

# Getting Started with Research at the National Archives

## Step 1: Determine your Topic of Interest

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If you already have a topic in mind, continue on to Step Two, to **Gather Information about your Topic**

### Topic Ideas

If you are still deciding about a research topic, here are some places on our website where you can get some ideas. The topics listed represent only a small fraction of possible research topics but will help you to get started.

- [Research Topics](#) page
- [Archival Online Catalog \(ARC\) Topics](#) pages
- [Archives Library Information Center \(ALIC\) "Reference at Your Desk"](#)
- [Access to Archival Databases \(AAD\)](#)

### Just want to browse our web site?

If you don't need a research topic and just want to browse our website and see some interesting historical documents, here are some places to start:

- The [Declaration of Independence](#), the [Constitution](#) of the United States of America, and the [Bill of Rights](#)
- Photographs by [Ansel Adams](#) and [Civil War](#) photographer Mathew Brady
- "[American Originals](#)"—from our stacks and vaults in our museum [exhibits online](#).

### Are you here for Genealogy?

- Are you here looking for information about how to look for your family history/genealogy? If so, you should see our [Genealogists/Family Historians](#) web pages.
- If you are here to obtain copies of military service and family history records, you can learn about [ordering copies](#) of records from the National Archives here.

### Are you looking for records about a Veteran?

Are you here looking for records about a veteran related to you? If so, you should see our [Veterans and Their Families](#) web pages.

If you are a veteran, or the next-of-kin of a deceased veteran, and want to receive a copy of the veteran's military service record:

- use [eVetRecs](#) to create your request, which you must print, sign, and mail to us, or
- use the paper form, called an [SF-180](#), that you can print, complete, and mail to us.

## Step 2: Gather Information about your Topic

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### **What is your Topics's connection with the Federal Government**

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At the National Archives, we hold documents created by or in the course of business with the US Federal Government. The more you know about your chosen topic, and why and how the United States Federal government was involved with that matter, the better the chance that your search for records will be successful. You can use your local library and web sites to learn as much as possible.

- Determine whether your topic can be searched in the National Archives. What is the connection between your topic and Federal Government programs and policies? Do some background reading on your intended subject, noting significant names, dates, events, and any evidence that Federal records may be used for further research.
- What is the connection between your topic and the specific time period during which the Federal Government may have been involved with your topic?
- What is the connection between your topic and the geographic locations that may relate to your topic and how the Federal Government may have been involved with programs and government for that area(s).

### **Are the records you need at the National Archives?**

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**Are you sure you need to use an archives instead of a library?**

Which is a better resource to help you find the information you need, a library or an archives ? Libraries and archives are different from one another in many ways. Here are some of the differences you can expect:

### ***At a Library***

A library contains published books and periodicals that usually can be checked out and replaced if lost or stolen. When using a library, you would:

- Use a card- or online-catalog that lists every item in the library's collections.
- Identify each item that you would like to use by its call number, which is a code used to categorize and organize items in libraries by subject.
- Walk directly to a shelf in the library and retrieve an item (self-service).

Questions relating to general historical or factual information, biographical information, and compiled, statistical information are usually better answered in a library.

The National Archives has a resource library, called the [Archives Library Information Center \(ALIC\)](#), that supports our staff and visitors. ALIC is a reference library; it does not provide archival records to the public.

[Presidential libraries](#) that are administered by the National Archives are not libraries in the traditional sense. They are repositories for preserving and making available [Presidential historical materials](#) of U.S. Presidents since Herbert Hoover.

### ***At an Archives***

An archives provides access to original records that were created and/or accumulated by a person, family, organization, or government institution in the course of its "life" or daily business. Because these records usually cannot be replaced, security and [preservation](#) of the records play an important role in making them available to the public. When using an archives, you would:

- Refer to an online catalog or paper-based guides, or a combination of both, to begin your research; you would need to identify the name of the organization that created the records, and identify the unit of records that might contain the information that you seek.
- Request records and await their retrieval from secure areas called "stacks."

- Examine records grouped together, not handed to you as separate pieces of paper. When you request records from the stacks, they will come to you in boxes and folders that are ordered in a sequence that preserves the filing system implemented by the organization that created and used the records. In an archives, it is as important to preserve and maintain the filing system of the records as it is to preserve and maintain the records themselves. If records are removed from their filing arrangement, it may be impossible to return the document to its proper place. [More](#) about how records are "grouped."
- Spend time, online or at the archives, learning about the records to locate the specific information that you seek. While some documents might be available through an archives's web site, only a small fraction of the records are available online. The cost to prepare, produce, and maintain electronic versions of billions of paper documents is exceptionally high. [Learn more about why all archived Federal records are not available on our web site.](#)

### **Are the records relating to your topic possibly located in a state, local, or private archives?**

Remember that the Federal Government has almost no jurisdiction over state, local, or municipal activities, or over private enterprises, unless mandated by the Constitution. Therefore, we do not have discrete files of birth, marriage, divorce, death, or similar state and local level records. (See our page on [vital records](#).)

Except for some donated materials, most of which are in the Presidential libraries, we do not have state, local, or private records. In almost all cases, therefore, there must be a discernable Federal or Presidential involvement in your topic for there to be documentation in the National Archives.

### **If you know the records you are interested in are at the National Archives, determine where they are located**

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The National Archives and Records Administration is truly a [national system](#) of records repositories, with many records beyond the Washington, DC area, in the [regional archives](#) and the [Presidential libraries](#).

To find which of our locations may hold what you are looking for:

- Use the [Archival Research Catalog](#)
- For microfilm available, search the [Microfilm Catalog](#)

- Check the [Guide to Federal Records](#)
  1. Search by Record Group number or by agency name or topic
  2. Find the description that covers what you are looking for
  3. See if the description notes where the records are located
- Review the holdings of the [Regional Archives](#)

**If you can't determine where the records are located which you want to see, please [contact us](#).**

### **Learn how records are grouped at the Archives**

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Once you determine that the National Archives is where you want to research your topic, you should become familiar with the concept of record groups. All records are part of a [Record Group](#) associated with a records creator: an agency, bureau, commission, or other entity of the Federal government. Knowing which part of the government created the records you want to see will help you narrow your search to a Record Group, and from there you'll narrow your search even further to a series of records within a Record Group.

- **What Federal agencies or Presidential administrations were involved?** Records in the National Archives are kept in the original order by creating agency or creating individual. You need to know whose records you need to see. See our page on [Federal Government organization](#).
- **What functions did these agencies perform?** Did the agency conduct investigations, hold hearings, prepare reports on technical matters, or correspond with the public or other governments? Thinking about these functions will help you identify more specifically what records you need to see.
- **When were the records you are looking for created?** It usually takes 20-30 years for records from Federal agencies to reach the National Archives. Presidential materials are taken into custody by the National Archives following the administration. If the records you are seeking have not been transferred to the National Archives, you will need to contact the creating agency directly.

Now that you've taken some time to investigate your topic further, you should use the NARA website to look for records or information about the records you may be interested in. Our web site likely contains answers to many of the preliminary research-related questions you might have.

# Online Research Tools and Aids

## Step 3: Find Records and Information about Records

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Our web site contains answers to many of the preliminary research-related questions you might have.

- To find copies of Federal records on our web site and/or information about the records and their historical context, you will have to look in several places.
- Some sources listed below are databases while others are online guides, publications, and exhibits.

## Ways to Search Online

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### **Archival Research Catalog (ARC)**

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ARC is the online catalog for NARA's nationwide holdings, located in the Washington, DC area, the Regional Archives, and Presidential Libraries. We currently have descriptions in ARC for over 63% of NARA's holdings. You can perform searches using keywords, and search by location, organization, person, topic, and for digitized images.

[Go to ARC](#)

To specifically search among the 126,500 digitized documents, photos, and images accessible online, you may want to start in the [ARC Galleries, Selected Topics](#).

### **Microfilm Catalog**

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This is a searchable database of more than 3,400 numbered microfilm. The described microfilm include those created by or purchased by NARA for researcher use. Determine which rolls of microfilm may be the most relevant for your research at NARA. You can search for microfilm by keyword, microfilm number, Record Group number, and/or location of our nationwide research facilities. Researchers at our research facilities may use this material for free.

[Go to the Microfilm Catalog](#)

## **Access to Archival Databases (AAD)**

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AAD is a search engine into some of NARA's holdings of electronic records. There are databases and indexes from more than 30 archival series, including over 350 data files totaling well over 50 million unique records; this number will continue to grow. Search by person, geographic areas, organizations, or dates.

[Go to AAD](#)

## **Archives Library Information Center (ALIC)**

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ALIC, part of the National Archives, provides sources for research about American history and government, archival administration, information management, and government documents to archives and records management professionals, the general public, and National Archives staff. Search their [online catalog](#) for holdings of the Archives libraries in Washington, DC and College Park, MD.

[Go to ALIC](#)

Additionally, ALIC's [Reference at Your Desk](#) feature provides quick access to online resources on many diverse subjects.

## **Guide to Federal Records**

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Search NARA's holdings of federal records at a very high level, to identify which record groups may have material relevant to your research topics. This includes records that originated in the executive, judicial, and legislative branches.

[Go to the Guide to Federal Records](#)

## **Finding Aids**

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### **Filing Manuals**

[Filing manuals](#) outline the filing classification systems used by staff in the Army, Navy, Coast Guard, and various departments and agencies of the federal government.

### **Regional Archives Holdings Guides and Resources**

For links to holdings guides, articles, lists, indexes to files, and other finding aids prepared by the Regions to assist researchers, see our [Regional Archives Online Finding Aids](#) page and visit our [National Archives locations](#) section.

## NARA Publications

### [Published research guides, articles, and papers](#)

These include guides, articles, reference papers, inventories, and more, all designed to help prepare you for your research at NARA.

## New Accessions and Openings

View our latest [Accessions and Openings](#) for all our locations.

## Search by Topic

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### [Research Topics](#)

For many topics, we have included related articles, finding aids, and search tips. Links to online information about selected topics in National Archives records.

## Search by Federal Government Agency

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Look for the [Federal Government organization](#) that created the records you are interested in.

## Search by Media Type or Format

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Search for records based on media-type or [format](#) of the records (such as paper documents, photographs, motion picture film or video, audio recordings, maps and drawings, aerial film, microfilm, databases and electronic records)

If you need to see records that are not available on our web site or other web sites, you may need to [contact us](#), [visit us](#), or [hire an independent researcher](#) to continue your research.

[Decide if You Should Visit Us in Person and Plan Your Visit](#)

# Plan Your Research Visit

## Step 4: First decide if you need to visit us in person

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- We perform limited research for the public. Please read more about our [Services for Off-site Researchers](#) and our [Research Support Services](#).

- If you can identify the records precisely enough to order copies, you may [order copies of some record types online](#), or you may [order copies](#) through us or approved vendors.
- If you require extensive research assistance, we offer you the following [lists of researchers who are available for hire](#).  
(Note: Researchers for hire are not National Archives employees. [Learn more...](#))

### **Contact us before you visit - write or call ahead**

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- [Find addresses, phone numbers, hours and directions to our locations nationwide](#).

Our research rooms are open to the public. Each of our locations holds different groups of records. To make the most efficient use of your time, please write, telephone, or [e-mail](#) us in advance to make sure that the documents or the microfilm you want to see are at the location you plan to visit.

You should first try to determine where the records are by:

- Using the [Archival Research Catalog](#)
- For microfilm available, search the [Microfilm Catalog](#)
- Check the [Guide to Federal Records](#)
- **For us to be able to answer your questions properly, you should be able to tell us:**
  - the Federal and/or presidential connection to your topic;
  - what agencies, offices, or individuals were involved and what time period you are interested in;
  - and what [kinds of records](#) (textual, maps, photographs, electronic, etc.) you are looking for.
- **If you expect to use records that may be security classified**, advance notice is necessary so that the classification status of the records can be determined using the [Freedom of Information Act \(FOIA\)](#).
- **When sending a letter or [e-mail](#)**, include **your postal address and telephone number** so that we can contact you in case more information is needed. Please allow time for us to respond.

## When You Arrive

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- Make your initial visit to any National Archives location, even those with extended hours
  - during weekday business hours
  - as early in the day as possible
- Archivists whose help is needed to begin research usually are not available during evenings or weekends. A late afternoon visit may not allow enough time for records to be identified and retrieved from the stack areas for use on that day.
- When you come to one of our locations to look at records, you will usually be issued [a researcher identification card](#).
- During your research visit, keep good notes as to records consulted so that you can differentiate between multiple groups of records searched, and your steps can be retraced if necessary.
- Anyone can use the National Archives. You do not need to be an American citizen or to present credentials or a letter of recommendation. Read about [Regulations for using the National Archives](#).
- You need to be [14 years old to do research](#) at the National Archives, unless you receive permission from the Research Center Branch Chief and are accompanied by a parent or guardian. >
- Read about [Security Procedures](#) at our Washington, DC and College Park, MD locations.
- New researchers at the National Archives Building in Washington, DC and the National Archives at College Park will view a PowerPoint [orientation presentation](#) before receiving a researcher card.
- Read more about [Services for Onsite Users](#).