Unlocking Manuscript Treasures
Spring Stay at Home 2023
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The World of Manuscripts

A manuscript is an unpublished primary material. Family historians may consult diaries, journals, family bible records, business journals and business account books in the course of researching an ancestor. Manuscript lingo includes several important terms such as[1]:

a. Linear/cubic feet - A measure of shelf space necessary to store documents.
b. Guides/Finding Aids – Essential tools to help you find specific items within a group of manuscripts.
c. Accession – Process of physically taking possession of and establishing basic control over the materials.
d. Provenance – Individual, family or organization that created the materials and the chain of custody of the materials before they arrived at the repository.
e. Record Groups – Collection of records that share a provenance.
f. Series – Arrangement of records according to a specific filing principle.
g. Collections – Group of materials with a unifying characteristic such as creator, geographic area, surname.

Many repositories, especially those with very old materials require certain procedures while viewing manuscripts. These may include the use of gloves, book cradles, and page weights. Many will not allow photographs. Always check for procedures when you visit a repository with manuscripts.

Manuscripts and genealogical events

The main genealogical events are births, marriages and deaths. These are what most people look for in an archive. However, archives also provide clues about identity and relationships. There are four categories of obvious sources of genealogical clues and these include

Bible records – rare but extremely helpful.

a. Evaluate the quality of the information by comparing the recorded dates to the date of publication of the Bible. Dates that are before the publication date suggest the material was entered after the fact and not at the time of the event.

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[1] See Society of American Archivists, https://www2.archivists.org/glossary/terms, accessed 25 August 2018

b. Also look at the inks and handwriting. Are they the same or different? Again, this is a sign of whether the information was recorded at the time of the event or later.

c. Finally, who owned the Bible? Was it a known family member or someone else?

Cemetery Records: Manuscript collections often include transcriptions of gravestones from obscure cemeteries. May find, in addition to the date of death, the date of birth, the maiden name or even place of origin.

Church Records: The earliest church records were often kept by the minister rather than the church itself. This is because ministers traveled from church building to church building, serving multiple congregations. Check local county histories for the names of the early churches and their clergy.

Town Records: If you know where your ancestors lived, check the handwritten or transcribed town records. Early New England town records cover court matters, town officer meetings, land records as well as vital events. Warnings Out was a mostly New England phenomenon whereby towns were extremely careful about who they recognized as inhabitants. Towns had a responsibility to take care of residents, including those that were unable to care for themselves.

Less obvious sources of genealogical information include diaries, letters, journals and manuscript collections. Family records of genealogical events, birth, death and marriage may be buried in a journal or a diary. You may have to read a lot of prose to extract the pertinent data. Helps to know the neighbors and friends of the diarist to determine if the material might have something about your family.

Letters frequently pass on important pieces of genealogical information such as the birth of a new niece or nephew or the death of an elder citizen of the town. To find letters that might apply to your family, you need to check not only your surnames, but the surnames of others in your ancestors' community.

Rounding out your family history

Diaries – Since diaries are typically maintained to capture the mundane, they are excellent sources information about everyday life. Sometimes, they also capture important national events.

Memoirs - Memoirs select specific events or scenes and weave them into a thematic story.

Correspondence – Letters between family members or mentioning family members add detail to your ancestors' lives.

Business Records – If your ancestor ran a farm, or a store, or a tavern, they kept account books. If they had a specific occupation such as blacksmith, midwife or gravedigger, you'll find account books.

Military Records – Most often we think of muster rolls in terms of potential military manuscript material, but consider also that military units kept supply books, pay books.

Town Records – Included vital events, names of town officials, registration of cattle marks, tax lists, fence and road inspections and warnings out.

Town Records, warnings out - Warnings Out was a mostly New England phenomenon whereby towns were extremely careful about who they recognized as inhabitants. Towns had a responsibility to take care of residents, including those that were unable to care for themselves.

How to find manuscripts

American Ancestor members have access to the online Digital Library and Archive. The Digital Library and Archives at NEHGS contains materials from three repositories at NEHGS:

- R. Stanton Avery Special Collections
- Research Library
- Wyner Family Jewish Heritage Center

The materials are browsable and mostly unindexed, although some have searchable transcriptions.

The material from the **R. Stanton Avery Special Collections** is also known as our manuscript collection. The collections have been arranged into 12 groups:

- Business Records & Accounts
- Church Records
- Civil War Manuscripts
- Commonplace Books
- Family and Personal Papers
- Family History Manuscripts
- Family Registers & Bible Records
- Finding Aids for Manuscript Collections
- French and Indian Wars Manuscripts
- Local History Manuscripts
- Revolutionary War Manuscripts
- William Bollan Papers

The collections from the **Research Library** include:

- City Directories
- Family History books
- Local History books

The seventeen collections from the **Wyner Family Jewish Heritage Center** include:

- Abraham Captain Ratshesky Papers
- Bureau of Jewish Education Records
- Combined Jewish Philanthropies Records
- Community and Social Service Organization Records
- Dr. Robert Sperber Papers
- Family and Individual Papers
- Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society Boston Port Records
- Jewish Communities of the North Shore
- Jewish Community Relations Council of Greater Boston Records
- Jewish Heritage Center Photographs
- The Jewish Times Collection
- Leo Shapiro Newspaper Collection
- Rabbinical, Synagogue and Jewish Education Papers
- Spiro Family Papers
- Winer, Kane, Snider Family Papers & Elm Farm Foods Records
- Wyner Family Papers
- YMHA & Hecht House Records

ArchiveGrid

Archive Grid, developed by WorldCat allows users to search over five million archival manuscript descriptions. Searching is possible by geographic location, collection, or surname.

How to Search

You can apply Boolean search logic to your keywords and terms, using AND, OR, NOT, and parentheses. You can also use specific indexes for your search terms.

Broaden Your Search

- Put an upper-case OR between your keywords. For example, dust OR bowl retrieves records containing either dust or bowl.

Narrow Your Search

- Put quotes around your keywords to find records with an exact phrase. For example, "dust bowl" retrieves records with the words dust and bowl together, but would not match a description where those two words were not adjacent and in that order.
- Put an upper-case NOT between your keywords. For example, dust NOT bowl retrieves records containing dust, but not bowl.

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- Put a ~ and a number between 1 and 4 at the end of your exact phrase. For example, "dust bowl"~4 retrieves records where dust and bowl appear within four words of each other.
- Put parentheses around your search terms. For example, (dust OR bowl) NOT Oklahoma retrieves records containing either dust or bowl, but not Oklahoma.

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