Researching Your Ancestors in Federal Depository Library Collections

Marie Concannon, Government Documents Librarian
Ellis Library, University of Missouri - Columbia
Phone (573) 882-0748 or E-mail concannonm@missouri.edu

A Suggested Plan for Conducting Genealogical Research in Federal Depository Libraries:

Step 1: Find a government depository library near you: http://tinyurl.com/33668l. Best bets in St. Louis are St. Louis Public Library, Washington University and St. Louis University (these have the most historic collections.) The University of Missouri in Columbia also welcomes genealogists.

Step 2: Call ahead to ask whether the library has a full text searchable U.S. Congressional Serial Set database. Ask about the computer use policy and access to printed materials housed off-site. For the first visit to a depository library, make an appointment to meet with the librarian for an orientation.


Optional (for genealogists considering research at the National Archives): Ask about WPA Historical Records Surveys. These books, compiled in the 1930s-1940s by the Work Projects Administration, described government record collections created at county, state and federal levels. Use them to identify specific record sets, then ask for them by name at the National Archives or in state archives.

About the U. S. Congressional Serial Set

This set of over 15,000 volumes dating back to 1817 includes citizens’ claims to the government for compensation or back payments, lists of landowners, pensioners, military officers, and inventors. It shows “private acts” to allow special exceptions to the law for one person, letters to Congress, petitions to the government, the complete Official Records of the War of the Rebellion, and over 50,000 maps.

The Serial Set was never well indexed until a full text database was made available. Proquest HeritageQuest Online does not cover the complete Serial Set. It will be available through your local public library after July 1.

Use the full text Serial Set database to find inventors’ names, then enter the patent number at http://www.pat2pdf.org/ to see the complete invention described and pictured.

Researching Federal Documents on the Web

Site provides access to over 5 million federal land conveyance records from 1820-present.
Click on “Search Documents” in menu bar.

Immigration records - Ellis Island Foundation, Inc. -- http://www.ellisisland.org

Hathi Trust http://www.hathitrust.org
Free online resource holds ten million digitized books including government documents. Free and fully searchable for names and phrases. There is no proximity searching yet.
U.S. Geographic Names Information System
Find a place name in genealogical records, and want to know where it was? http://tinyurl.com/lea6tgx

National Archives and Records Administration
Try the Archival Research Catalog (ARC) http://www.archives.gov/research/arc/
See the ARC Guide for Genealogists and Family Historians http://tinyurl.com/kgtjrrm

Census online
Free resource: http://www.census-online.com/links/

-------------------------------

Researching State and Local Documents on the Web

Public records online -- http://www.searchsystems.net/
Link list to county databases which include birth, marriage, death, military, cemetery, and other records.

Missouri Secretary of State, Local Records Inventory Database
http://www.sos.mo.gov/CountyInventory/

College and University archives
If your ancestor attended a college which is still in existence, check to see if it has a website with name searching. University of Missouri yearbooks from 1891-2005 are scanned and searchable online.
http://tinyurl.com/oxlwbdr

-------------------------------

Genealogically useful information in Missouri state publications:

I. Session laws, (1820-present).
The genealogically useful information is concentrated in the “Private Laws” section, also called “Acts of a Private Nature.” Limited indexing at the back of each volume.
- Adoptions
- Name changes
- Divorces and child custody
- Appointing guardians for orphaned children
- Granting free blacks permission to live in the state
- Legitimizing marriages and the children born in them
- Allowing certain individuals not to pay taxes, because of infirmity
- Paying individuals for service to the state (county sheriffs, etc.) This is called “Relief.”
- Authorizing a person to build a toll-bridge
- Granting people exceptions, so a law would not apply to them

II. Reports of state agencies and institutions.
The following agencies’ publications are most likely to list names:

a. Report of the Public Schools of Missouri
   Dates available: 1858-present
   Early editions list names of teachers

b. Missouri Adjutant General’s reports
   Dates available: 1861-1924
   Lists names of selected officers in Civil War, War of 1898, and WWI
c. Penitentiary records
   Dates available: mid-late 1800s
   Lists names and ages of prisoners along with their county of residence, crime, length of sentence, etc. There is a cumulated index available.

d. Missouri state colleges and normal schools, and special state-run schools like the Missouri School for the Blind and Missouri School for the Deaf. Annual reports from state reformatories do not show names, but census records might. Dates vary.

e. Miscellaneous categories:
   i. State boards of Licensing and Registration show names of 19th century doctors and midwives.
   ii. Department of Labor shows names of union leaders in each county
   iii. Missouri Official Manuals (“Blue Books”) show names of people who ran for state and county offices.
   iv. Contested elections go into great detail on the age, birthplace, and naturalization status of people who voted in local elections. These are fairly rare.

Universal Tips

• When searching a full text database like Hathi Trust or the U. S. Congressional Serial Set,
  o Enclose names and phrases inside quotes. For example, “George Washington Smith” will get better results than George Washington Smith.
  o Use the “OR” operator to string together name variants. For example, “George Washington Smith” OR “George W. Smith” OR “G. W. Smith” OR “Smith, G. W.”
  o Check to see if proximity operators are offered in the database. An operator like NEAR will allow you to search for certain words or phrases near other ones. For example, “George W. Smith” NEAR15 “St. Louis”
  o Use the parenthesis to build search strings if you want to limit /focus your results: 
    (“George Washington Smith” OR “George W. Smith” OR “G. W. Smith” OR “Smith, G. W.”) NEAR15 (Missouri or “Mo.”)

• Words on your screen too small? Hold down the Control key on your keyboard and then press the + key. To make the words small, use the Control and minus key.

• Make a mistake? Click Control + Z. This often “undoes” the very last thing you did.

😊 = this is quick and easy to search.