Annotated bibliography of government sources for genealogical research

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(The Title Doesn't Have to Say "Genealogy" To Be Useful, and Other Hints)

Why use government publications for genealogical research?

Usually when the term "government documents" is used, it means those that are **published**. With the explosion of electronic publishing, the preferred term now is "government publications." The U. S. Government Printing Office (GPO) is the world's largest publisher—everything from *Aarugha!* to *Zimbabwe*.

- All genealogists already use "government documents"—after all, that's what all of those county records, census records, etc., are.
- Some documents will contain actual data.
- Histories and chronologies will help you "flesh out" an ancestor's life or time period or help you analyze the clues you have.
- Maps can help you locate where an ancestor lived as well as give you clues about the area or a migration route.
- Many researchers are already familiar with the *American State Papers* and the *U.S. Serial Set*, two of the largest collections of government documents that are potentially useful to genealogists.
- When the title or subject doesn't say "genealogy"—look for bibliographies, indexes, maps, chronologies, biographical directories, histories. Be creative!

Tools for Finding U. S. Government Publications

Monthly Catalog of United States Government Publications. Monthly. Washington, D.C.: U.S.

Government Printing Office, Superintendent of Documents, 1895– . GP 3.8:

Available in CD-ROM from 1976–2000; available on Internet at <http://www.access.gpo.gov/su_docs/index.html> from 1994– .

The basic index to both depository and nondepository documents from all agencies.

Sales Product Catalog (SPC) at <http://bookstore.gpo.gov>.

Index to all publications currently *for sale* by the GPO.

Subject Bibliographies. Irregular, updated. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, Superintendent of Documents. GP 3.22/2:

Available online at <http://bookstore.gpo.gov/sb/index.html>.

Over 200 bibliographies of current in-print titles on different topics.

Congressional Information Service, Inc. *CIS/Index*. Monthly. Bethesda, Md.: Congressional Information Service, Inc., 1970– . Available electronically as *LexisNexis Congressional*.

Comprehensive index to all U.S. Congressional publications.

American Statistics Index. Monthly. Bethesda, Md.: Congressional Information Service, Inc., 1973– . Available electronically as *LexisNexis Statistical*.

Comprehensive index to all U.S. government publications that are statistical in nature.

LexisNexis Government Periodicals Index. 1988– .

Indexes articles in U.S. government periodicals. 1980–1987 available in print as *Index to U.S. Government Periodicals* (Chicago: Infordata International; ceased publication).

Indexes for the *U.S. Serial Set*, including the *American State Papers*

Congressional Information Service. *CIS U.S. Serial Set Index, 1789–1969*. 12 parts in 36 volumes. Washington, D.C.: Congressional Information Service, 1975–1979.

Each part consists of a 2-volume subject index and a volume of finding lists. The finding lists include an index of names of individuals in private relief actions, a numerical list of reports and documents, and a schedule of serial volumes. Check under names of individuals, specific geographic locations; other useful subject headings are "LIST," "MAP," "SOLDIERS," "PASSENGER," "LAND," "PENSION," and "PATENT."

**For the time period covered, this is the most comprehensive and easiest to use of available indexes.

Koepp, Donna P., ed. *CIS U.S. Serial Set Index, Part XIV: Index and Carto-Bibliography of Maps, 1789–1969*. 16 vols. Bethesda, Md.: Congressional Information Service, 1995– .

Indexed by geographic areas and subjects, by map titles, by personal names, and by corporate names. The carto-bibliography volumes are arranged by entry number. Published in three chronological sets: 1789–1897 (4 vols.), 1897–1925 (6 vols.), and 1925–1969 (6 vols.).

Earlier standard indexes:

Poore, Benjamin Perley. *A Descriptive Catalogue of the Government Publications of the United States, September 5, 1774–March 4, 1881*. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1885.

Ames, John Griffith. *Comprehensive Index to the Publications of the United States Government, 1881–1893*. 2nd ed. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1905.

U. S. Superintendent of Documents. *Checklist of United States Public Documents, 1789–1909*. 3rd ed., rev. and enl. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1911.

U. S. Superintendent of Documents. *Tables of and Annotated Index to the Congressional Series of United States Public Documents*. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1902.

U. S. Superintendent of Documents. *Catalogue of the Public Documents of the Government of the United States for the Period from March 4, 1893 to December 31, 1940*. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1896–1947. 25 volumes.

[known as *Document Catalogue*]

Other helpful indexes:

Claussen, Martin P. and Friis, Herman R. *Descriptive Catalog of Maps Published by Congress, 1817–1843*. Washington, DC: 1941.

Checklist of United States Public Documents, 1789–1976. Arlington, Va.: United States Historical Documents Institute, 1978. 118 microfilm reels with 5 index volumes.

McMullin, Phillip W., ed. *Grassroots of America: a Computerized Index to the American State Papers: Land Grants and Claims (1789–1837) With Other Aids to Research (Government Document Serial Set Numbers 28 through 36)*. Salt Lake City, Utah: Gendex Corporation, 1972.

Pursuing the Past: Genealogy Resources in Depository Libraries

Everything Old Is New Again: The Electronic Connection

Government or Government-Sponsored Web Sites

Bureau of Land Management - Eastern States, General Land Office Records Automation

url: http://www.glorecords.blm.gov/

Use this site to search the federal land patent databases. Search by name, county, legal description of land, and other information.

USGS Geographic Names Information System

url: http://mapping.usgs.gov/www/gnis/

Locate your ancestor's land, nearest town, or cemetery with this great resource. Find geographic features using a surname of interest.

National Park Service: Civil War Soldiers and Sailors System

url: http://www.itd.nps.gov/cwss/index.html

Find very basic facts about servicemen who served on both sides during the Civil War. Other information includes histories of the regiments, links to descriptions of 384 significant battles of the war, and other historical information.

Library of Congress American Memory: Historical Collections for the National Digital Library

url: http://memory.loc.gov/

Explore manuscripts, maps, photographs, and other collections.

My History is America's History

url: http://www.myhistory.org/

Read or contribute family stories. View timelines or learn everyday history.

Biographical Directory of the United States Congress, 1774-Present

url: http://bioguide.congress.gov/biosearch/biosearch.asp

Brief biographical sketches of all members of Congress. You never know—you may be related to somebody famous!

USPTO Patent Full-Text and Image Database

url: http://www.uspto.gov/patft/index.html

Full page images of patents since 1790; full-text since 1976. Patents from 1976 to the present are searchable by name and many other fields. Patents 1790–1975 are searchable only by patent number and current US classifications.

Non-Government Web Sites Providing Access to Government Information

Social Security Death Index

url: http://ancestry.com/search/rectype/vital/ssdi/main.htm

The Social Security Death Index is available online from a variety of commercial services (usually the search is free). The Death Index contains a listing of everyone who had a Social Security number, is deceased, and whose death was reported to the Social Security Administration.

Ellis Island American Family Immigration History Center

url: http://www.ellisislandrecords.org/

Search the ship manifests for the port of New York for the years 1892 to 1924. View the original manifests or transcripts; see photographs of the ships.

United States Historical Census Data Browser

url: http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/census/

Statistical data for US for each state and county from 1790 to 1960. Create a comparison table.

Official Records of the War of the Rebellion

url: http://library5.library.cornell.edu/moa/browse.monographs/waro.html

Cornell University's Making of America series includes full page images from *The War of the Rebellion*. The pages are also searchable.

TopoZone

url: http://www.topozone.com/

View digital images of topographic maps. Allows searching by feature name.

And Don't Forget . . .

FirstGov

url: http://www.firstgov.gov/

National Archives and Records Administration

url: http://www.archives.gov/

Library of Congress Catalogs

url: http://catalog.loc.gov/

National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections (NUCMC)

url: http://lcweb.loc.gov/coll/nucmc/nucmc.html .

Where to Write for Vital Records

url: http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/howto/w2w/w2welcom.htm

Pursuing the Past: Genealogy Resources in Depository Libraries

Sources and Suggestions for Further Reading

Bergen, Kathleen. "Hidden Cartographic Archives: Maps of the United States Serial Set." (Special Libraries Association, Geography and Map Division) *Bulletin* No. 143 (March 1986): 15–27.

For the years covering the American State Papers through 1941, it is estimated there are as many as 33,000 to 53,000 maps in the Serial Set. This article introduces the variety of historical and contemporary maps within the Serial Set, explores their value for research, and discusses available bibliographies and indexes.

Bray, Byron C. "Family History Online #4: General Land Office and Land Patent Records." *NGS Newsmagazine* 28 (March/April 2002): 99–102.

Introduces the web site and explains how to obtain copies of the records.

Bray, Byron C. "Family History Online #6: Civil War Records." *NGS Newsmagazine* 28 (July/August 2002): 217–220.

Describes how to use the National Park Service's Civil War Soldiers and Sailors System and how to obtain copies of the records.

Croom, Emily Anne. "Asking Uncle Sam." *Family Tree Magazine* 1 (December 2000): 48-52.

Nice overview of using federal records, particularly census, federal land, and military records. Includes a plug for using depository libraries.

Croom, Emily Anne. *The Genealogist's Companion & Sourcebook*. Cincinnati, Ohio: Betterway Books, 1994. [see Chapter 7: "Special Collections: Maps," pp. 107–111; and Chapter 8: "Libraries: Government Documents," pp. 123–125]

Discusses government maps and documents as genealogical resources, giving specific examples illustrating their use.

Davis, Robert S., Jr. "Exploring Little-Known Federal Records." *Ancestry* **12 (May/June 1994).**

Also available at <http://www.ancestry.com/library/view/ancmag/2674.asp>.

Suggests printed guides for uncovering "hidden" information in original records and microfilm at the National Archives.

Fales, Susan L. and Monahan, Michael A. "Missing Links: Family History and the Documents Collection." *Government Publications Review* **14 (1987): 495–512.**

Provides a selective overview of the types of government publications useful for family history research. Discusses the Serial Set, military records, biographical directories, WPA records, and other sources.

Fryxell, David A. "The Key to the Golden Door." *Family Tree Magazine* **2 (June 2001): 30-35.**

Nicely illustrated review of using the Ellis Island database.

"Genealogies—Federal Resources." WashLaw Web, Washburn University School of Law. Last modified September 10, 2002. <http://www.washlaw.edu/doclaw/genealogy.html>.

Selective and useful list of links to government agency web sites.

"Genealogy in Cornette Library Government Documents." Cornette Library, West Texas A & M University. Last updated August 25, 2002. <http://www.wtamu.edu/library/instruction/gengovdocuments.shtml>.

Helpful overview of both print and electronic documents from various government agencies.

Glavinick, Jacquelyn. "Genealogy Research in the U.S. Serial Set." *Heritage Quest* **No. 33 (March/April 1991): 14–16.**

A concise introduction to the history and use of the Serial Set. Cites specific examples which illustrate its value to genealogical research.

"Guide to Genealogical Records in the Government Documents Department of Alden Library." Ohio University. Site maintained by Doreen Hockenberry. Last updated July 25, 2002. <http://www.library.ohiou.edu/libinfo/depts/govdocs/genealo.htm>.

Hendrickson, Nancy. "Coming to Your Census." *Family Tree Magazine* **2 (April 2001): 47-51.**

Compares subscription services for digitized census images. Provides web sites for additional census help.

Meyerink, Kory L., ed. *Printed Sources: A Guide to Published Genealogical Records***. Salt Lake City, Utah: Ancestry, 1998.** [see Chapter 15: "Documentary Collections," pp. 545–571]

Discusses all types of documentary records, including federal, regional, and state. Valuable bibliography.

Mokotoff, Gary. "Strategies for Using the Ellis Island Database." Bergenfield, N.J.: Avotaynu, 2001. Updated periodically. Avotaynu web site. <http://www.avotaynu.com/ellisisland.htm>.

Specific tips for locating people in the Ellis Island database, with a slant toward Jewish research.

Robinson, Judith Schiek. *Tapping the Government Grapevine: the User-Friendly Guide to U.S. Government Information Sources***. 2nd ed. Phoenix, Ariz.: Oryx Press, 1993. pp. 87–89.**

Written in a very readable style, this book is a close second to Sears [see below] as a useful, comprehensive guide through the maze of government publications.

Sears, Jean L. and Moody, Marilyn K. *Using Government Information Sources: Electronic and Print***. 3rd ed. Phoenix, Ariz.: Oryx Press, 2001.** [see Chapter 3: "The Basics of Searching," pp. 10–22; Chapter 17: "Genealogy," pp. 111–127; Chapter 52: "Historical Searches," pp. 482–501; and Chapter 53: "National Archives," pp. 502–509]

The best source for finding out how to find government information. Organized by topic or type of record, it discusses the key documents, shows example pages from them, and gives references to finding aids.

Swartz, Betty Jean. "Getting to the Source: Government Documents for the Genealogist." *RQ* **23 (Winter 1983): 151–154.**

A selective guide to government publications that contain genealogical data or serve as finding aids for census records, maps, military records, or archival materials. Discusses the National Archives, Library of Congress, census data, maps and gazetteers, the Serial Set and other archival collections.

Szucs, Loretto Dennis. "Unlikely Sources: Government Documents: No Genealogy Here?" *Ancestry* **12 (January/February 1994): 24–25.**

Also available at
<http://www.ancestry.com/library/view/ancmag/2604.asp>

Although perpetuating the negative image of librarians, this article is useful as a brief introduction to using government documents for genealogical research. Discusses the Serial Set, War of the Rebellion records, and other specific documents. An inset by Curt B. Witcher presents the arrangement of a documents collection.

Witcher, Curt B. "Delving into Federal Government Publications." *Ancestry* **16 (September/October 1998): 53-57.** Also available at <http://www.ancestry.com/library/view/ancmag/742.asp>.

Excellent overview of how and why to use government documents.

Witcher, Curt B. "The Unknown Friends of the Family Historian— The Government Printing Office: Using Government Documents for Genealogical Research." Audiotape recorded at *New Horizons: A Conference in the Southwest***, Federation of Genealogical Societies and the Arizona Genealogical Advisory Board, Phoenix, Ariz., August 1992.** Available from Repeat Performance (2911 Crabapple Lane, Hobart, IN 46324) and Audiotapes.com <http://www.audiotapes.com>.

Witcher, Curt B. "Using Published Government Documents for Genealogical Research." Audiotape recorded at *A Chesapeake Homecoming: National Genealogical Society Conference***, Baltimore, Md., June 1993.** Available from Repeat Performance (2911 Crabapple Lane, Hobart, IN 46324) and Audiotapes.com <http://www.audiotapes.com>.