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Documenting the Career of Federal Employees

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If your eighteenth-, nineteenth-, or early twentieth-century ancestor was employed by the federal government, records held by the National Archives may help you document details of his or her career. This article describes a three-step process to successful research. As an overview of the research process, the article does not, however, provide an exhaustive review of all potentially relevant records.

Step 1: Determine When, Where, and By Whom Employed

The researcher should first determine when, where, and by which federal agency or agencies the person was employed. The best source of information will usually be *The Official Register of the United States*, an employee list that the federal government published biennially from 1816 to 1959, generally in odd-numbered years. From 1879 to 1911, it was published in two volumes with postal employees and contractors in volume 2, and all other civilian and military personnel in volume 1. The government reduced publication costs from 1913 to 1921 by ceasing publication of volume 2, and from 1925 to 1959 further reduced costs by listing only "administrative and supervisory" employees. *The Official Register* can be found at large public or university libraries, U.S. Government Depository Libraries, the Library of Congress, and the National Archives library.

The Official Register lists the employee's position or title and place of employment. The place of employment includes the geographic location and department, bureau, division, or branch in which the person worked. The researcher should carefully note the department's hierarchical structure and where in that hierarchy the person was employed because the records are

usually arranged in a similar pattern. A researcher seeking information about the federal career of Henry Crocker, for example, would need to know that he was an appraiser in the Department of the Treasury's Boston Customs House from ca. 1853 to ca. 1860.¹

The Official Register usually indicates the person's compensation, which may be an annual salary, daily or monthly wage, or an amount fixed by contract. It may indicate the person's state or country of birth and the county, state, and congressional district in which he or she resided at the time of appointment. Details concerning the nature of the employment are sometimes provided. For example, the 1901 *Official Register* reports that Mrs. Mary E. C. Hall, a "corn and wheat region observer" in Ann Arbor, Michigan, was paid twenty cents a day by the Weather Bureau to make "one observation per day between April 1 and September 30."²

Researchers interested in the career of regular army officers and enlisted men should check the *Army Register*,³ which exists for the period 1789 to ca. 1972. This publication includes the name, rank, date of commission, and regiment or department of military personnel. In some cases, it also indicates the state from which the person was appointed and/or the state where he was born. Lists of resignations, deaths, military forts and arsenals, and other information are often provided. The 1814 *Register*, for example, describes army uniforms and the regulations governing military conduct. *The Army List and Directory*, a monthly publication from 1891 to ca. 1941, provides detailed information about army officers.

The researcher may also wish to consult non-federal sources such as city directories, newspaper articles, and obituaries for additional information, especially for those employed prior to 1816.



Step Two: Identify Record Series That Might Provide Information

After outlining the person's federal career with information from *The Official Register* or *U.S. Army Register*, the researcher should consult the *Guide to the National Archives of the United States*,⁴ *Genealogical and Biographical Research: A Select Catalog of National Archives Microfilm Publications*, and *Microfilm Resources for Research: A Comprehensive Catalog*⁵ for an overview of the types of records and publications available for the federal employee's agency. Then the researcher should write to the appropriate National Archives reference branch for assistance in identifying and obtaining inventories, published and unpublished preliminary inventories, and microfilm descriptive pamphlets that describe the records of that agency.⁶ If the employee worked outside of the Washington, D.C., area at an agency's field office, the researcher should also contact the appropriate National Archives regional archives regarding any field office records. Federal government publications listed in the *Guide to U.S. Government Publications*⁷ are usually available at U.S. Government Depository Libraries.⁸

Next, the researcher should study these finding aids carefully for record series that may contain information about the kind of work the person did and his accomplishments and problems on the job. These records were created by bureaucrats for bureaucrats in order to accomplish the federal agency's mission, so the researcher generally should not expect the records to contain vital statistics or other information about his family. They should, however, provide the researcher with an understanding of the nature of the employee's work and work environment.

While studying the finding aids, carefully read the descriptions of the records. Understanding the purposes for which the agency created and maintained the records, what the records document, and how they are arranged will help the researcher make the best use of his or her time. What kinds of record series will provide fruitful research? As always, the answer depends on the kinds of records extant for that agency. Possible useful record series include card indexes, lists, registers, or rosters of employees; letters of application and recommendation; correspondence files; central files; log-books; minutes; reports; investigative or case

Information about this Treasury Department worker boxing currency around 1907 may be listed in The Official Register of the United States.

PROLOGUE

of other personnel-related matters, such as the petitions from immigrant inspectors employed at Vancouver, British Columbia, dated September 14, 1912, and October 7, 1913, regarding inadequate pay and long working hours. The 1912 petition¹⁴ focuses on the high cost of living for Americans in Vancouver, including the prices of foodstuffs, rent, and transportation, while the 1913 petition¹⁵ details their working conditions and hours.

Step Three: Examine Relevant Records

The researcher's third step in the research process is to examine the record series identified as potentially promising. Patience and plenty of time are essential. Even if the ancestor was a federal employee for only a short time, the volume of records available may make the search time consuming. Generally, the researcher should begin with microfilmed records, then continue the search in unfiled records. Many of the records mentioned in this article are available on microfilm.

First, examine the relevant card indexes, lists, and registers, paying particularly close attention to the dates upon which the employee began and ended his employment at a particular agency or particular geographic location. Pinpointing the person's employment span and rank in the hierarchy with as much precision as possible is essential to using research time effectively. While the finding aids' descriptions of chronologically arranged or other unindexed series may be enticing, the records' arrangement and bulk may lead the researcher who lacks sufficient information to waste time looking at records for the wrong time span or departmental subdivision. In fact, for early federal employees or contractors, the only record may be a pay voucher in the miscellaneous accounts of the First Auditor of the Treasury.¹⁶ For example, this may be the only record of employment for the men who renovated the White House during the Lincoln administration or who worked at the Harpers Ferry Arsenal.

Next, examine the correspondence files, central files, logbooks, and other administrative and personnel-related records. Since these are usually arranged in chronological order, a thorough search may take much time. Be sure to note any rubber stamp markings on late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century documents that show the document's routing history through the agency or even between agencies. On eighteenth- to mid-nineteenth-century documents, note the routing endorsements located on the reverse side. If the document has been

GENEALOGY EVENTS

Washington, D.C.

Genealogy workshops are conducted throughout the year. For up-to-date information, consult the monthly Calendar of Events. For a free Calendar, write to N-PA, National Archives, Washington, DC 20408.

Atlanta, Ga.

September 24, 1994. Annual Genealogical Festival, sponsored by the Friends of the National Archives—Southeast Region. Gwinnett Civic Center, Duluth, Georgia, 404-763-7477. Call for fees.

October 6, 1994. Advanced workshop: "Immigration and Naturalization Records." National Archives—Southeast Region, \$10 fee.

Chicago, Ill.

September 13, November 8, 1994. "Introduction to Family History." National Archives—Great Lakes Region, 312-581-7816. \$5 fee.

September 20, 1994. "Your Ancestors in Court." National Archives—Great Lakes Region, 312-581-7816. \$5 fee.

October 18, 1994. "Fleshing Out the Family Tree: A Look at Lesser Known Federal Sources." National Archives—Great Lakes Region, 312-581-7816. \$5 fee.

October 28, 1994. "Hands-on for Beginners." National Archives—Great Lakes Region, 312-581-7816. \$10 fee.

November 16, 1994. "Let's Get Organized." National Archives—Great Lakes Region, 312-581-7816. \$5 fee.

San Bruno, Calif.

October 21, 1994. "Chinese Immigration Records." National Archives—Pacific Sierra Region, 415-876-9009. \$12/\$15 fee.

November 4, 1994. "Military Records, Part I." National Archives—Pacific Sierra Region, 415-876-9009. \$12/\$15 fee.

Seattle, Wash.

September 6, October 4, November 1, 1994. "Using Census Records at the National Archives." National Archives—Pacific Northwest Region, 206-526-6507. \$5 fee.

September 13, October 11, November 8, 1994. "Using Military, Land, Naturalization, and Immigration Records at the National Archives." National Archives—Pacific Northwest Region, 206-526-6507. \$5 fee.

circulated to other offices within the agency or to another agency, you may wish to check the finding aids for those offices or agencies for record series that may contain information regarding action taken by those offices on the document.

Then consult the agency's minutes, reports, and investigative files if your research in the administrative or miscellaneous personnel records suggests that such record series may contain useful information.

Finally, you may wish to obtain federal pension and personnel records that are not in the legal custody of the National Archives. Some

federal employees who received pensions are included in the *General Index to Pension Files, 1861-1934*, National Archives Microfilm Publication T288, with a plain index card marked by the person's name, place of residence, and an "R-" number. To obtain the pension file, write to the Office of Personnel Management, Retirement Operations Center, P.O. Box 45, Boyers, PA 16017.¹⁷ In addition, the National Personnel Records Center (NPRC), Civilian Personnel Records, 111 Winnebago Street, St. Louis, MO 63118-4199, has personnel files for civilian federal employees. Contact the NPRC regarding access procedures and restrictions.

Conclusion

When you have completed examination of potentially relevant record series, your research is done. Hopefully, you will have found records documenting your ancestor's work as a federal employee. However, if you haven't been so fortunate, you will have a consolation prize: a good understanding of your ancestor's agency and its responsibilities, problems, and accomplishments. In either case, you will have found information to incorporate into your ancestor's biography. □

NOTES

¹See, e.g., *The Official Register of the United States*, 1853, p. 62; 1855, p. 41; 1857, p. 43; and 1859, p. 45.

²*The Official Register of the United States*, 1901, vol. 1, p. 1129.

³Over the years, its title page has shown several names: *U.S. Army Register*, *Official Army Register*, and *Register of the Army of the United States*, among others.

⁴*Guide to the National Archives of the United States* (1974). This book is currently being revised; a new edition is expected to be published in late 1994.

⁵These two microfilm catalogs are published by the National Archives.

⁶As of June 1994, the researcher may obtain unpublished preliminary inventories and lists from the Civil Reference Branch (NNRC), National Archives, Washington, DC 20408 (regarding federal civilian agencies), or from the Military Reference Branch (NNRM) in Washington, DC (regarding federal military agencies). National Archives publications, including microfilm descriptive pamphlets, inventories, preliminary inventories, and special lists are available from the Fulfillment Center (NEDC), 8700 Edgeworth Drive, Capitol Heights, MD 20743-3701 (telephone 301-763-1896 or 1-800-788-6282).

⁷Donna Andriot, ed., *Guide to U.S. Government Publications* (1993) (published annually).

⁸*A Directory of U.S. Government Depository Libraries* (October 1990) lists each library's name, address, telephone number, and date it joined the depository library system. Although most of these libraries do not receive all current U.S. government publications, they can be an excellent source for many older federal publications.

⁹Junius Boyle, navy storekeeper, U.S. Naval Depot, Máhon [Minorca, Balearic Islands, Spain], to The Honorable The Secretary of the Navy, Oct. 11, 1845, *Letters Received by the Secretary of the Navy from Navy Agents and Naval Storekeepers, 1843-1865*, National Archives Microfilm Publication M528, roll 2, Naval Records Collection of the Office of Naval Records and Library, Record Group 45, National Archives, Washington, DC.

¹⁰Letters from the period January to December 1855, *Letters Received by the Secretary of the Treasury From Collectors of Customs ("G," "H," "I" Series)*, 1833-1869, National Archives Microfilm Publication M174, roll 182, General Records of the Department of the Treasury, RG 56, NA.

¹¹Albert Gallatin, secretary of the treasury, to Richard Wall, Esq., supt. of Tybee Light House, Savannah, GA, July 13, 1808, vol. 3, p. 455, *Lighthouse Letters, 1792-1809*, National Archives Microfilm Publication M63, roll 3,

Records of the U.S. Coast Guard, RG 26, NA.

¹²See, for example, Monthly Meteorological Record of Corn and Wheat Region Station, Ann Arbor, Mich. during August 1901, Reports of Observers in the Corn and Wheat Regions, 1896-1902 ("Preliminary Inventory of Operational and Miscellaneous Meteorological Records of the Weather Bureau" [NC-3 Revised], entry 86, box 6, folder Ann Arbor, Michigan), Records of Surface Land Observation, Records of the U.S. Weather Bureau, RG 27, NA.

¹³Files 53108/24, 24A, and 24B ("Investigation of San Francisco Immigration Service, 1910-1911"), Subject Correspondence, 1906-1932, Records of the Central Office, Immigration and Naturalization Service, Records of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, RG 85, NA.

¹⁴Charles E. Selby, Alfred W. Chalker, Hugh W. Smith, and William M. Shearer, immigrant inspectors, to commissioner-general of immigration, Sept. 14, 1912, file 52999/56 ("Vancouver Force File, 1911-1913"), Subject Correspondence, 1906-1932, box 176, *ibid.* See also related correspondence in the same file: John H. Clark, commissioner of immigration, Montreal, Canada, to commissioner-general of immigration, Sept. 14, 1912; commissioner-general of immigration to U.S. commissioner of immigration, Montreal, Canada, Sept. 21, 1912.

¹⁵Robert Sherrard, Edward L. Lawrence, Ralph Dent Converse, William M. Shearer, Frank B. Frost, Hugh W. Smith, George E. Brunjes, and Charles E. Selby, immigrant inspectors, to commissioner-general of immigration, Sept. 19, 1913, file 52999/30-E ("Montreal Force File, 1911-1913"), Subject Correspondence, 1906-1932, box 179, *ibid.* See also related correspondence in same file: inspector-in-charge, Vancouver Immigration Division, to U.S. commissioner of immigration, Montreal, Canada, Oct. 7, 1913; John H. Clark, U.S. commissioner of immigration, Montreal, Canada, to commissioner-general of immigration, Washington, DC, Oct. 15, 1913; and commissioner-general to U.S. commissioner of immigration, Montreal, Canada, Oct. 22, 1913.

¹⁶Some of these records have been microfilmed but are difficult to use. See *Miscellaneous Treasury Accounts of the First Auditor (Formerly the Auditor) of the Treasury Department, September 6, 1790-1840*, National Archives Microfilm Publication M235 (1,170 rolls).

¹⁷It is suggested that the request letter include the following information in addition to that stated on the "R-" number card: date of birth, Social Security number (if the person had one), the department(s) for which the person worked, and the approximate date span of such employment.