The Historical Records of the Office of Naval Research

A Guide for Researchers

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Office of Naval Research

Arlington, VA
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INTRODUCTION
The Office of Naval Research was established by act of Congress, Public Law 588, in August 1946 as the U.S. government’s first permanent military agency devoted to funding civilian scientific research during peacetime. This guide is meant as an introduction for researchers seeking public documents and records about ONR, its activities, and the science and technology research that it funds and manages.

THE OFFICE OF NAVAL RESEARCH
ONR manages and funds basic and applied science and advanced technology development through the use of grants and contracts with an array of partners in academia, industry, and government in the United States and around the world. The U.S. Naval Research Laboratory in Washington, DC, is a subordinate command. ONR also works in close cooperation with the Navy’s systems commands and their warfare centers located across the United States, as well as with the other services. As a major supporter of scientific research since World War II, ONR has had a role in fostering scientific and technological innovations in a wide range of fields, as well as in maintaining the basic scientific research infrastructure that makes these breakthroughs possible. Consequently, historical research on ONR can illuminate discourses in the history of public and science policy, the relationship between government and academia, naval technology, and the military-industrial complex, as well as of individual disciplines such as oceanography, biology, robotics, physics, and numerous other fields.

Born in the aftermath of World War II, ONR was established by congressional legislation in 1946 to maintain the successful partnership of government, academia, and industry that had produced a series of technological innovations during the war. This template originated with ONR’s immediate predecessor, the Navy’s Office of Research and Inventions, created by order of the Secretary of the Navy in May 1945, and more broadly with the Office of Scientific Research and Development, a national wartime agency. Originally focused on basic science research using contracts, grants were added as a funding tool in 1959. Funding for applied research began in 1980 with the establishment of the Office of Naval Technology, an organization also headed by the Chief of Naval Research. In 1990, the Office of Advanced Technology was established to focus on advanced technology development. All three organizations were formally joined together as a single entity in 1993.

Originally located in Washington, DC, in the old Navy Department buildings on the National Mall, ONR is now located in the Ballston neighborhood of Arlington, VA. The Office of Naval Research is managed by the Chief of Naval Research, a naval flag officer; the Vice Chief of Naval Research, a marine general officer; and the Executive Director, a
Senior Executive Service civilian. The research activities of ONR, as well as the organizational structures put in place to manage them, have varied greatly over the agency’s lifetime. In general, however, ONR’s portfolio of research investments has been divided into a series of science and technology programs overseen and managed by program officers. In addition, over the years ONR also has been responsible for managing a number of significant tasks for the Department of the Navy, including the Navy’s patent office, the Navy’s Small Business Innovation Research office, and the Navy’s Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) education outreach office. Besides the Naval Research Laboratory, ONR’s other major partner laboratories have included the Special Devices Center (created in World War II and later a component of Naval Air Warfare Center Training Systems Division) until the early 1960s, and the Naval Arctic Research Laboratory, from 1947-1980.

Other components of ONR include ONR Global, which has offices in Santiago, Chile; São Paulo, Brazil; London, United Kingdom; Prague, Czech Republic; Singapore; and Tokyo, Japan. Founded in 1946 with a single office in London, ONR Global’s personnel interact with the international science and technology community and overseas operational commands to foster cooperation in areas of mutual interest.

The Naval Research Advisory Committee, also established by Public Law 588, was an independent civilian scientific advisory group dedicated to providing objective analyses in the areas of science, research, and development. The committee was the senior scientific advisory group to the Secretary of the Navy, the Chief of Naval Operations, Commandant of the Marine Corps, and the Chief of Naval Research. It produced one or more reports a year on topics of interest to the Navy and Marine Corps. In its early days, the committee’s purview was quite broad, dealing with early atomic energy policy for instance. The committee was disestablished in 2019.

THE ONR HISTORIAN
The current office of the historian was created in 2013. The historian provides the command with professional guidance in the field of history and historic preservation, and the public with an extensive program of outreach that includes oral history, research, publications, and multimedia materials. For help with research requests, please contact the historian at onrpublicaffairs@navy.mil or call 703-696-5031.
HISTORICAL RECORDS

The list below of secondary sources, dissertations, and primary sources contained in archives and libraries related to ONR should not be considered comprehensive and cannot attempt to document the voluminous amounts of scientific and technological research supported by ONR. It emphasizes resources that document the history of ONR as an organization and its major supported projects, and is intended to provide an overview of the kinds of resources available to researchers and others seeking to find publicly accessible documents and information about the Office of Naval Research, its research activities, and its relationship with the development of science and technology in the United States and the world since World War II.

SECONDARY SOURCES


9. _______. “Narrative History of the Office of the Coordinator of Research and Development.” [s.l. : s. n., 1946].


25. Pittsburgh University Historical Staff. “The History of United States Naval Research and Development in World War II.” [s.l. : s. n., 1949?].


DISSERTATIONS


ARCHIVES AND LIBRARIES

City University of New York
New York, NY
www.cuny.edu

Mina Rees Papers

Columbia University
New York, NY
www.columbia.edu

Documents related to Bruce Heezen and Marie Tharp

Harvard University
Cambridge, MA
www.harvard.edu

Harvard Cyclotron Laboratory Collection

Johns Hopkins University
Baltimore, MD
www.jhu.edu

Library of Congress
Washington, DC
www.loc.gov

Geography and Map Division

Heezen-Tharp Collection

Manuscript Division
Institute Archives and Special Collections

The special collections at MIT include personal papers and manuscript collections associated with various ONR-supported individuals and projects. In particular, there are numerous records for Project Whirlwind, one of the first digital computers, built at MIT in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

MIT Museum

The museum, located at Kendall Square near the campus, has a substantial number of artifacts and records related to Project Whirlwind.

National Archives

Most of the primary source material available concerning ONR is contained at the National Archives II facility in College Park, Md. Accessioned documents are found mainly in Record Group 298. Catalogued material in this group consists mostly of documents dealing with ONR’s predecessor organization during World War II, the Navy’s Office of the Coordinator of Research and Development. The National Archives also possesses significant unaccessioned records within RG 298, the bulk of which date
from the late 1940s to the 1980s, that are not fully catalogued. These materials are contained in federal records center boxes whose contents are listed only by broad topic.

There are also extensive records associated with ONR’s many international offices, the first of which was established in London in 1946, that may be found in Department of State record groups as well as in RG 298. Records of the Naval Research Advisory Committee can also be found in RG 298.

Other record groups at College Park that may contain material pertinent to ONR, its components, and the Navy are:

- Record Group 19: Bureau of Ships
- Record Group 38: Office of the Chief of Naval Operations
- Record Group 52: Bureau of Medicine and Surgery
- Record Group 59: General Records of the Department of State
- Record Group 72: Bureau of Aeronautics
- Record Group 74: Bureau of Ordnance
- Record Group 80: General Records of the Department of the Navy, 1798-1947
- Record Group 84: Records of the Foreign Service Posts of the Department of State
- Record Group 181: Records of Naval Districts and Shore Establishments
- Record Group 227: Office of Scientific Research and Development
- Record Group 343: Naval Air Systems Command
- Record Group 344: Naval Ship Systems Command
- Record Group 345: Naval Electronic Systems Command
- Record Group 346: Naval Ordnance Systems Command
- Record Group 402: Bureau of Naval Weapons
- Record Group 428: General Records of the Department of the Navy, 1947-

*Washington National Records Center, Suitland, MD*

ONR records from the past several decades are kept at this facility. Of particular note, there are many records at Suitland associated with NRAC, because of the committee’s early association and cooperation with the Atomic Energy Commission in the 1940s. Records kept at federal records centers remain in the legal possession of the original submitting agency, so all requests to view ONR records kept here must go through the Office of Naval Research. The records center keeps records officially for 30 years, but because of space considerations there are also other, older records kept here as well that have not been transferred to the National Archives facilities in downtown
Washington, DC, or College Park, MD. Many of the documents that have been transferred to College Park remain in uncatalogued boxes from the federal records center.

**Naval History and Heritage Command**  
Washington, DC  
[www.history.navy.mil](http://www.history.navy.mil)

**Archives Branch**  

Vice Admiral Albert J. Baciocco Papers

**Navy Department Library**

This library contains a number of unpublished administrative histories relating to the management of naval science and technology research and development during World War II and to ONR’s predecessor, the Office of the Coordinator of Research and Development (see Secondary Sources above, nos. 9, 12, and 23).

**National Museum of American History**  
Washington, DC  
[americanhistory.si.edu](http://americanhistory.si.edu)

Grace Murray Hopper Collection

**Naval Research Laboratory**  
Washington, DC  
[library.nrl.navy.mil](http://library.nrl.navy.mil)

The Naval Research Laboratory’s research library is the depository for all ONR technical reports, which detail the progress or results of ONR-funded projects and contracts. Among these also are European Scientific Notes, a yearly publication produced by ONR’s London office that detailed developments in European science. Many documents and books that once were in the possession of the old ONR library are now deposited at NRL.

NRL also has an extensive collection of oral histories, some of which deal with former ONR personnel as well as ONR-sponsored research.

**Pennsylvania State University**
University Park, PA
www.psu.edu

Samuel King Allison Papers

Alan Tower Waterman Papers

Princeton University
Princeton, NJ
www.princeton.edu

Charles Phelps Smyth Papers

Smithsonian Institution
Washington, DC
www.si.edu

Bruce C. Heezen Papers

Malcolm D. Ross Papers

Stanford University
Stanford, CA
www.stanford.edu

Felix Bloch Papers

United States Naval Academy
Annapolis, MD
www.usna.edu

Robert Dexter Conrad Papers

University of California San Diego and Scripps Institution of Oceanography
La Jolla, CA
www.ucsd.edu
www.scripps.ucsd.edu

Special Collections and Archives
The library at the University of California San Diego has extensive collections of material—including a large number of oral histories—relating to the history of oceanography, much of which was supported by ONR, as well as the archives of the Scripps Institution of Oceanography.

Roger Revelle Papers

Walter Munk Papers

University of Chicago
Chicago, IL
www.uchicago.edu

Marcel Schein Papers

University of Hawaii at Manoa
Honolulu, HI
www.manoa.hawaii.edu

University of Texas at Austin
Austin, TX
www.utexas.edu

Joseph B. Kruskal Papers

University of Washington
Seattle, WA
www.uw.edu

Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution
Woods Hole, MA
www.whoi.edu

Marine Biological Laboratory Library

The WHOI Data Library and Archives contain extensive archives, manuscript collections, and oral histories of projects and individuals associated with Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution supported by ONR. Highlights include records of the search
for RMS *Titanic*, records relating to the discovery of hydrothermal vents in the Pacific in the 1970s, and material on Project Nobska, an important research conference that shaped nuclear policy and submarine design in the 1950s.

**Yale University**  
New Haven, CT  
[www.yale.edu](http://www.yale.edu)

Henry Margenau Papers

Records of the Office of Naval Research, Yale University, 1945-1947