

The Forgotten & the Maligned: Using Government Documents for Genealogical Research

Curt B. Witcher, MLS, FUGA, IGSF

Senior Manager, The Genealogy Center, Allen County Public Library
900 Library Plaza, P.O. Box 2270, Fort Wayne, IN 46801-2270
www.GenealogyCenter.org | 260-421-1225 | Genealogy@ACPL.Info



Federal Government Documents

Definition & History

Since its inception, the United States government has gathered information, held hearings, conducted investigations, compiled reports, and published findings. The United States Government Printing Office has published many millions of documents. These publications, commonly called Federal Government Documents, contain innumerable historical records of potential value for genealogists.

Determining When to Use

It is worthwhile developing a checklist of when it would be prudent to seek out federal government publications as data sources in our genealogical endeavors. One should seek out federal documents if a potential ancestor:

- was involved in military activities
- had claims for losses based on military actions
- was involved in any dealings or transactions with the government
- settled in a frontier area
- suffered from any disaster
- sought relief from an "unjust" law or code--local, state or national
- attended a government institution/joined a government organization
- was a Native American or involved with Native Americans/First Nations
- was a member of a wave of immigrants
- was a member of a minority or oppressed group
- was involved in transportation, commerce, or banking
- served as a government official

Arrangement of Materials

The basic arrangement for federal government documents is a system designed for archiving large numbers of materials—a system where all materials from a particular issuing government agency are placed together regardless of the materials' subject matter. This system, the Superintendent of Documents Classification System, is both a help and a challenge for one attempting to access the wealth of information contained in the documents.

The Superintendent of Documents Classification System assigns each document a **SuDoc** number. The number begins with a letter which represents the government department or agency issuing the document. Some of important legacy and contemporary designations are in the following.

A -- Department of Agriculture
C -- Department of Commerce
D -- Department of Defense
GP -- Government Printing Office
I -- Department of the Interior
J -- Department of Justice
L -- Department of Labor
LC -- Library of Congress
T -- Department of the Treasury
W -- Department of War
Y -- Congress

The SuDoc classification system places a greater importance on successfully archiving the materials than it does on easy access to the documents. A classic example is when an agency changes name or changes departmental affiliation. The newly published materials receive a new SuDoc number while all of the previously published materials by the agency keep their old SuDoc number. That means material on the Mexican War could be classified under "W" for Department of War or "D" for Department of Defense, depending on when it was actually published.

Indices & Guides

CIS U.S. Serial Set Index. <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/amlaw/lwss.html>

The Serial Set collection contains the following types of publications: congressional journals, reports, directories, manuals, and related internal publications; reports from congressionally commissioned or conducted investigations; annual reports from Federal executive agencies; survey, research, and statistical publications of executive agencies; selected annual and special reports of non-governmental agencies.

The American State Papers portion of the set, which covers documents and reports of the first fourteen Congresses, includes ten subject classes: foreign relations, Indian affairs, finance, commerce and navigation, military affairs, naval affairs, post office department, public lands, claims, and miscellaneous. As they represent some of the earliest documents, they are an extremely important set of papers.

Cumulative Subject Index to the Monthly Catalog of the United States Government Publications, 1900-1971.

This voluminous work provides some subject access to the majority of United States government publications issued between 1900 and 1971. It represents a merging of the subject entries in the various annual and decennial indexes of the Monthly Catalog, and the addition of numerous other entries. It is important to note that the work does not include the names of persons who were beneficiaries of individual relief actions. More description and more references are at: www.archives.gov/research/alic/reference/admin-history/publication-indexes.html

Monthly Catalog of United States Government Publications. <http://catalog.gpo.gov>

The Monthly Catalog is an author, subject, and title index to published government documents. Having been published since 1895, it is the oldest and most comprehensive source for locating federal government documents. Online versions are not complete

Discover U.S. Government Information: www.govinfo.gov

More Federal Government Document Links/Resources of the Library of Congress:
<lcweb.loc.gov/rr/news/extgovd.html> and www.loc.gov/rr/main/inforeas/usgov.html

Important note: numerous government documents have been, and are being digitized. It is consequential to use Google, Internet Archive, and other similar websites to locate online versions.

Repositories

Most all public libraries house some federal government documents with medium to large public libraries typically housing rather significant collections. Land grant colleges and large university libraries are usually full federal document repositories as are large public libraries in many major metropolitan areas. State libraries also have rich collections of federal documents.

State and Local Government Documents

Definition & History

State and local government documents mirror their federal counterparts in that they are records created by particular government agencies and departments, or the reports generated by commissions, task forces, and study groups empowered by the aforementioned agencies and departments. Most state and local government entities have been producing official documents since their inception.

At the state government level, some of the most useful documents are the laws and codes which governed the people throughout the states' histories. After the territorial laws and early codes of most states, one can find divorce petitions, appointments, law suits, founding and establishment orders for schools and societies, and evidence of nearly every type of legal proceeding among the documents.

At the local government level, some of the most useful documents are the annual reports of the incorporated cities and towns. As late as the middle of the twentieth century, some town annual reports were recordings births, marriages, and deaths as well as a listing of local government employees, often with political affiliations, physical descriptions, and nativity data. It is important to remember that in the context of local government records, anyone whose salary, commission, etc. was paid with tax dollars was considered a government employee. Hence, these annual reports can contain an interesting assortment of individuals including police, fire, and street department rosters as well as teachers, librarians, and water works employees.

Arrangement of Materials & Indices

Like federal documents, state and local government documents tend to be organized by government agency, though one will find the use of more subject-based shelving and archiving schemes with these documents. There is no distinct or uniform indexing or cataloging scheme (like the SuDoc Number with federal documents) used with state and local documents. Numerous local libraries have devised their own cataloging schemes based on some modification of LC (Library of Congress) or Dewey Decimal cataloging systems. Many state and local documents are discoverable though Google.

Repositories

All public libraries within a particular state house a number of state government documents, with medium to large public libraries having the more significant collections. State libraries will have complete state document collections for their respective states. City, township, and county public libraries will have as complete of local documents collections as possible. It is important to note that many local government agencies still do not do a very adequate job documenting their activities and preserving records of their actions, even when mandated to do so.

Both state archives and state libraries may contain state and local government document information, indices, and sometimes actual digital copies.

List of State Archives: www.archives.gov/research/alic/reference/state-archives.html

List of State Libraries: www.lib-web.org/united-states/state-libraries

