

5

Archives, Libraries, and Newspaper Collections: An Introductory Survey

*by Eugenia Meyer and
Alicia O. de Bonfil*

This introductory survey is intended to serve as a guide to the more detailed descriptions of particular archives in the following chapters. For the purpose of obtaining exact information on archives, libraries, and pertinent newspaper archives for research in the history of Mexico, we believe that the foreign researcher should establish contact with Mexican investigators specializing in his particular field of interest. Only these specialists can provide the most practical lists of places and sources which will be of greatest utility to historians and students. The effort will be amply rewarded because on many occasions the guides which now exist mention collections which are not open to researchers and, even if they are open, often do not provide the services promised in the guide. By seeking out Mexican counterparts the researcher can save himself precious time. In keeping with this sentiment our comments will be brief; they can be amplified by consulting the more specialized chapters in this guide.

Without question the most important archive in Mexico is the Archivo General de la Nación (see chapter 6, section A, and chapter 9, section D) which not only contains primary source material but information from the pre-Columbian period, the colonial period, the era of Independence, the Reform, and the Revolution. Nevertheless, it must be pointed out that not all of the material is cataloged; this often makes the task of the researcher more difficult and drawn out.

The archives of the various ministries of state are also located in the Federal District. These contain information on the unique character and functions

of each of these ministries. As examples we cite the archives of the Secretaría de Hacienda y Crédito Público, the Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, the Secretaría de Salubridad y Asistencia, and the Secretaría de Defensa Nacional. From the information we have received we should add that generally there are no restrictions in access to these archives; nevertheless, one should prepare a formal request in advance. Certain subjects and certain periods may be closed, especially to foreign investigators, such as some of the documentation in the Foreign Relations and National Defense Archives.¹

With respect to historical information that can be obtained in the states, there is generally at least one important archive in each state of the republic. In addition to the state archives, there are the local and municipal archives which generally house documentation from parish archives, notarial archives, and judicial archives. It is common practice in the case of municipal archives to seek the permission of the municipal president or the judge in charge. For research in parish archives, although they are considered national property, it is proper to request authorization from the particular parish priest.

In all of these cases it is important to establish in advance a cordial relationship with local authorities. Promptness and efficiency, both in processing the request and in providing the material, depend in great measure upon the cooperation of these officials. Given the characteristic reserve and even mistrust of the Mexican, especially in the more rural areas, it is absolutely essential that foreigners attempt not only to gain confidence but to demonstrate the correctness of their intentions.

Within Mexico one finds an almost endless number of private archives, generally in the hands of the families of the original owners. It would be almost impossible to offer a complete list of them since most are privately maintained and only in special cases are they opened to researchers. It is for this reason that we suggest that foreign investigators establish contact with their Mexican colleagues in the same period of specialization. These specialists can offer information, provide letters of recommendation, and in some cases even establish direct contact with those persons in charge of the private archives.

A comprehensive guide to libraries in the Federal District is included as chapter 8. In addition to these libraries, however, each state of the Republic has at least one important library. It is generally located in the state capital or in the most important city of the area. For example, the main library of the state of Mexico is in Toluca; the main library of Veracruz is in Jalapa, which is also the location of the state university. In addition, the libraries of the state universities often have valuable documentary material.

Concerning private libraries, we must repeat what we indicated for private archives. They are generally not open to the public and it is best to establish initial contact through a Mexican historian who is familiar with them or has access to them.

For newspaper collections, the Hemeroteca Nacional in Mexico City is outstanding both for its organization and its catalog. State newspaper archives (in those states which have them) are also a valuable source for research because on many occasions they hold complete series of state newspapers and magazines which are not held by the Hemeroteca Nacional.

In the list of bibliographies which we include in chapter 12, section A, we have gathered those which are used most often by Mexican researchers in the field of history. Without question new bibliographical publications appear daily. Therefore it is recommended that researchers visiting the country establish contact with the Centro de Investigaciones Bibliográficas of the Biblioteca Nacional de México, which can provide the most up-to-date information.

NOTE

1. The editors would add that it is somewhat more difficult for foreigners to gain access to the National Defense Archives than to the Foreign Relations Archives. (R.E.G., M.C.M.)