

# Using the Records of the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA)

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The National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), Washington, DC 20408, has responsibility for the historical records of the federal government of the United States and its predecessor, the Continental Congress. Most of the general federal records are kept in the National Archives' Washington, DC (Archives I) and College Park, Maryland (Archives II) facilities although the most frequently used of this material has published finding aids and widely available microfilm copies. Local federal records are maintained at regional archives.

Records held by the National Archives and Records Administration are arranged by record group (RG). Each record group is assigned a unique number. Each record group has an inventory. ***Each inventory has a unique number that is different from the corresponding record group number.*** Records within a record group are divided by entry number.

Each microfilm publication of the National Archives and Records Administration has a unique number that does ***NOT*** correspond to the record group and inventory records of the corresponding original records. Each microfilm number is preceded by an alphabetical letter. The letters mean:

M: the microfilm has a descriptive printed pamphlet to aid in using the microfilm.

T: the microfilm does ***NOT*** have a descriptive printed pamphlet

A: the microfilm was created by a federal agency other than the National Archives and Records Administration (***no descriptive pamphlet***).

R: the microfilm was created by a regional branch of the National Archives and Records Administration (***no descriptive pamphlet***). The published catalogs to National Archives microfilm include lists of NARA microfilm by microfilm number.

The following are important general guides to the holdings of the National Archives. They are widely available and most of them are accessible through the National Archives' web site.

Burton, Dennis A. et al. *A Guide to Manuscripts in the Presidential Libraries*. College Park, MD: Research Materials Corporation, 1985.

National Archives and Records Administration. *Guide to Federal Records in the National Archives of the United States*. 3 vols. 1995.

----- *Guide to Genealogical Research in the National Archives*. 1983.

Also see the current printed catalog of National Archives microfilm. Some of the other valuable guides to researching federal records:

- American Indians: A Select Catalog of National Archives Microfilm Publications.* Washington: National Archives and Records Administration, 1995.
- Bacon, Lee D. "Early Navy Personnel Records at the National Archives, 1776-1860," *Prologue: The Quarterly of the National Archives* 27 (1995): 76-80.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Civil War and Later Naval Personnel Records at the National Archives, 1861-1924," *Prologue: The Quarterly of the National Archives* 27 (1995): 178-182.
- Beers, Henry Putney. *The Confederacy.* Washington: National Archives and Records Administration, 1986.
- Coren, Robert W., et al. *Guide to the Records of the United States Senate at the National Archives, 1789-1989.* Washington: National Archives and Records Administration, 1989.
- Deputy, Marilyn, et al. *Register of Federal United States Military Records: A Guide to Manuscript Sources Available at the Genealogical Library in Salt Lake City and the National Archives in Washington, D. C.* Bowie, Maryland: Heritage Books, 1986.
- Digested Summary and Alphabetical List of Private Claims Which Have Been Presented to the House of Representatives [1789-1851].* 1853. Reprint, Baltimore, MD: Genealogical Publishing Company, 1970.
- Hill, Edward E. *Guide to Records in the National Archives of the United States Relating to American Indians.* Washington.: National Archives and Records Administration, 1981.
- Immigrant and Passenger Arrivals: A Select Catalog of National Archives Microfilm Publications.* Washington.: National Archives and Records Administration, 1983.
- Military Service Records: A Select Catalog of National Archives Microfilm Publications.* Washington: National Archives and Service Administration, 1985.
- Munden, Kenneth W., and Henry Putney Beers. *The Union.* Washington, D. C.: National Archives and Records Administration, 1986.
- Musick, Michael. "Honorable Reports: Battles, Campaigns, and Skirmishes—Civil War Records and Research." *Prologue: The Quarterly of the National Archives* 27 (1995): 259-77.
- Newman, Debra. *Black History: A Guide to Civilian Records in the National Archives; and Selected Documents Pertaining to Black Workers Among the Records of the Department of Labor and Its Component Bureaus, 1902-1969.* Washington: National Archives and Service Administration, 1985
- Pfeiffer, David A. "Archivist's Perspective: Riding the Rails Up Paper Mountain: Researching Railroad Records in the National Archives." *Prologue: The Quarterly of the National Archives* 29 (1997): 52-61

Schamel, Charles E. "Untapped Resources: Private Claims and Legislation in the Records of the US Congress." *Prologue: The Quarterly of the National Archives*. 27 (1995): 45-58.

-----, et al.. *Guide to the Records of the United States House of Representatives at the National Archives, 1789-1989*. Washington: National Archives and Records Administration, 1989.

Schmitzer, Jeanne Carnella. "Genealogy Notes: Far From Home: American Citizens in the United States Military and Territorial Census Records." *Prologue: The Quarterly of the National Archives*. 29 (1997): 70-73.

Wehmann, Howard H. *A Guide A Guide to Pre-Federal Records in the National Archives*. Washington: National Archives and Records Administration, 1989.

## **FOLLOWING A PIECE OF PAPER IN THE 1800S FEDERAL GOVERNMENT**

You might be looking for letters your ancestor wrote to the United States Secretary of the Treasury in 1843, to the Confederate War Department in the 1864, or to the Freedman's Bureau in 1870. You have located the appropriate records at the National Archives and Records Administration or you have obtained the correct microfilm for the time period that you need. When you look at the inventory, however, you are not sure just what to do next.

During the mid to late nineteenth century, there were standard practices used by clerks, civil and military, Confederate and Federal, that while confusing to us today, were an efficient and common sense means of keeping up with paper in those times. Within these records can even be found letters of great historical and genealogical value that sometimes have not survived.

Below is what often happened to a letter received and answered in a government department in the 1800s. Frequently not all of the records described below will have survived for a particular department and the system had variations.

The letter would be received at the department and assigned a unique code designation. The designation would usually begin with the first letter of the surname of the letter's author. It would be followed by the letter's number and, sometimes, the year that the letter was received. For example, a letter written by James G. Brown, dated December 3, 1863, arrives in the Treasury Department on February 12, 1864. The letter might be assigned a code that begins with "B" for Brown, a number 253 because it was the 253rd incoming correspondence under the letter "B" so far that year, and the year 1864. The final code for Brown's letter might be B 253/1864. An abstract of the contents of the letter would be written on the back of the letter. This abstract is called an endorsement.

All of the endorsements found on the letter would be copied into the department's endorsement book, under the letter's coded designation. The endorsement books, were usually indexed. Sometimes letters were passed on to other persons, sub-bureaus, or

departments and became lost but the important information they contain survives is summarized as abstracts in the endorsement books.

When a letter was answered or passed on, that information was also abstracted in the endorsement book, with a coded designation to indicate where a copy of the reply can be found. Some departments did not keep endorsement books but instead used a "register of letters received" which listed each letter with its contents, by code designation, with cross references to where a copy of the reply could be found.

The letter would also be listed in an index to letters received. Some government agencies had all incoming letters copied into indexed, letters received books. During the War Between the States, the United States War Department assigned each letter a code based upon which branch of the War Department received the letter; see the descriptive pamphlet that accompanies National Archives micropublication M495 Index to Letters Received by the Secretary of War.

If a reply was written to the letter, the reply would be copied in the department's letter books. In any case, the original letter would be filed by its coded designation or sent to another person or department. The letter books, containing the copies of the replies sent, are usually indexed. These books each have code designations, such as "Book B", used for cross reference purposes in the previously mentioned endorsement books and registers of letters received.

Explaining this system can be difficult but most researchers quickly learn it for this system is simple common sense. Following such a paper trail can open a world of valuable information to a researcher seeking the reasons why an ancestor was writing to the Secretary of the Navy or the Adjutant General or some other government agency in the 1800s. tackling this pile of paper without first figuring out the system, however, brings special meaning to the old government saying "no piece of paper is ever lost here; it just sometimes cannot be found."

# ARCHIVES NATIONWIDE

The National Archives has locations nationwide, dedicated to making available the records of various regions and topics. All of the locations below are open to researchers, with some also having exhibition spaces.

Anchorage, Alaska

Atlanta, Georgia

Boston, Massachusetts

Chicago, Illinois

College Park, Maryland

Denver, Colorado

Fort Worth, Texas

Kansas City, Missouri

New York City, New York

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Riverside, California

San Francisco, California

Seattle, Washington

St. Louis, Missouri: The National Personnel Records Center

## Visit ▼

Exhibits

Programs

Events

Amending America

- DC Exhibit

- National Conversations on Rights and Justice

- Education Outreach

- Traveling Exhibit

- Kids and Families

Archives in DC

- Getting to the National Archives in Washington, DC

Presidential Libraries

Archives Nationwide