

Museums Have Records Too! Locating Your Ancestors Behind Closed Doors

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Genealogists use archives every day to locate records about their ancestors. Are there records that you are not accessing because you don't know they exist? Not all records are online or microfilmed. Museums are considered an archive, they have records too!

What is an Archive?

An archive is defined by the Society of American Archivists as: *An organization that collects the records of individuals, families, or other organizations* (<http://www2.archivists.org/glossary/terms>).

There could be one or more of these types of archives in any area where your ancestors were from:

- County or local archives collect and preserve local government records and historical records
- State archives collect and preserve government records and historical records from across the state
- An historical society that collects and preserves local records is also considered an archive.
- A genealogical society that accepts donations of family records is an archive.
- Local public libraries that have genealogy rooms with records in them are archives.
- University & Colleges with on campus libraries and archives is a great archive resource.
- Religious archives collect and preserve church records of all kinds within their specific denomination.
- **Museums** that have exhibits and displays may also have records collections and would be considered an archive. Don't forget the museums!

The term "archive" is not solely used to represent a county or state archive; any organization that accepts, collects and preserves government, historical and genealogical documents, records, memorabilia and artifacts is considered an archive, even if they don't have the word "archive" in their title.

Types of Museums

There are as many types of museums as there are archives and libraries.

- **Local museums:** Collects and displays local historical and genealogical documents, photographs and artifacts. Concentrates on local history and the people who lived in the area
- **State Museums:** Collects and displays state historical and genealogical documents, photographs and artifacts. Concentrates on the history of the entire state, the people who have made an impact in the state and highlights specific subject having to do with that state
- **Regional Museums:** Located in the region that they are celebrating. Collections documents, photographs and artifacts that helps to tell the story of the particular region and it's people
- **Ethnic Museums:** Concentrates on an specific race of people or ethnic people. Collects documents, photographs and artifacts that helps to tell the story of a certain race of people or ethnic group.
- There is a museum for everything and everyone!

Where Do I Start?

Knowing where to find the records and how to find the records is the first step. It's always best to start local:

- Try to narrow down the area where your ancestors lived to the specific county (parish) and the specific city within that county (parish)
- Find out what museums are in that specific area, where is the facility and obtain contact information.
- Talk to the museum curator about what records they have that are open to the public for research.
- Locate and bookmark the websites of each and every local museum.

Local Museums

Located in the local county, city or community where your ancestors lived. Could be a part of the local library, county archive, historical society or genealogical society.

- Contact the local museum and ask them about their archived records that are not on display, are they available to the public for research.

- Check to see if they have a Facebook, Twitter, Instagram or Flickr presence
- Visit the museums website to see what information they have available online before your travel
- Plan a visit to the museum once you have discussed with the curator what is available for research.

State Museums

If the records you are looking for are not at the local level, they may be at the state level. Many of our states have state museums.

- Go to the museum website and dig, click on everything. Records that are available are not always in plain sight.
- Some state museums have Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Flickr accounts where they share what is in their collections.
- State museums might be able to help you locate local museums where your ancestor lived.

Regional Museums

These museums are a great resource for the genealogists who are researching the region where their ancestor lived. A great place to get a better understanding of the terrain, customs and living conditions of our ancestors. Regional museums are also a great place to find displays and exhibits of archeological finds and the history of the area.

- Check to see if the museum has a website and dig through the website for any information they have shared freely for researchers
- Search for a regional museum on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram or Flickr for any documents, photographs and artifacts they have digitized and shared
- Contact the museum curator and discuss with them your family that lived in the area and get an idea of what records are available to the public for research
- Plan a visit to the regional museum to experience the unique items and information for that particular historical region

Ethnic Museums

These museums are a great place to find information about your ancestors and their heritage. These types of museums concentrate on the history of the particular race of people and what they have experienced.

- Locate a museum that correlates to the ethnic background of your ancestor, whether that is African American, Jewish, Irish, American Indian or any of the numerous ethnic peoples that are in our ancestry
- Check to see if the museum has a website and dig through the website for any information they have shared freely for researchers
- Search for these museums on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram or Flickr for any documents, photographs or artifacts that have been digitized and shared
- Contact the museum curator and talk to them about your specific ethnic heritage and see if they have any records that might help you
- Plan a visit to the museum to experience the unique items and information associated with your particular ethnic heritage

The Front Room and the Back Room

I like to say that museums have a “Front Room” and a “Back Room”

- **Front Room:** The “front room” is the place where all the exhibits and display are located. Museums display documents, photographs and artifacts for the general public to tour and view.
- **Back Room:** The “back room” is where the records are stored out of the view of the public. They are stored in what are called “stacks” which are rows and rows of shelves with the boxes records sitting on them.

What Kinds of Records are at Museums?

Museums could have just about any kind of record in their collections. Depending on what has been donated to them or what they actively seek to include in their collections, anything could be in a museum.

- **Photographs:** Many museums collect photographs. They are a fantastic exhibit item that draws in visitors but what is on display is usually not all the photographs they have. There are more housed in boxes in the “back room”.
- **Correspondence:** Museums get donations of personal papers all the time and included in those personal papers are letters, postcards and other correspondence.
- **Diaries, Journals and Autograph Books:** Many museums like to collect these types of records because not only do they tell the personal history of individuals but they also include local history as well

- **Military Records:** Local museums love to document their local veterans and military involvement. They could have photographs, correspondence, list of local soldiers and military memorabilia and artifacts.

Behind Closed Doors

Normally these types of records, along with almost all original records, are stored behind closed doors. This is why it is very important to talk to the museum curator and get to know the facility and what they hold in their collections. Why are these records behind closed doors?

- These records are original and unique and cannot be replaced if they are damaged or stolen.
- The back rooms or offsite storage areas are large and have thousands of boxes of records stored on shelves in what are called “stacks”.
- The preservation of these records is sometimes a continuing process.
- All of the “back room” records cannot be put on display or exhibit at one time. Many museums change out their displays and exhibits on a regular basis.

Digging Deeper into Online Museums

Many of our museums have an online presence. More and more these museums are scanning and digitizing their records and making them available to researchers online. Spending time at their websites is essential.

- Get Click Happy! Many museum websites don't make it easy to find the records, catalogues, finding aids and other indexes on their website. Don't be afraid to click on every link to find what you are looking for. Spend time getting to know the website. Visit the site often as the museum will add data as it becomes available.
- Utilize the website search feature. It may not be full proof but it might help you navigate the website more successfully.
- Use the “Ask the Curator” feature, if there is one. Many museum websites have this feature so that researchers can contact the museum to ask about records on the website or to submit a genealogy request. If there is no such feature, use the contact form provided or email them directly.
- Use websites that museums contribute information. There are several websites that museums contribute digitized records, catalogues, indexes or finding aids of records in their collections. Put these websites in your favorites and visit them often because there is always new information being uploaded by museums.
- If you are finding yourself at a stopping point with your genealogy research, search for museums. If you find yourself facing a genealogy brick wall, maybe checking with the local museum is the answer.

- Statistics say that there is only about 5% of all the world's genealogy records online or microfilmed, the remaining 95% of the records are just waiting to be found, maybe in museums!

Useful Links

ArchiveGrid

<https://beta.worldcat.org/archivegrid/>

Internet Archive

<https://archive.org/>

Accessible Archives

<http://www.accessible-archives.com/>

Hathi Trust

<https://www.hathitrust.org/>

National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections (NUCMC)

<https://www.loc.gov/coll/nucmc/>

Library of Congress

<https://www.loc.gov/>

U.S. National Archives

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

Remember: It's Not All Online, Contact or Visit an Archive Today!