

Finding Manuscript Collections with *ArchiveGrid*

Manuscript collections are fantastic places to do advanced, in-depth research on nearly any subject, maritime history certainly included. Oftentimes, the information you seek is available, but remains hidden in a manuscript collection or archive because that aspect of the collection wasn't relevant to the work of those who have written about it. Analyzing and extracting relevant information from these collections is tough. But just *finding* the data you want to analyze can also present a big challenge.

The main database that most seek out is **WorldCat**, the enormous library holdings catalog, but it can be frustrating to use because, in most cases, the results will not show you what institution holds the collection that interests you. The reasons for this are arcane; solutions exist, but they're difficult to put into action.

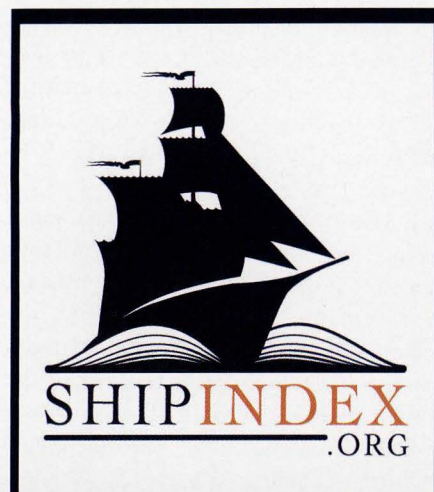
There is a better way of searching, however. **ArchiveGrid** (www.beta.worldcat.org/archivegrid) is a research project by a unit of **Online Computer Library Center (OCLC)**, the huge library cooperative, and its goal is to make the content in manuscript collections visible and findable. It does this by identifying everything that might be a "manuscript" item in WorldCat, then combines that with data from "finding aids" that are accessible online. A finding aid is a document, usually written by an archivist or a special collections librarian, that describes the contents of a particular manuscript collection. Writing finding aids takes a long time, and the process is detailed and tedious. The final documents summarize, rather than analyze, what is held in a particular collection. Their goal, of course, is to make the collection more accessible to researchers.

ArchiveGrid contains more than 4 million records, with content from over a thousand different institutions. Much of the content is based on algorithmic searches of WorldCat, so you might find a single cassette recording of a lecture, or you might find content that appears twice: once from WorldCat's bibliographic record for the collection, and once from the finding aid that was created by the collection's archivists and then harvested by the ArchiveGrid computers. You can use keywords to search the entire collection, or you can limit your search to a specific collection. A search for "Benjamin Packard," for instance, will return a link to a photograph of the famous ship in a scrapbook held and digitized by the State Library of Western Australia, found by way of its record in WorldCat. The search will also find a record of a crew list from an 1897 voyage, mentioned in a finding aid for a collection at the San Francisco Maritime National Historic Park.

While most users of ArchiveGrid arrive there via an online search engine, there's a lot to find if you start directly on the ArchiveGrid homepage. You can locate archive collections near you, and then search just within those collections. To do this, find an institution using the map or drop-down menu, then find its collection number (it's the number after "contributor:" in the URL). For example, Mystic Seaport's contributor number is "46." A search for "contributor:46" plus your search term, for this example, "contributor:46 schooner" will find records at Mystic Seaport with "schooner" in them. Of course, to search without limiting to a single location, just type in "schooner," or another term of interest. If you search for "parachute ship," you'll find logbooks for the whaler *Parachute* held at half a dozen different locations. In this example, you'll see that many of the results after the first page refer to the closing of a rope and twine factory in California; you could narrow your search to "(parachute AND ship) NOT twine" to exclude those irrelevant entries.

The fact that ArchiveGrid displays which collection owns a particular resource is enough to make it the best place to start for manuscript research. The absence of published books and journals is also a great benefit, as is the combination of both WorldCat holdings and finding aids. Institutions can request that ArchiveGrid include their finding aids in its regular searches; this is particularly useful if a small organization does not contribute its holdings to WorldCat. ArchiveGrid has a developer and a project manager assigned to it, though of course they have many other responsibilities, as well. Right now, there's not a lot of new development going into ArchiveGrid, but, even as it currently stands, it's a useful tool for locating relevant manuscript collections.

Suggestions for other sites worth mentioning are welcome at peter@shipindex.org. See www.shipindex.org for a free compilation of over 150,000 ship names from indexes to dozens of books and journals. †



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