Using Manuscript Collections In Your Genealogical Research

What are Manuscript Collections?

Archival manuscript collections are a unique, rich and underused source of genealogical information. They are comprised of original personal papers or records of businesses or organizations.

- **Personal papers** document the lives, accomplishments and activities of individuals and families. They include correspondence, diaries, scrapbooks, clippings, photographs, speeches, sermons, financial and legal records, family histories, certificates, keepsakes, and artifacts. Use of manuscript collections will illuminate how people lived their lives, decisions they made, and how they felt about the events they lived through and situations they encountered.

- **Business and organizational records** offer similar insight and will include articles of incorporation; by-laws; minutes of meetings; budgets, audits, and other financial records; correspondence; photographs; scrapbooks.

Archival materials are not arranged by subject. They are maintained according to their creator or **provenance**.

The original order established by the creator is maintained whenever possible.

The archivist arranges the collection into series and subseries, typically by document type, topic, chronology, or by creator.

Naming a Collection:

- **Papers** is used to describe collections created by individuals, e.g. the Ben King Green Papers.

- **Records** is used to describe collections created by organizations or businesses, e.g. the Arlington Funeral Home Records.

- **Collection** is used to describe materials artificially brought together, e.g. the Mexican War Letters Collection.
What are Finding Aids?

Finding aids are prepared to guide the researcher’s use of the manuscript collection. Components of a finding aid are:

- **Title Page:** Name of the collection; span of dates representing the oldest and newest items within the collection and the bulk of the collection; preferred citation.
- **Table of Contents**
- **Historical or Biographical Sketch:** Gives the researcher a brief, general introduction of the person or organization that created the collection.
- **Series Description:** Introduces the arrangement of the collection and provides a concise statement of files within each series.
- **Scope and Contents Note:** Describes how the archivist approached the collection for processing and describes the collections’ general characteristics, strengths, weaknesses or gaps.
- **Provenance:** Describes how and when the collection came to the repository.
- **Notes to the Researcher:** Refers the researcher to related materials; may offer instructions in handling the materials.
- **Container List:** Enumerates the contents of each box, generally on the “folder level.” Some container lists will list materials on an “item level.”

What are Holdings Files?

Files maintained by the repository to document the accession of the collection often holds many supplementary materials of interest to genealogists. They can include genealogies, photographs and research notes that relate to but are not a part of the subject collection.

How to Find Manuscript Collections:

Special Collections, University of Texas at Arlington Library:
http://library.uta.edu/spco/

National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections (NUCMC): Created in the 1950’s as a book catalog, these records are currently available online through the ProQuest database 
Archives USA. Subscribe to this database at http://archives.chadwyck.com/home.do.

Archival Consortia (Employing Encoded Archival Description (EAD)):

- Online Archive of California: http://www.oac.cdlib.org
- Online Archive of New Mexico: http://oanm.unm.edu
- Texas Archival Resources Online (TARO): http://www.lib.utexas.edu/taro/
- Virginia Heritage: http://ead.lib.virginia.edu/vivacad/cgi-bin/eadform.pl

Repositories of Primary Sources: A listing of over 5000 websites describing holdings of manuscripts, archives, rare books, historical photographs and other primary sources for the researcher. Websites from the United States, Canada, Europe, Asia, Africa, and other links are provided. http://www.uidaho.edu/special-collections/OtherRepositories.html

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