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## Research in Federal Records: Some Assembly Required

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Textual records held by the National Archives, the repository of all permanent valuable records created by the federal government, are accessible to genealogists who:

1. Understand the organizational structure of records;
2. Study the tools; and
3. Tap expertise.

**\*TIP:** Use a research log to document all aspects of the research process, including the tools used to identify and pull relevant records.

### Federal Research Questions

How did my ancestor interact with the federal government?

Are there federal records that illuminate my ancestor's life even if she or he is not named?

### 3 Steps for Conducting Successful Federal Research

#### 1. Understand the Structure.

Records created by normal business operations have a life cycle. When records reach the end of their useful life in an operational setting, those with permanent historical value are transferred to a repository. Only a small percentage of records are deemed "permanently valuable."

Records accessioned by the National Archives are organized in **record groups (RGs)**. Materials are maintained, as much as possible, in the arrangement in which they are received. Within records groups, archivists describe the record groups in **series**, a unit of records that results from the same function. Series are assigned **entry numbers**. The terms "series" and "entries" are used interchangeably. Currently, NARA holds 567 RGs; within those groups, there are more than 250,000 series.

Series can be arranged in a variety of ways: alphabetical, chronological, numeric, by subject-matter, or by any combination of methods. Series are sometimes broken into **sub-series**. **Items** are the lowest level of the hierarchy but items may contain multiple documents.

- Record Group (RG)
  - Series – also known as Entry (**with associated #**)
    - Subseries (possibly)
      - Item
        - Individual Documents (possibly)

## 2. Study the Tools.

Guides and finding aids are also hierarchical in nature. Comprehensive and subject guides provide contextual information about record groups and how they relate to each other, but do not provide enough information to pull records.

### Comprehensive Guides

Anne Bruner Eales & Robert M. Kvasnicka, ed., *Guide to Genealogical Research in the National Archives of the United States*, 3rd ed. (Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Record Administration, 2000); also known as the “Genie Guide.” Available at *HathiTrust Digital Library*:  
<https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015071221272>

Robert B. Matchette et al., *Guide to Federal Records in the National Archives of the United States*, 3 vols. (Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Record Administration, 1995).  
Online version: <https://www.archives.gov/research/guide-fed-records>  
Online index: <https://www.archives.gov/research/guide-fed-records/index-alpha/u.html>

**Subject Guides** have been published for numerous topics and vary in length and complexity.

**Reference Information Papers (RIPs)** are short guides on topics like civilian records, military service, federal land records, black family research, etc.

Available online at <http://www.archives.gov/publications/ref-info-papers/>

A list of **longer guides**—including on pre-federal records, the American West, the Civil War, the Holocaust, Latin America, etc.—is available here:

<https://www.archives.gov/publications/finding-aids/guides.html>.

- Many guides available at *HathiTrust*: [www.hathitrust.org](http://www.hathitrust.org) ; search by title
- A copy of Debra L. Newman’s *Black History: A Guide to Civilian Records in the National Archives* (1984) is available at the Allen County Public Library Genealogy Center website:  
[https://www.genealogycenter.info/nara/researchguides/search\\_blackhistory.php](https://www.genealogycenter.info/nara/researchguides/search_blackhistory.php)

### Other NARA formats:

- Try a subject-matter search of NARA’s website: <http://www.archives.gov>
- *NARAtions* (blog): <https://narations.blogs.archives.gov>
- Know Your Records (KYR), outreach and educational programming for researchers; over 60 recorded lectures on *Youtube.com*: <https://www.youtube.com/user/usnationalarchives>
- Past Virtual Genealogy Fairs: Lectures and handouts available at:  
<https://www.archives.gov/calendar/genealogy-fair>
- *Prologue Magazine* Genealogy Notes:  
<https://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/genealogy-notes.html>.
  - Future articles will be published at [www.archives.gov/news](http://www.archives.gov/news)
- NARA column in *NGS Magazine*, continuing series by Claire Kluskens, NARA archivist.
  - See also *Tweekey.com*, Kluskens blog on varied and many federal record topics

## Finding Aids

**Inventories & Preliminary Inventories (PIs)** are series-level descriptions of individual record groups; they include an administrative history, a discussion of scope, a physical description of the records, and make connections between related series. Used with the on-site Holdings Management System (HMS) that details record locations, they provide enough information to pull records. Many inventories out of print but are available on-site or online:

Allen County Public Library Shelf (a selection of PIs):

<http://www.genealogycenter.info/nara/preliminventories/>

**Special Lists** describe in detail the contents of certain important records series or units of records of the same form or function. They can include multiple record groups.

**General Information Leaflet (GIL) 3: *Select List of Publications. National Archives and Records Administration*** is a guide to the guides and includes a list of inventories, preliminary inventories, and special lists by record group number::

<https://www.archives.gov/files/publications/general-info-leaflets/3-publications.pdf>

The **National Archives Catalog** describes 95% of series held. The Catalog provides important location and format information and identifies the existence of finding aids. They are not linked directly but some of that content has been incorporated. Use the Advanced Search to filter results by record group number, format, location, and dates: <https://catalog.archives.gov/advancedsearch>.

**Catalog Search Tips:**<https://www.archives.gov/research/catalog/help/search-tips.html>

Try a surname search of the catalog; for inspiration, read:

- “Going Digital, One Twig or Leaf at a Time” by Claire Kluskens:  
<https://twelvekey.com/2017/11/05/going-digital-one-twig-or-leaf-at-a-time/>
- “Two Steps Every Researcher Should Take,” at *NARAtions* blog:  
<https://narations.blogs.archives.gov/2017/06/08/two-steps-every-researcher-should-take/>

### 3. Tap Expertise

Research at a repository with voluminous records, limited pull times and hours, requires strategic planning. Collaboration—with archivists, subject matter experts, and/or genealogical specialists—is required.

**NARA archivists** help you navigate on-site finding aids and tools and fill out pull slips.

## Genealogy Community

**Subject-matter specialists** can be identified by studying conference schedules and institute faculty lists.

Recorded Sessions

**FGS:** <http://www.fleetwoodonsite.com/>

**NGS:** <http://www.playbackngs.com>

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The **Genealogical Institute on Federal Records (Gen-Fed)** is a week-long program held on-site at the National Archives in Washington, D.C., in July:  
<http://www.gen-fed.org>.

**NGS** offers guided research trips to Washington, D.C., that offer personal support at NARA; [https://www.ngsgenealogy.org/cs/research\\_trips](https://www.ngsgenealogy.org/cs/research_trips).

**History Hub** is online support community of citizen archivists, researchers, and archival professionals, offering fast turnaround and access to past questions and answers:  
<https://www.archives.gov/citizen-archivist/history-hub>

### **BONUS LINKS**

**Reference reports** are one to four–page reports on specific records. Most focus on microfilm publications, including ones that can be viewed on NARA’s digitizing partner websites, but some include textual records;  
<https://www.archives.gov/research/genealogy/reference-reports.html>

List of Facilities in NARA Network: <https://www.archives.gov/locations#>

### **List of Descriptions and Images (partial coverage) linked from the National Archives Catalog**

Provided by Suzanne Isaacs & Meredith Doviak, [catalog@nara.gov](mailto:catalog@nara.gov)

- List of Men Mustered into Wisconsin Volunteer Regiments, 1/1864 – 4/1864 - <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/2767258>
- Alien Case Files, 1944 – 2003 - <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/4488912>
- Carded Records Showing Military Service of Soldiers Who Fought in Volunteer Organizations During the American Civil War, 1890–1912 - <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/300398>
- Carded Records Showing Military Service of Soldiers Who Fought in Confederate Organizations , 1903–1927 - <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/586957>
- Logbooks of U.S. Navy Ships and Stations, 1941–1983 - <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/594258>
- Case Files of Mexican War Pension Applications - <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/1104361>
- Case Files of Disapproved Pension Applications of Widows and Other Dependents of Navy Veterans , ca. 1861–ca. 1910 - <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/563246>
- Case Files of Disapproved Pension Applications of Widows and Other Dependents of Veterans of the Army and Navy, ca. 1861–ca. 1934 - <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/567876>
- Case Files of Approved Pension Applications of Civil War and Later Navy Veterans, ca. 1861–1910 - <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/580580>
- Case Files of Pension and Bounty-Land Warrant Applications Based on Revolutionary War Service - <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/300022>
- Inmate Case Files, 7/3/1895–11/5/1957 [Leavenworth] <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/571125>
- Applications for Enrollment in the Five Civilized Tribes, 1898–1914 <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/617283>