

FINDING ONLINE GEMS AT THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS AND THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES

Susan Goss Johnston

In the rush to fill in the next blank spot on our family tree, we sometimes forget that our goal is not a completed chart, it's a valid conclusion. It's not a name we're searching for, it's a person. Success requires that we learn the history of the time in which our ancestors lived, and it requires that we understand the records we use. It's time to skip the surname in a search box routine and spend an afternoon browsing the shelves of two of our nation's most valuable repositories. One of your brick walls just might crumble.

The Library of Congress

The Library of Congress is the largest library in the world, and its website merits much exploration. There are several collections genealogists will find especially valuable. One can enter a surname in the main search box and occasionally find a relevant result, but the most successful searches are those for *location* and *subject*. Best results are obtained when collections are searched individually. Much of the original material on this site is not indexed, so be prepared to browse those documents in which you might find information on your subject.

This presentation focuses on the "Digital Collections" available on the site. This collection can be reached from the home page or directly here: <http://www.loc.gov/collections/>.

- **Digital Collections – Browse by Topic:** <http://www.loc.gov/topics/>

Browsing by topic may be the best way to visit the Library of Congress's 260 digital collections, which comprise millions of individual items. Find photographs, maps, letters, music, audio recordings, and even historic videos in these collections. Depending on your research problem, any of these collections might have relevant material. Here is a sampling.

- "A Century of Lawmaking" in *The Congress and the Legislative Branch* under **Government, Politics & Law**. Explore each section in this site, but begin your search for individuals in the *American State Papers*, especially the sections on "Public Lands" and "Claims." The site includes a full-text search, but it is very rudimentary.
URL: <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/amlaw/>
- "American Notes: Travels in America, 1750-1920" in **General Collections**. Although this area offers a full-text search, browsing selections by subject may be more informative. This is a wonderful resource when seeking primary information on life in this country in a given time and place. URL: <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/lhtnhtml/>
- "The Stars and Stripes" in **News, Journalism & Advertising**. *Ancestry* acquired this World War One newspaper collection in 2006, but it's available for free from the Library of Congress website. The site offers a full-text search and issues can be browsed.
URL: <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/sgphtml/sashtml/>
- "Historic American Buildings Survey" (a.k.a. "Built in America") in **Prints & Photographs**. The history of a house is the history of the people who built it and lived in it. This area has significant information on many individuals, as well as photographs, blueprints, and maps. Don't forget to check for features, such as churches and bridges. Search or browse by location for best results. URL: <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/hh/>
- "Early Virginia Religious Petitions" in **American History**. Fruitful search possibilities include *place* and *subject*. Searching for names, however, is a waste of time. Many of these images include hundreds of signatures, and none of those signatures are indexed.
URL: <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/collections/petitions/>

- “American Life Histories: Manuscripts from the Federal Writers’ Project, 1936-1940” in *Great Depression & World War II (1929-1945)* under **American History**. More than 2,900 narratives, dialogues and case histories from individuals give first-hand accounts of life in America in the late 19th-early 20th centuries. This is part of the “United States Work Projects Administration records, 1524-1975,” not all of which is digitized. Browse or search by location, topic, or name.

URL: <http://www.loc.gov/collection/federal-writers-project/about-this-collection/>

- Maps don’t always include individual names of residents or landowners, but they are essential tools in family history research. These are two of my favorite collections.

- “Civil War Maps” under the topic **Maps**. Search by battle, and then narrow the results by time period or creator. URL: <http://www.loc.gov/collections/civil-war-maps/about-this-collection/>
- “Indian Land Cessions in the United States” in **Geography and Map Division** or **A Century of Lawmaking**. Beautiful township and range maps, useful whether studying Indian cessions or simply westward expansion. URL: <http://www.loc.gov/item/13023487/> or <https://memory.loc.gov/ammem/amlaw/lwss-iloc.html> (includes text as well as maps)

- **Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers:** <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

This collection spans the years 1836 to 1922 and includes newspapers taken from 42 states, the District of Columbia, the Piedmont, and Puerto Rico. Search possibilities available from the “Advanced Search” tab include *any word*, *all words*, *phrase*, and *proximity*. Limit the search to a date or date range, newspapers from one or more states, or selected newspapers.

Check out the “All Digitized Newspapers 1836-1922” tab. There are currently 1,969 digitized papers available. The complete list can be downloaded, and it can be filtered by state, ethnicity, or language. This is also a great point to begin browsing issues of a specific paper.

Although this presentation focuses on finding records online, one of the most valuable sections in this site is the “U.S. Newspaper Directory, 1690-Present.” Finding historic newspapers that might have information on your family is very important. For example, a search for newspapers published in Danville, Caledonia County, Vermont, yields only one historical title, the *North Star*, published from 1807-1891. Although many repositories hold copies of some issues, the Vermont Department of Libraries in Montpelier holds microfilm copies of all extant issues from 1807-1889.

- **Veterans History Project:** <http://www.loc.gov/vets/>

The Veterans History Project includes first-hand accounts of soldiers and supporters in conflicts from World War I through the present. This site provides an online database of the collection and a sampling of the collection’s audiotapes, videotapes, transcripts, letters, photographs, and memorabilia.

- **American Memory:** <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/index.html>

This was the former entry point for the Library of Congress collections, but all these collections are gradually being migrated to the more modern “Digital Collections” area. Not all have made the transition, though, and the simple lists offered here make browsing quick and easy. Bookmark these URLs; it’s possible that menu links may disappear in the future.

- **American Memory: List All Collections:** <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/browse/ListAll.php>.
- **American Memory: Updated Lists:** <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/browse/updatedList.html>.

- **Library of Congress Online Catalog:** <https://catalog.loc.gov/>

One of the joys of on site library research is browsing the shelves. If you find an item of interest, looking at nearby volumes may uncover an even more valuable treasure. *Browse* the Library of Congress catalog by subject. Find a book of interest and click on the link to the “LC classification (partial).” Voila! You’re browsing the shelf of nearby material.

Related Websites

- **The Library of Congress on Flickr:** http://www.flickr.com/photos/library_of_congress/

Browse by album, and don't forget to study any associated album notes. These may include links to related collections. One of the most beautiful collections on *Flickr* is the Library of Congress's set titled "1930s-40s in Color."

URL: https://www.flickr.com/photos/library_of_congress/albums/72157603671370361

- **The Library of Congress Blog:** <http://blogs.loc.gov/loc/>

Follow the blog to keep up-to-date on new collections and website revisions.

U.S. National Archives and Records Administration

Although NARA has updated and improved its website, a treasure map is still helpful when negotiating this site. The home page at <http://www.archives.gov/> is headed by five major categories, two of them especially important to online genealogical research. Note that the purpose of this website is to help researchers understand, find, and use records created by the federal government. To further this purpose, the site has databases, indexes, and digital samples of many records that may contain information on individuals, but a good researcher will go to the source for the full story.

- **Research Our Records**

This area provides easy access to the Archives' online search tools. Become familiar with *all* these tools, not just the ones discussed in this presentation.

- **National Archives Catalog:** <http://www.archives.gov/research/catalog/>

This catalog is your entry point to the records of the National Archives, whether you're searching for digital records, information about records, or research ideas. Use the "Advanced Search" if you want to narrow your results to a specific record group, a specific repository, digital objects, or any filter combination. Use the simple search for a wider sweep of the records, and then narrow the results with filter options in the left-hand menu.

- **Refine By: Data Source.** Are you searching for digital media only? Filter for "Archival Descriptions with Digital Objects."
- **Refine By: Level of Descriptions.** Many record groups and series descriptions provide a "search within" option. These individual files or units may not appear in the initial search.
- **Refine By: Type of Materials.** Searching for maps or data files only? Narrow the results here.
- **Refine By: Location.** If you're planning a visit to the National Archives at San Francisco, filter for that repository's holdings.
- **Refine By: Date.** This filter is not always helpful, as it is usually based on the years encompassed by the record group or series, not by the individual file date.

Results can be sorted, selected, and exported in a variety of formats, including CSV, PDF, TXT, and XML. This is a great tool when planning a research trip, whether online or on site.

Experiment with this search process by conducting separate searches for a *surname*, a *location*, and a *subject*; suggestions: **ingersol**, **caledonia vermont**, and **"spanish-american war" horses**.

- **Access to Archival Databases (AAD):** <http://aad.archives.gov/aad/>

As the name implies, this area provides access to databases created by the National Archives to facilitate access to their records. One of these databases, the "World War II Army Enlistment Records," was created from microfilmed computer punch cards. This is the original database from which *Ancestry* and *Fold3* created their records. However, NARA's version can be searched *and sorted* by any included field. Other databases include military enlistments, casualties, prisoners of war, and passenger lists. Some results from the AAD will appear in a search through the National

Archives Catalog, but the full database functionality available in the AAD is not available in the catalog at this time.

- **Microfilm Catalog:** <https://eservices.archives.gov/orderonline/>

Although the National Archives' microfilm catalog will not provide access to any individual names, the descriptive pamphlets (DPs) associated with NARA's microfilm publications will help researchers understand the records, their contents and organization, and locate relevant microfilm on websites such as *Internet Archive*. Enter the microfilm publication number in the search box, if known. Otherwise, use the "Advanced Search" option to search by subject. Selecting the publication title will open an information screen. The link labeled "View Important Publication Details" will open the descriptive pamphlet in PDF format.

- **Guide to Federal Records:** <http://www.archives.gov/research/guide-fed-records/>

Sometimes, you simply have no idea where to start on a problem. If that's the case, the number and variety of results from a catalog search are confusing. An online search of the *Guide to Federal Records in the National Archives of the United States* is a good place to start. Enter a general term, such as "revolutionary war", in the search box. The result is a list of record groups that hold series relevant to your search – and many of those series will contain records you didn't know existed!

- **Veterans' Service Records:** <http://www.archives.gov/veterans/>

Many of the records available on NARA's website are military records, and this area provides quick access to these records. Under the section *Research Using Military Records*, select "What's available online?" Among the many records listed here are two important sources of personal information that usually don't appear in a surname search of this website: the *World War II Honor List of Dead and Missing Army and Air Forces Personnel* and the *World War II Casualties for Navy, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard Personnel*. You must browse the pages to find your subjects.

- **Prologue Magazine:** <http://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/genealogy-notes.html>

Prologue, the quarterly magazine published by NARA, first appeared with the spring issue of 1969. The "Genealogy Notes" articles are must-reads for all genealogists. Written by archivists and archives specialists, these articles illustrate federal records research in action. The stories are fascinating and the reference notes provide clues to informative, but rarely used, federal records.

Related Websites

- **The National Archives on Flickr:** <http://www.archives.gov/social-media/flickr.html>
- **NARAtions: The blog of the U.S. National Archives:** <http://blogs.archives.gov/online-public-access/>
- **AOTUS Blog: The blog of the Archivist of the United States:** <http://aotus.blogs.archives.gov/>