

Finding Original Records: The Real Game of Hide and Seek

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Whenever possible, a researcher needs to examine the original record. Original records are documents created at or near the time of the event. Using an abstract or an extract of an original may not yield all the information from the original record. With today's technology, many digital images of original records appear online, making it easier than ever to find originals. This handout will explain the difference between original and derivative records, introduce various repositories for original records, and teach strategies for finding them.

OBJECTIVES

1. Explain original and derivative records and the primary and secondary information they contain.
2. Discuss the value of using indexes.
3. Demonstrate how to find original records online at FamilySearch and through industry partners.
4. Explore strategies for finding original records in repositories and how to prepare for visits.
5. Practice identifying original and derivative records with an interactive exercise.

ORIGINAL VERSUS DERIVATIVE RECORDS

Original Records are the most reliable and are less prone to errors than copies or extracts.

Types of Original Records

- Originals
- Duplicate originals
- Clerk's copies
- Certified copies
- Photocopies, scans, and digital/image copies

Examples include:

- Certificates (birth, marriage, death)
- Wills and probate documents
- Manuscripts and journals
- Photographs

- Parish records and oral histories
- Artifacts and microfilm/digital copies

Derivative Records are created from original records.

Types of Derivative Records

- Indexes
- Compiled genealogies
- Public online family trees
- Registers
- Ledger books
- Abstracts
- Transcriptions
- Databases

Examples include:

- Transcriptions, abstracts, extracts, and nutshells
- Indexes and compiled genealogies
- Public online family trees
- Registers and ledger books
- Reformatted reprints and databases

Note: Derivative records are less acceptable because they can introduce errors or omit information. Always seek the original record if possible.

Primary versus Secondary Information

Primary Information: Facts provided by an eyewitness to or participant in the event.

Examples include:

- Birth date and place recorded by a parent on a birth certificate.
- Date and location of death recorded by an attending physician on a death certificate.

Secondary Information: Facts provided by someone who did not witness the event, often based on memory or hearsay. Examples include:

- Birth details reported by a grandchild on a death certificate.
- Historical information recorded decades later in a family genealogy.

Key Insight: Both original and derivative records can contain primary and secondary information. Analyze each record carefully.

VALUE OF INDEXES

Indexes are valuable tools but are considered derivative sources. They:

- Help locate original or derivative records.
- Come in various formats, including books, databases, and microforms.
- Should not be cited as sources but as finding aids.

Why Find the Original?

1. The original may contain additional information not included in the index.
2. Errors in indexing or handwriting interpretation can occur.
3. Context from the original record book might provide crucial clues.
4. Determine if the index was created from an original or derivative source.

FamilySearch Wiki, United States Index Systems

https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/United_States_Index_Systems

FINDING ORIGINAL RECORDS ONLINE

FamilySearch

- FamilySearch Records: Indexed collections, searchable by name.
- Explore Historical Images: Browse brand-new images not yet cataloged or indexed.
- FamilySearch Catalog: Find most of the records available, searchable by place, surname, or keyword.

Other Online Platforms

- Ancestry.com (\$): Indexed and browsable collections with original records.
- MyHeritage (\$): Indexed and browsable collections with original records.
- National Archives (NARA): Digitized microfilm publications and original records via partners like Fold3 and FamilySearch.

<https://www.archives.gov/digitization/digitized-by-partners>

- American Ancestors
www.americanancestors.org
- Daughters of the American Revolution
www.dar.org

- The Internet Archive
<https://archive.org>
- Hathitrust Digital Library
<https://www.hathitrust.org>
- Digital newspapers
<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/search/titles/>
www.newspapers.com
www.newspaperarchive.com

FINDING ORIGINAL RECORDS IN REPOSITORIES

Archives and Libraries

Some original records are not even digitized and are only available at the archive or library. In these cases, on-site research may be necessary to track down original documents.

Archives exist to gather, preserve, and make historic materials available. Items often include manuscripts, photographs, letters, books, diaries, journals, maps and physical objects and artifacts. These records can be published or unpublished and come in many types of formats.

Types of archives

- Government: Federal, state, and local archives.
- Religious: Church archives and denominational collections.
- Colleges/Universities: Special collections and genealogical resources.
- Historical Societies: Local or regional history-focused collections.
- Genealogical Societies: Ethnicity or location-specific resources.
- Corporate Archives: Business-related historical records.

Finding archives and libraries

- **FamilySearch Wiki**: each state and county in the United States has a Research Wiki page which contains a list of the archives and societies including their contact information.
https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Main_Page
- **Google** search
- **Bibliographies** in books and websites for the area or subject you are interested in.
- **ArchiveGrid**: contains collection descriptions from libraries and archives.
<https://researchworks.oclc.org/archivegrid/>
- **WorldCat**: listings of materials held in libraries all over the world. <https://www.worldcat.org/>
- **National Archives Catalog**: online catalog of the National Archives and Records Administration. <https://www.archives.gov/research/catalog>

- **NUCMC** – National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections: descriptions of manuscript and archival collections from a wide variety of American repositories (shares with WorldCat).
<https://www.loc.gov/coll/nucmc/>

Ordering original records

National Archives (NARA) – You can order original records directly from NARA by visiting www.eservices.archives.gov.

Repositories – archives, churches, societies, and other repositories will often allow you to purchase a copy of their records. Be aware of these policies so you can be prepared.

Tips for On-site RESEARCH

Prepare

- **Exhaustive online research.** Find all the available digital records before you plan for on-site research. There is no need to search on-site if the records are available online.
- **Prepare your research.** Create a research goal. Gather and organize the necessary files. Prepare lists of collections you would like to see.
- **Travel plans.** Make your travel plans including arriving, place to stay, rental car, food and extra expenses.
- **Check the facility days and hours.** Some may offer special visiting hours. Make an appointment if available.