

APPENDIX 2

PROJECT REPORT:

Using the Microfilm Research Room

ADMINISTRATIVE UNIT:

Textual Reference Division (NNRS), Room 400

DATES:

March 12-17, 1990

METHOD:

Interview a random sample of researchers who use the Microfilm Research Room during one typical week, including evenings and Saturday. Interview findings are supported by observations of staff/patron interactions and interviews with staff.

NUMBER OF ANALYSIS UNITS:

NNRS - 292

ATTACHMENTS:

1. Questionnaire -- Microfilm Research Room
2. Map of Microfilm Research Room
3. Codebook -- Microfilm 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

- * The Microfilm Research Room logged 957 daily visits during the week by no more than 640 individuals or teams of researchers, 292 of whom were contacted at random for the study.
- * Five out of every six visitors were engaged in genealogical research projects of varying complexity. Nine percent of the week's visitors were carrying out work related projects, while about 10 percent were scholars or students engaged in academic studies.
- * One third of all researchers had never been to the National Archives before the day of the interview, and only one in six had made any advance contact with the Archives before beginning their research.
- * One quarter of those interviewed simply assumed that the National Archives had relevant materials available. An equal portion heard about the holdings from a specific genealogical information source, especially classes and conferences, or research in other archives or genealogical collections. Friends, family, and other word of mouth sources account for most of the balance.
- * Non-genealogical research projects were divided about equally between 19th and 20th century topics, with World War II and its military or political aftermath dominating the latter group of research topics. The Civil War remains a popular topic for scholars.
- * Well over half of the group interviewed asked for help or assistance from the staff, with the most common questions being "How do I get started?" and "Where are the reels or finding aids?" One in seven people who asked for help had substantive questions about the content of the records or needed specific advice on other holdings of the National Archives.

THE USER'S PERSPECTIVE

The first challenge researchers unfamiliar with the National Archives building face is figuring out how to proceed. Researchers do not necessarily know which records are available on microfilm, although they are given a clue with the only visual aid in the Pennsylvania Avenue lobby: a sign reading "Beginning genealogists: slide show in Room 401." Observations of front desk interchanges with patrons seem to indicate that the guards routinely refer patrons they identify as genealogists or needing microfilm directly to the fourth floor, bypassing the Consultants Office. Since a research card is not required to use microfilmed holdings, access to the research room by new researchers is effectively controlled by the guards and secondarily by the staff of the Consultants Office.

For new researchers unaccustomed to the procedures of the Microfilm Research Room, orientation may be cumbersome. The orientation film does a creditable job of describing the most relevant holdings for genealogical research, but gives short shrift to fundamental procedural matters. There is a distinct lack of welcoming, orientation, or procedural signs at the entrance, which is cluttered by vended-card machines, old typewriters, and a small table holding a sign-in register. The information desk is on a platform that places the surface at eye level for many patrons, and is oriented neither toward the door nor toward the majority of the readers. When volunteer genealogical aides are on duty in the orientation room, beginning genealogists do have the opportunity for orientation

counseling; when volunteers are not available, the overall impression the public receives is confusion.

For the experienced or adventuresome researcher willing to take some time to become familiar with the overall structure of the facilities, the Microfilm Research Room provides a manageable work environment. The published catalog of holdings on microfilm is a reasonably approximate list of materials available in the room; an updated location register is nearing completion. For the most part, microfilm cabinets are marked with their contents and descriptive pamphlets are available if you know where to find them and are willing to read in the dark or while standing in the aisles. A microfilm reader is usually available; brief waiting periods are common only on Saturdays. Advice is available and the genealogy specialist in the room can put researchers in contact with records experts in other reference branches.

FINDINGS

Research Visits: The Microfilm Research Room logged a total of 56,950 daily visits during Fiscal Year 1990, which was about 2 percent greater than the previous year's total of 55,899. During the study week in mid-March, about 640 discrete individuals or research teams signed the Register of Researchers a total of 957 times, which is below the average of 1095 for the year and well off the 1210 daily visits logged during the same week in 1989. A conservative projection of these figures indicated that at least 31,000 discrete individuals spend at least a few hours in the room each year.

On a typical day, about one-quarter of the visitors to the room report a research card number on the daily register. There is no practical way to determine how accurately this figure reflects the portion of researchers who have applied for a research card, since unlike in the Central Research Room, the sign-in log is not closely monitored by a security guard. The lack of oversight makes the register a less reliable source of information on the actual number of visitors to the room. For example, each day a few researchers sign the book each time they enter or reenter the room.

Purpose of Visit: Based on the assessment of the reasons people apply for research cards, each person interviewed was asked about the purpose of their visit in the following way: "Are you collecting information in this room for personal, professional, scholarly, or some other reason?" The responses to this question suggest that 72 percent of the visitors to the Microfilm Research Room on a weekly basis are engaged in purely personal projects, with an additional 8 percent describing themselves as hobbyists or avocational researchers, willing to pursue their interests in greater depth and over a greater period of time than personal researchers. Ten percent of the group interviewed are undertaking scholarly research projects in a variety of disciplines, mostly as students or faculty at colleges and universities. The remaining 9 percent are in the room because they need information for work-related projects.

The survey asked the 81 individuals interviewed who were not engaged in purely personal projects to state their occupation. Three of the ten faculty members interviewed reported that they were carrying out contract research projects not a part of normal academic research. Four of the eleven

professional writers described their projects as scholarly while the remainder described their motivations for visiting in occupational terms. One of the two federal government historians interviewed during the week described his purpose for visiting the room as a long-term personal project. Finally, two of the four National Archives employees encountered were engaged in scholarly projects on their own time, while the other two were carrying on official agency work. There is sufficient overlap between occupational and purpose categories to suggest that occupational categories **by themselves** may not necessarily be reliable predictors of research purposes.

Genealogical Research: It should come as no surprise that nearly 83 percent of all visitors to the Microfilm Research Room are engaged in genealogical research. Most, but by no means all genealogical research (87%) consists of purely personal family history projects, such as completing family trees with census records, documenting the emigration of ancestors with ship passenger arrival records, and confirming the military experiences of relatives who may have served prior to World War I using military service and pension records. These are the records featured in the orientation film, described in pamphlets, and recommended by the staff as the most fertile sources of personal family information.

Overall, just under three-quarters (72%) of all visitors on a weekly basis are tracing family roots. One third of this group of personal researchers has never been inside the National Archives in the past for any reason except a visit to the Rotunda. Fewer than one in seven personal genealogists make any advance contact by phone or mail before visiting the research room. This lack of preparation and experience means that a large portion (60%) of the genealogists ask for help at the desk, even if they have seen the orientation film. Yet when asked directly, three-quarters of this group of personal genealogists stated that they were able to find all or most of the information they sought.

Given the large number of people who use the Microfilm Research Room on a yearly basis, even a relatively small portion (13%) of genealogical research projects undertaken for reasons other than personal ones is significant. Interviews discovered at least 31 individuals (10.6% of the total number) who were doing genealogical research in the interest of scholarship or ongoing professional or avocational projects. If the sample is representative of the research clientele as a whole, the study findings suggest that over 4,000 people visit the National Archives each year on genealogy projects that may have an impact on many people beyond the individual researcher.

Some examples may illustrate the point. A historian from a Louisiana university is using census records to document patterns of slavery and emancipation in the Mississippi delta. A historian is coordinating the public rededication of a Civil War monument by preparing a book of family histories of the men named on the monument. At least two individuals were working on contract with law firms to locate heirs to family fortunes. A consulting firm hired by the Spain World Fair planning committee is documenting early Spanish emigration to America.

Some personal genealogical projects have more than a passing interest to individual researchers. One striking example of vital personal research is the case of an economist from a major Midwest

university who is seeking to document his claim to dual United States-Irish citizenship. In pursuing his research interests in Third World countries, he feels it is safer to travel as an Irish citizen.

Experience and Advance Preparation: During a typical week, 30 percent of all visitors are new to the Microfilm Research Room. Although only one in five researchers made any advance contact by telephone or mail before visiting, totally inexperienced researchers are more than twice as likely to have called or written than researchers who had been in the room before the day they were interviewed. It is quite apparent that people with even one day of prior experience are quite willing to just show up in the room and get to work.

One in six of the experience researchers were making their first trip to the building on the day they were interviewed. For the rest, the actual amount of experience that researchers have working in the National Archives varies from one to 60 days in 1990. One quarter of the experienced researchers are very frequent users, having spent more than ten days at the National Archives by March 1990. Most researchers claiming prior experience, however, have spent only one or two days in the building in recent months. The research experience for most people appears to be concentrated in a few days and highly focused on a single topic.

Although an orientation film is available for beginning genealogists, only half of those engaged in genealogical research claim to have viewed the film. Paradoxically, few of the new researchers interviewed had seen the film when interviewed, while over half of the visitors with prior experience had already sat through the film. It seems that many genealogists prefer to get started right away and only pause to see the film or learn more about how to do research when they have difficulty.

Finding Out About Holdings: All researchers were asked an open ended question about how they found out that the National Archives might have information they need. The question generated twenty-two response categories. Almost 40 percent of the total group simply assume that the National Archives will have the information they need on their topic. When pressed on this issue, many claim that it "just makes sense" that Census records would be housed in the nation's archives, "put two and two together when planning a trip to Washington," or confessed that their long-standing interest in genealogy led to general knowledge about the Archives.

Almost one third of microfilm researchers learn of the Archives from friends, relatives, colleagues, teachers, and other word of mouth sources. A significant portion (10%) are referred directly from other archival repositories and federal agencies, the including the Library of Congress and the Veterans Administration. For genealogists, a personal network of friends and family, reinforced by special classes and information published by the Mormon Church, seems to be the most powerful source of information about the holdings. Articles in newspapers, magazines and other print media were mentioned by only 4 percent of the respondents.

Research Activity: Because patrons refile the materials they use, it is not possible to provide an accurate measure of the volume or variety of records actually consulted in the Microfilm Research Room in any period of time. When interrupted for an interview, most researchers (64%) were

consulting census records or the Soundex index to the census. Military service and pension records accounted for 15 percent of the ongoing use, while ship passenger records were being used by 7 percent of those interviewed. The remaining 14 percent of the interview group account for the remaining use of all other microfilmed holdings in the room during the week.

When asked specifically how they located the reel currently mounted on the reader, patrons generally demonstrated their self-reliance. Only 19 percent of those interviewed relied on National Archives staff to pinpoint specific reels, including research room staff, volunteers, records specialists, and consultants. Two percent mentioned friends or family that accompanied them to the room. The remainder (78%) found specific reels on their own, by consulting microfilmed indexes, other archival records, published finding aids, or their personal records.

Self-sufficiency does not happen automatically. Two-thirds of those who depended on National Archives staff for the location of specific reels of film reported being in the beginning stages of their work at the archives. Few people who are in the middle or near the end of their work on the project needed any help at all in locating reels, but instead queried the staff on substantive matters of content, where to go next for information, and photo-duplication procedures. Clearly there is a sharp learning curve in the research room. New researchers, almost regardless of their past experience, need, but do not often take the time to learn the proper procedures of the room. Almost three-quarters of those who asked for any help in the research room wanted information on very basic procedures. Once these procedural matters are mastered, researchers seem to function self-sufficiently.

The majority of researchers do not confine their work at the National Archives to the Microfilm Research Room. When asked specifically whether they expect to, or have already used other types of holdings on their project, 74 percent responded "yes." Sixteen percent of this large group also said they would be willing to use other holdings, such as photographs and cartographic materials, if they knew more about what was available. Eight people (2.7%) responded to the question by saying they did not know that the Archives had anything other than microfilm.

There is a close connection between microfilmed and original textual records; in some cases access to documentary materials is only possible through microfilmed indexes. It should come as no surprise that two-thirds of those researchers who indicate an interest in non-microfilmed records intend to consult textual records. More significant is the interest in special media. Eleven percent of the respondents intend to use the still photograph collection; 13 percent need cartographic materials located in the Pickett Street, Alexandria facility; and 10 percent have used or will consult bound materials available through the Archives library.

Successful Research: Satisfaction with a research visit is a relative matter. No attempt was made to assess satisfaction through direct questioning. Instead, researchers were asked if "today, are you finding the information you had hoped or expected to find?" as well as the general status of their research (near the beginning, middle, end). Over 60 percent of those interviewed claimed that they were finding what they wanted, with a significant portion of these remarking that they have been

pleasantly surprised at their success. The vast majority of those who reported no success were at the beginning stages of their work in the research room.

For many researchers, the question about their research success served as a trigger for positive and negative comments about the equipment, services, and access tools in the research room. Researchers seem to have a love/hate relationship with the reader/printer equipment and the microfilm readers. Experienced researchers are particular about what machines they use, commonly preferring the old Recordak equipment. Many comments were received about the lack of routine maintenance. As for the printers, more than half of those interviewed claim to be using them, and yet many complain of the complexity or cumbersomeness of the process. Twelve percent of those who asked for help at the desk needed assistance with the equipment.

Many researchers who volunteered comments requested more direct assistance on procedures. While praising the staff for their knowledge of the genealogical materials, researchers want and seem willing to use more tools and guides that will help them become oriented to the procedures in the room. Better signs, more completely marked storage cabinets, a map of the research room, stack area, and index room, and step-by-step procedural guides were frequent requests.

Researchers who make use of the 1860 and 1870 censuses are particularly frustrated by the inadequate indexes for these years. Several experienced researchers referred to published indexes at the Daughters of the American Revolution library that ought to be in the National Archives collection.

METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES

- * Ideally, the selection of a simple random sample of researchers would have involved assigning a unique number to each person who signed the daily log during the study period and choosing the appropriate number of interviews from this population using a random number table generated in advance. This approach to selection was ruled out because of logistical constraints, especially the fact that researchers are not assigned to specific microfilm readers when they sign in.
- * Random selection was also limited, because individuals who made repeated visits during the week were more likely to be selected than those who only visited the room for a brief periods. For example, a person who visited the room on a daily basis through the week was five times more likely to be selected as someone who visited only one day. As a result, the study may be biased in favor of experienced researchers.
- * During peak periods in the room, it was sometimes difficult to conduct interviews with all eligible researchers. People who used the room for less than one hour at a time tended to be missed, especially those who consult microfilmed indexes. As a result, the study may be biased in favor of researchers who make more extended use of the microfilmed holdings.
- * In any single interviewing pass through the room, any one microfilm reader was approached once, even if more than one individual used the reader during the interview cycle. As a result, the study may be biased in favor of people who remain at a station for long periods of time.

- * No interviews were conducted on Monday and Tuesday evenings; therefore it is not possible to evaluate statistically the differences between evening and daytime users.

DISCUSSION

The Microfilm Research Room is not a self-service operation, although most researchers learn to function in a relatively self-sufficient manner after several hours of trial and error searching, supplemented with questions to staff, friends, or anyone else who will help. There appears to be a major difference between brand new researchers and those with a day or more of experience, in terms of their ability to function in the research room. The most frequently asked question of staff is "How do I get started?" Existing tools and programs to orient researchers (film and brochures) are content rather than process oriented, leaving researchers with the need to ask how to take the first two or three steps. The lack of a comprehensive location system forces experienced researchers branching into new areas to ask for guidance. Beginning genealogists fortunate enough to be guided by volunteer genealogy specialists typically encounter few problems in getting started.

It appears that there are very few functional differences between researchers with a few days experience and those who have spent many years in the room. Both groups are familiar with the machinery, the location of holdings, and the availability of indexes and finding aids. Seasoned researchers may be more sophisticated in their approach to the record, but they are not necessarily more efficient than researchers with a modest amount of experience.

The second most popular question to staff is "Where are the materials I need?" The room is very poorly marked and understanding the logic of room is complicated by the necessarily low light level. Patrons have requested, and would benefit from carefully prepared maps of the research room and stack area that show both the location of key record groups and the process necessary to gain access to the records. Ideally the entire room ought to be redesigned to capture the attention of new researchers and those with procedural questions.

The third most popular question is "Where do I go from here?" Many researchers are clearly interested in pursuing their research interests beyond the Microfilm Research Room. As currently designed and signed, the National Archives building makes multi-media research a complicated and sometimes confusing undertaking. Nevertheless, thousands of researchers each year find their way out of the room and into other reference branches in the Washington area. It is not within the scope of this portion of the report to describe the potential of multi-media research. Yet the challenge for microfilm researchers who view their research in broad terms needs to be addressed.

Finally, it is important to restate the significant value to the National Archives of understanding the ways in which researchers are putting information from the holdings to use in ways benefiting many individuals who may never set foot inside the building. In the process of "leaving researchers alone," and thereby not learning about the work that goes on in the room, the agency misses the opportunity to demonstrate the impact it has on the general public. There is no more of a "general" public than the group of researchers that finds its way to the fourth floor each year. The place to begin focusing on the value of the National Archives is in the Microfilm Research Room.