

Finding and Using Digitized Manuscript Collections for Genealogical Research

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Manuscript collections can contain genealogical gems. Letters, diaries, photographs, histories, and many more information-packed wonders reside in repositories around the world. Many repositories are digitizing parts of their collections and making them available online, so we don't have to take a trip to access the information we're looking for, but finding these collections can still be a challenge. Learn how to search for online collections, use finding aids to determine their usefulness for our research, and locate amazing records.

What are manuscript collections?

Although the literal meaning of manuscript is 'handwritten,' [a] Library's manuscript collections cover all kinds of unpublished written records and many contain published and pictorial records as well. The kinds of records are extremely diverse: letters, diaries, notebooks, speeches, lectures, drafts of books and articles, research or reference files, cutting books, photographs, drawings, minute books, agenda papers, logbooks, financial records, maps and plans.¹

Where are manuscript collections housed?

- Archives
- Libraries
- Universities and other educational institutions
- Historical Societies
- Museums
- Private collections

Finding aids

The National Archives and Records Administration describes finding aids this way: "Finding aids are tools that help a user find information in a specific record group, collection, or series of archival materials. Examples of finding aids include published and unpublished inventories, container and folder lists, card catalogs, calendars, indexes, registers, and institutional guides. Formal publications that

¹ "Manuscript collection," *Dictionary of Archives Terminology, Society of American Archivists* (<https://dictionary.archivists.org/entry/manuscript-collection.html>).

help a user find information regarding a record group, collection, or series of archival materials are also finding aids.”²

Pro Tips

- Manuscripts wander—learn to follow them
- Many finding aids are digitized, even if the collections they describe are not
- Play around—experiment with your searches
- Browse as well as search—you might turn up something amazing
- Use the databases, but also the repositories’ own websites
- Search regularly on Google

Major databases for locating manuscript collections

National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections (NUCMC) (<https://www.loc.gov/coll/nucmc/>). To search through their gateway: <https://www.loc.gov/coll/nucmc/oclcsearch.html>

WorldCat (<https://www.worldcat.org/>) and *FirstSearch*.

ArchiveGrid (<https://researchworks.oclc.org/archivegrid/>).

SNAC (Social Networks and Archival Context) (<https://snaccooperative.org/>).

U.S. national finding aids

Library of Congress Manuscript Division (<https://www.loc.gov/rr/mss/>).

National Archives and Records Administration (<https://www.archives.gov/research/catalog>).

State and regional online finding aids

Archives West (<http://archiveswest.orbiscascade.org/>).

Arizona Archives Online (<http://azarchivesonline.org/xtf/search>).

Online Archive of California (<http://www.oac.cdlib.org/>).

Explore Chicago Collections (<https://explore.chicagocollections.org/>).

UNCAP (Uncovering Chicago Archives Project) (<http://uncap.lib.uchicago.edu/>).

Kentuckiana Digital Library (<https://kdl.kyvl.org/>).

Five College Archives & Manuscript Collections (Massachusetts) (<http://asteria.fivecolleges.edu/index.html>).

² “Finding Aid Type,” *The National Archives Catalog*, <https://www.archives.gov/research/catalog/lcdrg/elements/findingtype.html>

Mississippi Digital Library (<https://msdiglib.org/>).

Mountain West Digital Library (<https://mwdl.org/index.php>).

OhioLINK Finding Aid Repository (<http://ead.ohiolink.edu/xtf-ead/>).

Philadelphia Area Archives Research Portal
(<http://dla.library.upenn.edu/dla/pacscl/index.html>).

University of Pittsburgh Digital Collections
(<https://digital.library.pitt.edu/islandora/search>).

Rhode Island Archival and Manuscript Collections Online (<http://www.riamco.org/>).

Rocky Mountain Online Archive (<https://rmoa.unm.edu/>).

Texas Archival Resources Online (<https://legacy.lib.utexas.edu/taro/>).

Virginia Heritage (<https://vaheritage.org/>).

University of Wisconsin Digital Collections
(<http://digicoll.library.wisc.edu/wiarchives/>).

University finding aids

Brown University (<https://library.brown.edu/collections/mss/>).

Cornell University (<https://rare.library.cornell.edu/finding-materials/>).

Dartmouth College
(https://www.dartmouth.edu/library/rauner/manuscripts/manuscripts_guide.html).

Iowa State University (<https://www.lib.iastate.edu/research-tools/research-help/find/find-manuscripts-archives>).

Louisiana State University (<https://www.lib.lsu.edu/special/research/manuscripts>).

University of Nevada, Las Vegas
(https://www.library.unlv.edu/speccol/research_and_services/finding_our_materials)

The Catholic University of America (<https://libraries.catholic.edu/special-collections/archives/collections/manuscript/index.html>).

University of Birmingham (England)
(<https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/facilities/cadbury/archives/about.aspx>).

International finding aids

Archives Canada (<http://www.archivescanada.ca/>).

Archives Hub (<https://archiveshub.jisc.ac.uk/index.html>). United Kingdom

Archives Portal Europe (<http://www.archivesportaleurope.net/>).

Archon (<http://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/find-an-archive>). Find archives in the United Kingdom and around the world.

Archivportal (<https://www.archivportal-d.de/>). Germany.

British Library Manuscripts Catalog (<https://www.bl.uk/>).

Calames (<http://www.calames.abes.fr/pub/#culture=en>). France

Archives of Spain (<http://censoarchivos.mcu.es/CensoGuia/portada.htm>).

Global Resources: The International Collections of the Library of Congress (<https://www.loc.gov/rr/international/int-aboutcoll.html>).

Library finding aids

The British Library (<https://www.bl.uk/subjects/manuscripts-and-archives>).

Denver Public Library (<https://history.denverlibrary.org/western-history-collection>).

Milwaukee Public Library
(https://www.mpl.org/archives/local_history_manuscript_collections.php).

New York Public Library (<https://www.nypl.org/about/divisions/manuscripts-division/finding-materials>).

Bibliothèque Nationale de France (<https://archivesetmanuscrits.bnf.fr/>).

Aids to Specialized Collections

Blair-Caldwell African American Research Library
(<https://history.denverlibrary.org/blair>).

Metropolitan Museum of Art (<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/libraries-and-research-centers/watson-digital-collections/manuscript-collections>).

The New Bedford Whaling Museum
(<https://www.whalingmuseum.org/explore/library/manuscript-collections>).

New York Historical Society (<https://www.nyhistory.org/library/manuscript-collections>).

Other aids

A Directory of Historical Societies in the United States, Canada, and Australia
(<http://www.daddezio.com/society/hill/index.html>).

Directory of State Archives (<https://www.statearchivists.org/connect/resources-state/>).

Hidden Collections Registry (<http://registry.clir.org/>).

Directory of Corporate Archives in the United States and Canada (<https://www2.archivists.org/groups/business-archives-section/directory-of-corporate-archives-in-the-united-states-and-canada-introduction>).

Google searches

Using both basic and advanced searches on Google can lead us to many more resources. A search for a topic or location along with the words “manuscript collection” or “digital archive” can bring up a gold mine of resources.

Resources

“Library Research Guide for Finding Manuscripts and Archival Collections,” *Harvard Library* (<https://guides.library.harvard.edu/archives/us>). This guide for scholars offers links and information on how to search the main databases for U.S. and some international manuscript collections.

“Library Research Guide for Finding Manuscripts and Archival Collections—Europe,” *Harvard Library* (<https://guides.library.harvard.edu/archives/europe>). This guide for scholars offers links and information searching selected European repositories.

“How to Read a Finding Aid,” *Purdue University Libraries and School of Information Studies* (<https://guides.lib.purdue.edu/c.php?g=352889&p=2378063>). Explains common elements of a finding aid and gives an example of an annotated finding aid.