

Navigating our Nation's Federal Records

Overview of the NARA System

Ann G. Lawthers, ann.lawthers@nehgs.org

What is NARA

NARA stands for the National Archives and Records Administration. It is the nation's record keeper. Approximately 2 to 5% of documents created each year by federal agencies are slated for preservation by NARA. The mission of NARA is to preserve, maintain, and make accessible materials that record American history. There is a network of archives centered around the Washington, D.C. area.

Regional Archives include 14 centers that hold historically valuable federal records accessible to the public locally. In addition, there are Regional Records Centers with expertise in records management and liaise with Federal offices within their service area. And Affiliated Archives include organizations such as the Library of Congress for their prints and photographs, the Oklahoma Historical Society for their holdings related to Records of the Five Civilized Tribes and of other Indian tribes in Oklahoma and several military academies for their military records.

NARA records are created by a federal agency, bureau, commission or on behalf of the federal government. They have been determined to be important for legal or historical reasons.

NARA Record Group	Record Type
RG 29-Census	Census
RG 85-INS, RG 36-Customs	Passenger Lists
RG 85-INS, RG 21-District Courts	Naturalizations
RG 24-Navy, 93-Rev War 94, Adjutant General, RG 109-Confederate Records	Compiled Military Service Records
RG 15-VA	Military Pension Files
RG 49-BLM	Homestead Files

To determine whether NARA might have records of interest to you, consider your ancestor's relationship to the federal government. How might your ancestor have interacted with the federal government?

The following types of records of interest to genealogists are held by NARA:

- Census Records
- Passenger Arrival Records (Immigration)
- Naturalization Records
- Land Records
- Military Records
- Other (see <https://www.archives.gov/research/genealogy/topics>)

NARA also holds records for the following groups:

- Native Americans
- African Americans
- Japanese Americans
- Chinese Americans
- Hispanic Americans

Summary

NARA has federal records created in the course of running a federal agency or department

- No master name or subject index
- No vital records (generated by state and local government, not the federal government)
- No church records (generated by churches)
- No state militia records (generated by states)
- No records before 1795

The records are held nationally and in regional archives.

The NARA Website

NARA has a number of tools specifically designed to help the family historian. Beginning with the home page, if the user clicks on "Research Our Records" (left most tab/button on the home page) the next page includes a special box "**Research Your Ancestry.**" Clicking this opens a page with multiple links to articles and resources designed to help the family historian learn about, access and use NARA material.

NARA Reference Reports are brief (one to four page) descriptions of research strategies for frequently used records. Mostly these reports describe microfilm resources although some describe textual material.

One may also download useful blank forms such as the federal census forms or draft registration forms.

NARA has also created special pages that highlight the most popular record topics at NARA. These may be accessed by going to the “Resources for Genealogists” page

(<https://www.archives.gov/research/genealogy>) and click on “Popular Topics.”

Under “Tools for Genealogists,” you will find a the “Access to Archival Databases.” These are databases that include information of interest to genealogists such as passenger lists for selected population groups, selected military records and files from the Social Security Application system.

Accessing Records at NARA

The key to NARA holdings is its catalog. While name searches can be performed, they will only turn up material that has been indexed. Wildcards are allowed, but only at the end of a word.

NARA suggests the following keywords for selected topics:

Topic	Suggested Keywords
African-American	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• “Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands”• Slave• Slavery
Court records	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• “Admiralty case”• “Bankruptcy case”• “Civil case”• “Civil War prize”• “Criminal case”• “Equity case”• “Law case”
Immigration	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Alien• Chinese AND immigration• Immigration• Manifests• Naturalization• “Passenger lists”
Land	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• “Bounty land”• Homestead• “Land entry”



Topic	Suggested Keywords
Military	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Bounty land” • “Draft registration” • Pension • “Selective Service” • Service records AND [name of war, ex: Civil War] • Veteran
Native Americans	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • [name of tribe, ex: Cherokee]AND “census card” • “Indian allotments” • “Indian funds” • “Indian school”

Once you have precisely identified your document, you may be able to order the file through the online ordering service.

Resources

Background

National Archives Trust Fund, *Guide to Genealogical Research in the National Archives* (NARA: Washington, DC: 1885)

<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.c067015933&view=1up&seq=11&skin=2021>

NARA: *Guide to Federal Records* <https://www.archives.gov/research/guide-fed-records> (online only)

Prologue Magazine genealogy articles: <https://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/genealogy-notes>

Navigating NARA

Charts and Forms page: <https://www.archives.gov/research/genealogy/charts-forms>

NARA Genealogy videos: <https://www.youtube.com/c/USNationalArchives/search>

Access to Archival Databases (AAD): <https://www.archives.gov/files/calendar/genealogy-fair/2017/5-aad-handout-2of5.pdf>

Accessing Records

Ordering online:

<https://eservices.archives.gov/orderonline/start.swe?SWECmd=Start&SWEHo=eservices.archives.gov>

Plan Your Research Visit: <https://www.archives.gov/research/start/plan-your-visit>

Research Visit FAQs: <https://www.archives.gov/research/start/research-visit-faqs>

What's Allowed in Research Room: <https://www.archives.gov/research/start/whats-allowed.html>