

Program JGSI Meeting July 27, 2008: Mining The National Archives

By Alice Marcus Solovy

The program for the July JGSI meeting was titled “Mining The National Archives.” It was presented by Ginger Frere, the reference librarian in family history at the Newberry Library in Chicago, IL.

The evolution of a central holding agency for U.S. records was slow. Records were scattered and sometimes lost in fires. Some records weren't kept because they weren't deemed important enough to save or space couldn't be found for them. In 1800, fires damaged records in the War Office. In the 1870's, the top floor of the patent office had a fire. Later in N.Y., another fire destroyed records. It wasn't until 1912 that President Taft raised the need for a National Archives. After that, in 1921, a Commerce Department fire destroyed many records including census records. It wasn't until 1926 that one million dollars was appropriated for the National Archives. Yet it wasn't until 1934 that the agency actually evolved. Between 1935 and 1942 a listing of holdings was given to the National Archives agency. NARA finally became an independent agency in 1989.

Their website, www.archives.gov, explains their purpose in an eleven minute clip. In brief, NARA safeguards government records so people can learn of American rights from essential documentation. The holdings created by and for the federal government are from all three branches of government: legislative, executive, and judicial. There are nine billion pages of actual records. If they were laid end to end, they would circle the earth more than fifty-seven times. Among their holdings are more than 93,000 motion picture films, more than seven million maps, and more than eighteen million aerial photos. The volume of holdings grows at a huge amount. More than 95% of the holdings are declassified. They are accessible to anyone

who is at least fourteen years old.

The main location for the National Archives is in Washington, D.C. Archives II, which houses aerial photos and more recent military records among other things, is in College Park, MD. NARA has locations in fourteen U.S. cities coast to coast. Many microfilm records are in copies in those cities. Textual records for each facility are only located in that particular city. (Note for Illinois readers: some copies of some National Archives records are in the Mormon Library in Wilmette, Illinois.)

Records can be found in any recorded information format: paper pages, photos, and microfilm. They occur in one of two ways: original order (those are found in the order in which they were created time wise), or by provenance. Provenance involves records made from one creator, or department, or person. Provenance records shouldn't be mixed. Therefore, in looking for information about one person, records can be found scattered because they can come from different sources.

Only 1-3% of all records are kept permanently. Census and military records are retained permanently. Records are arranged by the federal agency they pertain to and then arranged in a record group, which is then arranged by a record series. Your ancestor might possibly be found in naturalization records, passenger lists, census records, or federal court or tax case records. They may have been involved in more than one agency's records. To make it easier to use these records there is an online tutorial at their website.

NARA also sells a [Guide to Genealogical Research](#) for \$25.00. It goes through the most commonly used records. Additionally, NARA has published microfilm catalogues and other

guides.

Sometimes if you can't find records one way, you can find them another. Many WWII personnel records were destroyed in a fire. If you know the military unit, you might find more information by researching the unit. Other records, besides military records, are records regarding the slave trade here and internationally, bankruptcy records for federal courts, and some income tax records. There was a special income tax to help pay for the Civil War. There are also lists of deaths of Americans abroad. There are records of special censuses, such as one for manufacturers. Anything producing a product, such as a bakery, had this type of census between 1810 and 1880. There are records of military units, post office records (these break down by state, county, and town), and State Department records that can include estate issues and legal issues.

ARC is their online catalog which lists 62% of their holdings. Through eVetRecs copies of a veteran's service record can be ordered. AAD gives online access to records in a small selection of historic databases.

NARA has a partnership with Footnotes and with Family Search from the Genealogical Society of Utah, and with generations network (generations network is owned by ancestry.com). The NARA website also has a genealogy link. Mrs. Frere generously provided her email address at the end of the program, gfrere@informationdiggers.com.