

## Archival Institutions

The term *archival institution* is used most often to refer to an archives, manuscript repository, historical society, or library with a special collections department. Archival institutions can be large or small; domestic or foreign; public, private, or governmental. They preserve and make available the documents of organizations and individuals that have enduring value.

Archival records appear in a variety of physical forms, including textual documents, photographs, electronic records, maps and architectural drawings, motion pictures, videotapes, and sound recordings. They are organized not by author or subject, as are books in a library, but according to *record groups* or *collections* that reflect the way the materials were accumulated or developed by organizations or individuals in the course of their daily activity. These records are accessed through specialized finding aids that describe the records generally by group rather than by individual document.

[Cover: Researchers at work in the Central Research Room at the National Archives Building in Washington, DC]

## Selecting the Right Institution

A variety of reference tools are available at local and university libraries to assist you in finding appropriate archival institutions for your research. Two comprehensive resources are: *Directory of Archives and Manuscript Repositories in the United States* compiled by the National Historical Publications and Records Commission. 2nd edition. Phoenix: Oryx Press, 1988; and the *National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections*. Washington: Library of Congress, 1959--.

Other references might include a directory of historical agencies in North America, a compilation of special collections in college and university libraries, or an international guide to picture sources. The *Guide to the National Archives of the United States* (GPO 1996 and available on the National Archives homepage at [www.archives.gov](http://www.archives.gov)) is representative of the broad institutional guides available.

For online computer assistance in locating a wide range of resources, access the Research Libraries Information Network (RLIN) or Online Computer Library Center (OCLC) at your local library.

If you have access to the Internet, you can use the World Wide Web to electronically visit many institutions, such as the National Archives at [www.archives.gov](http://www.archives.gov) and the

Library of Congress at [www.loc.gov](http://www.loc.gov). Many state and local repositories also have Web sites, such as the Virginia State Library at [www.lva.lib.va.us](http://www.lva.lib.va.us) and the Maryland State Archives at [www.msa.md.gov](http://www.msa.md.gov).

## Preparing for Your Visit

Preparation for research begins with a careful examination of secondary sources relating to your topic. Familiarity with names, dates, events, and historical context will enable you to focus your topic, gauge the time you will need for research, and narrow your search for appropriate records. Clues to the location of relevant primary sources can often be found in footnotes and bibliographies as well as in institutional guides and finding aids available locally.

It is advisable to contact an institution before making a visit in order to determine the availability and volume of potential materials and the procedures that will affect your archival research. Inquiry should be made about hours of operation, record media, restrictions on documents, research room procedures, security, copying fees, meals, and transportation.

## Conducting Your Research

It is important that you consult with the institution's reference staff throughout your research visit. They will be able to direct you to guides and other finding aids to the institution's documentary collections and suggest ways for you to refine your topic.

As you conduct your research, be realistic about the volume of material you will be able to cover in the time you have allotted. Take care to observe all procedures governing the handling, review, and reproduction of documents, paying special attention to the nature of the medium and copyright and access restrictions.

## Archival Publications

General information about archival institutions and documentary materials can often be found in your local library. For discussion of special topics relating to the field, you are encouraged to consult the many fine publications issued by the Society of American Archivists, 600 S. Federal Street, Suite 504, Chicago, IL 60605, or visit [www.archivists.org](http://www.archivists.org).

## Educational Opportunities

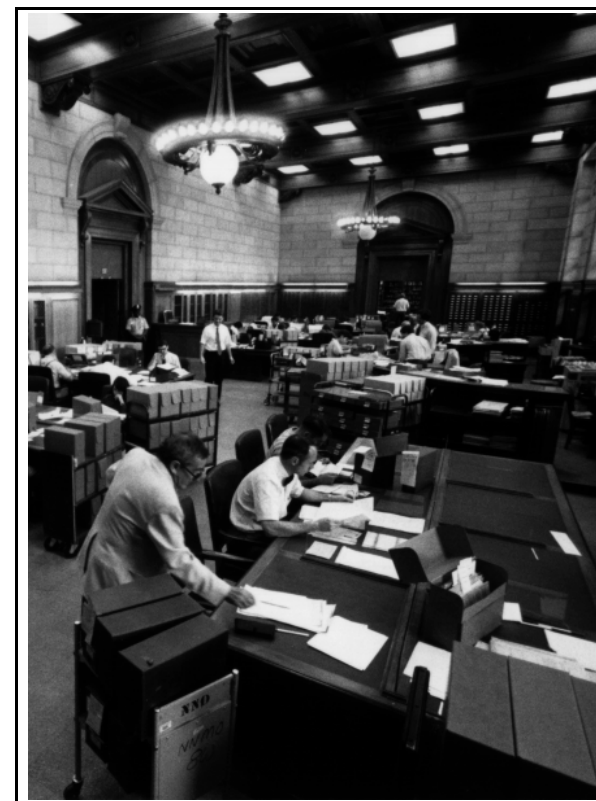
Courses in archival research are sometimes offered by university history or library science departments or as part of outreach efforts of archival institutions, state committees for the humanities, or National Park Service sites. Courses may also be available through local continuing education programs.

The National Archives in Washington, DC, schedules a variety of workshops throughout the year on special research topics. The four-day research course *Going to the Source: An Introduction to Archival Research* is offered each May for graduate students and the research public on how to prepare for archival research, identify useful collections, locate archival facilities, work with reference archivists, and develop successful research strategies. The eight-day workshop *Primarily Teaching* is offered each summer for educators on how to conduct research in the National Archives, create teaching materials from archival documents, and develop strategies for using documents in the classroom.

For further information about these and other courses, contact the sponsoring organization, MARAC ([www.marac.info](http://www.marac.info)), or the National Archives, Education Branch (NEEE), Washington, DC 20408, (202) 501-5210.

Prepared by the MARAC Outreach Committee and written by Paula Nassen Poulos, 1995. Minor revisions made in 2007.

# Research in Archival Institutions



**MARAC**  
Mid-Atlantic Regional Archives Conference