

## APPENDIX 3

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**PROJECT REPORT:**

Using Textual Records in the National Archives

**ADMINISTRATIVE UNITS:**

Reference Services Branch (NNRS)

Suitland Reference Branch (NNRR)

**DATES:**

July 2-20, 1990; September 4-7, 1990

**METHOD:**

Interview/Observation. Interview a random sample of researchers who use the Central Research Room over a three-week period and interview as many researchers as practical who use the Suitland Research Room during a one week period. Interview findings are supported by observations of staff/patron interactions, interviews with staff, and tracking of reference service request slips.

**NUMBER OF ANALYSIS UNITS:**

NNRS - 189; NNRR - 30

**ATTACHMENTS:**

1. Notice to Researchers
2. Questionnaire -- Central Research Room
3. Interview Guidelines -- Central Research Room
4. Codebook -- Central Research Room
5. Codebook -- Suitland Research Room

*Archives & Museum Informatics* will provide copies of the attachments to the original appendices to any reader upon request. Contact:

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## HIGHLIGHTS OF FINDINGS:

- \* Most researchers who use the Central Research Room have a serious need to obtain the information they seek. Very little casual research is taking place regardless of purpose of visit.
- \* At least one-quarter of all visitors to the facility are engaged in personal research projects. Most but not all of these projects are related to genealogy or personal family history. Most genealogical records used in the research room are pension and military service records not available on microfilm.
- \* Previous experience is an important determinant of research success. The majority of researchers in the room in any given week have at least three days' experience at the National Archives. One-quarter of all visitors to the research room have no prior experience. Half of this group made no advance contact prior to visiting.
- \* Preservation sensitivity among the group of researchers is extraordinarily low. Most feel that damage or deterioration is not a relevant issue in their case. This finding, when combined with the propensity of researchers to use the self-service photocopy equipment, suggests the need for continuous vigilance and improved user training on the use of original records.
- \* Most researchers who seek assistance in the research room need help on routine matters such as photocopying, service orders, and records retrieval. There appear to be sufficient numbers of researchers with serious records-related questions, however, to justify the placement of reference and records specialists in the research room.

## FINDINGS

The quantitative analysis is presented below under four headings: who uses the research room, what records are used, the research process, and assessments of researcher experience.

### Who Uses the Research Room

Researchers were asked to state the purpose of their visit as it pertained to the records they were currently consulting (Q11). The initial question was phrased rather generally to allow respondents some degree of flexibility in responding. Follow-up questions probed for specific occupational categories (e.g., student, retired person, government historian) (Q12) and whether or not the researcher was working for a client (Q12a). Based upon responses to the initial question, as well as the follow-up questions, each researcher was assigned to one of the following four categories: personal, academic, professional, avocational. In some cases the category was assigned after the interview was completed.

Researchers carrying out personal research projects comprise 23.8 percent of the total. When combined with the 9.5 percent of researchers undertaking more extensive projects of an avocational nature (hobbyists), the portion of the people who are self-motivated to consult textual records during a typical week in the summer is about one-third of the total researcher population. Researchers working in academic environments comprise 39.2 percent of the total population. This

group includes faculty and students in all disciplines and at all levels who are working on any form of scholarly research. The remaining group of professional researchers comprises 27.5 percent of the overall population and includes all individuals working for a client as well as all non-faculty researchers whose motivation to visit the research room relates to their occupation. In this regard official government historians are grouped as occupational researchers, along with lawyers (or their clerks) working on legal cases and self-employed writers who make all or part of their living through the interpretation of historical sources. A single open-ended question (Q4) sought information on how researchers found out that relevant records were located in the National Archives. Researchers were urged to be as specific as possible and were not prompted for possible examples. Responses were noted verbatim and grouped into categories during analysis. A total of twenty-six discrete sources of information were identified, including friends or colleagues, National Archives publications, footnotes in books, and references from other archivists or librarians. The responses appear to fall into five logical groupings: verbal sources, written sources, general research activity, presumption, and direct National Archives sources. As has been demonstrated by user studies in other types of archives, most researchers find out about appropriate sources via word-of-mouth sources or simply assume that the sources exist. Verbal sources, which include such things as comments from teachers, references from friends or relatives and similar personal contacts were mentioned by 37 percent of the group interviewed. Specific written sources, such as newspaper articles, footnote citations, or non-National Archives resource guides were mentioned by 13.2 percent of the group. Over one-quarter of the population (25.9 %) declared that they deduced the existence of appropriate records or simply guessed that the National Archives was the place to visit. A typical response in this category was "Where else would the State Department records be?"

When people who claimed to just know that sources exist were asked to be more specific, 19 percent of the total group made reference to general information-seeking behavior that led to the discovery of appropriate records in the National Archives. An example of responses in the category of general research was "Well, I started at the public library and then consulted a guidebook to Washington, D.C., which led me to a general source book on archival records, which finally gave me the right telephone number, so I called."

People who mentioned any type of National Archives source of information, ranging from genealogical classes through published preliminary inventories and the National Archives guide, were grouped separately. Although only 4.8 percent fall into this category, the actual impact of direct National Archives sources and agency outreach activities should not be underestimated. Referrals from colleagues, teachers, and other archivists may be almost totally driven by information provided directly from the agency. The same situation may be true for researchers who make their connections through more general research activities.

The systematic interviews explored the nature of researchers' experience with on-site research at the National Archives (Q5) and their efforts to make advance contact by phone and mail (Q6). Overall, 23.3 percent of the group of researchers had never conducted research at the National

Archives prior to the day they were interviewed. About half of this group had called or written in advance; the remainder (about 10 percent of the total) is "fresh off the street."

Of the 76.7 percent of the population with some previous experience (even a single day), less than one in five had ever called or written before making their first visit to the National Archives on their current topic. The range of actual experience within this group, however, varies greatly. A follow-up question (Q5a) asked respondents to indicate about how many days they had spent in the National Archives in the past six months. For 10.3 percent of the group, the interview day marked the first return in the year, for many after long absences. About a third (35.2%) of the "experienced" group had spent between one and three days on-site, most frequently consecutively. Another third of the group (33.1%) reported 4 to 15 days on-site in 1990. The remaining portion of researchers with prior experience (21.4%) are the group best characterized as "veterans," having spent more than 16 days in National Archives facilities in the previous six months. Looking toward automation of the National Archives' finding aid system, the survey sought to measure how familiar researchers are with computers. The concept of "familiarity" should be distinguished from both expertise or willingness to use automated systems. Patrons interviewed in the Central Research Room were asked a special sequence of four questions on their familiarity with computers: ownership or frequent use of personal computers, use of computer software other than word processing, experience with online searching, and familiarity with databases of archival records. The results should be heartening for systems developers.

Overall, 89 percent of the 189 people interviewed claim under careful questioning to either own a personal computer or use computer equipment frequently in their work. This level of response belies common stereotypes of research capabilities, and tracks favorably with the phenomenal growth of computer usage in the past decade. Of those who own or use computers frequently, over half use them for tasks beyond word processing, including database management, statistical analysis, and desktop publishing. These two findings indicate that the users of the National Archives, at least those who use textual materials, claim to be quite familiar with the advanced capabilities of computer technology and may welcome automated access systems.

Further questioning shows that 72 percent of all respondents to the survey have personally used a computer to search for information from an online library catalog, a database of books and articles, or a database of archival materials. Probing revealed much of this experience has been gained in relatively simple online library catalogs in academic or public libraries. Yet many respondents were quick to note the advantages and disadvantages of more advanced systems, including those at the Library of Congress (SCORPIO and MUMS), the Public Records Office, and Harvard University.

The final question in the sequence demonstrates a broad unfamiliarity with the availability of two of the major national databases of archival information. The Research Libraries Information Network (RLIN) is a consortium of over 40 research libraries that have pooled their catalog listings, including archival collections. The National Archives contributes records to RLIN. The Online Computer Library Center (OCLC) is a database built from the collections of over 1200 academic, public, and special libraries and includes numerous records describing archival collections. The

holdings of the National Archives library are included in the OCLC database. A total of 16 percent of the researchers interviewed report making some use of either RLIN or OCLC.

Table 1 reports the findings of a measure of computer familiarity created by combining the responses to these four topics. The first row includes researchers who claim to be personally unfamiliar with computing equipment and claim never to have searched for information in an online environment. Many researchers who fall into this category made statements like, "I stay as far away from computers as I can," or "My wife does all my typing." A disproportionate number of researchers involved in personal projects fall into this first category. The second row includes researchers who claim to be familiar with computers, but who confine their use of them to word processing applications. Well over half of the personal researchers interviewed either have minimal or no experience with computers. The third row in Table 1 includes people who claim to have had some experience in searching for information in a bibliographic database; over three-quarters of this group also owns or uses computers frequently for some purposes other than word processing. Further probing reveals that much of this experience with searching is on relatively simple online catalogs located in academic and public libraries, although a significant portion of the group described sophisticated searches undertaken recently. The final row includes people who satisfy all three criteria for a complex approach to computers: they own or use computers frequently, have at least minimal experience beyond word processing, and have retrieved information from an online database such as RLIN, OCLC, or DIALOG. Academic and avocational researchers, who most likely are undertaking projects requiring a breadth of information sources, are represented more strongly in this category than their occupational and personal counterparts.

**Table 1: Familiarity with Computers**

	<b>Academic</b>	<b>Occupational</b>	<b>Personal</b>	<b>Avocational</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>
None	4.0% (3)	3.8% (2)	28.9% (13)	6.7% (3)	11.1% (21)
Minimal	41.9% (31)	48.1% (25)	24.5% (11)	33.3% (6)	38.6% (73)
Searching	40.5% (30)	44.3% (23)	42.2% (19)	33.3% (6)	41.3% (78)
Complex	13.6% (10)	3.8% (2)	4.4% (2)	16.7% (3)	9.0% (17)
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>39.2%</b> <b>(74)</b>	<b>27.5%</b> <b>(52)</b>	<b>23.8%</b> <b>(45)</b>	<b>9.5%</b> <b>(18)</b>	<b>100%</b> <b>(189)</b>

## What Records Are Used

On one level, each researcher's project is unique, requiring a special mix of records applied to a particular historical research question. The study sought to discover the existence of basic patterns that may be evident in the use of holdings or in the definition of research topics.

In the process of each interview in the Central Research Room, the questionnaire was annotated to indicate one of the four reference units with responsibility for providing access to the records delivered to the room: Military Reference Staff; Civil Reference Staff; Diplomatic Reference Staff; and Legislative Reference Branch. Roughly half (48.7%) of the patrons interviewed were found to be in the midst of consulting military records; 31.2 percent were using civil records; 16.9 percent were consulting diplomatic records; the balance (3.2%) were using records serviced by the Center for Legislative Archives.

Space on the questionnaire was provided for noting the specific record group and box number of the files being consulted at the time of the interview as well as a brief description of the files (Q1). Over the three week interview period, a total of 71 record groups were observed being consulted by 189 people. Only five of these were consulted by four or more people in the course of the interview cycle. Two of the four most popular groups, RG 15, Records of the Veterans Administration (32 uses) and RG 94, Records of the Adjutant General's Office, 1780-1917 (16 uses) contain military service and pension files that are frequently consulted by genealogists. The single most popular record group for non-genealogical research is RG 59, Records of the Department of State (30 uses). The two groups with four uses apiece were RG 26, Records of the US Coast Guard, and RG 200, National Archives Gift Collection.

Researchers appear to be blind to existing and potential preservation problems in textual records. In spite of observed damage to records being used during the interview weeks, 92.6 percent of those interviewed stated unequivocally that the physical condition of the materials was satisfactory for their uses (Q2). Some researchers noted their awareness of the problem of brittle paper, but felt the issue did not apply in their case. Indeed, researchers as a group expressed far more concern about the physical condition of finding aids in the research room and in reference branches than about deteriorated records.

Less than one quarter of all researchers interviewed in the Central Research Room were engaged in genealogical projects of any sort (Q10). When combined with responses to interviews in the Suitland Research Room, the total figure is even lower. Although most genealogical researchers are undertaking personal or avocational research, several individuals pursuing genealogy for academic or occupational reasons were also identified.

When asked to describe the topic of research, researchers tended to be either very specific, supplying relevant names, dates, and places, for example, or very vague (e.g., sports). Eliciting the general topic of research may be a much less useful mechanism for identifying records and service needs than gathering detailed information about the components of a specific research question.

Nevertheless, a simple attempt to categorize researchers by topic yielded a total of 21 discrete topics. Four researchers refused to state a topic. Beyond family history, the category into which most genealogical research falls, the most popular topics currently are the Second World War (24), 20th century foreign policy (23), U.S. social history (15), and military history other than WWII (14).

### **The Research Process**

The survey sought information in the following areas: how researchers located the specific records they were using when interviewed; the nature of any assistance sought, if applicable; the intended use of other records in the National Archives; whether or not they expected to make reproductions; their intended end-product; and the status of their research projects.

When researchers were asked to name specific sources of information used to locate the materials they were currently using (Q2), a total of 12 specific answers to the question were logged. Records specialists in the National Archives were the most frequently mentioned source and the source typically mentioned first, prior to any probing by the interviewer. Preliminary inventories, registers, microfilmed indexes, and other finding aids ranked second in popularity and were especially likely to be mentioned when asked to be specific. About 10 percent of the group were led directly to appropriate sources by friends and colleagues. Other sources of specific records information mentioned include book citations, other records used previously, and the Foreign Relations of the United States series.

Each researcher was asked two questions about the nature of any advice and assistance they may have received; the first question concerned general assistance with their research project (Q7), the second pertained to specific advice or assistance on day of the interview (Q8). Most researchers (86.8%) discussed some aspect of their topics with a reference archivist, yet the nature of that advice varies tremendously. The most frequently mentioned information obtained from archivists is the specific availability and location of records. Some researchers said that they never consulted any form of finding aid; archivists located specific records and completed the reference service request forms for them. Those researchers who reported that they had not talked to a reference archivist tended to reach the Central Research Room via the Microfilm Research Room, where records are available directly. The most vocal praise for reference service was reserved for those archivists who focused on the research process and the structure of the records, rather than on the content of specific records series.

About one-third (32.3%) of those interviewed in the Central Research Room reported seeking any advice or assistance that day. The majority of this advice (60%) consisted of specific information on photocopying procedures. The balance tended to seek information on such matters as interpreting the content of records, where else to pursue their research, declassification procedures, and similar questions that require specialized knowledge not generally available in the research room.







