

APPENDIX 1

PROJECT REPORT:

Initial Consultation and Referral

ADMINISTRATIVE UNIT:

Consultants Office (NNRS), Room 207

DATES:

January 29-February 2, 1990

METHOD:

Observe the researcher registration and consultation process in the National Archives Consultants Office and briefly interview all patrons who apply for a research card. Information from researcher applications is merged with observation/interview data to construct a portrait of new researchers and their research questions.

NUMBER OF ANALYSIS UNITS: NNRS - 213

ATTACHMENTS:

1. Research Orientation Log
2. Instructions for Consultants
3. Instructions for Observers
4. Codebook -- Consultants Office

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:

- * The Consultants Office issued 263 research cards to 217 distinct teams of researchers. During a typical week in 1990, 265 research cards were issued.
- * Approximately 33 percent of all researchers issued cards during the study week were engaged in genealogical research.
- * Two-thirds of the researchers who enter the Consultants Office have never been in the National Archives before; well over half of this group made no advance contact prior to their visit.
- * One in six researchers (15%) is engaged in academic research at any level. For one third of the total, research needs originate in the work place while the balance have personal reasons for visiting.
- * Consultation is largely limited to identifying which reference branch can serve the researcher more completely and is carried out mostly by memory.
- * In 79 percent of the cases, consultants issued cards and made referrals based solely on information volunteered by researchers in their initial inquiry. In the remaining cases, probing by consultants yielded an additional 3.5 pieces of information.

INITIAL CONSULTING FROM THE RESEARCHER'S PERSPECTIVE

The first challenge a new researcher faces is figuring out how to proceed. The National Archives Building (NAB) has two entrances that are not linked directly: Constitution Avenue provides access to the Rotunda, the Circular Gallery, and the Gift Shop; Pennsylvania Avenue is for staff, researchers, and physically challenged visitors. Because the entrance for staff and researchers is directly across the street from the "Archives" METRO station, a significant number of tourists must be redirected to Constitution Avenue on a daily basis. Researchers who enter the National Archives Building at Pennsylvania Avenue, are greeted by armed security guards and unarmed security personnel who handle the first stage of a multi-part process that ends in one or more research rooms. Typically the guards first find out if visitors are interested in doing research and second if they are doing genealogical research. Genealogical researchers are almost universally referred directly to the Microfilm Reading Room regardless of the type of materials they may need. All unescorted visitors to the building without a research card or government ID card must sign one of three registers. Researchers need a research card only if they wish to consult materials available beyond the Microfilm Reading Room. Researchers holding valid cards may proceed directly to reference units. Guards refer potential researchers to the Consultants Office if they do not have a valid research card or if researchers express a need for general consulting.

Once upstairs in Room 207, new researchers complete NA 140003 Researcher Application, present a photo ID, and are issued a card valid for two years. (Individuals without a photo ID are issued a card good for one day only.) An optional block on the form asks for information on the purpose of genealogical research (personal/professional), the title of possible resulting publications, occupation, employer, academic status, and major field. During FY 1990 about 75 percent of the applicants for research completed the block fully. The remaining portion left one or more of the

optional questions blank. While issuing the research card, technicians who staff the desk inquire about the topic of research, eliciting sufficient information about media and topic to refer researchers to the most appropriate reference branch within the Washington, D.C., area. If technicians handling the registration process are unable to make reliable referrals, researchers are referred to one of the staff archivists in the Consultants Office. During busy periods, it is not uncommon to have four or more researchers completing applications while several more are engaged in consultations with archivists. All the while incoming telephone calls arrive at the rate of one every 90 seconds.

RESEARCHER DATABASE

Since October 1989, information from completed researcher application forms has been compiled in a database built with the assistance of dBase III+. All of the information from the form is included in the database except the topic of research, which has proved difficult to categorize. In addition the field for occupational data contains a large portion of "other" codes, because a full list of occupations has not been developed. The database contains a significant amount of missing item-level data in the fields drawn from the optional section of the form which complicates meaningful analysis of the data. Errors are sometimes compounded from the manual keying of data and the difficulty of interpreting handwriting. Although the database has significantly increased reporting capabilities in the branch, its potential is not fully realized because the basic registration form itself does not support database development.

FINDINGS

Research Visits: In Fiscal Year 1990, the Consultants Office issued a total of 13,795 research cards, or an average of 265 per week. During the study week, Monday, January 29, through Saturday, February 3, the Consultants Office issued 263 research cards. Fourteen of these were issued after 5:00 pm or on Saturday when the Consultants Office was closed; consequently these researchers were excluded from the study. An additional three cards were issued to NARA staff members to permit them to conduct personal research in the reading room. These too were excluded, leaving a pool of 246 researchers who needed cards issued or renewed. In addition to this group, archivists consulted with seven individuals who possessed research cards issued earlier, bringing the total number of researchers eligible for the study to 253.

The "research visit," as opposed to the daily visit, is the basic unit of analysis of the project and is central to the interpretation of the findings of the entire study. The two principal statistics currently gathered and reported on walk-in visitors by the National Archives, indeed by most archival repositories, are "Research Cards Issued" and "Daily Visits." The first number, a running count of new researchers, roughly measures the influx of individuals over a given period of time. The research card count does not account for the fact that a significant amount of research is carried out by research teams; for example a film producer and technical crew searching for appropriate footage, a husband and wife documenting the same family tree, or lawyer and paralegal team combing the files for regulatory precedents.

The daily visit count is typically compiled by summing the number of people who sign the register of researchers each day and cumulating these totals over reporting periods ranging from a week to a year. The daily visit count is a very useful measure of the demand on staff and facilities on a day-to-day basis. The prevalence of research teams and the tendency of many researchers to spend more than one day on their projects tend to inflate the daily visit count. If a researcher makes use of more than one research room in a given reporting period, the meaning of the count is lessened still. For example, if a film production team of four people spends three days retrieving images from two reference branches each day, reference statistics will account for this group as four research cards issued and 24 daily visits--all for a single "research visit."

The "research visit" is the most useful way of comparing the characteristics and experience of researchers who visit the National Archives. Research teams visit for varying lengths of time and are composed of people with varying background experiences; they define their research questions in various ways, choose to take advantage of one or more reference services at the Archives, and visit one or more reference rooms or consulting areas. Given the complexity of research use at the National Archives, measuring reference activity in terms of "research visits" is much more meaningful than attempting to compare and contrast researchers on either the basis of research cards issued or daily visits logged.

Every eligible researcher was accounted for in the study. During the five weekdays of the study period, 213 "research visits" of individuals or teams of two or three researchers were observed. Of the "research visits" observed for the study, 175 (82.2%) are discrete individuals, 36 (16.9%) are teams of two people, and the remaining two (.9%) are teams of three people.

Experience: Two out of five questions asked directly of registrants sought information on previous experience working at the National Archives and with archival materials in general. Twenty-eight percent of those interviewed had never been to the National Archives in the past and also had never handled archival materials. An equal portion reported having prior experience with both the National Archives and other archival repositories. Most of the remaining interviewees had some experience with other archival repositories but had never visited the National Archives. Only nine respondents spent time at the Archives but had never researched in other archival repositories. Overall, two-thirds of the researchers who enter the Consultants Office in a given week have never set foot in the door, while most of the remaining third has most likely spent some time pursuing holdings on microfilm, where no research card is required.

Regional Distribution: Although researchers visit from all regions of the country, the National Archives building in Washington predominately attracts researchers from the local area. During the study week, two-thirds of the researchers observed in the Consultants Office live within a three-hour drive of Washington. Seventy-nine percent (168) of the research groups hail from Eastern seaboard states. Eleven percent (24) traveled from states west of great divide while 7 percent (15) of research groups live in midwestern states. Six teams (2.8%) from foreign countries registered for research privileges.

Information drawn from the Consultants Office researcher database shows that the pattern of local use holds true for the entire year. Of 15,542 researchers included in the data file, nearly half reported hailing from the District of Columbia, Maryland, Virginia, Delaware, and West Virginia, well under a three-hour drive to the National Archives. Over two-thirds of the total group of registrants live in Eastern seaboard states. During the year, 564 people, or about 3.6 percent of the total live in foreign countries, which is very similar to the proportion of foreign citizen research teams interviewed during the study week.

How Researchers Find Out About Holdings: The facade of the National Archives building holds few clues as to its contents. Logic would have it that researchers with some need for archival information would go to some lengths to find out if and in what ways the National Archives may be of assistance. Two questions asked of every registrant sought information on whether researchers bothered to call or write for advance information and how they found out that the archives had relevant information.

Only 39 percent of all research visitors during the study week reported having called or written in advance of their visit. Two-thirds of those who had not made any advance contact also had no prior experience at the National Archives and so are bound to be completely unfamiliar with the complexities of the building and its services. Overall, one in every seven researchers who is issued a new card is new to the National Archives, has no prior experience with archival holdings, and has made no advance contact by phone or mail. The Consultants Office is the first opportunity this large group of visitors has had to speak to an archivist, explain their needs, learn about the National Archives, and figure out how to get answers to their questions. At other extreme, almost one-third of those requesting a research card have spent some time at the National Archives and also have worked with archival materials in other repositories.

When asked directly how they may have found out that the National Archives might have information on their topics, more than half (51%) reported "word of mouth" as the primary source, including friends, relatives, professors and instructors, and professional colleagues. Ranking second in importance (17%) are researchers' own previous experiences in working at the National Archives, research libraries, or other archival repositories. All written sources combined, including newspapers, magazines, footnotes, scholarly journal articles, account for only 12 percent of the sources mentioned by researchers. National Archives-produced pamphlets, books, finding aids, courses, and tours were mentioned by only 5 percent of the researchers queried. Finally, and of particular interest, is the group of researchers (15%) who under questioning firmly stated that they "just assumed" the Archives had the right information or had a "general knowledge" of the holdings. People made comments like "I just put two and two together," or "Where else would I go to get State Department records?" to explain their decision to visit the Archives.

It is important to note that survey researchers generally agree that questions requiring memories beyond one year in the past often result in inaccurate or superficial responses. The relatively high responses in the "just assumed" category, as well as the low recall of National Archives sources, may

be a result of failed memories or the fact that researchers may be in a hurry and therefore ill-disposed to speculate or recall the origins of facts long ago learned.

Purpose of Visit: Each researcher or research team that was observed during the study week was categorized according to the underlying purpose of their visit. In this project, an attempt was made to base assignments on information provided on the researcher application and from observing the registration process. No direct question was asked of researchers, as in later projects.

Four categories of researchers are evident. Some researchers have purely **personal** reasons for consulting archives. Typical personal researchers are tracing family immigration patterns, documenting their own military service, or seeking historical facts out of mere curiosity. A second group of researchers is affiliated with an **academic** institution and include faculty and students in a variety of disciplines functioning at various levels. A third group is motivated to seek archival information for use in a professional setting. Government administrators, journalists, lawyers, and film makers working on specific work-oriented projects are typical examples of **occupational** researchers. A person's occupation, per se, may not necessarily place them in this group, unless their purpose for visiting the archives is related to their job. The fourth group of researchers have an **avocational** interest in archives, and are willing to pursue their interests in greater depth and over a greater period of time than personal researchers. Persons researching Civil War history on their own, documenting the personnel of a World War II ship, or the design of a fortification in Florida are examples of history hobbyists. They often expect to produce some concrete product from their work and may have significant publications to their credit.

During the study week, people undertaking purely personal projects comprised the largest group of researchers (37.6%), followed closely by those engaged in work-oriented research (32.4%). At a distant third place were academic researchers of all disciplines (15.5%). Few avocational researchers registered during the week, comprising only 3.3 percent of the total. It is important to note that it was not possible to assign over 11 percent of the study group to a specific category, even after assessing carefully the completed researcher application form and responses to the observation questionnaire. For the full year, nearly one-quarter of all registrants did not complete the optional block on the registration form requesting each person's occupation. In addition, the annual totals show that 37 percent of the researchers listed occupations that did not fall into pre-assigned categories, and therefore complicating an analysis of what motivates researchers to visit the National Archives.

Genealogical Research: Visitors undertaking genealogical projects need only register if their research projects take them beyond the Microfilm Reading Room, where the census, ship passenger arrival lists, and pension indexes are available. Certain records of high interest to genealogists, especially Civil War pension files for Union veterans, have not been microfilmed, leading a significant group of visitors to the Consultants Office. Based on observations of the registration process, it is unlikely that more than one third (32.4%) of the total group of research visits logged through the Consultants Office during the study week have anything to do with genealogical research. For the entire year, the proportion of researchers who volunteered that they were

undertaking genealogical research was 31.9 percent of the total group, which is almost identical to the proportion of researchers interviewed during the study week.

Not surprisingly, most of the genealogical researchers are undertaking personal research projects. The vast majority of genealogical researchers have experience with other archival repositories prior to their trips to the Archives, have assumed or been told directly that the Archives is the place to be, and did not bother to confirm this advice in advance. Most genealogists who register in the Consultants Office are beyond the stage of casual research and have highly focused service needs. There is evidence, however that a small portion of genealogical researchers (perhaps 10 percent) register in the Consultants Office primarily to obtain a research card as a souvenir of their trip to the Archives.

How Specifically are Questions Posed?: In response to the opening question "May I help you?" researchers state a request for information as they seek to acquire a research card. If insufficient information is provided in the initial question, front desk staff probe just enough to refer the researcher to appropriate reference branches. The observation questionnaire was structured so that this initial question as phrased by the researcher could be noted verbatim for analysis, as well as information elicited in probing. The form contained a list of possible elements, or facets, that may be provided by the researcher. The list was based on the results of a study of question asking in seventeen archival repositories, undertaken in 1989 by David Bearman, and included fourteen concepts, such as personal or organizational names, date, media, and geographic place.

For this study, the medium of information is distinguished from a type or form of documentation. In addition, agency-specific elements were added to the list, including Record Group number and reference branch name.

An overall assessment of queries from 212 researchers is provided in Table A. As a group, researchers provide an average of 2.3 elements in their initial request to the front desk attendant. In 168 of 213 cases, this information was sufficient to permit the issuance of a research card and a referral to a reference branch or reading room for more information. With further questioning, the remaining 44 cases yielded 157 elements, or an average of 3.5 additional pieces of information per person probed.

The table shows that researchers volunteer and are probed on pieces of information that will lead them to the next step of the process. By volunteering medium of information, for instance photographs, motion pictures, or maps, researchers recognize that specific assistance is only available in other areas of the building. Names of individuals, dates, and broad subjects also facilitate the referral process.

Table A: Question Elements in Initial Consulting					
Element	Initial Question (n = 212)		Probing (n = 44)	Total (n = 256)	
	Count	Percentage		Count	Count
Medium	98	46.0%	27	125	48.8%
Date	94	44.1%	31	125	48.8%
Name	94	44.3%	22	116	45.3%
Subject	54	25.4%	16	70	27.3%
Place	45	21.1%	16	61	23.8%
Organization	42	19.8%	12	54	21.1%
Type	31	14.6%	13	44	17.1%
Event	14	6.6%	7	21	8.2%
Record Group	11	5.2%	6	17	6.6%
Other Element	8	3.8%	3	11	4.2%
Title	7	3.3%	2	9	3.5%
Footnote	2	0.9%	1	3	1.1%
Action/Function	1	0.5%	0	1	--
Language	0	--	1	1	--
NARA Admin. Unit	0	--	0	0	--

Time Spent in the Consultants Office: Few people who pass through the Consultants Office receive any service except the issuance of a research card. Only 11 percent (25) of the group spent any time at all with consulting archivists beyond the front desk. Furthermore, 90 percent of the group of researchers was whisked through the process in five minutes or less. Twenty researchers consulted with archivists for up to fifteen minutes and two interviews took longer than fifteen minutes.

Sources of Information Used by Consultants: Referral is largely a memory process. Over 93 percent (199) of all researchers were referred to the next step of the reference process by memory alone. The National Archives guide and finding aids were consulted in 2 percent and 8 percent of the cases, respectively. Occasionally, consultants placed internal telephone calls to records

specialists to get specific information (5.6%), but more typically researchers were referred directly to a specialist or a reference branch by the front desk attendant. No calls were placed to the Library, Records Center staff, Presidential Libraries, other federal agencies, or other archival repositories, and only two calls went out to Archives field branches for information.

Referrals to Records Specialists and Research Rooms: Once they are issued a research card, researchers are referred to a reading room to consult records or to a reference branch for more specific information. In general desk attendants and consultants ask only enough questions to make a reasonably accurate referral within the National Archives system. During the study week, all but one researcher was sent to a branch or office of the Archives within the Washington D.C., area. Observations of the registration process indicated that about 8 percent of the group did not expect to make immediate use of the Archives, deciding instead to simply acquire a research card for future use. The remaining people indicated that they intended to move right on the next step. Column one of Table B lists where the group of researchers who received cards during the study week were referred. The second column lists the number and percentage of the overall study group who signed into various National Archives reference areas in the two weeks immediately following the issuance of their research cards.

Table B: Referrals from Consultants Office				
Reference Unit	Referred		Visited	
Central Reading Room	28	13.1%	90	42.2%
Microfilm Reading Room	47	22.0%	64	30.0%
Civil Reference Branch	32	15.0%	34	15.9%
Military Reference Branch	29	13.6%	36	16.9%
Still Pictures Branch	25	10.8%	33	15.5%
Motion Pictures Branch	28	13.1%	28	13.1%
Other Units	23	10.8%	17	7.9%
Missing	1	0.4%	22	10.3%
TOTAL	213	100.0%	324	100.0%

Ten percent (22) of those who were issued research cards during the study week did not sign into any reference units in the Washington D.C., area within the following two weeks. Every person who was referred to the Central Reading Room signed the registration book. Fourteen of these twenty-eight also visited the Microfilm Reading Room. Of the 47 people referred to the Microfilm Reading Room, all but five signed in there. Twenty-four consulted only microfilmed holdings in the next two weeks, and probably did not need research cards. Twenty percent of each group sent to Military and Civil Reference went to both branches. Ten percent of those sent to the Still and Motion Picture Branches went to both branches over the next two weeks. Only two of the seven research teams sent to Suitland and Pickett Street locations signed the registration logs at those locations within the two-week period after the study week.

METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES

- * In 11 percent of the cases, it was not possible to categorize researchers by purpose of visit. The primary reason for this failure was that researchers failed to complete the description of the proposed research project, which is required of all researchers and also failed to complete the optional section at the bottom of the form.
- * The week of study may or may not have been a "typical" week in the Consultants Office. Although the number of research cards very nearly coincides with the average number of cards issued per week over the course of the year, the distribution of researchers by purpose of visit may not be representative of the entire population of National Archives researchers. Only by gathering and assessing information from researchers on a continuous basis is it possible to know what is typical and what is not.
- * Since the data was gathered for this study, some administrative circumstances have changed. Most importantly, the lead technician who issued research cards and provided initial consulting is no longer on the staff. His personal approach to the job most likely affected the depth of services offered at the time.
- * In the interests of carrying out a relatively unobtrusive study, fewer direct questions were asked of researchers than in subsequent projects. As a result, the findings of the study are not directly comparable responses to interviews carried out in reference rooms. In addition, unobtrusive research limited the opportunities to probe researchers for greater accuracy or depth. Researcher comments were accepted at face value, and vague responses were treated equally with clear ones.

DISCUSSION

There are at least two distinct ways in which the Consultants Office can support reference and access at the National Archives; first, as an efficient process for approving research applications and identifying for visitors the next steps in the reference process; second, as a consulting center that identifies and addresses the archival information needs of the majority of patrons who need assistance in using the agency's service. As it now stands, the Consultants Office straddles both approaches, functioning fully as neither a registration nor a consulting center. The mission of the office should be clarified and strengthened in time for the opening of Archives II when researchers will be confronted with a more complex reference system than already exists. Currently, the

Consultants Office is administered primarily as a mechanism for getting thousands of new researchers from Pennsylvania Avenue in contact with records specialists. From the researcher's perspective, the registration process is straightforward, relatively unobtrusive, and efficient. Patrons experienced with other archival repositories are accustomed to requesting permission to consult the holdings. Inexperienced researchers seem to adapt easily to the process. Most researchers know what they want in terms of service, even if they do not know where to get it or how to proceed. When called upon, the professional archivists staffing the Consultants Office draw upon their National Archives experiences to help researchers understand the research process. On the occasions when the researcher's information needs coincide with the consultant's knowledge of the records, researchers are often able to identify quite specific bodies of records to consult.

If the Consultants Office is supposed to function in the National Archives building and Archives II primarily as a "research card factory," then there are a number of actions that could be taken to improve the process.

- * Focus the responsibilities of the office on advising visitors about basic procedural matters. Staff need not necessarily have detailed knowledge of the holdings, but rather are trained as a group in the complexities of the National Archives system and are adept at referring patrons to specialists, including those in other archival repositories within the metropolitan area.
- * Establish a closer working relationship between office staff and security personnel, so that patrons are accurately and efficiently referred to appropriate reference branches.
- * Establish a central telephone switchboard operation within the office to make sure that incoming calls on reference matters are handled expertly and efficiently and that the volume and variety of inquiries by telephone are tracked more thoroughly.
- * Establish a reference paperwork control center within the office with the responsibility of administering a database of patron registration, reference service requests, and service orders.

The Consultants Office has not realized its full potential as a system for introducing new researchers to the reference services, helping coordinate research on complicated projects, monitoring the overall composition of the research clientele, and tracking trends in research use for administrative purposes. If the Consultants Office is to become the hub of on-site reference services at the National Archives and an essential source of information for researchers unfamiliar with archival research, then the capabilities of the office should be upgraded through the special recruitment and training of personnel and the acquisition of more sophisticated computer equipment. If managed properly, the Consultants Office will be poised by the opening of Archives II to improve initial access to holdings in both buildings. Among the actions that could be considered toward achieving the goal of enhanced initial consulting services are:

- * Unify staffing and supervision of the Pennsylvania Avenue information desk and the Consultants Office.
- * Increase the number of professional staff assigned to the Office and provide special training in consulting and referral techniques.

- * Increase the number of CIDS trainee archivists assigned permanently to the Office.
- * Increase the variety of records that can be ordered within the Consultants Office.
- * Increase the production by the professional staff of access tools available in pamphlet form, especially search paths for complex record groups.
- * Upgrade the researcher database so that it can be used as a system for tracking not only registration information but also reference use in both Archives I and Archives II.