

# Finding Herstory in the Archives: Researching Female Ancestors

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Genealogists and family historians cut their research teeth on online databases and websites. But if you limit your search to only what is available online, you will eventually hit the proverbial brick wall.

Researchers need to utilize a host of tools, including exhausting online resources and archival collections. While some researchers may spend years researching their family history without ever stepping into an archive, research is significantly enhanced (and some stumbling blocks removed) by archival research.

One of the reasons I love archives is that they allow me to find and study materials available nowhere else. They house unique collections that shed light on our ancestor's lives. For reconstructing women's lives, archives are essential. Women's lives are not always documented in the places we generally search, such as government records. Archival materials allow us to delve into sources that include women such as:

- Organizational records
- Church records
- Correspondence
- Diaries and journals
- Scrapbooks
- Photographs

What is an archive? Merriam-Webster defines it as “a place in which public records or historical documents are preserved.” < <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/archive>>. Libraries and archives are different, though libraries can house archival collections and archives include books and periodicals. While a library is the place to access books and periodicals, an archive will have original documents authored by those living in your ancestor's community. The type of archive will determine what kinds of documents you will find.

## **Types of Archives**

Archives differ on type and what they collect. What types of archives exist? According to the Society of American Archivists < <http://www2.archivists.org/usingarchives/typesofarchives>> the following are a few examples:

- College and university archives
- Corporate archives
- Government archives
- Historical societies
- Museums
- Religious
- Special collections

I would also add to their list:

- Genealogy societies
- Membership groups.

Knowing the types of archives available can assist you in searching for the appropriate archive for your research. Seek out archives in the place/s your ancestor lived, for the groups she was a member of, and her religious community.

## **Materials Found in Archives**

Items found in an archive include manuscripts and ephemera. Manuscripts are the unpublished papers of an individual, group, business, or organization. They can come from a government entity or public official, a business, a non-profit group, religious organization, school, society, institution, membership group, or an individual. Manuscripts are materials written by community members, neighbors, friends, and acquaintances, people who we typically ignore as a source for genealogical information. A midwife may have written about your ancestor's birth. The journal of a neighbor may provide details about a death and subsequent funeral. Insight about your ancestor's work-life may come to light in that employer's manuscript collection found at an archive or museum. It is through the writings of others that we can better understand our ancestor's lives.

Examples of manuscripts and other materials housed in these collections include correspondence, business documents, writings, scrapbooks, autograph albums, birthday books, an author's research for a book, vital records substitutes, court records, photograph albums, diaries/journals, maps, land records, church records, membership organization meeting notes and so much more.

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Archives also house ephemera. Ephemeral items are those that may not normally be archived. They are items that either have a short lifespan or were meant for limited use. However, these items can have great genealogical significance. Ephemera may be as diverse as restaurant menus, maps, postcards and correspondence.

So how do I use archives to research women? I've used a manuscript at a private library to learn more about the woman who authored the work and her family. I examine files that include vital records, court documents, and (surprisingly) home sources at my local National Archives to learn more about immigration and American women's lives. A nineteenth-century ledger from the store that an ancestor frequented is housed at a state archive. This ledger lists people who purchased items, including my ancestor. A quilt with names and birthdates found in a museum collection provided me an extraordinary glimpse into a family and their community that I research. For me, archives have provided a glimpse into family history not available anywhere else.

### **The Search Begins**

To begin your search for archival materials, you will want first to identify possible repositories. Consider the area you are researching and identify state and local historical and genealogical societies; state, public, private and academic libraries; local and specialty museums. To find an archive search websites such as Library and Archives Canada, FamilySearch Research Wiki, Cyndi's List, and Wikipedia (see links in Resources section). The Council of State Archivists has a list of US state and territorial archives < <https://www.statearchivists.org/about/state-archives/state-archives-directory?Execute=1> >. A directory of corporate archives can be found on the Society of American Archivists website <<http://www2.archivists.org/groups/business-archives-section/directory-of-corporate-archives-in-the-united-states-and-canada-introduction>>.

Not all manuscript collections for a specific area are located in a local repository. Items get donated or acquired by various organizations for all sorts of reasons. That's why using a resource website or a catalog can help search many repositories at one time, regardless of where they are located.

There are many different catalogs to use to find archival collections. Catalogs like Archive Grid provide a one-stop place to search several repositories at once.

Archive Grid < <https://researchworks.oclc.org/archivegrid/>> is a catalog of 7 million "primary source materials" held in repositories worldwide. Conduct a keyword search, and then from the results list, you can narrow your search by archive and archive location. Results include card catalog details and the repositories contact information.

WorldCat <<https://www.worldcat.org/>>, is a worldwide catalog of libraries with over 2 billion items. The hits you receive on WorldCat are not limited to books and magazines; archival materials are also part of your search results.

Use Google or your favorite search engine to find other archives and catalogs of interest.

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## When Using Archives

Searching on an archive catalog can be tricky. Items are not cataloged in the same way as a library catalog. In the case of an archival catalog, search by your ancestor's locality. The collection will not be indexed by the name of everyone mentioned. It will most likely be cataloged according to the locality, the name of the author, and other identifying features, like occupation or religion. While we genealogists are accustomed to searching for information based on our ancestor's surname, that strategy will be least effective in your search through manuscript collections. Unless your ancestor is the author or someone of prominence, their name will most likely not appear in the catalog entry.

Try various keywords as you search the catalog. You are researching not just an individual but a community, an occupation, a religion, neighbors, etc. Online archive/library catalogs many times have finding aids for their special collections. Consult these to better understand how to conduct a search.

One perceived drawback to archive research collection is that you will most likely need to visit the collection in person. Most records will not be digitized. Don't let this be a deterrent to your research. In cases where travel is prohibitive, contact the archivist to learn more about the item. If the archive is far from your home, see if there is another way to access the collection you need. For example, has the collection been digitized or microfilmed? Will the archive do a quick look-up for you, or can you submit a request with payment?

Use your network to see if you know someone living in the area who can conduct a look-up (what about a Facebook friend, a relative, or another genealogy society?). Consult a professional researcher through associations like the Association of Professional Genealogists <<https://www.apgen.org/cpages/home>> . Building up a network of researchers via social media (Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn) can benefit you when you need some local assistance.

If you can travel to the repository to look at the collection, remember a few things:

- Plan ahead, well in advance.
- Call or email first and ask what restrictions or rules there might be for using the archive or the collections. For example, some collections might have restricted access, allowing only certain researchers to look at the collection or maybe the collection is not available until a specific date.
- Is there something you need in order to conduct research there? Specific identification? In some cases, you might need a special "reader's card," such as when researching at the National Archives (US).
- Archival items may be stored offsite and require time to retrieve or for the archivist to search to determine if any privacy issues exist. So that means you may need to wait days before you can look at the item.

- Make sure the archive will be open and the collections available for your visit. Nothing is worse than investing the time and money into a trip to find out that the archive is closed for a month due to renovations.
- Finally, make sure you understand what you will and won't be able to do while there. For example, ask about their photocopy policy. Some archives might let you photocopy documents yourself; others may require that you provide them with a list of what you want copied, and they will mail it to you at a later date. Some documents might be too fragile to copy, and you will only be allowed to transcribe them. You may need coins to make copies if they have a no camera or phone policy. In one place I have researched, I was allowed to take photos of the document with my phone, but I could not use those images for anything but personal research. For publications or presentations, I had to pay for an official photo from the institution. Think about what you will be making copies of and how you want to use them.

For many of us, research travel is not in our budget. You may decide to go to that archive while on a family vacation. Maybe it's also great opportunity to introduce kids or grandkids to family history. This is a great way to save money and make the most out of travel. However, when visiting archives, know that their rules may prohibit having children with you. An archive might have an age limit for visitors. In some cases that might even be 18 years of age.

### Resources

Using Archives: A Guide to Effective Research by the Society of American Archivists  
<http://www2.archivists.org/usingarchives>

Cyndi's List – Libraries, Archives, Museums  
<https://www.cyndislist.com/libraries/>

FamilySearch – Canada Archives and Libraries  
[https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Canada\\_Archives\\_and\\_Libraries](https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Canada_Archives_and_Libraries)

Archives Canada  
<https://archivescanada.accesstomemory.ca/>

Library and Archives Canada  
<https://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/Pages/home.aspx>

Library and Archives Canada Blog  
<https://thediscoverblog.com/>

Library and Archives Canada – Genealogy and Family History – Places (Includes places to research for each province and territory)  
<https://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/discover/genealogy/places/Pages/introduction.aspx>

Digital Public Library of America  
<https://dp.la/>

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Europeana

[https://classic.europeana.eu/portal/en?utm\\_source=new-website&utm\\_medium=button](https://classic.europeana.eu/portal/en?utm_source=new-website&utm_medium=button)

Flicker the Commons

<https://www.flickr.com/commons>

The National Archives (US) – Resources for Genealogists

<https://www.archives.gov/research/genealogy>

The National Archives (UK)

<https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/>

Nova Scotia Archives – Virtual Archives and Databases

<https://archives.novascotia.ca/virtual/>

Wikipedia – List of Archives in Canada

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_archives\\_in\\_Canada](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_archives_in_Canada)

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