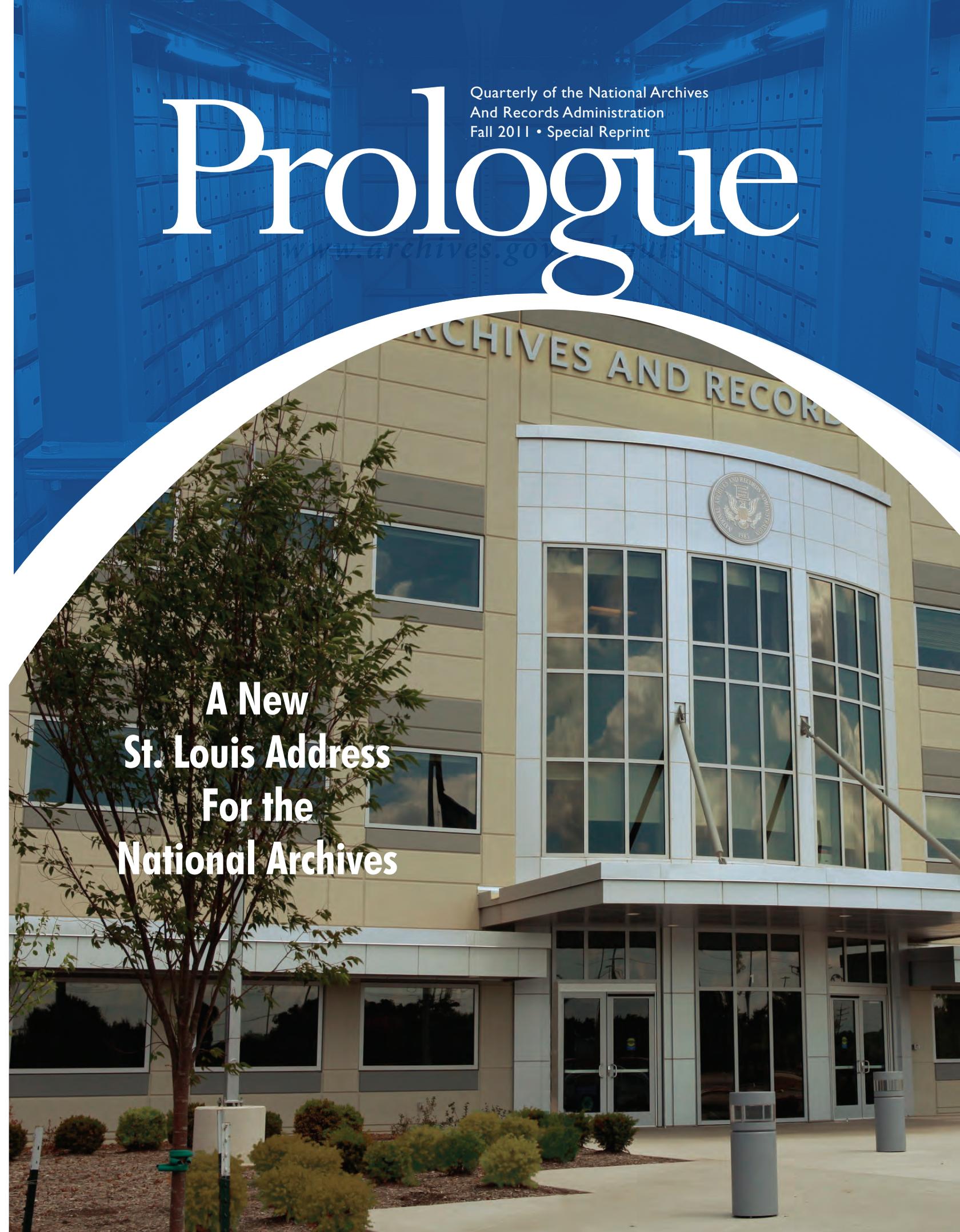


Prologue

Quarterly of the National Archives
And Records Administration
Fall 2011 • Special Reprint

**A New
St. Louis Address
For the
National Archives**



Before he was one of the legends of major league baseball, Jackie Robinson was a lieutenant in the U.S. Army during World War II. In 1944, he was court-martialed for actions while being held in custody after he refused a bus driver's order to move to the back of the bus at Fort Hood, Texas. He was eventually acquitted and received an honorable discharge. For the full story, go to www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2008/spring/robinson.html

National Baseball Hall of Fame Library, Cooperstown, N.Y.



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Prologue

QUARTERLY of the NATIONAL ARCHIVES and RECORDS ADMINISTRATION



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EDITOR'S NOTE

If you've ever received a paycheck from Uncle Sam, either in the military or in civilian service, there's a file on you in St. Louis. In fact, there are files on more than 100 million Americans there, some dating back to 1821.

The files provide detailed information about these individuals when they worked for the government as well as documentation of their government service so they can qualify for promised benefits.

The National Archives is now moving these files into a new state-of-the-art facility at 1 Archives Drive, which will house both the National Archives at St. Louis and the National Personnel Records Center. The move will be complete in September 2012.

This reprint of three articles from the Fall 2011 issue of Prologue, the National Archives'

flagship publication, takes a close look at how this records center came into being and what it is today. And if your file is here, it might be right next to the file of Clark Gable, Elvis Presley, or Douglas MacArthur.

And just to show you how rich in information these files are, we dig deep

into the file of Jack Kerouac, the "Beat Generation" writer who desperately wanted to be in the Navy. It's a surprising and unusual story.

If you enjoy these articles, please join us for more at our blog, "Prologue: Pieces of

History" at <http://blogs.archives.gov/prologue/> or subscribe by using the order form in the back of this reprint. You'll also find us on Facebook and other social media sites. Also, visit us at www.archives.gov/publications/prologue.



JAMES WORSHAM



NATIONAL
ARCHIVES

1 Archives Drive

PERSONNEL RECORDS ARE CONSOLIDATED AT NEW LOCATION IN ST. LOUIS

By William Seibert, Wanda Williams, and Nancy Schuster

The boxes are lined up in neat rows on metal shelves, shelf after shelf after shelf, 15 stacks high. Look up, and you can see through the metal grating to the next floor, and the floors after that, where 14 more stacks rise above you.

The view is impressive, even a bit scary—like standing under the Eiffel Tower and looking straight up.

If you lined up end to end all the boxes that will fill those shelves, they would stretch 545 miles from this new building, housing the National Personnel Records Center (NPRC) and the National Archives at St. Louis, to Dallas.

The statistics behind them are staggering.

These are the personnel files of an estimated 100 million individuals who served their country in the military or as a civilian—about 9 billion textual, digital, and microfilm pages. Some of the files date to 1821, and the largest one is that of Air Force Gen. Henry “Hap” Arnold at 6,044 pages. The records are in 15 separate storage areas that have a combined capacity of 2.3 million cubic feet.

Moving the files from their old home to this new state-of-the-art archival facility at the rate of 6,000 cubic feet a day will have taken 383 days when it is complete in the fall of 2012. The building itself, which opened earlier this year, sits on more than 7 acres of a 29.5-acre property.

Privately owned and leased by the federal government for the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), this \$115 million building replaces two aging facilities, one of which experienced a fire in 1973 that destroyed millions of records.

The new building is technically the home of two NARA units. One is the NPRC, which has physical but not legal custody of more recent permanent military and civilian records. The other is the National Archives at St. Louis, which has legal custody of older military and civilian permanent files that have been accessioned by the National Archives.

Although it will be a while before all the boxes arrive, the thought of all of them lined up conjures up images from the movie *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. In fact, the comparison does not end there, because tucked inside each of these boxes are treasures, records just as valuable as the ones Harrison Ford’s Indiana Jones found.

These treasures are chapters of people’s lives, some covering a few years, some almost a lifetime.

They are stories of heroism, of courage that overrode heartbreak, and of devotion to duty, whether the job was a life-or-death mission or routine office work that too often draws little recognition. There are, of course, stories unflattering to their subjects as well. And they

all remain important and relevant long after they happened.

That they are important consider this: The center gets nearly 5,000 requests a day for information from these files—more than 1 million a year—making this arguably our busiest location.

NPRC Boasts a Staff That Can Act Quickly

When Americans need to consult their military or civilian personnel records, our staff—more than 700 in this new building and 185 more in an underground annex in nearby Illinois—are in place to respond quickly.

They came to the rescue of a terminally ill Korean War veteran who was denied access to medical care because he could not find his copy of his discharge document, DD Form 214. Within hours of the request, the staff produced a Certification of Military Service by piecing together a military record for him, using other documents stored at the NPRC, and the veteran got his needed care.

They can quickly pull the file on Sgt. Alvin C. York, who won the Medal of Honor, and retrieve the documentation of his bravery in the face of danger—leading an attack on a German machine-gun nest in World War I, killing dozens of enemy soldiers and capturing more than 100 of them.

They helped a university professor find the missing fact in his search for the complete story of how a group of African American soldiers were court-martialed in Kenya in World War II. That piece of information opened the floodgates for the professor, and he is planning a book.

By consulting a 1920s federal civilian personnel file, they



The Center is the National Archives' busiest location, receiving nearly 5,000 requests a day for information from its files—more than 1 million a year. It is the repository for the personnel records of former members of the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force, and Coast Guard as well as civilian employees of the federal government.

put a Missouri woman back on the right path to finding out why her grandfather disappeared mysteriously.

And they can pull the military file on the late actress Beatrice Arthur and show you her World War II record from the Marines, where the future “Maude” and “Golden Girl” drove trucks and worked as a typist.

This is what happens in this new building in St. Louis County, where the NPRC and the National Archives at St. Louis are co-located. This is where the American people can see and use records about themselves that the government has on file.

Since the early 1950s, the NPRC (including its predecessor organizations) has been the repository for the personnel records of former members of the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force, and Coast Guard as well as civilian employees of the federal government.

The National Personnel Records Center's new \$115 million building is now open. It will hold personnel files of an estimated 100 million individuals who served their country in the military or as a civilian. The building is also home for the National Archives at St. Louis, which has legal custody of older military and civilian permanent files that have been accessioned by the National Archives.





In 2009, construction crews broke ground in north St. Louis County for a building to store archived (permanent) and pre-archived records. The building itself, which opened earlier this year, sits on more than seven acres of a 23.5-acre property.



Construction at the new building is now complete. It provides state-of-the-art environmental protection for the records and allows storage of military and civilian personnel files that were previously stored in separate buildings in the St. Louis area.

These records are important to veterans and separated civilian employees because they document their time in service and allow them to qualify for the benefits the nation has promised them. The records are equally valuable to their families and future generations.

Archivist of the United States David S. Ferriero underscored the importance of the new facility for both the records and those who request them.

“We are tremendously excited about this new state-of-the-art facility,” Ferriero said. “The design and planning were driven by our mission of preserving and protecting the records housed here. Equally as important is our ability to serve the needs of those who need access to the information contained in these records.”

He added: “We are very proud of our service to veterans, civil servants, and their families and look forward to providing them with even better service at 1 Archives Drive.”

All Personnel Records To Be in Single Facility

For many years, the military and civilian personnel files were stored in separate buildings in the St. Louis area, but it became clear that a new facility was needed when many of the records were reappraised as permanent holdings.

The existing decades-old buildings did not provide appropriate environmental conditions for the storage of permanent records, and a new unit, known as the National Archives at St. Louis, was created to maintain

the records as they are transferred into the legal custody of the National Archives.

The temporary records that were stored at the older NPRC buildings have been relocated to the NPRC Annex in Valmeyer, Illinois, about 40 miles southeast of St. Louis. This records center was built in a former underground limestone quarry in the bluffs high above the Mississippi River. An additional 185 employees work in the Annex, which has the capacity for more than 2.5 million cubic feet of records.

In 2009, construction crews broke ground in north St. Louis County for a building to store archived (permanent) and pre-archived records. This massive construction project pumped \$435 million into the local economy and generated more than 300 jobs in the St. Louis area.

The new building was built and is owned by the Molasky Group of Companies, which leases it to the General Services Administration and NARA.

The construction has been completed, and most employees are now working in the new building. But the work of relocating more than 2 million cubic feet of permanent records will continue through September 2012. During this time, the NPRC staff will continue to provide timely responses to all reference requests, and efforts are being made to ensure that services to veterans and other customers are carried on with little or no delay for the duration of the move.

When the move is complete, the new facility will have consolidated, for the first time, millions of civilian and military per-

sonnel records in a single repository.

The new building is one of the largest in our nationwide network of archives, federal records centers, and Presidential libraries. Its 700 employees are the largest group of National Archives personnel outside the College Park, Maryland, building.

NARA, however, is not the only tenant in this new building. Among the 14 other agencies with offices there are the Department of Veterans Affairs, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Federal Aviation Agency, the Secret Service, and units of the individual military services.

New Features: Storage, Research, Public Programs

The new building meets all modern archival standards and is certified under the Leadership in Energy and Environment Design (LEED) program. Archival storage bays are equipped with particulate and ultraviolet filtration. In addition, special paint, sealants, caulking, and the finishes for the shelving have been certified for minimal off-gassing of volatile organic compounds, which are harmful to documents over time.

At the new building, nearly all the records storage units are 29 shelves high, compared to only 10 to 14 shelves high at the older buildings. The staff will gain access to the first 15 shelves by using rolling ladders on the floor level. Two levels of steel catwalk will provide access to the remaining shelves.



The staff will gain access to the first 15 shelves by using rolling ladders on the floor level. Two levels of steel catwalk will provide access to the remaining shelves.

The move is also allowing the staff to undertake a rearrangement of its vast holdings to achieve greater efficiency and logical order. Military records will be organized according to the different branches of service, and the civilian personnel records will be shelved by agency.

Visitors will have the advantage of a much larger public research room with more research stations that accommodate laptops, scanners, and other equipment.

More than half of all public research room visits are made by persons doing family history research. Authors, academics, and representatives of other federal agencies also use personnel files for a variety of research projects. (See the article on Jack Kerouac's military file elsewhere in this issue as an example.)

Visiting researchers are encouraged to schedule an appointment prior to their arrival.

The new building also has a large multipurpose room equipped with videoconferencing technology. These rooms can be used for training, meetings, public programs, and exhibitions.

NARA's traveling exhibition "Documented Rights" will be on display through the end of February 2012. The public is invited to visit the exhibition, see the new building, and learn about the wealth of National Archives holdings found both locally and around the nation.

Much Data about Individuals Included in Personnel Records

The civilian and military personnel files often



The construction is now complete, and most employees are now working in the new building while records continue to be moved in through September 2012.

contain more than just the standard applications or routine government forms. A family historian may find a photograph, handwritten letters, or other meaningful documents. Even the standard forms can contain information about a veteran's or a former civil servant's parents or guardians, siblings, or spouse as well as other data that can help further a genealogical search.

The Department of Defense and the individual military services retain ownership of the military personnel records when they are initially retired to NPRC.

Only limited information from the files is releasable to the public without the permission of the subject of the record (or if he or she is deceased, the immediate next of kin) as long as the military service department maintains ownership.

Legal title to the military personnel records transfers to the National Archives 62 years after a veteran's discharge, death in service, or retirement. After this transfer of ownership, the records are referred to as "archival" or "accessioned" holdings. Archival records are open to the public; researchers do not need the consent of the veteran (or the next of kin) in order to view or obtain copies of the record.

Currently, the National Archives in St. Louis has 270,245 cubic feet of archival military personnel files (about 56 million individual files), and that volume will increase annually. The oldest holdings are Navy records that document service ending in the 1880s, and the most recent ones are from 2004. (Older military rec-

ords, including those from the Civil War and others dating back to the Revolutionary War, are housed in the National Archives Building in downtown Washington, D.C.)

The archival military personnel files typically contain information about parentage, date and place of birth, physical description, citizenship status, education, prior employment, home address at time of entry into service, marital status, assignment history (units, ships, duty stations), military occupations and ranks, foreign service locations, awards and decorations received, citations for meritorious and valorous conduct, documentation of bad conduct and nonjudicial punishment, and dates and character of service.

The new facility is also the repository for numerous related series of records. They include the Selective Service System Registration Cards and Classification Ledgers that document the military draft in force between 1940 and 1975, Army General Courts Martial Case Files (1911–1976), and Trade Cards describing specific aspects of civilian work in naval shipyards during the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Civilian personnel records are originally owned by the federal agencies that created them or by one of the agencies with government-wide jurisdiction over personnel matters: the Civil Service Commission or the Office of Personnel Management.

During the past two years, the National Archives has taken legal custody of more than 213,000 cubic feet of civilian personnel records



Visitors will have the advantage of a much larger public research room with more researcher stations that accommodate laptops, scanners, and other equipment.



More than half of all public research room visits are made by persons doing family history research.

(representing the service of millions of employees), created by more than 112 different federal agencies between 1850 and 1951.

These accessioned civilian personnel files contain valuable information about the personal lives and professional careers of former civil servants employed by the U.S. government in cabinet-level departments and independent agencies. They present a panorama of individual lives ranging from those who rode dusty trails across an American continent as rural postal carriers to men and women who traveled the world as Foreign Service Officers.

Archival civilian personnel folders contain information on parentage, date and place of birth, physical description, citizenship status, education, prior employment and letters of reference, home address, mar-

ital status, job series and position descriptions, pay grades, employment locations, letters of commendation, and dates of employment.

Recreating Military Records Destroyed in the 1973 Fire

The NPRC staff will be leaving the site of the 1973 fire: the Page Avenue building where the military records were stored.

Almost 40 years ago, around midnight on July 12, 1973, fire broke out on the sixth floor of the NPRC military records facility. Approximately 22 million personnel files of former members of the Army, Army Air Force, and Air Force who served between 1912 and 1963 were stored there.

For four days, firefighters labored to bring the fire under control and extinguish it. The fire was one of the worst losses of records in U.S. history, destroying 80 percent of the Army records and 75 percent of the Air Force records: an estimated 16 to 18 million individual files. The old building was not equipped with a sprinkler system, and the exact cause of the fire is still undetermined.

In the wake of this disastrous loss of information, employees began to identify and collect record material from other government

agencies that could be used to reconstruct aspects of an individual's service history. These holdings are referred to as Auxiliary Records, and the National Archives at St. Louis holds upwards of 50 different series of them.

The most heavily accessed series of Auxiliary Records are various collections of pay records. These payrolls, pay vouchers, and pay rosters provide the most concentrated items of information on a given individual of any of the Auxiliary series. A single pay voucher can document the veteran's rank, unit of assignment, date and place of entry into service, date and place of separation from service, character of service or type of discharge, and prior service, if any.

Many payrolls and rosters show the individual's home address at the time of separation. Pay records that document wartime service also indicate whether, and how long, the veteran served overseas.

The records that were salvaged from the fire sustained damage not only from the blaze but from the water used by the firefighters. These records are maintained in dedicated records storage bays with appropriate temperature and humidity controls.

When the records are required for reference, the St. Louis Preservation staff employs techniques and equipment that safeguard the rec-



To learn more about

- Veterans' personnel records, go to www.archives.gov/veterans/.
- Researching World War II records,

go to www.archives.gov/research/military/ww2/index.html.

- How the U.S. Army guarded the Trans-Siberian Railway in 1918–1920, go to www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2002/winter/.
- Workers on the Panama Canal, go to www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/1997/summer/.

ords and ensure that the information can be extracted from the documents without further damage or loss.

Preservation technicians spend many hours carefully removing mold from and separating documents that were fused together as a result of the fire. Despite the fragile condition of the burned records, staff have been able to retrieve vital data to verify service and ensure that veterans receive the benefits to which they are entitled.

Newly Opened Records Series Focus on World Wars I and II

A number of interesting subgroups of personnel records were recently processed and opened to the public for the first time.

One is a collection of personnel files of the female nurses enrolled in the Secretary of War's Army School of Nursing established in 1918. Included are original letters written by female students who reveal their worries about World War I's impact on their lives as well as their pride in being able to "do their bit" in the war.

The school was part of a larger initiative to increase the pool of nurses available for overseas

duty during World War I. Walter Reed General Hospital in Washington, D.C., managed the program until it was discontinued in 1931.

Other recently opened World War I-related records are the individual personnel files of the Russian Railway Service Corps. This organization was made up of American railroad workers, with no military experience, who were sent to Siberia in 1917 at the request of the Provisional Russian government to improve the operating conditions of the Trans-Siberian Railroad.

Organized at the direction of the President, the corps was under the general supervision of the State Department. The first group of 339 railway engineers, War Department civilian employees, sailed for Vladivostok on November 19, 1917.

The Russian Railway Service Corps operated in Siberia until the spring of 1920, shortly after the overthrow of the White Russian government in Irkutsk, when members of the corps were evacuated from the country along with U.S. Army troops.

Of particular interest to genealogists is a group of records found among the Panama Canal Company's earliest personnel files. These records provide a fascinating glimpse into the lives of the men hired to build the canal in the first years of the last century. Included are the files of U.S. citizens as well as of Caribbean contract workers. Today, descendants of the contract employees can use these records to trace their West Indian and Latin American ancestry.

One of the most remarkable groups of government employees to emerge during the World War II was the Women's Army Service Pilots, or WASPs. Accomplished aviators as well as newly trained enthusiasts, these women, more than 1,000 strong, had the responsibility of delivering planes from the assembly lines of aircraft factories around the country to military bases worldwide.

Their individual personnel folders contain a wealth of compelling documentation, including photographs, applications for employment that provide detailed vital statistics and biographical data, Aviation Cadet Qualifying Examinations, clothing and equipment issuance lists, letters of recommendation, and re-

sults of physical examinations for flying.

There is also correspondence with Jacqueline Cochran, who in early 1942 was authorized by the Chief of Staff for Air, Gen. Henry "Hap" Arnold, to organize and head the program. Other letters provide insight into the experiences of these intrepid women fliers.

• • • •

The personnel records at NPRC and the National Archives at St. Louis tell the stories of Americans who served their country in uniform, fighting wars and keeping the peace, and as civilians, making federal programs work for Americans.

At the new facility at 1 Archives Drive, these stories of the men and women who served their country are safeguarded just as securely as records in other NARA facilities around the country—records that document and guarantee citizen rights, hold government officials accountable, and record the national experience.

Whether finding or reconstructing documentation of an individual's service or assisting visitors in their research of a chapter in someone's life, no job is too small for the St. Louis staff of the National Archives and Records Administration. **P**

Authors

William Seibert serves as chief of archival operations in St. Louis. He joined the staff of the National Archives in 1978, working first in the NPRC's Records Reconstruction Branch. Subsequently, he served as assistant chief in the Air Force Reference Branch, senior appraisal archivist and chief of the center's Appraisal and Disposition Section, and NPRC preservation officer.

Nancy Schuster is a management and program analyst with the National Archives in St. Louis. Of her 34 years of federal service, she has been with NARA for 16 years.

Wanda Williams has been an archivist with the National Archives at St. Louis since 2009. Her career with NARA began in 2006 as a reference archives technician and with the Nixon Library's Watergate tapes team. She holds an M.A. in U.S. and Caribbean history from Morgan State University in Baltimore, Maryland, and is an active member of the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations and the Association for the Study of African American Life and History.



The files are being moved from their old home to this new state-of-the-art archival facility at the rate of 6,000 cubic feet a day until the move is complete in the fall of 2012. The records will be rearranged by military service and federal agency to achieve greater efficiency and logical order.

FEDERAL FILES ON THE *Famous—and Infamous*

The collections of personnel records at the National Archives include files that document military and civilian service for persons who are well known to the public for many reasons.

These individuals include celebrated military leaders, Medal of Honor recipients, U.S. Presidents, members of Congress, other government officials, scientists, artists, entertainers, and sports figures—individuals noted for personal accomplishments as well as persons known for their infamous activities.

The military service departments and NARA have identified over 500 such military records for individuals referred to as “Persons of Exceptional Prominence” (PEP). Many of these records are now open to the public earlier than they otherwise would have been (62 years after the separation dates) as the result of a special agreement that allowed these records to be transferred to the National Archives as early as 10 years after the veterans’ dates of death.

These archival records concern persons as diverse as Spiro Agnew and Arthur Ashe, Humphrey Bogart and Frank Capra, Henry Fonda and Alex Haley, Lyndon Johnson and Charles Lindbergh, George S. Patton and Jimi Hendrix, Grace Hopper and Beatrice Arthur.

Many of these files are now being digitized in order to ensure their preservation and to make them more widely

available. Digital copies of PEPs can be purchased on CD/DVDs. The price of the disc depends on the number of pages contained in the original paper record and range from \$20 (100 pages or less) to \$250 (more than 1,800 pages). For more information or to order copies of digitized PEP records only, please write to *pep.records@nara.gov*. Archival staff are in the process of identifying the records of prominent civilian employees whose names will be added to the list. Other individuals whose records are now available for purchase on CD are:

Creighton W. Abrams, Grover Cleveland Alexander, Desi Arnaz, Joe L. Barrow, John M. Birch, Hugo L. Black, Gregory Boyington, Prescott S. Bush, Smedley Butler, Evans F. Carlson, William A. Carter, Adna R. Chaffee, Claire Chennault, Mark W. Clark, Benjamin O. Davis.

Also, George Dewey, William Donovan, James H. Doolittle, John F. Dulles, Merritt Edson, Milton C. Eisenhower, Earl H. (Pete) Ellis, James V. Forrestal, Benjamin D. Foulois, Clark Gable, Virgil I. Grissom, Leslie R. Groves, John Hamilton, William Hasley, Oveta Hobby, Lafayette R. Hubbard (Navy), Lafayette R. Hubbard (USMC), Edouard J. Izac.

Also, John F. Kennedy, Joseph P. Kennedy, Robert F. Kennedy, George C. Kenney, John L. Kerouac, Husband E. Kimmel, Ernest J. King, Mary Klinker, Alan W. Ladd, John A. LeJeune, Curtis LeMay, Douglas MacArthur, Terrance (Steve) McQueen, Charles McVay, Alton G. Miller, Doris Miller, William L. Mitchell, Victor Morrow, Audie L. Murphy, Chester Nimitz, Richard M. Nixon, Joseph H. Pendleton, Tyrone E. Power, Elvis A. Presley, Joseph Pulitzer, Lewis Puller, Eddie Rickenbacker.

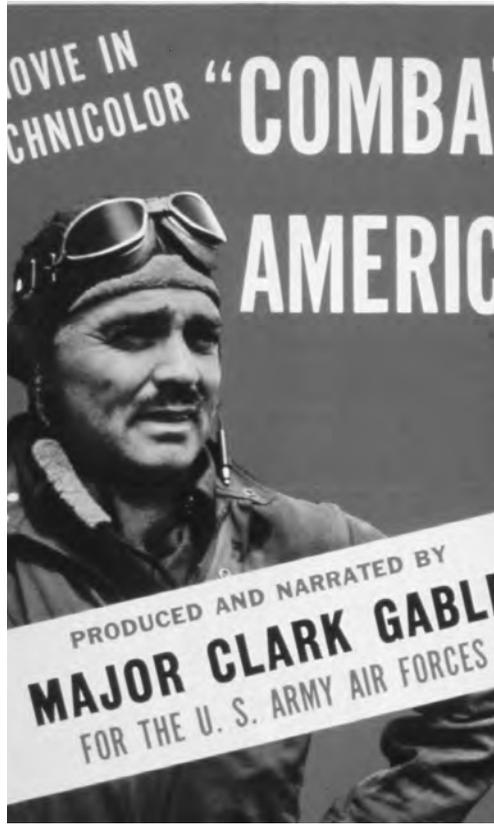
Also, Jackie Robinson, Knute K. Rockne, Elliott Roosevelt, James Roosevelt, John A. Roosevelt, Barry Sadler (Army), Barry Sadler (USAF), Lance P. Sijan, Eddie Slovik, Carl Spaatz, Joseph W. Stilwell, Albert L. Sullivan, Francis H. Sullivan, George T. Sullivan, Joseph E. Sullivan, Madison A. Sullivan, Maxwell Taylor, Alexander Vandergrift, and Alvin C. York.



Col. Oveta Culp Hobby, Director of the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (later the Women's Army Corps), World War II, received the Distinguished Service Medal. In 1953, she was appointed as the first secretary of the U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare.



Gen. Benjamin O. Davis: The U.S. Army's first African American general officer. Here he watches advancing troops while standing at the windshield of an amphibious vehicle on a beachhead somewhere in France in the summer of 1944.



Clark Gable: Film actor, most famously as Rhett Butler in *Gone with the Wind* (1939). First lieutenant in U.S. Army Air Corps, then First Motion Picture Unit in Hollywood. Promoted to major, May 1944. His separation papers were signed by Capt. Ronald Reagan.



Virgil I. Grissom: Air Force pilot, Korea, 334th Fighter-Interceptor Squadron, awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross. An original NASA astronaut (1959), and one of seven original Mercury astronauts. Second American in space. Died in pre-launch test for the *Apollo 1* mission at Cape Kennedy, Florida, January 22, 1967.



Grover Cleveland Alexander: A National League pitcher. Served in France (1918) as a sergeant with the 342nd Field Artillery. Pitched for Philadelphia Phillies, Chicago Cubs, and St. Louis Cardinals. Earned 373 career wins and won pitching's Triple Crown in 1915, 1916, and 1920.



Maj. Gen. Leslie R. Groves: U.S. Army Corps of Engineers officer appointed in August 1941 to oversee construction of the Pentagon and in September 1942 to direct the Manhattan Project, which developed the atomic bomb during World War II. Later promoted to lieutenant general.



Lt. Col. James H. Doolittle: Led attack of 16 B-25 Mitchell medium bombers from the aircraft carrier *USS Hornet* on April 18, 1942, with targets in Tokyo, Kobe, Osaka, and Nagoya. Awarded the Medal of Honor and later promoted to general.



HIT THE ROAD, JACK

*Kerouac Enlisted in the U.S. Navy
But Was Found “Unfit for Service”*

By Miriam Kleiman

Jack Kerouac—American counterculture hero, king of the Beats, and author of *On the Road*—was a Navy military recruit who failed boot camp.

While some Kerouac biographies mention his military experience, the extent of it was unknown until 2005, when the National Personnel Records Center in St. Louis, Missouri, made it public. It was part of the release of military files of about 3,000 prominent Americans who had been deceased for at least 10 years.

Kerouac enlisted in the U.S. Navy Reserve (then called the U.S. Naval Reserve) during World War II. But he never left the United States, never saw action, and never even completed basic training.

In all, he lasted 10 days of boot camp before being referred first to the sick bay and then the psychiatric ward for 67 days. Kerouac’s extensive medical and psychiatric evaluations produced both a large file and the conclusion that he was “unfit for service.”

The qualities that made *On the Road* a huge success and Kerouac a powerful storyteller, guide, and literary icon are the same ones that rendered him remarkably unsuitable for the military: independence, creativity, impulsivity, sensuality, and recklessness.

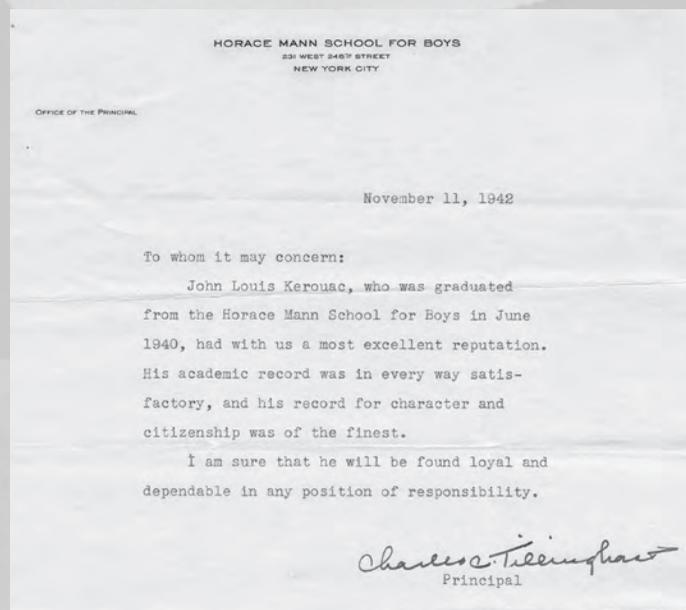
On the Road can be viewed as a giant extended shore leave. Indeed, the first of his cross-country trips later depicted in *On the Road* took place in 1947—just a few years after his failed military attempt.

This year marks the 60th anniversary of the writing of *On the Road*. Although the book was published in 1957, Kerouac produced the legendary 120-foot continuous scroll in April 1951 by taping long sheets of tracing paper together so he could type without interruption.

Columbia Beckons Kerouac With a Football Scholarship

Kerouac’s military personnel file is half an inch thick—nearly 150 pages—and details a troubled soldier-in-training who collapsed under military discipline and structure. The doctors’ findings identify and foreshadow the care-free, reckless, impulsive wanderlust that characterizes Kerouac’s writing.

This file presents both a very gifted and a very disturbed young man. While his military record includes extensive mental examinations, it also includes stellar letters of recommendation. Kerouac attended Columbia University on a football scholarship. There, he



Above: Jack Kerouac enlisted in the U.S. Naval Reserve in December 1942 because he was unhappy at Columbia and sought greater meaning at a historic time.

Left: A letter of recommendation from the principal at Horace Mann Prep stressed Kerouac’s “excellent reputation” and that “his record for character and citizenship was of the finest.”

was praised by teachers and professors for his “unusual brilliance,” loyalty, citizenship, character, and “good breeding.”

Born and raised in Lowell, Massachusetts, Kerouac completed high school there, then spent an additional year of high school at Horace Mann Prep in New York on a full scholarship before continuing to Columbia University. He completed his freshman year “with failure only in chemistry.” He quit college to enter the merchant marine but left after three months.

At the request of his football coach, Kerouac returned to Columbia in October 1942, but he dropped out a month later. In a November 1942 letter, he told a friend he was unhappy at Columbia and sought greater meaning at a historic time:

I am wasting my money and my health here at Columbia . . . it's been one huge debauchery. . . . I am more interested in the pith of our great times than in dissecting “Romeo and Juliet.” . . . These are stirring, magnificent times. . . . I am not sorry for having returned to Columbia, for I have experienced one terrific month here. I had a gay, a mad, a magnificent time of it. But I believe I want to go back to sea . . . for the money, for the leisure and study, for the heart-rending romance, and for the pith of the moment.

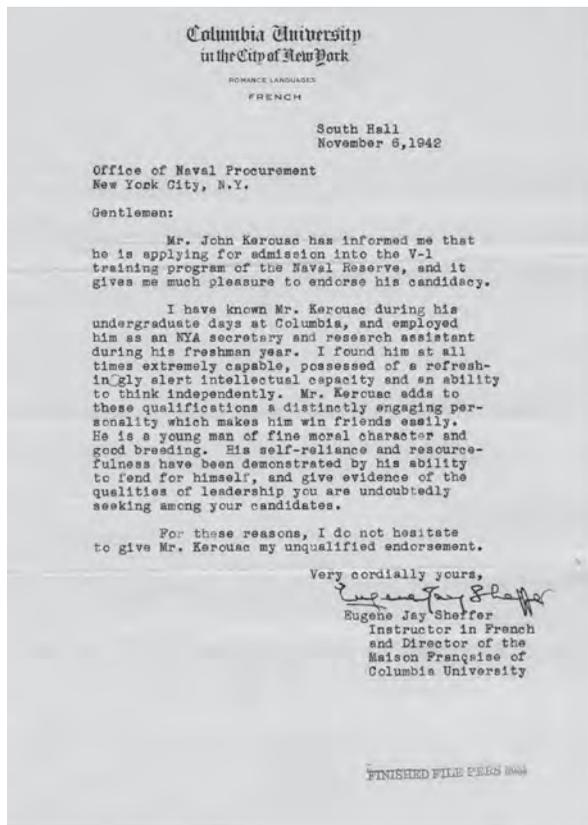
In an unmailed letter to a girlfriend in July 1942, Kerouac outlined noble reasons for enlisting:

For one thing, I wish to take part in the war, not because I want to kill anyone, but for a reason directly opposed to killing—the Brotherhood. To be with my American brother, for that matter, my Russian brothers; for their danger to be my danger; to speak to them quietly, perhaps at dawn, in Arctic mists; to know them, and for them to know myself. . . . I want to return to college with a feeling that I am a brother of the earth, to know that I am not snug and smug in my little universe.

On December 8, 1942, a year and a day after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, Kerouac enlisted in the U.S. Naval Reserve for a four-year term of duty.

“Fine Moral Character And Good Breeding”

Kerouac’s military personnel file includes glowing letters of recommendation. His school record was “one of unusual brilliance both scholastically and athletically,” gushed Lowell High School Master Joseph G. Pyne. Kerouac was “an ideal pupil with an unusual combination of brilliance and athletic ability,” Pyne added.



Kerouac’s French instructor at Columbia wrote of his student’s “self-reliance and resourcefulness” and “qualities of leadership you are undoubtedly seeking among your candidates.”

And he was an overachiever—earning 88 credits when only 70 were required for graduation.

Horace Mann Prep principal Charles C. Tillingham praised Kerouac’s reputation in a letter of recommendation written in November, 1942:

John Louis Kerouac . . . had with us a most excellent reputation. His academic record was in every way satisfactory, and

his record for character and citizenship was of the finest.

I am sure that he will be found loyal and dependable in any position of responsibility.

Kerouac received an “unqualified endorsement” from his French instructor at Columbia the same month:

I found him . . . extremely capable, possessed of a refreshingly alert intellectual capacity and an ability to think independently. Mr. Kerouac adds to these qualifications a distinctly engaging personality which makes him win friends easily. He is a young man of fine moral character and good breeding. His self-reliance and resourcefulness have been demonstrated by his ability to fend for himself, and give evidence of the qualities of leadership you are undoubtedly seeking among your candidates.

Before reporting to basic training, Kerouac requested a transfer—hoping to upgrade to “Naval Aviation Cadet” (Navy pilot) instead of “Apprentice Seaman.” He appeared before the Naval Aviation Cadet Selection Board in Boston for a series of examinations.

Despite testing well in most subjects (he received a 91 percent “general classification,” 99 percent in spelling, and 95 percent in English), his transfer was rejected. The board found Kerouac “not temperamentally adapted for transfer.” In addition, Kerouac failed overall due to “mechanical inaptitude”—scoring just

23 percent on the mechanical aptitude test.

In his semi-autobiographical novel *Vanity of Duluoz: An Adventurous Education, 1935–46*, Kerouac summarized this experience:

I entrain to Boston to the US Naval Air Force place and they roll me around in a chair and ask me if I’m dizzy. “I’m not daffy,” says I. But they catch me on the altitude measurement shot. “If you’re flying at eighteen thousand feet and the altitude level is on the so and such, what would you do?”

Resume of Occupational Training

Among the better positions I've held down were a newspaper job, a stenographical job as private secretary, and several interesting construction jobs from Maine to Virginia. In college, I managed to earn some spending money by typing out manuscripts. I sailed with the Merchant Marine this past summer, as a General Utility man, and this also proved to be interesting and exciting, since we steamed into several North Atlantic ports including Greenland and Iceland. I have held down countless other better odd jobs, none of which seem significant enough to mention. My general occupational record is rather scant, because I've spent much time studying.

John Kerouac

Kerouac's handwritten resume of job experience lists his newspaper job and stint in the merchant marine and states that his record is "rather scant, because I've spent much time studying."

"How the screw should I know?"

So I'm washed out of my college education and assigned to have my hair shaved with the boots at Newport.

Navy Boot Camp Disastrous: "Bored Easily, Lacked Focus"

Kerouac reported to the Naval Training Station in Newport, Rhode Island, on February 26, 1943. There were concerns from the start, however; during his initial examination, he was "recognized as sufficiently abnormal to warrant Trial Duty status." The trial period did not go well; Kerouac's boot camp experience was a disaster. After only 10 days of basic training, he was transferred from the Naval Training Station to the Naval Hospital in Newport because he had numerous headaches and "appeared to be restless, apathetic, seclusive [*sic*]."

In addition, "neuropsychiatric examination disclosed auditory hallucinations, ideas of reference and suicide, and a rambling, grandiose, philosophical manner." Diagnosed with dementia praecox (schizophrenia), Kerouac was

sent to the Naval Hospital in Bethesda, Maryland (now the National Naval Medical Center), for further examination.

At the Naval Hospital, doctors questioned Kerouac at length about his family, academic, work, and sexual history. His file contains numerous exchanges between Kerouac and his doctors.

However, his concurrent letters to friends and family offer a different perspective. Kerouac wrote to friends and family while under observation. These letters reflect Kerouac's varying responses to the diagnosis of severe mental illness—reactions ranging

from rejecting to accepting, and even embracing and exalting, his condition.

These letters also show that Kerouac seemed to enjoy challenging, leading, and even shocking his doctors. While this behavior may have been a defense mechanism or even denial, Kerouac did seem to have a basic understanding of psychiatry; he details conditions, symptoms and indicators, of mental illness, dementia praecox in particular. Contrasting his medical file with his letters yields insight into Kerouac's psyche at a pivotal time in his life.

Kerouac's psychiatrists astutely determined that his failed military experience resulted from his rejection of authority, order, discipline, and structure.

Not surprisingly, especially given his later adventures, Kerouac hated boot camp due to "the regulation and discipline." His medical history from the Bethesda Naval Hospital notes that he became bored easily and lacked focus. He "impulsively left school because he had nothing further to learn" and "just as precipitously" left numerous jobs "because he felt too stilted."

"Patient believes he quit football for same reason he couldn't get along in Navy, he can't stand regulations, etc." He quit school "because he felt he had gotten all he could from college."

"I was frank with them," Kerouac admitted. "I was in a series of ventures and I knew they'd look them up; like getting fired from jobs and getting out of college."

"I just can't stand it I like to be by myself"

Initially, Kerouac viewed the psychological testing as "folly" and a "farce." He told his mother that in response to headaches "they diagnosed me with dementia praecox." Kerouac believed he was different, but not mentally ill: "as far as I'm concerned I am nervous; I get nervous in an emotional way but I'm not nervous enough to get a discharge."

He claimed he was exhausted because prior to boot camp he had been writing 16 hours a day, working on the novel *The Sea is My Brother*, which he called a "gigantic saga" (this novel was first published posthumously).

He did not like basic training at all: "I just can't stand it. I like to be by myself." In an undated letter, Kerouac expained:

[I]t was clearly and simply a matter of maladjustment to military life. On this, the psychiatrist and I seemed to be agreed in silence. I believe that if his queries had ended at that point, my diagnosis would have been psychoneurosis—a convenient conclusion which could have explained any number of idiosyncrasies in a protean personality. . . . I see no reason for being ashamed of my maladjustment.

In *Vanity*, Kerouac details this maladjustment at length:

Well, I didn't mind the eighteen-year-old kids too much but I did mind the idea that I should be disciplined to death, not to smoke before breakfast, not to do this, that, or thatta . . . and this other business of the admiral and his Friggin Train walking around telling us that the deck should be so clean that we could fry an egg on it, if it was hot enough, just killed me.

[A]nd having to walk guard at night during phony air raids over Newport RI and with fussy lieutenants who were dentists telling you to shut up when you complained they were hurting your teeth. . . .

They came and got me with nets. . . .
“You’re going to the nut house.” “Okay.”
[S]o they ambulance me to the nut hatch.

Kerouac crystallizes his problem with the Navy in *Vanity*—lack of independent thought. Responding to questions from Navy doctors, Kerouac explained that he was constitutionally incapable of adhering to Navy discipline:

[I]ndependent thought . . . now go ahead and put me up against a wall and shoot me, but I stand by that or stand by nothing but my toilet bowl, and furthermore, it’s not that I refuse Naval discipline, not that I WONT take it, but that I CANNOT. This is about all I have to say about my aberration. Not that I want, but that I cant.

The Navy sought underlying causes of Kerouac’s mental illness. The “family history” section notes that Kerouac “denied familial disease. Mother is nervous and father is emotional.” Kerouac wrote to his mother, Gabrielle, on March 30, 1943, and encouraged her to speak candidly with his doctors if they called:

Although I tried to hide it, they found out about my headaches when I went to get aspirins a few times. I guess I wrote too much of my novel before I joined the Navy. Anyway, they’ve placed me under observation in the hospital, and all I do all day is sit around in the smoking room and smoke. . . .

Well, if I can’t make the Navy, I’ll try the Merchant Marine school—they’re not strict there. . . .

At any rate, I have an idea they’re going to call you up about it. They’re going to give me a nerve test tomorrow. . . .

I told them about my [car] accident in Vermont, my football injuries & everything, so that if I have anything, they’ll

discover it. Anyway, try to remember my symptoms and tell them about it.

When the Navy did call his parents, Jack’s father, Leo, did not provide a stellar character reference. Leo said that Jack had been “boiling” for a long time and that he “has always been seclusive [*sic*], stubborn, head strong, resentful of authority and advice, being unreliable, unstable and undependable.” He added that Jack “tends to brood a great deal.”

Gabrielle’s response suggests a lack of understanding of Jack’s condition:

Tell me Honey what seems to be all the fuss out there. At first I thought you were sick, but now pop tells me you refuse to go through the training, or in other words refuse to serve your country. Oh Honey *lamb*, that’s not like you, don’t you know that it will be an awful mark against you? . . . [I]t can’t be that “*bad*.”

A Scant Job History And “Bizarre Delusions”

Navy doctors believed Kerouac’s impulsivity contributed to his exceedingly erratic work history. Kerouac jumped from job to job and quit college twice. He had left the merchant marine after three months “because he was bucking everybody.” He worked briefly as a sports reporter for the *Lowell Sun* but quit. Kerouac’s “occupational” history concludes:

Very unreliable. Has been fired from every job he had except newspaper reporting. The latter was for a small paper at \$15 per week, which he quit. He has been discharged from steamship job, garage job and waiter job. He is irresponsible and not caring.

The sole writing sample in his file, Kerouac’s handwritten “Resume of Occupational Training” lists his newspaper job and stint in the merchant marine but does not list what he termed “countless other little odd jobs, none of which seem significant enough to mention.” He explained, “My general occupational record is rather scant, because I’ve spent much time studying.”

Kerouac recounts his move to the Naval

Hospital in Bethesda in *Vanity*, stating that he “was put first in the real nut ward with guys howling like coyotes in the mid of night and big guys in white suits had to come out and wrap them in wet sheets to calm them down.

Just days after his official initial diagnosis, Kerouac told a friend why he was under evaluation: “One of the reasons for my being in a hospital, besides dementia praecox, is a complex condition of my mind, split up, as it were, in two parts, one normal, the other schizoid.”

My schizoid side is . . . the bent and brooding figure sneering at a world of mediocrities, complacent ignorance, and bigotry exercised by ersatz Ben Franklins, the introverted, scholarly side; the alien side.

My normal counterpart, the one you’re familiar with, is the half-back-whoremaster-alemate-scullion-jitterbug-jazz critic side, the side in me which recommends a broad, rugged America; which requires the nourishment of gutsy, redblooded associates; and which lofts whatever guileless laughter I’ve left in me rather than that schizoid’s cackle I have of late.

Only through his writing could Kerouac unite these disparate parts:

And, all my youth, I stood holding two ends of rope, trying to bring both ends together in order to tie them. . . . I pulled—had a hell of a time trying to bring these two worlds together—never succeeded actually; but I did in my novel “The Sea Is My Brother,” where I created two new symbols of these two worlds, and welded them irrevocably together.

Kerouac underwent analysis, challenging his doctors and playing on their preconceptions:

Next came an investigation of the “bizarre” in me. First, “bizarre delusions.” Was I the center of attention in a group? Of course!

“Extreme preoccupation” is another symptom of dementia praecox, a characteristic, I am proud to say, with which I am stricken. I cheerfully revealed this, and he cheerfully jotted it down.

Next, he tried to detect “unreal ideas” in my makeup. What was the strangest thing I’d ever seen? . . . I gave vent to an image compounded of all the mysticism I knew, from Poe & Ambrose Bierce to Coleridge and DeQuincey. A gleam in his eye!

In another letter in early April 1943, Kerouac joked about his condition:

(Surely, I am dementia praecox—just this afternoon, I was in such a melancholic stupor, the doctor showed concern.) And now! And *Now!* I feel fine and by God I’ll tell the world.

Navy Psychiatrists Review Kerouac’s Sexual History

The medical report’s “sexual and marital” section notes that Kerouac had “sexual contact at age of 14 with a 32 year old woman which upset him somewhat.” In addition, Kerouac “Enjoys rather promiscuous relationships with girl friends and is boastful of this. No apparent conflicts over sexual activity noted.” Kerouac openly discussed such matters: “He has no shame, remorse or reluctance to describe his affairs.” This openness will not surprise readers of Kerouac.

Again, Kerouac—at least in his correspondence—seemed amused by the questioning, and played upon the military’s bias against homosexuality, as described in this undated letter:

The psychiatrist questioned me further, obviously in search of a blue-ribbon diagnosis. First he began to probe my emotional attachment, and found

much food for thought there when I told him I wasn’t in love with any girl, and didn’t plan to get married at all. (This, of course, is pouring it on thick, but I wanted to see his reaction. He maintained a poker face & jotted down some notes—a superb performance!)

He wanted to know of my emotional experiences and I told him of my affairs with mistresses and various promiscuous wenches, adding to that the crowning glory of being more closely

aged veterans to serene academicians, turn back to sex in their last years as though suddenly conscious of its deep and noble meaning, of its inseparable marriage to the secret of life.

Navy Views Writers With Some Suspicion

Navy doctors viewed “patient’s occupation as a writer” as a further sign of his mental imbalance. One doctor labeled Kerouac “somewhat grandiose” because:

Without any particular training or back ground, this patient, just prior to his enlistment, enthusiastically embarked upon the writing of novels. He sees nothing unusual in this activity.

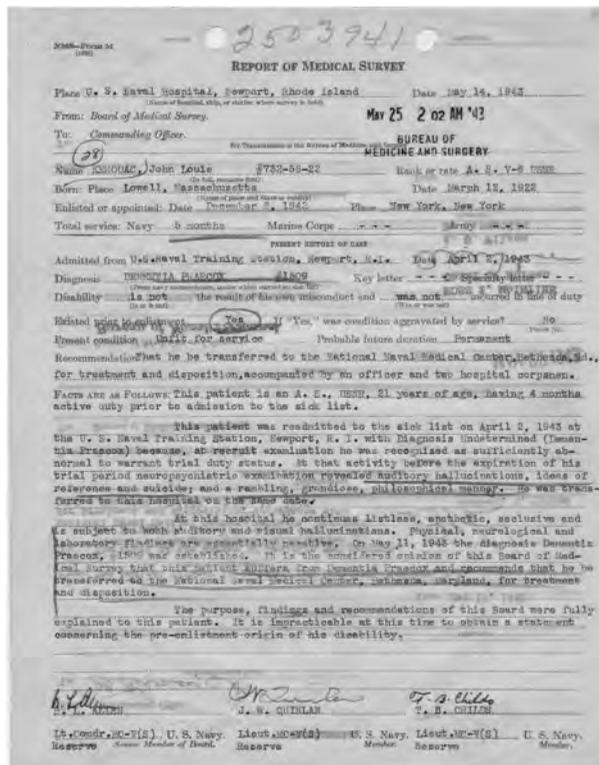
A medical history excerpt from May 27, 1943, adds:

Patient describes his writing ambitions. He has written several novels, one when he was quite young, another just prior to joining the service, and one he is writing now. . . .

Patient states he believes he might have been nervous when in boot camp because he had been working too hard just prior to induction. He had been writing a novel, in the style of James Joyce, about his own home town, and averaging approximately 16 hours daily in an effort to get it down.

This was an experiment and he doesn’t intend to publish. At present he is writing a novel about his experiences in the Merchant Marine. Patient is very vague in describing all these activities. There seems to be an artistic factor in his thinking when discussing his theories of writing and philosophy.

Kerouac knew that his doctors viewed his writing with concern and yet played upon their preconceptions. In an undated letter to a friend, Kerouac recounted his responses to his psychiatrist’s questions. Asked for more



A May 14, 1943, Board of Medical Survey report determined that Kerouac suffered from Dementia Praecox, involving “auditory hallucinations, ideas of reference and suicide; and a rambling, grandiose, philosophical manner;” and reported his transfer to the U.S. Naval Hospital at Newport, Rhode Island.

attached to my male friends, spiritually and emotionally, than to these women. This not only smacked of dementia praecox, it smacked of ambisexuality.

Kerouac addressed this issue more seriously in an early April 1943 letter:

Sex, of course, is the universal symbol of life—I’ve discovered that all men, from

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examples of his “bizarre behavior,” Kerouac highlights his writing:

Spending my time writing. And oh yes, dedicating my actions to experience in order to write about them, sacrificing myself on the altar of Art.

“Bizarre behavior” . . . and the full diagnosis of dementia praecox. All this folly doesn’t faze me, except for one item. Since I have “bizarre delusions,” no one takes me seriously. Thus, when I asked for a typewriter in order to finish my novel, they only humoured me.

(“The poor boy, now he’s under the ‘bizarre delusion’ that he’s a writer!”)

Many aspects of Kerouac’s personality viewed by the Navy as signs of mental illness were later praised as qualities that made him a gifted and expressive writer. In compiling Kerouac’s medical history, Navy doctors wrote that he heard voices and “imagines in his mind whole symphonies; he can hear every note. He sees printed pages of words.” Kerouac told his doctors that that he did not hear random voices but certainly did hear music:

I don’t hear voices talking to me from no where [*sic*] but I have a photographic picture before my eyes; when I go to sleep and I hear music playing. I know I shouldn’t have told the psychiatrist that but I wanted to be frank.

Kerouac’s Hospitalization Brings Birth of an Icon

While it is impossible to know the full effect of his hospitalization and protracted analysis, Kerouac’s letters suggest that time was turning point for Kerouac personally, professionally, and spiritually.

He spent the rest of his life running from structure, discipline, rules, regulations, and authority. The further he ran, the more he was embraced as a countercultural icon and embodiment of a new “Beat” way of life. One can only guess how much of his later escapades were in direct reaction to the strictness of his military experience.

Kerouac’s hospitalization gave him time to ponder and solidify his self identity as a writer. From the hospital, Kerouac pledged a new beginning:

I must change my life, *now* . . . this does not mean I shall cease my debauching; you see . . . , debauchery is the release of man from whatever stringencies he’s applied to himself. In a sense, each debauchery is a private though short-lived insurgence from the static conditions of his society.

In a letter to a friend from junior high school, written in early April 1943, Kerouac committed to starting his personal journey:

The pathos in this hospital has convinced me, as it did Hemingway in Italy, that “the defeated are the strongest.” Everyone here is defeated, even this “broth of a Breton.” I have been defeated by the world with considerable help from my greatest enemy, myself, and now I am ready to work. I realize the limitations of my knowledge, and the irregularity of my intellect. Knowledge and intellection serve a Tolstoi—but a Tolstoi must be older, must see more as well—and I am not going to be a Tolstoi. Surely I will be a Kerouac, whatever that suggests. Knowledge comes with time.

As far as creative powers go, I have them and I know it. All I need now is faith in myself . . . only from there can a faith truly dilate and expand to “mankind.” I must change my life, *now*.

Hit the road, Jack, and don’t you come back no more . . .

On June 2, 1943, the Navy completed its evaluation and changed Kerouac’s diagnosis from dementia praecox to “Constitutional Psychopathic State, Schizoid Personality.” The schizoid trends “have bordered upon but have not yet reached the level of psychosis, but which render him unfit for service.”

The doctors suggested his discharge, and Kerouac signed a form stating that this condi-

tion was a preexisting one. On June 10, it was recommended that Kerouac be discharged “for reason of unsuitability rather than physical or mental disability.”

On June 30, 1943, Kerouac’s military duty was officially terminated “by reason of Unsuitability for the Naval Service.” The Navy made it clear that he was not welcome to return; Kerouac “is not recommended for reenlistment.” He was given “an outfit of civilian clothes,” a travel allowance of \$24.60 to return home to his not-so-supportive parents in Lowell, and a one-time “mustering out” payment of \$200.

Kerouac left the hospital and hit the road.

His official military personnel file was closed 10 days later and remained closed for 62 years, until it was opened by the National Archives in 2005, unearthing a fascinating and previously unknown chapter in this legendary dreamer and writer’s life. **P**

NOTE ON SOURCES

Special thanks to Eric Voelz and Lenin Hurtado of the National Personnel Records Center in St. Louis, Missouri, for their guidance.

Unless otherwise noted as a letter from or to Kerouac, all quotes are from Kerouac’s official military personnel file, which includes an expansive and detailed 27-page medical history.

The letters cited in the article, written concurrent to Kerouac’s time under psychiatric evaluation, are from *Jack Kerouac: Selected Letters, 1940–1956*, ed. Ann Charters (New York, NY: Penguin Group, 1995).

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