

The Online National Archives Catalog: Understand and Do More With It

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Don't spin your wheels. Learn how to effectively and efficiently use the online National Archives Catalog to find genealogical gems.

Methodical research in federal records in the National Archives requires researchers to consider how their person or subject might have interacted with the federal government, identify relevant record groups and record series, and then search those record series for mention of the person or subject. The online National Archives Catalog can help find nuggets of information that would have taken hours, days, or years to find in pre-digital days—or perhaps would never have been found at all. Genealogical researchers should search the Catalog annually for surnames and place names of interest. Here's how to do it.

National Archives Catalog URL: <https://catalog.archives.gov>

- Significant tool for locating federal records in the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) that are useful for genealogical and historical research.
- Contains over 26.7 million descriptions and 132.6 million digital objects (images of textual objects) as of April 2021 – and is continuously growing.
- Advanced Search URL: <https://catalog.archives.gov/advancedsearch>
- Everything in the Catalog has its own unique National Archives identifier (NAID), a number that is assigned sequentially as information and digital images are added.
- Search Tips at <https://www.archives.gov/research/catalog/help/search-tips.html>
- Catalog Guide for Genealogists: <https://www.archives.gov/research/genealogy/catalog-guide>
- Research Our Records: <https://www.archives.gov/research> - links to information and tools

Limitations:

- NARA has approximately 11.5 billion textual pages (plus motion pictures, etc.), so 132.6 million digital images are only about one percent of its holdings. More information is at “Record Group Explorer Data” at <https://www.archives.gov/findingaid/stat/discovery>.
- Nearly all of the other 99% of NARA's holdings are also available to researchers. For more information, see “Research Our Records” at <https://www.archives.gov/research>.
- The Catalog includes millions of personal and place names, but that is only a small fraction of the names found in billions of records. It is **not** an every-name or every-place index.
- You can help make records in the Catalog more discoverable by tagging and/or transcribing images and participating in Citizen Archivist projects. For more information, see “Citizen Archivist Dashboard” at <https://www.archives.gov/citizen-archivist>.

Understand Federal Archival Practices:

- Records are arranged by federal agency (Record Group).
- Records are kept in the manner in which the agency organized its records. Thus, **record series** may consist of file units and/or items, such as correspondence files, case files, indexes, financial records, and so forth.
- Records may be arranged alphabetically, numerically, alpha-numerically, by subject, or by some other method that made sense to the agency at the time it created and used the records.
- Each creating agency had different sub-agencies that changed frequently over the years, and this affected what records were created and how they were arranged.

Understand Catalog Content:

- **Record Group.** Every Record Group (RG) has a Catalog entry that indicates the name of the Record Group, the NARA locations that hold original records, the number of record series in that RG, and links that allow researchers to either browse through the record series descriptions or to search within the record group for specific search terms. As an example, see the Catalog entry for RG 28, Records of the Post Office Department (NAID 357), at <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/357>.
- **Record Series.** Every record series has a Catalog entry that identifies the name of the series and its date span, the RG in which it is located, a description of the records and their arrangement, the amount of materials, which NARA unit holds the records, other useful information, and links that allow researchers to either browse through the file or item descriptions (if available) or to search within the series for specific search terms. For example, see the Catalog entry for Post Office “Reports of Site Locations, 1837-1950” (NAID 608210), also in RG 28, at <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/608210>.
- **File units** that are described include the name of the file and its date span, the record series and RG in which it is located, a description of the records, which NARA unit holds the records, other useful information, and links that allow researchers to browse through either the file or its items if digital images are available. However, most individual file units are not yet described in the Catalog. Two file unit examples from RG 28 are:
 - “Ohio: Fulton–Geauga” (NAID 68615326) at <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/68615326> (includes digital images).
 - “Michigan” (NAID 40482249) at <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/40482249> (no images).
- **Items** can be textual (paper) records, photographs, artifacts, and so forth. Item descriptions include the name of the item and its date span; the file, record series, and RG in which it is located; a description of the item; which NARA unit holds it; other useful information; and a digital image if available. Most individual items are not yet described in the Catalog. Examples of items include:
 - “Petition from Lewis Douglass and Others to the Secretary of War” (NAID 594720) at <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/594720> (textual record)
 - “Photograph of Private Hubbard Pryor After Enlistment in 44th U.S. Colored Troops” (NAID 849136) at <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/849136> (photograph)
 - “Sampler of Chester Goodale” (NAID 1656127) at <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/1656127> (artifact)
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- **Authority records** describe:
 - Units of federal agencies, such as Post Office Department Office of Railway Mail Service, 1864-1873, at <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/10479783>
 - Important persons related to Catalog descriptions, such as “Lincoln, Abraham, 1809-1865” at <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/10580370>
 - Geographic locations such as Dinwiddie County (Va.)” at <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/10036719>
 - Subjects such as “Lawyers” at <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/10637317>
 “Postmasters” at <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/10646051>
 “Military Pensions” at <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/10643990>

Searching the Catalog

- **Remember: Check “National Archives Catalog Search Tips” for more tips and ideas:** <https://www.archives.gov/research/catalog/help/search-tips.html>
- BASIC SEARCH allows you to search word(s) that appear anywhere in a description.
- ADVANCED SEARCH allows you to search word(s) with limitation, such as Record Group, level of description, facility location, etc.
- “SEARCH WITHIN” instructions. The “Search within” function on the Record Group, Series or File Unit page is not intuitive. Clicking on this blue button causes the system to load the first twenty records for that Record Group, Series, or File Unit.



In the empty “search bar” at the top of the page type in your specific search words and then hit the magnifying glass button. The web page will refresh with Catalog entries that match the search terms.



Example Searches. Let’s try some searches beginning on the Advanced Search page at <https://catalog.archives.gov/advancedsearch>. Results indicated are as of 7 January 2021.

- **Name Search: Venable.** Type in Venable as the search term, click on File Unit under Level of Descriptions, then hit Search. There are 2,832 file units with Venable in the title or file description, including an Alien Case File for Venable Nesbitt, Confederate Applications for Pardon and Amnesty from James Venable and James M. Venable of Virginia, appointment papers relating to Abraham B. Venable of the Sacramento, California Land Office, and 2,829 other files of various kinds containing the name Venable.
- **Name Search: Roy Knapp.** Click the box next to Limit Search to “Archival Descriptions” and type in Roy Knapp (without quotes) in the search term box. That nets 12 series, 4,266 file units, and 1,136 items in which the words Roy *and* Knapp occur in the title or description.

Now do it again, but put quote marks around “Roy Knapp.” Only one file and one item are found. “Knapp Roy” with quote marks finds 31 file units and 7 items. The use of quote marks can narrow searches significantly. This strategy may help with common names.

- **Name Search with a Key Word:**
 - The search term *postmaster smith* (without quotes) found 15 series, 4,301 file units, and 2,478 items in which both postmaster *and* Smith occurred in the title or description. However, some are “false positives” such as “Postmaster Appointments for Smith County, Kansas (NAID 78742244), <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/78742244>.”
 - The search term *postmaster “charles smith”* (with those quotes) found 129 file units and 27 items in which the terms “charles smith” and postmaster both occurred in the title or description. However, none of those results appear to refer to Charles Smith who was a postmaster. This is not a “failed” search; it simply indicates that none of the online descriptions point to a record for postmaster Charles Smith at this time. There were probably many Charles Smiths who served as postmaster, but you’ll have to find records about him a different way.
 - The search term *private “charles smith”* (with those quotes) found 406 file units and 141 item descriptions in which the terms “charles smith” and private both occurred in the title or description. Search results include Civil War military records for several Private Charles Smiths plus a variety of other records relating to Charles Smith House, Charles Smith Sanitarium Historic Site, Lieutenant Charles Smith, and so forth.... in which the word private also occurs.
 - Searches for less common names may have better results, such as *postmaster deshong ashland* (without quotes) that results in 4 file units, of which one is for a postmaster named DeShong in Ashland, Ohio.
- **Geographic name search.** Catalog searches for geographic locations are also beneficial to locate useful records for the area in which an ancestor lived. It is then usually necessary to search through the records themselves (online or in person) to determine if an ancestor is mentioned. Some results will be false positives.
 - The search term *Geauga* found five series, 697 file units, and 623 items whose descriptions mentioned that Ohio county.
 - The search term *Henrico* found 72 series, 5,012 file units, and 874 items whose descriptions mentioned that county *or* people whose name was Henrico. Changing to search to *Henrico Virginia* (without comma or quotes) reduced the results to 64 series, 3,394 file units, and 820 items that may be more relevant.
 - The search term *Ashland Ohio* (without comma or quotes) found 27 series, 3,356 file units, and 1,993 items that used both of those terms in the description. An example of a false positive result from this search is “Photograph of the Rodney MacBain Family from Ashland, Kentucky, Camping at Vesuvius Recreation Area” (NAID 2131440) at <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/2131440>. Vesuvius is in Ohio, but not near Ashland.
- **Geographic search with a Key Word** can generate more useful results. For example, the search term *Henrico Virginia postmaster* (without comma or quotes) found 94 file units and 16 items that contained those three words, but most have nothing directly to do with postmasters in Henrico County. The most relevant searches—the ones that do pertain to Henrico County, Virginia, postmasters—are at the top of the list.