



National Archives and Records Administration

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Using the 'Official Register of the United States' to Research Federal Employees, 1816–1959

An act of Congress on April 27, 1816 (3 Stat. 342) required the Department of State to produce a biennial register of the names of all U.S. civil employees, military and naval officers, and agents. In addition, the Secretary of the Navy provided for the publication of the names, force, and condition of all ships and vessels belonging to the United States, including when and where they were built. A subsequent act of July 14, 1832 (4 Stat. 608) required the *Official Register* to include government printers, a statement of monetary allowances to mail contractors, and correct lists of all presidents, cashiers, and directors of the Bank of the United States and its branches.

Intended to make the federal government more accountable to the general public, the *Official Register* published pertinent information about the federal workforce, including the name of every employee, their job title, state or country of birth, the location of their post, and their annual salary. The military lists provided the names of officers, rank, and place of birth, while the naval lists also included date of commission and current duty station. An act of March 3, 1851 inserted the state or territory from which each employee was appointed. As the federal government grew, later volumes of the *Register* only published information about higher-level administrators and supervisors. The Department of State compiled the *Official Register* until 1861; responsibility then changed to the Department of the Interior. In 1906 the Bureau of the Census assumed oversight, followed by the Civil Service Commission in 1933. The federal government ceased publication of the *Official Register* in 1959.

Arrangement of Employee Information

From 1817 to 1905 the *Official Register* organized information in a tabular format, arranged by branch of government, and thereunder by department. Bureau, agency, and commission listings appeared separately under each department and often changed over the years. The *Official Register* generally arranged federal employee information according to the following entries:

- Legislative (Senate, House, and Library of Congress)
- Executive Office of the President
- Department of State
- Treasury Department
- War Department
- Navy Department
- Post Office Department
- Department of the Interior
- Department of Justice
- Department of Agriculture
- Department of Commerce
- Department of Labor
- U.S. Commissions
- Smithsonian Institution
- National Home for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers
- Government Printing Office
- District of Columbia Government
- Independent Agencies
- Judiciary (US Supreme Court, US Court of Claims and Private Land Claims, US Circuit and District Courts, US Territorial Courts)

From 1907 to 1921 the *Official Register* employed a directory format consisting of one-line entries for all federal employees arranged alphabetically by surname. The entries used an extensive system of abbreviations to list employee information. Additional tabular entries identified the principal officials of each department, providing in more compact form an overall statement of departmental organization. After 1921 the *Official Register* removed the all-name directory, reverting to lists in table format of administrators and supervisors in each Executive and Judicial department of the federal government and the District of Columbia, whose salaries were paid directly by the U.S. Treasury.

The Postal Service

From 1879 to 1911 the *Official Register* was published in two volumes, due to the ever expanding size of the Post Office and Postal Service. In addition to the various offices of the Post Office Department, the Postal Service volume listed employees from the following departments:

- Railway Mail Service
- Mail Contractors
- Special Mail Service
- Mail Messengers
- Post Offices and Postmasters
- Clerks in Post Offices
- Free Delivery System (Letter Carriers)
- Money Order System
- Post Office Inspectors
- Stamped Envelope Agency
- Postal-Card Agency
- Postage-Stamp Agency

Mail contractors in particular provided voluminous information regarding several types of services, including the Railroad Service; Electric and Cable Car Service; Steamboat Service; Regulation, Screen, and Other Wagon Service; Foreign Mail Transfer Service; and Pneumatic Tube Service. After 1911, the *Official Register* ceased publishing Postal Service information.

Using the *Official Register*

The early volumes of the *Official Register* from 1817 to 1875 do not contain an index, but rather a table of contents arranged alphabetically by department, office, or position. From 1877 to 1905, an alphabetical name index appears at the end of each volume. The switch to the directory format from 1907 to 1921 eliminated the need for a comprehensive name index.

The *Official Register* is available at the Archives Library Information Center (ALIC) in the National Archives Building, Washington, DC. This set, however, is incomplete; early volumes from 1817 to 1829 are missing. Most U.S. government depository libraries also carry sets of the *Official Register*, as well as many large universities and public libraries. Researchers may locate the nearest depository library via the internet at <http://www.gpoaccess.gov/libraries.html>. Some volumes of the *Official Register* (1883–1893) are published as well in the U.S. Congressional Serial Set. See Serial Set volumes 2214–2215, 2410–2411, 2567–2568, 2764–2765, 2985–2986, and 3230–3231.

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