

VISITING THE STATE ARCHIVES

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I have succinct advice about visiting state archives. "Don't."

Now that I have your attention, let me amplify that advice slightly. Don't visit a state archives until you have identified and used any published resources and identified and used any microfilming done by the LDS church. That microfilm is available at the Family History Library and for rental at family history centers around the world. Microfilming at state archives has been a priority of the program, especially for states in the eastern third of the country.

For pure research, a trip to Salt Lake City may be a more efficient use of your time and money than a trip to the state capital. However, if vacation or business takes you to the state where your ancestors lived, you may want to visit that state archives. Knowing what to expect can increase the potential for discoveries and reduce the potential for frustration.

HOURS AND PARKING

Prepare for your visit on the Internet. In a search engine such as Google, enter the name of the state and the word "archives." The entry you want will be near the top of the list. Or, on CyndisList, select United States, the state, Libraries, Archives & Museums, and the link for the archives.

The website should have driving directions, hours of operation, days of closing, and information about parking and handicap access. Many archives are not open on Saturday, which may be your only free day, and some are closed on certain weekdays. They often have restricted hours, opening later and closing earlier than you would expect. Many close for the lunch hour.

Your time on site is probably very limited. There is no point in wasting it driving around looking for the building or finding parking. It would be disappointing if you arrived shortly before they closed for lunch or the entire day. You may want to pack a lunch to eat in the car.

COLLECTION AND CATALOG

Most archives have at least a partial catalog and description of their holdings on the website. Take the time to do a little advance preparation.

LIBRARY

Determine from the website if there is a library associated with the archives. If your visit is limited to one day, your time is best spent in the archives, but if the library has more extensive hours, you can use its resources when the archives is closed.

ARRIVING

Arriving at an archives can be a process rather than an event. Because you can access irreplaceable manuscript materials, registration is usually required and restrictions

apply to what you can take in with you. Be prepared.

Allow for the extra time and be pleasant (they are, after all, protecting the materials so that researchers like you will be able to use them in the future).

Usually you must complete a form. Take a photo ID with you. A few archives require that you obtain their photo ID in order to view manuscript materials. Usually you are issued a key to a locker in which to place all non-permitted articles. Some lockers are quite small. Thus, it is wise to leave unnecessary items in the car.

The safest thing is to assume that you will be allowed to take a minimum of items with you. This means pencil, paper, and a few research notes. You will probably not be allowed any kind of purse, briefcase, bag, case, file, umbrella, or coat. If you tend to be easily chilled, it is wise to wear a cardigan. Usually you can bring your laptop computer in, but be aware that many archives are in facilities that are more than a century old, and there may not be electrical outlets, so make sure the battery is fully charged.

STAFF

Cutbacks in state budgets have hit archives especially hard. There are fewer staff persons to help you. In some states the attitude is incredibly friendly and helpful. In others this is not true. In many the staff is simply overloaded. Begin by saying "I've never been here before. Can someone give me a brief orientation?" During your visit, be wise about asking for help.

You should come prepared with a succinct research problem. You usually are requested to indicate this when you register, and the person giving the orientation will probably ask. Respond in one sentence and add "but I'd like to understand in general what is available for future reference."

SPECIAL INDEXES AND CARD CATALOGS

One of the most valuable features of state archives, and one that is usually not available on microfilm or the Internet, is special indexes and card catalogs that have been prepared by the staff over decades in order to save wear and tear on fragile older records. At state archives I have used wonderful indexes to vital records, court records, naturalizations, land entries, and various county-level and state-level records.

COUNTY RECORDS

Many state archives serve as the custodian not only for colony and state records, but also for older records from the counties. If you have several days in an area, this can save much driving time from courthouse to courthouse.

DOCUMENT ACCESS, RETRIEVAL, AND OFF-SITE STORAGE

Although you are visiting "the archives," you may discover that many of the records aren't right there. It can

take anywhere from a few minutes to several days to retrieve the records you request. If you did not see information about this on the website, it is a good question to ask during orientation.

PHOTOCOPYING

When you are getting the orientation tour, ask about photocopying. Often, you cannot make copies of documents yourself; occasionally you can't even make copies of microfilm yourself. Rarely is there a coin-operated machine. In most cases, you are on the honor system. At the end of your visit, you are expected to report the number of copies and pay for them all at once, so remember to count pages as you are preparing to leave.

MICROFILM

When you've determined what records you want to look at, you may be surprised to be directed to a box of

microfilm. Often it is the same LDS microfilm that you could have rented at home, hence the advice at the beginning of this article. Some archives have a limited number of microfilm readers; almost all are very old. Look for a diagram and instructions on loading and operation. Follow any restrictions about how long you can use the reader.

WHAT HAS NOT BEEN FILMED?

One of the best ways to visit a state archives is after you've taken advantage of records available from the Family History Library. Keep a detailed list of what they didn't film and use your visit to explore those records.

With advance preparation and a flexible attitude, you can find your visit to a state archives to be enjoyable and productive.