

FINDING PRIVATE PAPERS

BY PATRICIA LAW HATCHER, CG, FASG

Private papers can be very difficult to locate. Because they are private, many may still be in private hands. However, some families and businesses have understood that such records are better protected in archival institutions.

Be aware that this does not necessarily make them public property or even publicly available. Also, access requires time. It may take several hours or even days for records to be retrieved once you arrive at an archives. There may be restrictions on the publication of what you find. (You can use the information, but may not be able to publish an image or even a full transcript without permission.) Some institutions are not fond of dealing with genealogists, having had bad experiences in the past. But if you plan ahead and are polite, patient, and persistent, and respect the rules and guidelines, you—and those researchers who follow you—will be able to use the records.

Records at archives, particularly state archives, often have been microfilmed, by the institution or by the LDS church, but rarely does this microfilming include private records.

BIBLE RECORDS

The National Society Daughters of the American Revolution encourages members to transcribe Bible records. They are compiled and turned in annually by each state to the DAR Library in Washington, DC. Duplicate copies may have been deposited in state or local libraries or archives. In the early 1970s, the collection—which includes many items in addition to Bible records—was microfilmed by the LDS Church. Kirkham's two-volume *Index to Some of the Bibles and Family Records . . .* (arranged by state, then by surname) was the easiest way to scan for a surname (especially a common surname), but the collection has more than doubled since that time, so you will also want to check the DAR online catalog. [Now check the online Genealogical Records Committee Index.]

Several genealogical societies have been active for many years collecting Bible records. The New England Historic Genealogical Society has produced a CD-ROM of Bible records in its collection. The National Genealogical Society's Bible record index is online [members only] (copies available for a fee), and its Family Papers project is currently digitizing many records that will become available for a fee in the future. A primary surname index to the Bible records at the Genealogical Society of Pennsylvania is online.

Bible records have long been favorite items for publication in genealogical journals. As an editor, I can say that we love them because they are short (usually one to three pages), which gives us flexibility in making an issue come out to the right number of pages.

LIBRARY CATALOGS

James A. Fortson used the calendar pages of an almanac to record numerous events about individuals in the Arkadelphia (Clark County, Arkansas) area from 1875–1897. He also often recorded the weather, which could be of interest to family historians with ancestors in the general area. Fortson was the great-great-grandfather of my friend Linda Shaddock Rogers. The journal was in the hands of other family members. They cooperated with Linda, who published a monograph of the diary.

As an example for this article, I checked the online catalogs of seven libraries that I knew had the publication to determine the subjects under which they had catalogued *Clark County, Arkansas: Arkadelphia & Environs, A Journal by James A. Fortson, Recorded 1875–1897*. Linda had obtained Library of Congress cataloging (CIP), so there was consistency in headings for three of the libraries, but notice the variety elsewhere (see below). Similar variety would be found in cataloging manuscripts in any archives. You should investigate several locality levels and a variety of subjects in your searches. Linda's book was found under the following subject headings:

- Library of Congress, Mesquite [Texas] Public Library, and Riley-Hickingbotham Library at Ouachita Baptist University [Arkansas]:
 - Fortson, James A., 1829-1898--Diaries
 - Arkadelphia Region (Ark.)--Social life and customs
 - Arkadelphia Region (Ark.)--Genealogy
- Allen County [Indiana] Public Library:
 - Clark County (Ark.)--History--Sources
- Dallas [Texas] Public Library:
 - Clark County (Ark.)--Genealogy
- DAR Library:
 - Fortson, James A. (1829-1898) - Diaries
 - Clark Co., Arkansas - History
- Family History Library:
 - Fortson
 - Arkansas, Clark - Biography - Personal narratives
 - Arkansas, Clark - Vital Records

ON-SITE RESEARCH

At local libraries, genealogical societies, and historical societies, you will want to check the “vertical files.” When individuals donate items (usually photocopies), the papers are placed in file folders and filed alphabetically in file cabinets. When on a research vacation, remember to take an alphabetized list of all family surnames, both ancestral and collateral, so that you can search the vertical files efficiently and not miss that precious Bible record, letter, or photograph that is filed under the surname of the son-in-law whose wife inherited the family papers.

FINDING AIDS

Libraries have many bibliographies that list published and unpublished diaries, letters, and manuscripts. These include Arksey and Reed, *American Diaries*; Forbes, *New England Diaries*; Goodfriend, *The Published Diaries and Letters of American Women*; Havlice, *And So to Bed*; Hinding, *Women's History Sources*; and Matthews, *American Diaries in Manuscript*.

Explore the online catalogs of archives to identify manuscript holdings you want to investigate. Unlike a traditional library catalog, you may find entries that include extensive background information on the collection and a detailed list of contents. Because private papers may end up in archives far removed from the events described therein, you should use an Internet search engine to determine if there are unexpected archives you want to visit.

If you are visiting Boston, check the *Guide to the Manuscript Collections of the New England Historic Genealogical Society*. If you are visiting Philadelphia, the *Guide to the Manuscript Collections in the Historical Society of Pennsylvania*, formerly a printed volume, has been renamed and is now MANX (Manuscript and Archive Information Exchange), available online.

Institutions acquire archival materials on a steady basis. Thus, printed catalogs become outdated—as does your search of online listings. How do you keep up with what's new? Often a major genealogical or historical society that is associated with the collection publishes new manuscript acquisitions in its newsletter. Some list manuscript, book, and microform acquisitions in one merged list, but others have separate manuscript listings. Many have articles highlighting particular elements of the manuscript collection.

To find a neighbor's diary or a store ledger or other manuscripts, check the National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections, affectionately known as NUCMC (pronounced "nuck-muck"). This contains summary

descriptions of archives' manuscript holdings reported to the Library of Congress. From 1959 through 1992, this was published in book form. Each volume is indexed separately, but there is a cumulative *Index to Personal Names 1959–1984* and a less-widely available *Index to Subjects and Corporate Names in the National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections 1959–1984*.

Entries beginning with the 1986–87 volume can be searched online [in 2012, the website indicates there are no plans to include earlier volumes in this online version]. If a library near you has a subscription to ArchivesUSA[®], you can search all years of NUCMC through it.

Business records are often found in archival collections. The archives may even have a separate finding aid for these records, as they are often used by social historians. For example, a copy of *A Guide to the Business Records in the Archives Branch, Virginia State Library* [now the Library of Virginia] is at the Family History Library.

If they are not too extensive, business records may be transcribed or abstracted in the journal of a genealogical or historical society. For example, the *Virginia Genealogical Magazine* has been publishing a variety of store records and account books. Many societies have published more extensive records, such as those of funeral homes, as separate volumes. Both books and manuscripts are often subject-catalogued under the locality, then a term such as "Business and Commerce."

To find material from private papers published in periodicals, identify all the periodicals for the area of interest and investigate them. In the Locality section in PERSI (Periodical Source Index), letters are often listed as History or Biography and business records as History. Diaries may be classified as Church, History, Military, or Other.

STRATEGY

To locate private papers, you will need to use a broad range of finding strategies and allocate sufficient time to explore the resources you identify.