Catalog

An obvious choice for research at the Library of Congress is a search in its online catalog (<https://catalog.loc.gov>) for print, manuscript, cartographic (map) material, and other resources. Use the Advanced *Add Limits* feature to narrow the results to specified types of material.

A Century of Lawmaking (memory.loc.gov/ammem/amlaw)

This online resource at the Library of Congress allows browsing and searching of the debates of Congress, the reports or documents they published, and the acts that they passed through 1875. For the contemporary *Congressional Record*, see *CONGRESS.GOV* (<https://www.congress.gov>), the Library's current legislative information website.

American State Papers (ASP)

The 38-volume *American State Papers* comprise the legislative and executive documents of Congress from 1789-1838. The books are arranged into ten classes or series, with IV (Commerce and Navigation) being the likeliest one of most interest for rivers and canals.

Serial Set

The *United States Congressional Serial Set*, commonly called the *Serial Set*, contains congressional reports and documents published since 1817. For full details about what has been included in this set over the years, see “An Overview of the U.S. Congressional Serial Set and Its Predecessor Publications: A Research Guide” by Richard J. McKinney on the Law Librarians’ Society of Washington, D.C. website (<http://tinyurl.com/l37x4vo>).

An article by Jeffrey Hartley in NARA’s *Prologue* magazine Spring 2009 issue, “Using the Congressional Serial Set for Genealogical Research,” (online at <https://tinyurl.com/hvyh8s92>) provides a good overview of this process.

Searching ASP and the Serial Set

The entire contents of *ASP* and the *Serial Set*, every-word searchable, are available through a paid subscription to ProQuest Congressional or Readex. Too expensive for individual subscribers, these subscriptions are often available to the public at Federal depository libraries or university, law, or larger public libraries. This is the easiest and most comprehensive way to search these important government documents. The basic *Serial Set* and *American State Papers* are available in Genealogy-Bank by individual or institutional subscription, and these volumes are also every-word searchable.

Another option is to become familiar with the learning materials about these resources at the Library of Congress *Century of Lawmaking* website (<https://memory.loc.gov/ammem/amlaw>). *Century of Lawmaking* does have the entire set of *ASP*, but be aware that only the index and table of contents are searchable; content is not. The site also has selected reports from the *Serial Set*, historically significant documents such as Indian land cessions.

A further option is to access print or microfiche versions of these sets at a Federal depository library. There are more than 1000 of these throughout the country. To find one, see the Federal Depository Library Directory (FDLD) online at <https://ask.gpo.gov/s/FDLD>.

Corps of Engineers (www.usace.army.mil)

As a military organization, the Corps of Engineers falls under NARA’s purview, and most of the agency’s records are held by NARA. However, you may locate relevant information and files at a regional Corps division or a local lake’s office. There may even be records at a state park that leases land from the Corps of Engineers for a lake-side recreational area or campground. Publications like Fredrick J. Dobney’s *River Engineers on the Middle Mississippi : A History of the St. Louis District, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers* online at the Corps’ Digital Library (<https://usace.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p16021coll4/id/116/>) provide the history of the rivers and canals in an area.

Non-Federal Sources

Although NARA and the Library of Congress are the “go-to” places for the majority of government records, there are still countless other resources to be found at repositories such as regional or local libraries or museums and state archives or libraries. Such resources might be located by searching the National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections (NUCMC) or WorldCat.org. For more information about NUCMC, see the Library of Congress website (<http://www.loc.gov/coll/nucmc>).