

**Article: “From Prospects to Paydirt: Conducting Research at the Library of Congress”**

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## From Prospects to Paydirt: Conducting Research at the Library of Congress

Carolyn T. Brown, *Library of Congress*

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The Library of Congress is undoubtedly the world's greatest repository of human memory. With collections numbering some 110 million items, it is the largest, most comprehensive library in the history of the world. Its materials encompass nearly all subjects; they are written in over 450 languages and 39 scripts; they are recorded on materials ranging from papyrus to optical disks. In one location, the researcher can conduct multilingual, cross-disciplinary research using materials in nearly every medium. The Library is an intellectual treasure house for the historian.

Yet the very attributes that make the collections an unparalleled resource can prove daunting to the first time researcher. The Library has 21 reading rooms in three adjacent buildings; additional materials are housed off-site; all bibliographic data are not yet entered in the online catalog; and like many research libraries, it is a closed stack facility. The following "tricks of the trade" should help the researcher mine the Library's treasures efficiently. Some will be self-evident to the experienced researcher, but we hope every researcher will find something of value.

### Planning the Trip

"Preparation, preparation, preparation" should be every researcher's mantra. It may take several forms.

### Focusing the Inquiry

Because the Library's holdings are so vast, the more pointed the query, the more successful the search. For instance, tracking down the basic

elements of the entire 19th century women's movement in the U.S. might prove overwhelming; researching Susan B. Anthony's contribution to it would yield unexpected resources. Paring down the inquiry to the most specific subjects or issues can be best accomplished at the researchers' home research library where basic materials can usually be secured and examined with speed and efficiency. This is also the place to go for common sources of information, such as *Foreign Affairs* or David McCullough's biography of Harry Truman. At nearby libraries, the reader often may browse the shelves for the desired item and scan the stacks for other related materials.

Using basic reference materials at the home institution enables you to bypass these materials at the Library and proceed straight to unique resources. Naturally, the Library keeps essential resources ready at hand, such as *The Dictionary of American Biography* or the *Bibliography of Asian Studies*. However, you may prefer to reserve time at the Library of Congress for using resources from among the 80,000 items in the Main Reading Room's ready reference collection that are not available to you at home. So, to receive maximum value for your time, try to advance your project beyond the preliminary stages if possible before coming to the Library.

### Scouting the Research Territory Electronically

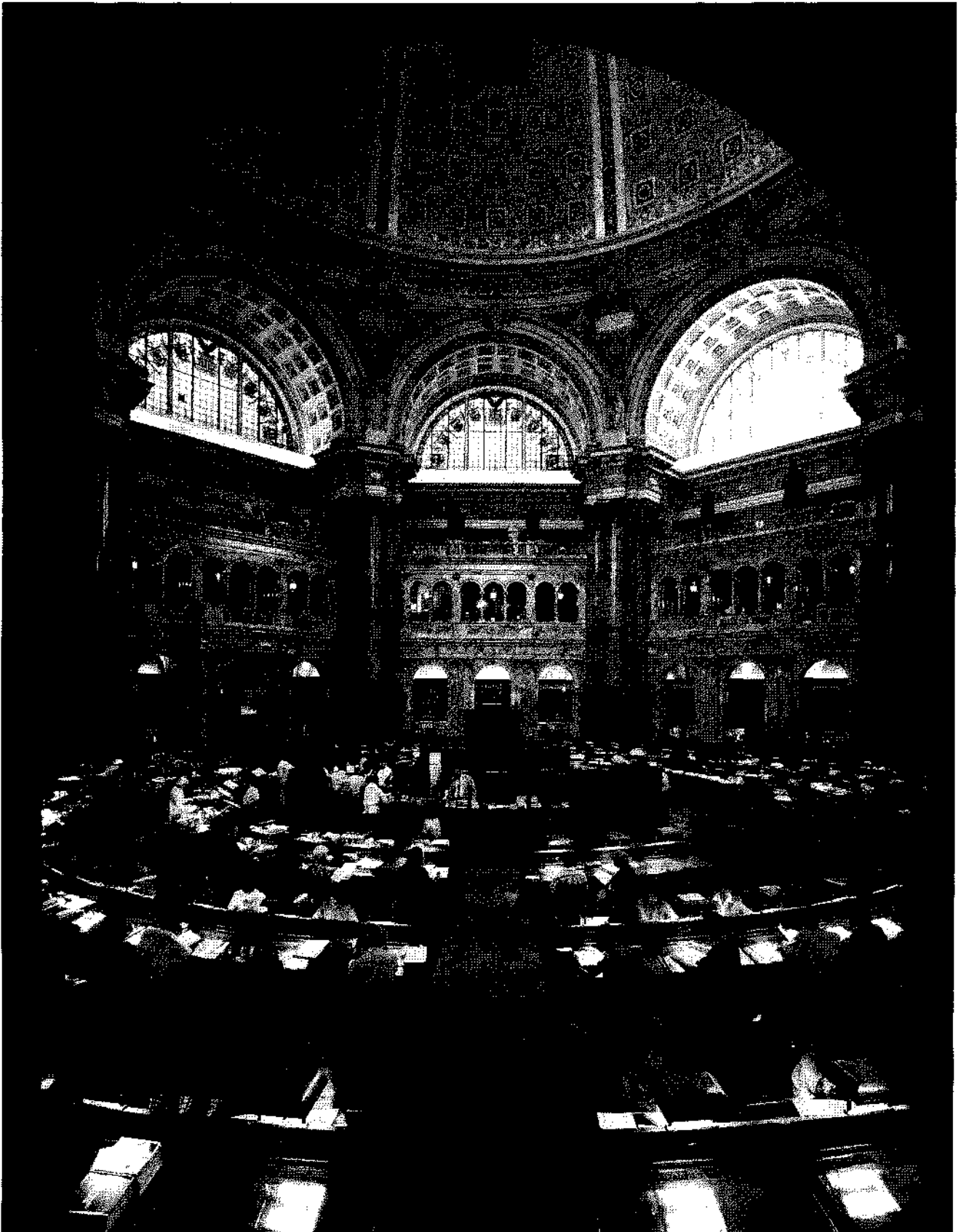
The Library is constantly building its CD-ROM resources and expanding access to electronic databases and to the Internet. For example, Library readers may access a subset of information from both FirstSearch and Eureka. Again, in order to use your time at the Library of Congress with greatest efficiency, it is wise to tap these known resources via your home

institution or personal computer service prior to your trip.

The Internet is a real boon. "Let your fingers do the walking" to the Library's home page to obtain information about the Library, its reading rooms, public and technical services, events and publications. Through it you can access its online systems and find links to other Internet sites. The home page also offers information about subject headings, which are the key to subject searching and to cross-references and links. LOCIS, the Library of Congress Information System, contains bibliographic records for materials in a variety of formats and languages and access to more than 27 million bibliographic entries. Instructions on using LOCIS are provided at both the Library's Web site ([www.loc.gov](http://www.loc.gov)) and its gopher MARVEL ([marvel.loc.gov:port 70](http://marvel.loc.gov:port 70)). Instructions may be downloaded from the Library's FTP site ([ftp.loc.gov](ftp://ftp.loc.gov)). Legislative information is available via the Internet service "Thomas," named for Thomas Jefferson, ([www.loc.gov](http://www.loc.gov)), which provides information beginning with the 103rd Congress.

Just for fun, take a look at the online exhibitions, which include "Temple of Liberty: Building the Capitol for a New Nation," "1492: An Ongoing Voyage," "Revelations from the Russian Archives," "Dresden: Treasures from the Saxon State Library," and several more.

To take full advantage of finding aids and tools that Library staff have crafted over the years, to access certain specialized catalogues, and, of course, to take advantage of the excellent reference staff, you will certainly want to visit the Library in person. Nevertheless, a great deal is available over the Internet. More and more college and research libraries, and many public libraries offer Internet services, so that gaining local access may not be a problem.



Main Reading Room, Library of Congress

### Other Time Savers

If your needs can be met by a few specific items, consider interlibrary loan. The Library of Congress will lend materials not available elsewhere to public and academic libraries, which in turn make these available to their users, either by lending specific items or providing photocopies. Request these through your local institution.

Once you are ready to visit the Library of Congress, you may wish to discuss your needs with the Library staff of the appropriate collection and, if you live outside the Washington, DC area, to request up to three titles to be held for your arrival. In special cases, some additional accommodations may be possible. For more information about this "Advance Reserve" service, phone the Special Search Section at (202)707-7457 between 10:00 am and 9:00 pm Monday, Wednesday, and Thursday, or 10:00 am to 5:00 pm Tuesday and Friday.

All reading rooms are open Monday through Friday from 8:30 to 5:00. The Main Reading Room, the Serials and Government Publications Reading Room, and a few others extend their hours until 9:30 pm on Monday, Wednesday, and Thursday. They are also open Saturday from 8:30 am to 5:00 pm, as are the Manuscript and Music Reading Rooms. The Library is closed on Sunday. For a complete listing of each reading room with hours of operation and telephone numbers, consult the Library's home page or request the brochure "Public Services in the Library of Congress" by calling (202)707-5522.

### Upon Arrival

#### Reader Registration

All readers must register. Thus, your first stop should be the reader registration desk located in the Jefferson Building (the original Library of Congress building) on the ground floor in room LJ G22. Researchers are encouraged to enter from Second Street SE (through the parking lot.) You will need to present a picture ID (passport, driver's license, academic or student ID, etc.) and

valid proof of address. This is important. For security reasons, sufficient ID is necessary to access the Library's collections. Normally the registration process takes about 15 minutes unless the demand is great. Try to arrive during the early morning or late afternoon, which are off-peak periods. You will be issued a renewable registration card good for two years. Some reading rooms require additional registration procedures.

To promote collections security, all reading rooms have some limitation on what can be brought into them. Some, such as the Manuscript, Rare Book and Special Collections, and Prints and Photographs divisions, are quite restrictive. In these

cases, lockers are provided nearby for reader convenience. The rule of thumb: bring only what you require to accomplish your day's work. Most reading rooms do permit laptop computers, which you must register with the Library police upon entering and exiting. If you know which reading rooms you plan to use, telephone ahead for guidelines.

#### Developing Expertise in Using the Library

The Library offers several brief courses for researchers free of charge. Enrollment is especially advisable if your tenure will be rela-



Great Hall of the Jefferson Building, Library of Congress.

tively long, if your search will require sophisticated techniques, or if you are a novice in maneuvering through huge research libraries. Most Mondays at 10:00 am, the Library offers "Research Orientation to the Library of Congress." This ninety-minute session introduces the reading rooms, collections, databases, card catalog, and automated resources. In addition, researchers may enroll in introductory classes that provide specific techniques for using the Library's online catalog, which is composed of two sections, MUMS and Scorpio. Advanced searching classes are also available. Register for all courses in person at the Computer Catalog Center (LJ 100) or by phone (202) 707-3370, Monday through Saturday, 8:30 to 5:00 pm.

### Where to Begin

The Library of Congress has three buildings on Capitol Hill connected by underground tunnels. Room numbers begin with "L" for "Library," followed by "J," "M," or "A," (Jefferson, Madison, or Adams Building), and the number indicating floor and location. Depending on the building, the street floor is the first floor or the ground floor, so always check. All reading rooms are accessible to the handicapped.

Most readers will start their research in the Reference Assistance Room adjacent to the Main Reading Room on the first floor of the Jefferson Building. Here, expert reference librarians will help in planning a specific research strategy, using the catalogs and reference materials,

referring you to other bibliographic sources, and locating hard to find materials.

However, advanced preparation may suggest that one of the more specialized reading rooms would be a better starting point. In these you will find unique catalogs and reference works, and staff with specialized knowledge. Knowing the principle on which the various reading rooms are organized will help you establish your plan of action. Items in the general book collections are retrieved primarily through the Main Reading Room but also through the Local History and Genealogy Reading Room, and the Science/Business Reading Room. Some materials are organized by format and are located in a format-specific reading room: Prints and Photographs; Geography



Asian Division Reading Room, Library of Congress.

## The Profession

and Maps; Rare Book and Special Collections; Motion Picture, Broadcast, and Recorded Sound; Music; Manuscript; and Serial and Government Publications. Others are organized primarily by subject: Science/Business; Law; the American Folklife Center; and the area studies reading rooms for Africa and the Middle East; Asia; Europe; and the Hispanic world. Usually, you can guess the location of materials from the name, but not always, so be sure you know where you really need to go before you set out for a new reading room.

A pre-trip phone call to the Library's telephone reference desk (202)707-5522, Monday through Friday 8:30 to 5:00 pm, may help you determine your first destination. Or, after leaving reader registration, ask for advice at the Reference Assistance Room, adjacent to the Main Reading Room. Again, the more pointed your research question, the more quickly you will identify the optimal location to begin your work.

If your research focuses on the non-English speaking world or the developing world, or if the sources you need are in foreign languages or non-roman scripts, the area studies reading rooms might provide a good starting point. Staff there will help you use their collections and will direct you to appropriate sources throughout the Library.

### Procedures for Using Reading Rooms

In most cases, items from the general collections should be ordered with call slip from the Main Reading Room, the Local History and Genealogy Reading Room, or the Science/Business Reading Room; or they can be submitted electronically using designated ACCESS terminals in the Computer Catalog Center (LJ 100). You may request five items per hour. To request a larger number of items, see below, "Special Services." Materials requested from the general collections will usually arrive within 30 to 90 minutes. For maximum efficiency, make requests at off-peak times, early morning, late afternoon, or evenings. Service in

the smaller reading rooms may be faster.

In general, for security reasons, materials must be used within the reading room in which they are served. However, most reading rooms will arrange to hold items for your return, or where possible, facilitate cross use in other ways. Further, if you will be working primarily in the area studies reading rooms but also need materials from the general collections, these can be delivered to you in area studies.

Procedures and restrictions in the special reading rooms vary and, when possible, should be clarified in advance. For example, researchers who know which Manuscript collections they wish to use are well advised to write ahead for special instructions because some manuscript collections have restrictions or require prior permission from persons outside the Library. Other items may need to be retrieved by Library staff from off-site facilities.

### Special Services, Special People

Several services assist with special research needs.

In the reading rooms that service the general collections, normally only five items may be requested per hour, and up to fifteen items for next-day delivery. In addition, researchers may request up to fifteen items during any of the five weekdays for delivery on the following Saturday. If you require long runs of a periodical or a large number of titles for a unique project, you can be accommodated if you request materials three or more days in advance, depending upon the number of items. Consult the Collections Management Division (202)707-7400 for further information. Within the rules and taking account of staff resources, reading rooms will try to facilitate the researchers' work.

As noted earlier, all reading rooms will hold materials for future use. The Main Reading Room, Local History, and Science/Business reading rooms will hold up to five books for three days. Or you may wish to secure a study shelf where you can retain 25-30 items for ap-

proximately one month. Shelves can be renewed although they are limited in number.

In addition to the study shelves, the Library also makes available a limited number of study desks. These are ordinarily assigned to scholars who will use them substantially full-time and whose research requires extended use of the Library's collections. Criteria for assignment to a study desk or study room include a publishing contract, a research grant, sabbatical leave with defined research purposes, substantiated scholarly duties associated with an editing venture, etc. For further information or to apply for study shelves or study desks, contact the Research Facilities Officer at (202)707-5211.

A word to the wise! Have books held for you if you expect to use them again in a day or two. It can take several days for a book to be returned to its proper position on the shelf.

There is another secret to successful, in-depth research at the Library of Congress that many researchers never discover: finding the staff expert who knows your subject in greatest depth. Even the experienced researcher accustomed to burrowing through large research libraries is strongly advised to consult the reference staff. For one thing, a very few materials do not appear in the electronic database or even in the catalogs of individual reading rooms. More importantly, over the years Library staff have created innumerable finding aids that will save time and direct you to hard to find items. Reference help will prevent your missing important sources.

Invaluable materials sometimes turn up in unexpected places. For example, if you have undertaken a study of early 20th century African American popular culture, it may not have occurred to you to consult the Library's collection of films produced by the early African American film industry. Did you know you can buttress research on American cities at the turn of the century by examining the Sanborn Fire Insurance Map Collection, which details the buildings in 12,000 American cities and towns from 1867 to the 1970s? If you venture beyond the book and

serial collections, you may encounter amazing finds.

The expert most able to facilitate your research will usually be a reference librarian or a specialist closely associated with a reading room. However, in a few cases, the very person you most need to contact may work in another department. The Library's expert on a small Asian country might not work in reference or in the Asian Division but in cataloging. Obviously, that person cannot be available for general reference questions. However, a very few questions will merit that person's expertise. If your research requires it, ask the librarian who has been guiding your research if someone employed elsewhere in the Library has special expertise that might help you. Please consider this an option of last resort.

If during your tenure at the Library you establish a collegial relationship with a staff expert, that person may also be able to provide assistance after you have returned to your home institution. Knowing your subject and the materials you have already consulted, he or she may be able to alert you to new materials as they arrive and to answer subsequent questions.

### For Community, For Pleasure

The Library has some of the ambience of a thriving academic community. You will find a wide range of scholarly events and cultural activities both day and evening: lectures, discussions, roundtables, symposia, conferences, concerts, poetry readings, and occasional film showings. Even when these are directed primarily towards Library staff, the public is nearly always welcome. All are available free. For details, click on "News and Events" on the Library's home page; also check the following: concerts (202)707-5502; poetry and literature programs (202)707-5394; films (202)707-5677; folklife programs (202)707-6590. The staff newsletter, *The Gazette*, lists upcoming activities. Free copies can be found

in busy locations throughout the buildings. Also check bulletin boards and special notice holders next to elevators.

The Library's dining room, called the Montpelier Room, its cafeteria, coffee shop, and snack bar, all located in the Madison Building, are open to researchers. By displaying your reader registration card, you may use them even during restricted hours. Nearby restaurants offer a broad variety of excellent food, and the local bookstore carries research supplies.

Finally, unless your stay is extremely short, set aside an hour for a guided tour of the stunningly beautiful Jefferson Building. Completed in 1897, its unique blend of art and architecture celebrates the universality of knowledge and embodies American turn-of-the-century optimism. The architects hoped to demonstrate in marble and paint that the United States could surpass European libraries in grandeur and devotion to classical culture. The elaborate embellishments of the building's interior repay careful attention. Through the generosity of the United States Congress, the building has been renovated and restored to its original beauty. You will want to walk through the soaring, magnificent Great Hall, climb to the visitors' perch overlooking the glorious Main Reading Room, and visit the newly opened Treasures Gallery where special items from the collections are displayed. If time allows, see the new film about the Library and also visit the new, permanent exhibition, "Treasures of the Library of Congress."

### In Sum

Perhaps the Library's most precious gift to the researcher is the opportunity for multidisciplinary research in materials that use multiple formats and employ all of the world's languages. To research the biography of President Theodore Roosevelt, for example, you can consult his presidential papers, including

correspondence and personal diaries, photographs and newsreels, newspapers from all over the United States tracing his activities and their public reception, the journal *Outlook*, with which he was closely associated, the papers of some of his close friends and associates, as well as foreign materials documenting his extensive diplomatic activity in Africa, Latin America, the Far East and Europe. Or you can study, for instance, the Islamic concept of the orthodox religious life as expressed through the centuries in Egypt, Lebanon, Turkey, Spain, Uzbekistan, Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Indonesia, and other nations using materials in Arabic, Turkish, Spanish, Russian, Uzbek, Urdu, Indonesian, etc. In each format and language you may uncover unsuspected resources, many one of a kind, housed in one complex.

The collections and staff of the Library richly reward the researcher. We have acquired these resources for your use; the staff is here to facilitate your work. We invite you to come pursue your hunches, explore new leads, run down blind alleys, discover insights through serendipity and shared tips from other researchers. If you enjoy research, there is no better terrain to explore than the Library of Congress.

### Useful Phone Numbers:

General telephone numbers:  
 (202)707-5000 Voice  
 (202)707-6200 TTY  
 Reference telephone numbers  
 (202)707-5522  
 Recorded information numbers  
 (202)707-6400 (reading room hours)  
 (202)707-6500 (researchers)  
 (202)707-4700 (directions)

### About the Author

Carolyn T. Brown is assistant librarian for library services at the Library of Congress. She wishes to thank all who assisted in the preparation of this article, particularly Lavonda Broadnax, Tori Hill, and Marilyn Parr.