LOCATING ARCHIVAL SOURCES

Each collection housed in an archives consists of hundreds, thousands, or hundreds of thousands of individual items created and assembled by individuals or organizations going about their day-to-day business. All those hundreds of thousands of items—whether they are letters, or diaries, or photographs, or newspaper clippings, or texts of speeches—contain information which could potentially be used to answer a myriad of different questions.

Over the generations, archivists have used an ever-evolving set of tools (or “finding aids”) to describe these raw materials so that researchers can locate sources that will help answer their questions.

These tools direct researchers to:

1. the archival repository where the materials are preserved (such as the Smith College Archives, or Special Collections and University Archives at UMass)

2. the collection or set of papers within that repository which contains relevant source materials (such as the Margaret Sanger Papers or the Papers of Virginia Woolf)

3. the specific parts of that collection or set of papers where relevant materials are filed—usually the box and/or folder number.

In most archives, researchers figure out which boxes they want to look at—usually with the help of the friendly archivist—give the collection name and box number(s) to the archivist and s/he goes to the stacks to get the boxes.

Most archival repositories make use of both modern and old-fashioned tools to locate sources within their holdings. Some of the older (paper-based) tools will only be available in the archives or library, while others are available any time via the Web.

TOOLS AVAILABLE FROM THE WEB:

Worldcat and Five College Library Catalog will help you find the repository and the collection name. They contain brief collection-level descriptions of collections, similar in length and detail to the catalog records available for books. The two should produce the same results because they both get their information from the same place. In both cases, you can link from the brief catalog description to more detailed folder & title lists, if they are available online.

Worldcat: from the Libraries home page go to Research, Databases by Title, W, Worldcat. In the Advanced Search screen Limit Type to: Archival Materials. For collections with online finding aids, you can link from there to the full folder & title list of the collection. Look for “Access” and click on the asteria link for more information about collections in the 5-colleges. This link takes you to the Five-College Archives and Manuscript Collections database (aka Finding Aids site)
**Five College Library Catalog**: from the Libraries home page on left side, choose “Catalog,” then “Advanced” then use the options to Limit your search by Format to Archives and Manuscripts. You can link from there to the full folder & title list of the collection if it is online. Look for “Link to online” towards the bottom of the record and click on “connect to finding aid.” This link takes you to the Five-College Archives and Manuscript Collections database (aka Finding Aids Site)

**Five-College Archives and Manuscript Collections** (aka Finding Aids Site) will help you find repository, collection name, and often box numbers as well. Modern style finding aids (sometimes known as collection registers or inventories) are full of useful information about the creator of the papers; about what kinds of materials are included in the papers and where, in all those boxes, you’re likely to find it; about how and when the papers got to the repository; and if there are any restrictions on using the materials.

From the Libraries home page go to Research, Databases by Title, F, Five College Archives and Manuscript Collections. If you use the basic search screen, the database will find relevant materials in archives in all five colleges. You can limit your search to just Smith archival collections, by going to Advanced Search and using the “Limit by institution” feature.

The search results page will provide a brief overall description of the collection and tell you where that collection is preserved (Smith or one of the other colleges). From there, if you click on the Collection name, or “Browse finding aid” you’ll see a “Collection overview” with a summary description of the collection and its creator. On the left side of the screen there is a menu with links to the different parts of the finding aid (Biographical note, Scope and contents of the collection, etc.). If you click on “View entire finding aid” you can use Edit and Find to search the entire finding aid by keyword. This will allow you to figure out which boxes you want to request when you get to the archives.

It’s also possible use **Google** to locate relevant sources and link to online finding aids, but you will have to sort through a lot of extraneous information to get there.

**TOOLS AVAILABLE IN THE ARCHIVES:**

- **Archivists.** The staff is there to help you find and use the materials. Archivists love their jobs, have a variety of other tools at their disposal, and a lot of obscure information rattling around in their brains. They REALLY want to help you find the good stuff in their collections. So, don’t be shy.

- **Paper card catalogs.** Many older repositories rely on paper card catalogs for access to materials that became part of collection decades before anyone dreamed of the Web. They reflect old-fashioned methods of organizing and describing collections that are no longer in use, but they are full of information that is not available anywhere else.