

Preserving America's Most Valuable Documents

Standing between two of Washington D.C.'s most prominent buildings, the White House and the Capitol, the National Archives is home to hundreds of important national documents. Student group travelers will want to include a stop at this popular venue during their next trip to Washington, DC.

The United States National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) is an independent agency of the United States federal government charged with preserving and documenting historical records. The agency is responsible for publishing acts of Congress, presidential proclamations, executive orders, and federal regulations.

For years the NARA oversaw each branch and agency. Because they maintained their own records, the NARA was frequently faced with the loss and destruction of valuable records. In 1934, Congress established the National Archives to centralize federal record keeping. Today, the facility is home to the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights, and the original copy of the Magna Carta, confirmed by Edward I in 1297.

Touring the National Archives is like taking a journey through the history of American struggles and triumphs. The National Archives Experience, using exhibits and tours, seeks to motivate people to learn the individual stories of each document, make use of the patriotic spirit that lives on because of records, and to care more deeply about democracy.

Student tours begin in the William G. McGowan Theater with an informative film that illustrates the relationship of records and democracy through the lives of real people. The film helps visitors appreciate the documents and records that they see during the tour.

The next stop is the Public Vault, where visitors experience the feeling of going beyond the walls of the Rotunda into the stacks and vaults of the archives. Here, groups examine historic documents, maps, drawings, audio clips, and films. For example, Abraham Lincoln's telegrams to his generals during the Civil War are available for viewing. Students also may listen to audio recordings from the Oval Office. About 1,100 original documents and records are displayed at any given time.

For more in-depth learning experiences, the Boeing Learning Center Learning Lab can be reserved for middle school groups. Twice per day, the Learning Lab provides an on-site collaborative research experience for classes of up to 36 middle school students. The problem solving exercise inspires young visitors to connect to our nations exciting, and very dramatic past.

The tour wraps up in the Rotunda's Charters of Freedom exhibit where students come face to face with the Constitution, Declaration of Independence, the Bill of Rights, and the Magna Carta. New cases for these documents make them more accessible to visitors of all ages. A multi-language audio tool is being developed to provide all visitors with a more meaningful experience. Flash photography of the documents is prohibited because the flashes can cause the documents to fade over time.

Many people are unaware of the fact that some of the National Archives most requested records are used for research in genealogy. Examples include census records from 1790 to 1930, ship passenger lists, and naturalization records. Other requested records include still pictures, motion pictures, and electronic media.

The Louisiana Purchase and the Emancipation Proclamation are also housed in this facility. Most documents are public domain, as works of the federal government, and are excluded from copyright protection. The NARA stores classified documents and its Information Security Oversight Office monitors and sets policy for the U.S. government's security classification system.

The National Archives is open year round Monday through Friday from 10:15 a.m. to 4 p.m. The facility also has a gift shop and cafe. The months between June and February are the best time to visit because they are the least busy.

In addition to the National Archives in Washington, DC, there are also 12 Regional Archives facilities across the country and two major facilities in St. Louis, Missouri. The NARA also maintains the Presidential Library System, a nationwide network of libraries for preserving and making available the documents of U.S. presidents. Some of the more prominent libraries are the Herbert Hoover Presidential Library in West Branch, Iowa; the Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library in Hyde Park, New York; the Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum in Yorba Linda, California; and the William J. Clinton Presidential Library in Little Rock, Arkansas.

About the Author

[Travel Adventures](#) Travel Adventures is a student tour provider staffed by educators who understand the needs of teachers. It has served over one half million students since 1987 and its mission is to "empower teachers to create change by expanding the classroom to the world."

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