

Finding Aids, Inventories, and Record Group Descriptions: Why Should I Care?

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INTRODUCTION:

According to *Wikipedia* “a **finding aid**, in the context of archival science, is a document containing detailed information about a specific collection of records within an archive. They often consist of an inventory and description of the materials, their sources, and their structure.”

As genealogists, we need to think of finding aids as road maps to buried treasure. And much like a treasure map, we have no idea what kind of treasure we might find at our destination, and it will likely involve a lot of digging! We are decades into the computer age of genealogy, and there is no doubt that new records surface every day that can help us in our research. Unfortunately, many of the records being placed online are the same records that were microfilmed decades before. Why is this unfortunate? Because these are the records deemed “genealogically significant” — wills, deeds, probate records, etc. Good stuff, definitely. Unfortunately, it is likely other researchers have already combed through these same resources. It will be the precious find in a manuscript collection that nobody has ever seen that will solve your brick wall problems!

WHAT IS A MANUSCRIPT?

Many of the finding aids we will be discussing are road maps to manuscripts, so we must take a moment to understand the definition of a manuscript.

The Library of Congress’s Manuscript Division is a good example of what we mean by the treasures we can find in different repositories. Previously, their website described their collections as follows: “*As reflections of personal lives, professional careers, and organizational activities, the division's collections contain many different types of manuscripts in every conceivable format—originals, letterpress copies, carbons, and photocopies that have been handwritten, typewritten, and computer-generated during the past three hundred and fifty years. Consider the kinds of material that you or members of your family have accumulated over the years. These would include: diaries, personal and official correspondence (incoming and sometimes copies of outgoing letters), school papers, speeches, drafts of literary manuscripts and other writings, notebooks, account books, ships’ logs, commonplace books, autograph and commemorative albums, scrapbooks, press clippings, subject files, photographs, legal and financial papers. All of the above as well as other types of material are likely to be represented somewhere in the division's holdings, although rarely will one collection contain every type and format. Collectively these*

materials constitute what is meant by the terms papers and records as used by archivists.” Exploring the research guides for manuscript collections at the Library of Congress (<https://guides.loc.gov/manuscript>) and exploring their collections online can give you a better understanding of the breadth of information found in manuscript collections.

For genealogical purposes, we may take a broader view of manuscripts, as many of the repositories we visit contain “archives and manuscript” divisions. For example, within the same building and utilizing the same retrieval methods, the Pennsylvania State Archives has Record Groups (RG) and Manuscript Groups (MG). RGs contain “*records created or received by agencies or officers of the Commonwealth [of Pennsylvania] and its political subdivisions.*” MGs contain “*the records and papers of prominent individuals and families, business enterprises, and social, cultural, political and military organizations.*”

HOW DO I FIND THEM?

ArchiveGrid:

<https://researchworks.oclc.org/archivegrid/>

“ArchiveGrid includes over 7 million records describing archival materials, bringing together information about historical documents, personal papers, family histories, and more. With over 1,400 different archival institutions represented, ArchiveGrid helps researchers looking for primary source material held in archives, libraries, museums and historical societies.” ArchiveGrid is essentially a finding aid tool to many, many manuscript collections.

National Archives of the United States (NARA):

<https://www.archives.gov/research/guide-fed-records>

There is no possible way that this lecture can cover all the records of NARA and how to find them. We will concentrate on what NARA’s Descriptive Pamphlets, Microfilm Publications Guides, Preliminary Inventories, Research Guides, and Special Lists. A very good introduction and sampling of these publications can be found at the website of the Genealogy Center at the Allen County (IN) Public Library at <http://www.genealogycenter.info/nara/index.php>. The website above leads you to the web version of the 1996 3-volume publication, *Guide to Federal Records in the National Archives of the United States*, which is an amazing finding aid for what treasure lurk beyond the pension files and passenger lists in our country’s archives. Examples will be shown in lecture. Additionally, *The Archives: A Guide to the National Archives Field Branches* by Loretto Dennis Szucs and Sandra Hargreaves Luebking (Salt Lake City: Ancestry Publishing, 1988) may be dated but gives excellent coverage of finding aids for record types as well as references to many, many catalogs, microfilm publications, and preliminary inventories. Many publications and associated records have been posted on *Ancestry*. A quick reference to what available on *Ancestry* can be viewed and searched at “NARA Collections on Ancestry.com” at <https://www.ancestry.com/search/categories/nara/>.

Historical Records Survey Projects of the Work Projects Administration (WPA):

http://sites.rootsweb.com/~flmgs/articles/Works_Projects_AdministrationMarch2011_BM.pdf

This link takes you to an excellent article written by Bryan L. Mulcahy discussing the depth of information found in WPA finding aids. Between 1936 and 1943, finding aids to federal archives, state archives, county courthouses, churches, and regional repositories were published in staggering numbers that are full of information for the genealogist, and are grossly underutilized. Many finding aids were NOT published, but they exist in manuscript form in several repositories throughout the United States. A must-have reference is Sargent B. Child and Dorothy P. Holmes, *Check List of Historical Records Survey*

Publications: Bibliography of Research Projects Reports (Washington, DC: W.P.A. Technical Series, 1943). It has been reprinted by other entities and can often be found in used bookstores. It is also available digitally at FamilySearch and Internet Archive.

Manuscript Repositories:

Remember that a “manuscript” can refer to just about anything that could exist, usually in written form, to help a genealogist. Many local, state, and regional archives have published finding aids to their collections. But what is an “archive”? *The New Oxford American Dictionary* defines an archive as “*the place where historical documents or records are kept.*” This could just as easily be the Indiana Historical Society in Indianapolis, Indiana; or the local history room at the Wakarusa (Indiana) Public Library (Wakarusa, population in 2010: 1,758); or the attic of your great-aunt. This takes us back to the benefits of *ArchiveGrid*, but many collections are not found there. Today, finding aids of larger collections are dynamic and ever changing, so the online versions are the definitive place to search. Printed finding aids from the past are still helpful. They may give the reader a better understanding of the breadth of a collection, and a treasure found in a 1996 printed finding aid will certainly still be in the collection in 2019! Additionally, some repositories have vague collection finding aids online with more detailed ones in print or onsite. Remember too that many printed finding aids may not be just finding aids for singular repositories, but a finding aid for different repositories located in a defined area. Examples will be shown in lecture.

Newspapers:

A brief mention that newspaper finding aids are called “Union Lists”. These exist on a state level and can be found in published form. A large nationwide compilation was published in 1937 entitled *American Newspapers, 1821-1936: A Union List of Files Available in the United States and Canada*. The largest and most helpful finding aid for American newspapers is Chronicling America’s “U.S. Newspaper Directory, 1690-Present” at <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/search/titles/>. In 2025, this site will be transitioning to a new interface, and this directory will be found at <https://www.loc.gov/collections/directory-of-us-newspapers-in-american-libraries/>.

Ancestry:

Many genealogists are either unaware or forget that *Ancestry*’s site contains many digitized finding aids that are not going to show up by searching for an ancestor’s name. The site has a primary subcategory entitled “Research Guides & Finding Aids” (https://www.ancestry.com/search/categories/ref_guides/) that contains nearly a thousand worldwide references. It is well worth browsing.

WHERE ELSE SHOULD I LOOK?

As previously mentioned, the inherent problem with searching manuscript collections or locating finding aids that can help our research is that we have no idea where our treasure might be hidden! If you are looking for the probate records of your ancestor in Hummelstown, Pennsylvania, you go to the Clerk of the Orphans’ Court at the Dauphin County Courthouse in Harrisburg. If you are looking for the deed for your ancestor’s land in St. Charles, Missouri, you go to the St. Charles County Recorder of Deeds. But the family Bible of your great-great-great-grandparents from Louisa County, Virginia, may have been passed on to a daughter who moved to Kentucky, who passed it to her daughter who died in California. It was purchased in an estate sale and donated to an archive in Oregon. How will you ever find it?

Genealogical research is all about following clues. The same applies to finding aids to collections. Search broadly under categories that define your ancestor. Think beyond names and geographical limitations. Consider occupations, ethnicities, religion, and subjects broadly defining your ancestor. In addition to finding aids discussed above, there are finding aids for finding aids and repositories!

Donald L. DeWitt's *Guides to Archives and Manuscript Collections in the United States: An Annotated Bibliography* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994) can be searched by subject, leading you to a finding aid and a repository of interest.

The National Historical Publications and Records Commission's *Directory of Archives and Manuscript Repositories in the United States: Second Edition* (Phoenix, New York: Oryx Press, 1988) is the last printed volume of this kind and at over 30 years old is dated. It can be searched on ProQuest's Archive Finder, but you will have to find an institution with this service. Still, it is 853 pages of repositories that can be searched by subject. A follow-up Internet search should find the same repository today and hopefully an online finding aid of its collections.

Although this lecture focuses on printed or online sources physically called "finding aids" or something similar, remember that a finding aid can be the bibliography of a book, a footnote in a genealogical article, or a random reference to a unique source in a discussion with your fellow researchers.

CONCLUSION:

There is no one-stop shopping to finding and utilizing manuscript sources, nor can every resource be listed for your specific research needs. Fortunately with the advent of the Internet age the secrets lurking within special collections are starting to become unlocked with online finding aids, but there is still a lot to be gleaned from many of the ignored ones in print. It will take work, perseverance, ingenuity and time — but what you will find will be truly remarkable!

The purpose of this lecture was to whet the appetite of the genealogical researcher and urge him/her to dig into the unknown. Cast a broader net and look into resources and repositories that are not necessarily those that come to mind immediately when looking for our ancestors. There are numerous finding aids lurking out there to help you in your quest. The treasures are there. Find the treasure maps first!