Guide to Searching the Smithsonian Institution Archives

Last updated 9/16/2022. Contact osiaref@si.edu with questions.

Begin your research with our search portal! Use the search box on the Archives homepage (http://siarchives.si.edu), or click the magnifying glass at the top right of any Archives webpage to expand the search box.

Why is it important to learn search strategies for the Archives website?

If you've used other common internet search engines, typing two words in the Archives search box (like margaret collins) will not work like you expect.

Read through this document to learn about search operators, search filters and facets, collection and image numbers, and getting the most out of your Archives research!

In the Archives search box, you may enter Keywords, a Collection Number, or an Image Number.

Search by Keywords

In your list of search results, you'll find all instances of your search term across our website: in Finding Aids, digitized Media, timeline items from our institutional Chronology, Blog Posts, WebPages that describe our services, and collection items that have been digitized as PDFs.

Multiple Keyword Search

For a search of multiple keywords, separate each word in your search term with AND (in all capitals). This will locate the search results that contain all your keywords, in any order. For instance, to search for the words margaret and collins (in any order), enter the search term margaret AND collins.
Exact Keyword Search

Use quotation marks “” around your keywords to search an exact phrase. Using quotation marks “” will tell the search engine to pay attention to the exact order of characters. Because of this, the searches “margaret collins” and “collins margaret” will return separate sets of results.

Advanced Search Techniques

You can also combine an exact phrase in quotation marks “” with the operator AND. For example, “margaret collins” AND entomology will retrieve all search results that contain the exact string “margaret collins” as well as the word entomology.

Search Filters and Category Tabs

On the search results page, you will see links to the category tabs Finding Aids, Media, Chronology, Blog Posts, WebPages and PDFs.

Click any tab to narrow your results to that genre.

If you're looking for archival collections related to your research topic, you may wish to view Finding Aids only.
The categories Media and PDFs include collection materials digitized by our staff: photographs, images, drawings, slides and negatives, and scanned documents and field books.

The Chronology, Blog Posts, and WebPages tabs will show secondary sources about Smithsonian history and our holdings.

Finding Aids

A Finding Aid is a guide to an archival collection. It describes the records in the collection as well as the individual, department, office, unit, or organization that created the records. The final section of a Finding Aid is a Container List, a folder-level inventory for every box in the collection. If you find your search term in the Container List, and want to learn more, note the collection number, box number and folder number (or title) for your reference request.

| Folder 4-5 Curricula Vitae, 1992-1996 | Box 2 of 3 |
| Folder 6 Termite References, undated | Box 2 of 3 |
| Folder 7 Women’s Committee Grant, 1994 | Box 2 of 3 |
| Folder 8 Exhibit - Women’s Committee, 1994 | Box 2 of 3 |
| Folder 9 Isoptera Correspondence, 1984-1985 | Box 2 of 3 |
When you click on a Finding Aid from the search results page, your search term will not automatically be highlighted. Use the Find function of your browser (CTRL+F) to locate your search term within the document.

Additional Filters
There are more filters to narrow your search on the left-hand side of the search results page. Just be aware of a few quirks!

Creator
The Creator filter will limit your results to materials created by a specific individual, department, office, unit, or organization. We are currently re-indexing our collections, so this filter may not give you an exhaustive list of results. Instead, use an exact search phrase with quotation marks " " in the search box to cover as many of a creator’s collections as possible.

Select Date Range
Use the Select Date Range slider to narrow your results to a particular date range. Click Submit to view your list of refined results.
Search by Collection Number

If you already know which collection you’re interested in, use the formatting below to find the collection’s Finding Aid (collection guide). Include quotation marks around your search term.

- Record Unit 34 → “000034”
- Record Unit 321 → “000321”
- Record Unit 7002 → “007002”
- Accession 06-225 → “06-225”
- Accession T89040 → “T89040”

To search by collection number, the search engine requires six characters inside the quotation marks.

Search by Image Number

If your citation or image file comes from Archives collections and includes a string of numbers, or numbers and letters, you probably have an image number! Enter the image number in the search box to locate the image’s item record, metadata, and to ask our staff about permissions.
Archives **image numbers**, also known as **image IDs** or **local numbers**, may use any of the following formats:

- 2002-12143
- OPA-124
- SIA2011-2821
- MAH-1238
- SIA_000095_B62_F16_018

**Contact Us**

To request access to materials, or for additional help, contact the reference team: https://siarchives.si.edu/what-we-do/reference-inquiries, or osiaref@si.edu.

**Other Resources**

Looking for archival collections held by other Smithsonian units? Use Smithsonian Online Virtual Archives (SOVA): http://sova.si.edu.

Looking for specimens, objects, or works of art held by a Smithsonian museum? Use the Collections Search Center: http://collections.si.edu.