



NATIONAL ARCHIVES *and* RECORDS ADMINISTRATION
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Central Decimal File Hints

[Unless otherwise noted, all examples are derived from the version of the Central Decimal File used from 1910-1949. The same principles apply to the 1950-1963 version of the files.]

The Department of State's Central Decimal File, in use from 1910 to 1963, is a pre-arranged subject filing system. The filing of documents was based on the use of subject numbers and country numbers that were combined to build a file number. The file manuals issued by the Department of State are the most basic guide to using the files. Those manuals, however, may lead researchers to a false sense of certainty as to the location of documents of interest. The files are split into the following time segments: 1910-29, 1930-39, 1940-44, 1945-49, 1950-54, 1955-59, and 1960- January 1963.

To most effectively use the Central Decimal File, one must understand how the documents were categorized and filed. The Department of State instructed Foreign Service Posts to limit each reporting document to one discrete subject in order to facilitate indexing, filing, and retrieval. This was not always possible to do at the most detailed level so the filing system provided for levels of specificity and the indexers in the Department aimed to file documents at the appropriate level of detail/specificity with regard to both subject and country in a given document.

Subject Numbers

When researching a topic that is a sub-file of a broader topic, researchers should be sure to examine the documents in the higher-level (more general) file categories in addition to the file "on" a given topic. This is especially true for the records in Class 8: Internal Affairs of States. For example, the filing manual indicates that the file number for stock exchanges is "8**.5171" (where the ** is replaced by the appropriate country number). The hierarchy of file numbers leading to that topic, however, is:

- 8**.50 Economic Matters
 - 8**.51 Financial Conditions
 - 8**.517 Exchanges
 - 8**.5171 Stock

While documentation dealing with stock exchanges specifically will be found in "8**.5171", documentation relating to multiple types of exchanges (there are separate file categories for cotton, wool, livestock, grain, produce, coffee, sugar and "other" exchanges, too) will be found under "8**.517" and documentation of an even more general nature will be found categorized as "8**.51". And the most general records will be found under "8**.50". In order to locate all mentions of stock exchanges, one should review the files at all levels.

Country Numbers

A similar situation pertains to the use of country numbers. In the filing system, each region, country, or colonial possession was assigned a number. The broad outline of the country numbers is:

1910-49	1950-54
00 The World	00 The World
10 Americas	10 Western Hemisphere
13 Central America	13 Central America
20 South America (West Coast)	20 South & Central America
30 South America (East Coast)	36 West Indian Republics
36 West Indian Republics	40 Europe
40 Europe	50 Western Continental Europe
50 Western Continental Europe	60 Eastern Continental Europe
60 Eastern Continental Europe	70 Africa
70 Balkan States	80 Near East
80 Africa	90 Far East
90 Asia	

The countries in each region have their own country number. For example, the West Indian Republics ("36") are divided as follows:

- 37 Cuba
- 38 Haiti
- 39 Dominican Republic

Colonies generally were given a number that tied it to the home country by adding a letter to the country number of the home country. For example, the country number for France is "51", while that for Algeria is "51r" (sometimes "51R"). In some cases, countries retained their "colonial number" after they gained independence or came under the control of a different country. For example, the Pacific territories lost by Germany after World War I retain their pre-war numbers. Many country numbers changed with the major revision of the Central Decimal File that went into effect on January 1, 1950, and during the wave of newly-independent countries in the Africa during the late 1950s and early 1960s. The National Archives prepared a comprehensive list of the country numbers over time; it is available in the Archives II Research Room.

As noted above, the appropriate country number is combined with the pertinent subject number to develop the file number under which documents of interest are filed. If interested in petroleum in Iran, for example, join the country number for Iran ("91") with the subject number for petroleum

("8**.6373") to determine that the appropriate file for petroleum in Iran is "891.6363". The documents found there will generally deal only with Iranian petroleum matters, but, as with the subject numbers, there is a hierarchy to the country numbers that can lead to other files with pertinent records. Documents of a more general nature will be filed using the country number for Asia ("90") in file "890.6363". Such documents are likely to discuss petroleum matters with a more regional perspective, putting the issues relating to Iran into a regional context. Depending on the topic (and petroleum is one example), it might be useful to look at the file of petroleum in the World ("00") – "800.6363". Note that documentation of a regional nature that discusses a colonial entity will be found under the geographically appropriate number. Thus, documents discussing French Indochina ("51g") in a regional context will be filed under Asia ("90").

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