



NATIONAL LIBRARY OF SOUTH AFRICA

LIBRARY GUIDE 2026 - 2027

*Guide to Accessing the Manuscript Collections at
the National Library of South Africa*



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1. INTRODUCTION

This Guide is intended to assist in the access and retrieval of the Manuscript Collections held by the National Library of South Africa (NLSA).

The Manuscript Collections of the NLSA have grown over the years with no design except that resulting from the duty of a NLSA to conserve any unpublished documents acquired by gift, bequest or purchase which may have a bearing on the history or culture of the country.

The originators of these manuscripts and typescripts therefore may sometimes be well-known public figures, such as Ruth Alexander, Achmat Davids, John X. Merriman, Sir John Herschel, Chief Hlubi Langalibalele, Irma Stern, Paramount Chief George Tlali Moshoeshoe, Dr Wilhelm Bleek and Lucy Lloyd, or unknown persons who nevertheless contributed to knowledge of the country.



Lady Anne Barnard Collection
MSB 68



Charles Sirr Orpen Collection
MSB 711

2. OUR MANDATE

The *National Library of South Africa Act 92 of 1998* mandates the following:

- i. to build up a complete collection of published documents emanating from or relating to South Africa;
- ii. to maintain and extend any other collections of published and **unpublished** documents with the emphasis on documents emanating from and relating to Southern Africa;
- iii. to promote the optimal management of collections of published documents held in South African libraries as a national resource;

- iv. to promote optimal access to published documents, nationally and internationally;
- v. to provide reference and information services, nationally and internationally;
- vi. to act as the national preservation library and to provide conservation services on a national basis;
- vii. to promote awareness and appreciation of the national published documentary heritage; and to promote information awareness and information literacy.

3. TERMINOLOGY

3.1 Definition of a Manuscript Collection

A manuscript collection traditionally refers to a group of unpublished materials, often including handwritten documents, typescripts, photographs, diaries, and other related items, that are organised and preserved for research and historical purposes. These collections are typically associated with an individual, family, organisation or a specific subject matter.

3.2 Abbreviations

MS(S) = manuscript(s)

NAREM = National Register of Manuscripts (administered by the National Archives of South Africa)

NLSA = National Library of South Africa

3.3 Manuscript shelf-mark prefix explanation

MSA = General / Non-South African material

MSB = South African collections (Small collection)

MSC = South African collections (Large collection)

MSD = Manuscripts transferred from the Dessinian Book Collection

MSE = Microform collections

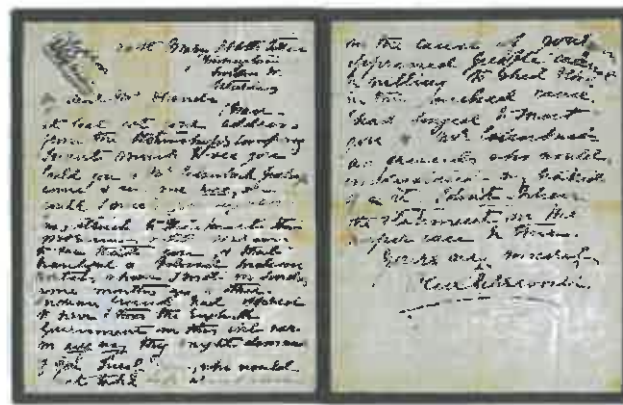
MSH = Church registers



John Knox Bokwe Collection
MSB 59



George Tlali Moshoeshe
Collection
MSB 350



Olive Schreiner Collection
MSC 26

4. ACCESSIBILITY

NLSA online catalogue: <https://nlsa.on.worldcat.org/>

NLSA collections also available via: <https://search.worldcat.org/>

Partial contents: <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.za/>

A printed alphabetical index is available and comprises the names of collections and the main subjects covered. It is not intended to be the full analysis of the collection. For this, a search on the National Library's online catalogue is required.

For those collections online for which there is only a short entry, please consult the Special Collections staff for any printed handlists that may be available.

Manuscript collections received before 1995 are included in the *National Register of Manuscripts* (NAREM), a database managed by the National Archives and Records Service of South Africa. It tracks unpublished archival materials, private collections, and institutional papers housed in libraries and archives across South Africa. Post 1995, new acquisitions are only available via the NLSA catalogue.



W.H.I Bleek Collection
MSC 57



Irma Stern Collection
MSC 31



Rheinische Missionsgesellschaft Collection
MSB 396

The medieval and renaissance manuscripts bequeathed by Sir George Grey are kept separately with the Sir George Grey Book Collection.

The *Sir George Grey Manuscript Collection* - MSB 222, the *Sir George Grey (Auckland) Collection* -MSB 223, the *Sir George Grey (Tswana Documents) Collection* -MSB 899 and the *Grey Letters Collection* - MSB 788 are housed together with the rest of the Manuscript Collections and the procedures to access these are applicable as outlined below.

5. WHERE TO ACCESS THE MANUSCRIPTS

The manuscript collections are primarily available at the Cape Town Campus of the NLSA, 05 Queen Victoria Street, Cape Town. An appointment can be made with the Special Collections department. Twenty-four hours' notice is required for the retrieval of the manuscripts from the off-site storage vaults.

Email: info@nlsa.ac.za

Telephone: 021 4875620 / 4875619

6. RESTRICTIONS

Strict rules regarding donor-imposed restrictions on Manuscript Collections may apply for privacy or legal reasons. These restrictions may pertain to access, reproduction and publication.

7. ACCESS REGULATIONS

- a) All researchers wanting physical access to the Manuscript Collections must register by completing the *"Application to Access Special Collections"* form when visiting the NLSA.
- b) A valid form of identification (e.g. Passport, Identification card, Student card) must accompany the application. A letter of introduction/reference may be requested if deemed necessary.
- c) Staff will advise researchers on any applicable access conditions that may be in place.
- d) Additional restrictions may apply to some materials, based on copyright, donor agreements, size, and format of materials.
- e) When visiting the Reading Room, all personal belongings, including backpacks, briefcases, handbags, laptop cases, etc. must be placed in the lockers provided or may be kept at the front of the Reading Room.
- f) Manuscripts may only be consulted in the Special Collections Reading Room.
- g) Researchers may request up to six manuscript boxes to be retrieved daily.
- h) Only one manuscript box will be issued to be consulted at a time. On returning the box, the next manuscript box will be issued to the researcher.
- i) Only pencils to take notes may be used when consulting the Manuscript Collections.
- j) No food or beverages are allowed in the Reading Room.
- k) Researchers should not lean on, write on, fold, trace over, or handle materials in a way that may damage them.
- l) The researcher is responsible for the careful handling of all materials. Staff are on hand to guide and advise researchers if necessary.

- m) The researcher should keep all the manuscript materials in the correct file order.
- n) Self-photography is not permitted. Please enquire with staff about available options.
- o) Manuscript Collections may not be photocopied, except in certain circumstances as approved by the delegated NLSA authority.
- p) The NLSA reserves the right to refuse any reproduction request if, it is in the NLSA's judgment that the fulfilment of the request would violate copyright law, be detrimental to the physical safety of the material or is in contravention of donor agreements.
- q) Permission to receive copies does not constitute permission to publish or reproduce.
- r) Unless for private research purposes, users must apply to the NLSA to reproduce any manuscript materials (e.g. publish, exhibitions, documentaries etc.).

8. REFERENCES

1. Directorate State Archives and Heraldic Services. (1995) *Guide to the South African Manuscript Collections in the South African Library, Cape Town*. Pretoria: State Archives Service.
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