Dear Researcher,
You can’t do all your genealogical research at the computer. You must leave the computer and enter a real records repository like the National Archives (NARA) and experience the joys (and frustrations) of research in original records.

Does it sound too daunting to even think about searching billions of paper records, still photographs, aerial photographs, and even motion pictures for interesting and useful genealogical and historical information? Do not be afraid, for here is the road map to get you to your destination.

Come to the National Archives in Washington, D.C. Plan to spend a full day—from opening until closing—to get the full use of your time and travel dollar. Of course, one day is not enough to do all of your research. Plan for more than one day if you can. But, a day or two should give you a beginning education on the research process. The Web page, “The National Archives in Washington, D.C.” <http://www.archives.gov/dc-metro/washington/index.html> will give you basic information such as address, hours, and transportation. If you don’t stay at a downtown hotel, a suburban hotel within walking distance of a Metrorail stop would be a very practical alternative. Some of the records you want may be at the National Archives at College Park, Maryland, and its Web page will help you with the same logistics <http://www.archives.gov/dc-metro/college-park/>. NARA also has thirteen Regional Archives holding records created by federal agencies outside of Washington, D.C., and several “affiliated archives.” See the Web page, “Our Nationwide Network...” at <http://www.archives.gov/locations/> for more information.

Now, how do you decide which of the billions of records to examine? First, understand that the National Archives and Records Administration holds the permanently valuable records of the United States federal government. The records are kept in their original order (1) by federal agency and then (2) by record series.

Record Group
The records are kept by “Record Group” (RG), which is a federal agency or a major part of a federal agency. The records of a large agency like the Department of Commerce, for example, will be found in several record groups. The top level records are in RG 40, General Records of the Department of Commerce, while its bureaus are separate record groups, such as RG 29, Records of the Bureau of the Census; RG 27, Records of the Weather Bureau; or RG 370, Records of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, to name just three.
There is no rhyme to RG numbers, but there is a reason. RG numbers are normally assigned in the order in which records of the various federal agencies came to the National Archives. Thus, because its records were the first to arrive at the National Archives, RG 1 is the Records of the War Labor Policies Board, a temporary agency set up during World War I.

So, the genealogical researcher’s first step is to decide which RGs might contain information about ancestors or other relatives. Genealogists are accustomed to doing “name searches”—whether in books or online—but I am going to ask you to change your focus and look at it from a different perspective. Focus on identifying which federal agencies created records about the geographic area (such as state or county) in which the ancestors lived and then (later) worry about what kind of indexing there might be!

Which RGs might contain information? You need to do some background reading. The Guide to Federal Records in the National Archives of the United States (1995) is available online at <http://www.archives.gov/research/guide-fed-records/>. For every federal agency for which NARA has records, it describes the agency’s history, including which were the predecessor and successor agencies, and gives general descriptions of some of the records created by that agency. Understand that the “paragraph numbers” in the Guide mean nothing except as a useful “talking point” in a conversation with an archivist or when writing or e-mailing NARA with a more specific question.

To get started with the Guide you might want to first look at the list of RGs by agency name at <http://www.archives.gov/research/start/by-organization.html> or by RG number at <http://www.archives.gov/research/guide-fed-records/index-numeric/>.

Read about some agencies and their records. Find something interesting? Good. Now what?

Record series
Within RGs, the records are kept by “record series”—different bodies of records that document the agency’s work. There might be correspondence files, claims files, subject files, financial records, and so forth. (Just think of the many types of record series you keep—automotive, bank, health, insurance, real estate, retirement, and so forth.) The agency files are kept in the same order in which the agency kept and used them because that order made sense to the people who made the records, and it gives insight into its policies and procedures. That order might be alphabetical, chronological, numerical, alphanumeric, or in some other way. How many records are in a record series? It might be just an inch of records, or several thousand boxes.

How do you determine which record series you want to examine? You might be able to do this while still at home. Newer inventories, preliminary inventories, reference information papers, and subject guides, and other publications that are still in print can be obtained by mail. See “Select List of Publications: General Information Leaflet 3” at <http://www.archives.gov/publications/select-list/index.html>. Some of these publications are also online.

However, if the inventory or preliminary inventory is out-of-print, this step normally requires you to be at the National Archives facility where the records are held (Washington, D.C., or College Park, Maryland, or one of the thirteen Regional Archives) in order to examine the inventory or preliminary inventory and the Master Location Register (MLR) for that RG. You’ll do that in a finding aids room. Most inventories or preliminary inventories were written many years ago and therefore give an incomplete list of the records in the
RG. The MLR lists all record series in the RG but does not provide a descriptive paragraph about the records. Eventually all series descriptions will be in the online Archival Research Catalog (ARC) <http://www.archives.gov/research/arc/>, but NARA is still working toward that goal.

**Records Request Slip (aka Pull Slip)**

While you are in the finding aids room at the National Archives Buildings, you’ll be interacting with a NARA employee who works with the RG in which you are interested. Please understand, however, that no one knows everything about all the records, and very few NARA employees are genealogists. We genealogists look at the world of records differently, and that oddball scrap of information that provides a valuable clue to us may look unimportant to those who are not genealogists.

Once you’ve identified some record series of interest from an inventory or MLR, you’ll fill out a records request slip with the help of a NARA staff member. Since many records series are voluminous—tens, hundreds, even thousands of cubic feet—the NARA staff member will help you narrow down your request to a reasonable amount, i.e., specific boxes or volumes that may contain the name, county, or subject of interest. Get your records request slip submitted by the “pull times” of 10 or 11 a.m. and 1:30 or 2:30 p.m. (or also 3:30 p.m. on certain Thursdays and Fridays), and within two hours you’ll be examining the records in which you are interested. Researchers may submit pull requests for only one RG per pull time, and are limited to one cart of material.

**Find some good stuff?**

I hope you do. Come back again if you don’t—figure out different records to look at next time. The possibilities are endless. For example, one member, now deceased, of the Mount Vernon (Virginia) Genealogical Society, did research in Vietnam-era military records, photographs, and sound recordings at the National Archives at College Park, and found lots of material that documented—directly or indirectly—his part in the Gulf of Tonkin incident.

What records can you find documenting the part your ancestors played in the building of our nation?

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**More NARA information sources**


NARA’s Web site is vast but here are four more Web pages to help get you started:


Prologue’s Genealogy Notes at <http://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/genealogy-notes.html> links to informational articles from past issues of Prologue:
Quarterly of the National Archives and Records Administration. Magazine subscriptions are $20 annually.

“Quarterly Compilation of Periodical Literature: Record Group Clusters” at <http://www.archives.gov/research/alic/periodicals/nara-citations/> lists articles (from 1973 to present) in a wide variety of publications that cited records from the National Archives. Reading these articles might lead you to records of interest.

“Research by Selected Topics” at <http://www.archives.gov/research/topics.html> links to online articles, reference information papers, and other finding aids.

Past issues of the *NGS Quarterly* contain many excellent “how to” articles on researching particular records in the National Archives. Here are some recent ones:


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