Finding and Using Manuscripts, Special Collections, and Repositories



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1. **What are manuscript repositories and special collections?** A quick (and somewhat sassy) response would be that they are the opposite of a dumpster or incinerator. They are libraries, historical societies, archives, and other places that hold manuscript collections. It might be a repository that covers only one or a few main subjects such as local history, railroads or transportation in general. Special Collections are generally part of a larger institution's library with a section dedicated to manuscripts, as in many college and university libraries. This session covers U.S. repositories.

2. **What is a manuscript?** Generally, these are one-of-a-kind items, and many are sources of primary information, i.e., records created at, or near, the time of an event, and by someone closely involved. Many are handwritten, unindexed, on varying sizes of paper, in loose piles, boxes, or in bound volumes. Some are personal papers and others are from businesses or organizations. The rich details they include are too important to overlook in your family history research. Did someone in your greater family understand the importance of such documents and donate them to a repository rather than contributing them to the trash?
    - Did 2d Cousin Annabelle donate a family bible to an archive?
    - Where are the files from the small-town lawyer or doctor?
    - What happened to the file of family genealogist Granduncle Levi?
    - Where are the records of a circuit rider from Indiana, Ohio, and Missouri located?
    - How about records from clubs and groups that relatives joined in North Carolina?

3. **How do we locate these places?** Directories of these repositories are found in library reference sections and online. If you see a directory that is several years old but does have a basic description of the holdings, use it but then check online or make a call. The next question is how do we find out the specifics of what they do have? Simply, we have finding aids with some in libraries and others online. Look for online catalogs and finding aids of libraries, archives, and historical societies in the areas where your family lived and in locations where others moved. Then look just about anywhere!

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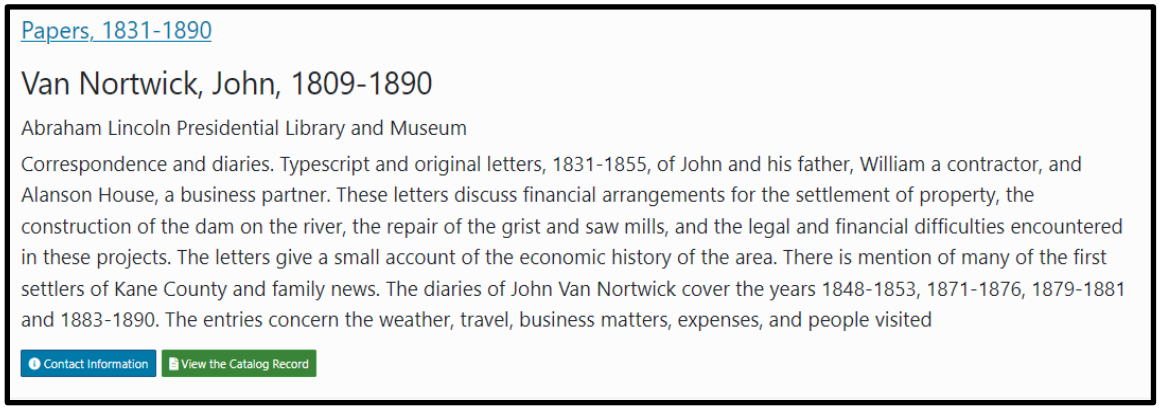
4. **A variety of FREE finding aids**. One type of finding aid is an expanded description or inventory listing contents of one or more archival or manuscript collections. It provides an overview explanation of the specific collection, may include brief biographical details on the creator, inclusive dates of the material, and hopefully, an overview listing of what each box or volume contains. Some go into detail folder by folder. It may direct you to related collections or publications. Others include a topic or subject list that tells what is covered and often the main names covered. Each finding aid is the result of one or more individuals basically judging what is important in the collection. Related finding aids include card and computer catalogs, calendars, printed collection guides, published articles, ArchiveGrid, vertical files, binders, loose papers, the memories of librarians and archivists, main name indexes, card indexes, in-house guides, registers, databases, and more. Check under individual names, family surnames (and the neighbors and associates), geographic localities, business names, and owners' names.

5. **What else can be found via manuscript finding aids?** In addition to the items mentioned earlier, you may find records of individuals, churches, schools, and businesses. The records might include military detail, tax records, justice of the peace papers, records of birth, death, and marriage, maps, photographs, account books, personal letters, and oral history transcriptions. It might be the records of the community midwife, the local funeral home, or the last secretary of that book club grandma joined. Manuscripts may help with the missing maiden name, generational links back many decades, and provide more of the family story.

6. **The grandaddy of all general manuscript finding aids.** The first successful cumulative U.S. manuscript finding aid **was** the *National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections* (NUCMC), a cooperative cataloging program via the Library of Congress. The last statistical update I saw showed more than 200,000 descriptions from about 1800 repositories included overall. Thankfully, today we have additional electronic finding aids to help us find collections. NUCMC is no longer available. It ceased operation in early summer of 2026 with the recent retirement of the last librarian working on it. Few repositories were contributing to NUCMC because they had their own cataloging and online capability. Not every place with manuscript collections has participated in NUCMC. NUCMC loc.gov/coll/nucmc/ now directs us to ArchiveGrid and to WorldCat. They are great as is Archive Finder but searches directly on the LOC website often returned separate information and often in fewer steps.

7. **What did NUCMC tell researchers?** A typical descriptive entry included collection title, years it covers, number of items, volumes, or boxes, total linear or cubic feet, name of repository, descriptive highlights, and if there are other finding aids. Most entries tell how the collection was acquired, i.e., by donation (and by whom) or by purchase. The descriptions often include places, names, subjects, and related collections. From 1962-the early 1980s, NUCMC was in annual published volumes. If you find a library with them on open shelves, browsing a couple volumes and their indexes will open up a world of possibilities for research.

8. **ArchiveGrid**. A FREE website to search for links to over 7 million manuscript collections related to railroads, land, old settlers, businesses, immigration, organizations, migration, church records, families, and many other search terms. 1,400+ repositories are represented. A collection that pertains to your ancestor may not be housed anywhere near where that person resided. Most are found in U.S. repositories, but some international repositories are included. It does not include ALL of NUCMC. Seach via WorldCat or my preferred direct method https://researchworks.oclc.org/archivegrid/ A search for Kane County, Illinois:



9. **WorldCat** is free online and can be accessed from home. It offers access to catalog holdings of thousands of libraries and other repositories worldwide. Searches can be limited in several ways including the Format category of "Archival Material" and "Manuscript." The filters to do this are in the left hand column once you have done a keyword search. https://www.worldcat.org/.

10. **Archive Finder.** Archive Finder has "all" NUCMC cataloging from 1959 –. Conflicting sources say 2010 or the present. An expensive database marketed to libraries, historical societies, and archives. It is often found at major repositories and is generally free onsite. It is part of ProQuest. Archive Finder also includes data from the Directory of Archives and Manuscript Repositories in the United States (DAMRUS), the National Union Catalogue of Manuscript Collections (NUCMC), and the National Inventory of Documentary Sources in the United States (NIDS).

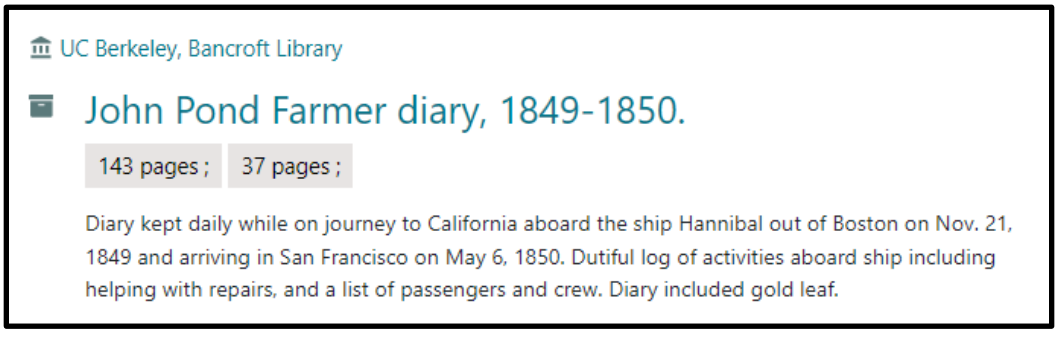
11. **Historical Records Survey.** The Historical Records Survey (HRS) was part of President Roosevelt's 1930s New Deal programs. It was under the auspices of the Work Projects Administration. HRS field workers visited repositories and compiled descriptions of manuscripts held in those institutions. Other guides provided general information on manuscript repositories in a state, rather than descriptions of individual collections. A U.S. wide directory of such places and their collections was one hoped-for aim of the late 1930s Historical Records Survey, but funding and then World War II stopped the majority of WPA work. Many guides are digitized today on HathiTrust hathitrust.org/ and FamilySearch familysearch.org under Books or via a catalog search. Some examples:

a. *A Guide to the Manuscript Collections in the Duke University Library, Durham, N.C.,* Raleigh: Historical Records Survey, 1939.
b. *Guide to Depositories of Manuscript Collections in Illinois (preliminary edition).* Chicago: Illinois Historical Records Survey, 1940. https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015034759566&seq=1
c. *Guide to the Manuscript Collections in the Worcester Historical Society*. Boston: Historical Records Survey, 1941.
d. "Historical Records Project" and "Federal Writers Project." *Achievements of W. P. A. Workers in Illinois, July 1st, 1935 - June 30th, 1938*. Page 21. Brief view of the early years of these projects. Illinois Digital Archives. idaillinois.org/digital/collection/isl/id/18615/rec/4

12. **State Guides.** Some state-level historical societies, archives, and individuals have done surveys and/or publications showing descriptions of archival and manuscript collections. These publications range from before and after the WPA era. Among these are Illinois, Minnesota, New York, North Carolina, Oregon, and Tennessee. Something described in one of these publications may not be included in a later guide or on the repository website.

13. **Limitations of repository cataloging.** Can you imagine doing the computer input for a *century* or two of collected materials? Many repositories face this task. However, an increasing number have accomplished that, and others have been working for years to input collections previously catalogued or inventoried on cards, or paper. Even with industry standards, the individual cataloger may view a collection's contents differently than another would. Many online catalogs do not presently include all manuscripts. Before a personal visit, a clear written inquiry to a librarian or archivist may be necessary.

14. **Older published guides** to manuscript collections fill library shelves and are complemented by online links and descriptions today. Spending some time investigating finding aids on Special Collection Libraries such as the Bancroft Library of the University of California, Berkeley turns up results like this entry shown below. The search was for a specific ship's captain and a family from Brooklyn, New York. Alas, it wasn't found but look at this one.



15. **Before we could go online to search.** Decades of published guides to manuscript collections are at our fingertips on library shelves and a growing number are now digitized. Other guides are directly on repository websites. Many are guides to a single repository and

others cover a multitude of places. Older historical and genealogical periodicals also provide insight into some collections.

16. Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum [formerly called the State Historical Society of Illinois and has material far beyond presidential manuscripts]. https://presidentlincoln.illinois.gov/learn/library-research/library-collections/

17. Brichford, Maynard J., Robert Mize Sutton and Dennis F Walle. *Manuscripts Guide to Collections at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign*. Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1976.

18. Buttlar, Lois J. and Wynar, Lubomyr Roman. *Guide to Information Resources in Ethnic Museum, Library, and Archival Collections in the United States.* Greenwood Press, 1996.

19. Cain, Barbara T., et al. *Guide to Private Manuscript Collections in the North Carolina State Archives*. 3d Rev. Ed. Raleigh: North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources, 1981.

20. Directory of Corporate Archives in the U.S. and Canada, 1997 but revised online in 2018. https://www2.archivists.org/groups/business-archives-section/directory-of-corporate-archives-in-the-united-states-and-canada-introduction

21. Explore Chicago Collections. https://explore.chicagocollections.org Participating organizations https://explore.chicagocollections.org/members/


Cambrian Benevolent Society of Chicago Records, 1853-1996

Minutes, financial records, membership information, miscellaneous receipts and correspondence, event programs, and newsletters of the Cambrian Benevolent Society of Chicago (1853-ongoing). Also orders of worship, event programs, miscellaneous correspondence, and newsletters of the Hebron Welsh Westm...

DATES: 1853-1996

TOPICS: Societies & Clubs | Societies & Clubs | Religion | Early Chicago (1837-1871)

LIBRARY/ARCHIVE: Newberry Library

22. Gaidmore, Gerald P. *A Guide to Church Records in the Library of Virginia*. 2d ed. Richmond: Library of Virginia, 2002.

23. Galloway, John A. *Guide to Western Historical Manuscripts*. Columbia, MO: University of Missouri, 1957.

24. Galveston & Texas History Center, Rosenberg Library. One of the many archives, libraries, historical societies, and university special collections covering Texas and related history and filled with manuscripts. https://www.galvestonhistorycenter.org/about/history-and-mission

25. Harper, Josephine L. *Guide to the Draper Manuscripts.* Madison, Wisconsin: State Historical

Society of Wisconsin, 1983. https://www.wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Article/CS4103

26. Historical Society of Pennsylvania. *Guide to the Manuscript Collections of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania*. Philadelphia, PA: Historical Society of Pennsylvania, 1991.

27. Larson, David R. *Guide to Manuscripts Collections & Institutional Records in Ohio*. [Columbus]: Society of Ohio Archivists, 1974.

28. Online Archive of California. https://oac.cdlib.org/ "The OAC is a website that provides free public access to detailed descriptions of primary source collections (artwork, manuscripts, papers, historic photographs, and so on) maintained by more than 200 libraries, special collections, archives, historical societies, and museums throughout California -- including collections maintained by the 10 University of California (UC) campuses."

29. Philadelphia Area Archival Research Portal (PAARP), formerly the PACSCL Finding Aids Site. A consortium of repositories in Pennsylvania and New Jersey. http://dla.library.upenn.edu/dla/pacscl/index.html.

30. Sokol, Susan Blosser and Clyde Norman Wilson, Jr. *The Southern Historical Collection: A Guide to Manuscripts*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Library, 1970. [A supplementary guide was published in 1976.]

31. Smith, Dorothy E. *Wright State University Department of Archives and Special Collections*. Dayton, Ohio: Department of Archives and Special Collections, University Library, Wright State University, [1987].

32. Smith, Laura Katz. Et al. *The Appalachian Collection at Virginia Tech: A Guide to Manuscript Collections*. Blacksburg, VA: University Libraries, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, 1990.

33. Repository websites. For each city, county, and state related to your ancestral interests, check for online finding aids, catalogs, and whether a catalog search can be limited to manuscripts, personal papers, business records, membership organizations, and other key words. Look for guides to researching some of these same types of records.

34. Before visiting these repositories. Many require advance contact or an appointment to help determine what you need, even when you have already located a collection of interest. Not all collections are stored onsite. Fortunately, some websites detail the guidelines but be sure to double check hours by phone before a visit. Inquire about other policies such as IDs, pencils, computers, scanners, photocopying, and the hours, parking, and area restaurant details. Ask about additional finding aids.