

APPENDIX 3

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

	Academic	Occupational	Personal	Avocational	TOTAL
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)
TOTAL	39.2% (74)	27.5% (52)	23.8% (45)	9.5% (18)	100% (189)

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.

Researchers were asked if they expected to use other types of National Archives holdings on their projects, other than what was available to them in the research room (Q9). One-hundred-twenty-five of the 189 people interviewed (66.1%) of the total interview group mentioned one or more types of records other than textual records. Eighty-eight people (70.4%) planned to use microfilmed holdings of the National Archives; 48 mentioned still photographs (38.4%); 21 expected to or already had consulted cartographic records on the current project (16.8%); and 15 mentioned motion pictures (12%). Only 14 (11.2%) people expressed an interest in using the National Archives Library, even though the facility is adjacent to the research room.

Since the introduction of self-service photocopying services in 1986, researchers have increasingly taken advantage of this convenient form of retrieving information. To learn more about the service, all researchers interviewed were asked a series of questions about their need for reproductions and their intended use of the service order system.

Table 2 reports the answers by 189 researchers in the Central Research Room to two questions about their use of self-service copying services and their intention to place reproduction orders. The first row includes people who neither photocopy documents themselves nor request the National Archives to do it for them. Only 10 percent of all researchers fall into this category, about half of whom were observed using personal computers or tape recorders. In the Central Research Room, over 14 percent of the researchers were using special equipment, most typically laptop computers.

Table 2: Use of Photocopying Services

	Academic	Occupational	Personal	Avocational	TOTAL
None	9.5% (7)	9.6% (5)	8.9% (4)	6.7% (3)	10.1% (19)
Self/Orders	86.5% (64)	80.8% (42)	84.4% (38)	72.2% (13)	83.1% (157)
Order only	4.0% (3)	9.6% (5)	6.7% (3)	11.1% (2)	6.9% (3)
TOTAL	39.2% (74)	27.5% (52)	23.8% (45)	9.5% (18)	100% (189)

The second row includes researchers who state they plan to make self-service copies and who may also place reproduction orders. In the third row are people who indicate that they intend only to order reproductions. Overall over one quarter of the people interviewed plan to have reproductions made for them. When pressed for their willingness to endure the costs and delays inherent in

the reproduction order process, about two out of three mentioned the gains in research efficiency or the need for high quality or special format reproductions, while one-third noted limitations on self-service copying due to preservation considerations.

Researchers in the Central Research Room claim to be project oriented (Q14). Over 80 percent of the group mentioned a specific end result of the research efforts, the vast majority of which are written reports or publications.

Assessments of Researcher Experience

The value of reference and access services to the public is vested not only in the uniqueness of the holdings but also in the perception by researchers that the National Archives contains just the right materials to address the task at hand. When asked directly how important the materials they were currently using for the successful completion of their overall project (Q20), the overwhelming majority (93%) stated that the materials were either "essential" or "very important." Not a single person indicated that the materials were "only a curiosity" and only 2 percent stated that the holdings were "interesting, but maybe not useful." A small portion (5%) called the archival materials before them "possibly useful, but not important." Clearly, the people who visit the Central Research Room are pleased with the content of the records and consider the agency to be an essential resource for completing their projects, regardless of the nature of the topic.

[A sensible alternative view, one that will require further research to verify, is that the National Archives attracts only people who must have access to the holdings to complete their projects. Curiosity seekers and those who are able to find alternative sources of historical information choose not to visit or plan their projects in such a way so that they do not have to visit the facilities.]

Finally, researchers were asked to estimate how successful they were, on the day they were interviewed, in finding the information they hoped or expected to find (Q21). Such a question is premised, of course, on the assumption that researchers have realistic expectations. In spite of a fairly cumbersome, time-consuming reference process, researchers report that they are generally successful in identifying relevant information in the holdings. Many of those who were most successful report that they found much more useful information than they had expected to find. More than half of those who were not successful in finding information were at relatively early stages of their research (Q16), and so may not have had very high expectations. Of those who did express frustration at not finding the information they were seeking, most placed the blame on gaps in the holdings rather than on the staff or finding aids. An important qualifier of the responses included in the table is that most researchers who were interviewed were at the end of the reference process. Success in retrieving relevant information may tend to erase, at least for the moment, memories of difficulties or frustrations encountered earlier in the research process.

Use of the Suitland Research Room

A total of 30 interviews were conducted at the Suitland research facility over a four-day period. This group of interviews was never intended to be analyzed separately, but rather to be included in

a larger database of responses from interviews in six additional research rooms. Attached is a listing of the responses to the interviews carried out at Suitland.

METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES

- * The week chosen for conducting interviews in the Suitland research room was atypically brief on account of the Labor Day holiday.
- * The process for selecting researchers for interviews during the study weeks was not technically random. It was not possible to select randomly from the base population (discrete individuals who signed the daily research log) because desk space is not assigned by name. Alternatively, researchers were selected sequentially by moving among tables.
- * The study is biased against people who make brief visits to the research room, primarily to photocopy a small number of records. Observation suggests that typically this group consists of genealogists consulting military pension records.
- * The study was designed to track behavior in the research rooms, rather than to elicit information about how researchers perceived the services they received. Observation of behavioral patterns reinforces quantitative findings.
- * A cross-section study through a single research room is incapable of capturing rich information on the overall process that one or more researchers follow to complete a project.
- * This study only investigated the intended or claimed use of other National Archives research rooms and records. Other components of the overall study sought to investigate actual use of multiple research rooms or more than one record medium for a single project.

DISCUSSION

Beyond the quantitative patterns identified above, researchers commented extensively on the nature of their research needs and the quality of the services received at the National Archives. The following is a summary of the five major clusters of comments received in the course of interviewing patrons over the three-week study period.

- 1) There is a significant number of misunderstandings about the scope of holdings at the National Archives. Some researchers do not realize that the agency acquires only federal records; some have no appreciation for the complexity of the structure and content of the files they must consult; some have difficulty visualizing the relationship of the microfilmed indexes to the textual records; some do not realize until well into their research activity that the files are not indexed by subject. The fact that these misunderstandings are voiced so clearly in the research room--which theoretically is the point at which all misconceptions about the research process and the scope of the holdings should have been resolved--suggests that greater emphasis needs to be placed on user "training" earlier in the process.
- 2) The vast majority of frustration exhibited by researchers centers on the inadequacy of findings aids rather than on the quality of personal service. Most researchers who chose to express concern about the difficulties they have had in locating records that they **expected** to find blamed insufficient detail in the findings aids, general descriptions that do not sufficiently

narrow the range of possible records, and the lack of overt subject indexing. When asked to elaborate, researchers seem to feel that in some way the finding aids ought to capture a level of topical specificity similar in character to the specific research questions researchers bring to the National Archives. Whether this expectation is based on previous experience with library-based subject searching or is simply a product of high expectations is not clear. The findings point, however, to the conclusion that a number of factors (e.g., serious need, fairly elaborate preparation, previous experience, sophisticated research questions) combine to raise expectations beyond the capacity of the National Archives to satisfy them.

- 3) Satisfaction with the research experience at the National Archives is intimately linked to the successful retrieval of needed information. Patrons appear willing to endure significant procedural challenges if they can reasonably expect to accomplish their task. Apparently most researchers do not expect to be handed their needed information "on a silver platter," but do expect to be able to narrow the range of possible locations of records to about "one cart" or so, in the case of textual records.
- 4) Assessing true satisfaction with the personal services offered by the National Archives is quite complicated by the propensity of researchers to blame everything but the staff for their difficulties. Interviews elicited numerous comments such as the following: "The records I need probably never existed." "The records I need were probably destroyed or are still at the agency." "These records are so complicated, it's no wonder the finding aids aren't very good." "I don't want to criticize the staff, because they need all the support they can get." "The Archives has never had enough money to do the job properly."
- 5) The three most significant challenges that emerge from the interviews in the Central Research Room are: first, the need to assist novice and first-time users acclimate themselves to the complexities of records retrieval and use; second, the need to maintain the balance between the needs of researchers who require and demand a peaceful environment for serious study and the needs of researchers who see the central research room as a photocopy factory; and third, the need to provide researchers with a greater understanding of the process of archival research in 20th century records.