archives.gov
web site recommendations summary
March 17, 2010

section I

understanding today's archives.gov

our approach

To compile this analysis and set of recommendations, we have undertaken a number of activities to better understand the site itself, its ability to satisfy its various audiences and the challenges it currently faces. These include:

- **In-depth review of site data and user feedback**
  Including WebTrends reports, ACSI survey data, site search data, and visitor comments from 2009

- **Inventory of all site assets**
  Compilation of all site pages into a relational database for use as a resource throughout the development process

- **Comprehensive usability review of navigational systems**
  In-depth analysis of left-hand menus and identification of persistent usability issues

- **Identification of top tasks and sub tasks**
  Analysis of click paths and ACSI survey responses to determine top user objectives

- **Page-level analysis of key site sections**
  Identification of content-related usability challenges and redundancies on individual pages

- **Review of analogous web sites**
  Detailed analysis of other archival sites, top-rated government sites and relevant commercial sites

- **Review of relevant best practices**
  Research on applicable topics from books, web sites and webcasts

*A list of deliverables related to these activities along with other materials referenced can be found at the end of this document.

key challenges

In the course of the research described on the previous page we identified a number of challenges within the current site. These are primarily focused on five key areas:

- ## Not Task-Oriented
  The site is not organized around the top tasks that visitors want to perform. While the "Most Requested" links on the home page help guide users to critical pages, the internal pages don't focus on tasks and are full of unrelated links and content that distract users from the task at hand.

- ## Inconsistent & Irrelevant Navigation
  The left-hand menus systems hamper usability by including items irrelevant to the page's topic, duplicating items and naming items inconsistently. The organization of menu systems is treated differently among the various site sections and menus frequently do not provide links to critical blocks of content.

- ## Scattered Content
  Critical content (especially that related to holdings, genealogy and educational materials) is dispersed throughout the site. Visitors often need to traverse multiple sections on a sort of "content scavenger hunt" to locate the breadth of information available on a particular topic.

- ## Duplication & Clutter
  Throughout the site, content is frequently duplicated, cluttered with extraneous links and buttons and frequently laid out in a way that makes it difficult to determine its meaning.

- ## Outdated Design
  The design, while not inherently bad, is outdated and doesn't reflect the clutter-free, spacious designs typical of modern sites. The narrow page width doesn't take advantage of the extra screen real estate afforded by today's higher resolution monitors. Finally, the current site is not designed for use with a content management system.

section II

goals & recommendations

redesign goals

To address the challenges we've identified with the current site, we have established five goals for the redesign effort:

1. **Focus on Top Tasks**
   Identify the activities that users actually want to perform and reorient the site's organization and design around rapid and stress-free execution of these tasks

2. **Streamline Navigation**
   Provide multiple means for users to access the content they seek and redesign menu systems with an eye towards top task orientation and simplification

3. **Consolidate Holdings**
   Relocate holdings-related pages currently dispersed throughout the site into a single topically-organized section focused on the needs of both casual browsers and professional researchers

4. **Simplify Content**
   Eliminate redundant content while enhancing the presentation, findability, and usability of information on the site
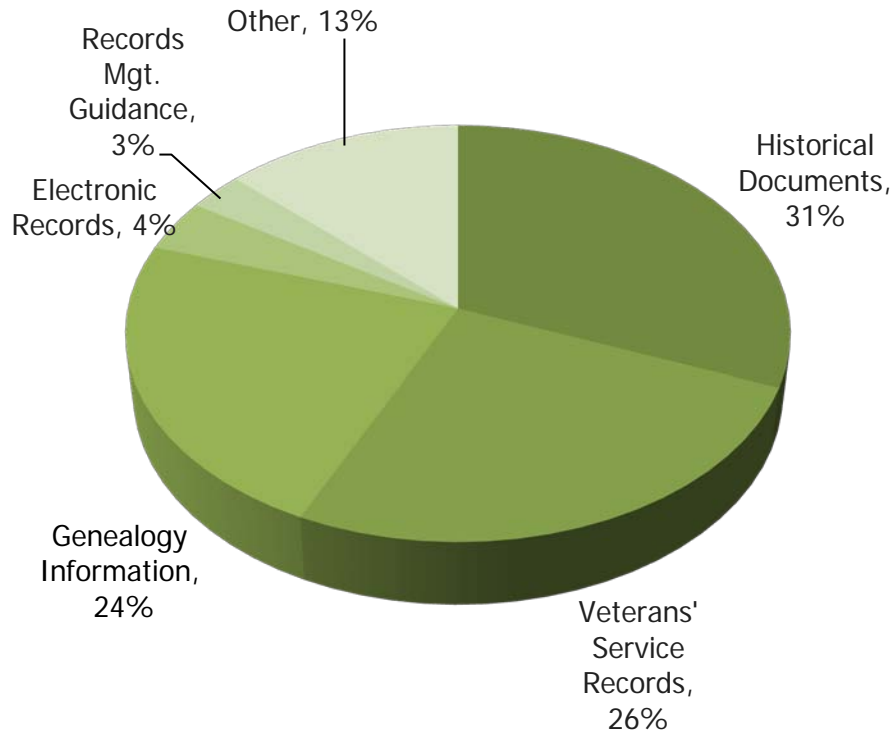
5. **Update Visual Design**
   Redesign the visual aspects of the site to create a friendlier, less cluttered design as a means of both enhancing usability and underscoring the redesign effort

These goals are further defined on the next nine pages.

goal 1: focus on top tasks

- A top task focus begins with identifying the key activities users want to perform on the site and organizing content and navigational systems around these user goals.

- Task-based navigation provides at least two benefits:
  - Visitors are able to direct their browsing experience based on their needs and will frequently be able to avoid having to navigate multiple levels of menus to find the content they seek.
  - The NARA Web Program will be able to better measure the site's effectiveness based on how well a user is able to accomplish a specific task. Specific click paths can be analyzed and site traffic patterns monitored so that the site can be continually tuned to the needs of its visitors.

- Since many of the tasks that visitors perform are open-ended (e.g. research historical documents) and don't have a concrete, measurable goal (e.g. view the Bill of Rights) it will be difficult to quantify how effective the site is in helping visitors achieve many of its tasks.

- The task-based focus will be most effective when employed on portal pages. There, a comprehensive list of tasks related to a user's objective (e.g. research genealogy, learn about the Archives) should be prominently placed.

what are the top tasks?

Other, 13%

Records Mgt. Guidance, 3%

Electronic Records, 4%

Historical Documents, 31%

Genealogy Information, 24%

Veterans' Service Records, 26%

source: ACSI Satisfaction Survey (1/1/2009-12/31/2009)

- When respondents to the ACSI survey were asked what they were looking for, their responses were distributed as shown in this graph.

- The top three items (historical docs, service records and genealogy information) account for 81% of the desired information.

- These three items were important to virtually every audience group accessing the site.

- "Other" consists of the following:
  - Events Information (2%)
  - Lesson Plans (2%)
  - Federal Register Publications (2%)
  - Address/Hours (2%)
  - Online Exhibits (2%)
  - Ordering and Forms (1%)
  - Grant Information (1%)
  - Employment Information (1%)

what do these tasks really mean?

Determining the top tasks is only half the effort. By analyzing click stream data and ACSI survey response comments we have established the following sub tasks for each of the three most popular tasks:

Locate Military Service Records and Veterans' Information	Perform Genealogical Research	Access Historical Documents and Electronic Records
Order copies of service records	Learn about genealogy research	Learn what records are available online
Get information on Forms DD-214 and SF-180	Learn what resources are available through NARA	Learn how to do research using the Archives (both online and in person)
Find service records for historical research	Perform research with census records	Access popular historical documents
Learn about other methods of accessing service records	Perform research with immigration and naturalization records	Perform research by topic
Obtain medical records	Perform research with military records	Perform genealogical research
Learn about the 1973 fire	Perform research based on ethnicity	Locate military service records
	Perform research with other record types (e.g. land records)	Search NARA's online databases (specifically ARC)
	Perform genealogical research using ARC	Order copies of records
	Learn about genealogy fairs and events	Learn about Federal Records
	Visit a related web site	
	Learn how to preserve family documents	

goal 2: streamline navigation

To accommodate the browsing styles of the broadest number of users, a number of different modes of navigation should be developed in the redesign effort:

- **Traditional Menus**
The hierarchy of menus in traditional navigational bars is familiar and has the benefit of presenting the most comprehensive "at a glance" snapshot of the site content. However, in a site as large and complex as Archives.gov, developing a comprehensive information hierarchy is a daunting challenge. Therefore, we believe this mode should be complemented and supported by three other systems.

- **Task-Based Navigation**
As described on the previous pages, this navigation mode will be a primary focus of the redesign effort. Navigation on the home page and sectional portals will focus on key user tasks. Content not associated with top tasks will be made accessible using the other three methods listed here.

- **Traditional Search**
While not used by all, the search box is the first option used by many visitors who seek specific information. It is also the last resort option for users frustrated by the menu system. The usability of this system must not be overlooked.

- **Role-Based Navigation**
Given the clearly defined types of visitors who use Archives.gov (see Section III) and the popularity of the role-based links on the current home page, some groups should be able to self-identify themselves and browse within an information context designed according to their role. Role-based navigation should be limited to those groups with role-specific content (i.e. veterans, educators). Groups whose top tasks merely involve searching content not specific to their role (i.e. journalists, general public) should rely on the other navigation methods.

reimagining menu systems

To enhance the usability of menus throughout the site and maintain a focus on the tasks related to a page's content, the following principles should be applied:

- **Order links based on their relevance**
  Within a menu system links should be grouped into three categories according to their relevance to the current page's content. These categories should be displayed with the most immediately relevant links at the top. These groups are:
  - Immediately relevant content (links directly related to the current page's topic)
  - Sectional content (links not directly related to the specific task but still relevant within the broader section)
  - Other related content (links to other sections on the Archives.gov site or even links to other web sites)

- **Navigation systems should be comprehensive**
  Too many content sections are inaccessible from the primary navigation menus. While every page within a section does not require a link, all major topics should be readily accessible.

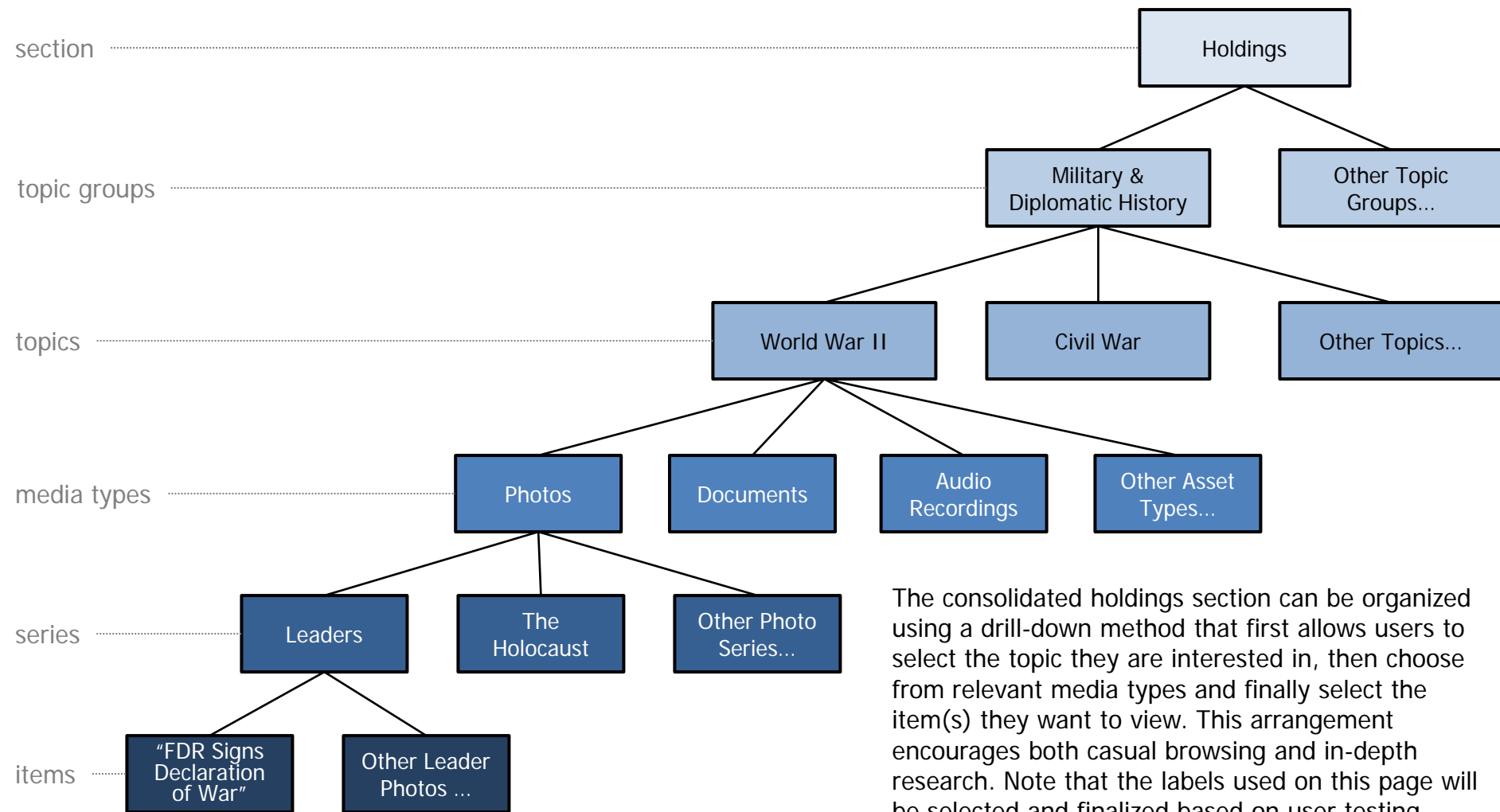- **Navigation items should have unique destinations**
  In many left-hand navigational systems, multiple links within the system point to the same page. This makes menus unnecessarily long and adds confusion. Diligence should be applied when creating menus to ensure this doesn't happen.

- **Links in primary navigation systems should be relevant**
  Often, links included in the left-hand navigation bars are only tangentially related to the topic at hand. By trying to include every possible destination a user might seek from a particular page, many sections' menus become unnecessarily large and cause visitors to waste time trying to figure out why these extraneous links are there. Users must understand not only *what* a link is pointing to but also *why* it belongs in its context.

goal 3: consolidate holdings

- The consolidation of holdings currently spread across the site (research, genealogy, education and regional archives sections) into a single section is a critical objective of the redesign effort. Some key reasons why include:
    - User comments clearly show frustration with being able to find the information they seek (either via search or navigation) and are frequently unaware that content related to their interests may exist in other locations throughout the site.
    - Historical documents are vital to every audience type and geographic region.
    - NARA is aggressively moving to digitize and catalogue its holdings electronically.

- Objectives of a consolidated holdings section include:
    - Moving all of NARA's online holdings (including documents, photos, multimedia, catalogs and databases) into a single section that is prominently linked from the home page.
    - Organizing holdings by topic (e.g., Military and Diplomatic History, Famous People, etc.)
    - Providing a surface layer of simplicity that makes causal browsing and research fun and educational for everyone
    - Providing a deep layer of sophistication that enables professional research and "deep digging."
    - Providing cues that show how to take online research on a particular topic further (related documents, database searches)
    - Showing users how to extend their research experience offline through visits to regional facilities, ordering copies or by hiring a professional researcher.
    - Allowing constituencies like genealogists and teachers to perform specialized research.

revised holdings section hierarchy

section .... **Holdings**

topic groups .... **Military & Diplomatic History** | **Other Topic Groups...**

topics .... **World War II** | **Civil War** | **Other Topics...**

media types .... **Photos** | **Documents** | **Audio Recordings** | **Other Asset Types...**

series .... **Leaders** | **The Holocaust** | **Other Photo Series...**

items .... **"FDR Signs Declaration of War"** | **Other Leader Photos ...**

The consolidated holdings section can be organized using a drill-down method that first allows users to select the topic they are interested in, then choose from relevant media types and finally select the item(s) they want to view. This arrangement encourages both casual browsing and in-depth research. Note that the labels used on this page will be selected and finalized based on user testing.

goal 4: simplify content

A page-by-page assessment of the site's content is required to support the organizational changes described in goals 1-3. As content managers review their pages, the following guidelines should be applied:

- **Eliminate redundant content**
  Many of the pages on the site contain identical or virtually identical content. This has led to confusion among users. Redundant content should be eliminated and placed at the location within the information hierarchy most relevant to the page's topic.

- **Name all page elements consistently**
  The four key elements used to identify a page (and, by extension, its content) are frequently named inconsistently. These elements are: the page's file name, its navigation menu link, the page's title tag and the page's top-level heading. To maximize a page's searchability and minimize user confusion, they should be packed with keywords and be clearly related to one another.

- **Avoid the usage of technical terms in public-oriented areas**
  Since this is a government site, it is inevitable that many technical terms and acronyms will be employed. However, non-technical members of the general public make up the broadest audience and are frequently confronted with government- or archives professional-related jargon in the navigation systems and content areas of the site. Technical terminology should be limited to those sections specifically targeted at audiences who readily understand its meaning.

- **Improve the top to bottom page flow**
  Many pages are interrupted by buttons, boxes and other call outs that interrupt the readability of a page. When necessary, these elements should be placed unobtrusively and consistently so as not to hamper a visitor's ability to scan and absorb a page's meaning.

goal 5: update visual design

Updating the site's visual design to one more in sync with modern design practices not only makes the appearance of the site up-to-date but it also serves as a clear cue that more substantive aspects of the site's overall design have changed. Some common practices that should be employed include:

- ## Embrace white space
  Visual and textual elements on the page should be given room to breathe. By opening up the design, users are better able to distinguish between the various zones of the page and more able to effectively navigate and digest content.

- ## Adopt a wider page
  Take advantage of the fact that nearly 92% of site visitors are viewing the site at a resolution of 1024 pixels or wider and utilize more horizontal real estate to keep less of the site (especially on portal pages) "below the fold."

- ## Use color sensibly
  Give the overall site a distinct color identity and color-code each section. Balance the site's color treatment with sensible minimalism. Avoid gratuitously using a wide variety of colorful icons that can weigh the page down unless they aid or reinforce the usability goals of the page. Use color to add context, to reinforce action areas and to call attention to important task-oriented features.

- ## Reduce clutter
  Many pages contain graphical buttons and text boxes that link to other areas of the site or serve as internal banner ads. While some relate to a page's topic, many are extraneous and can be distracting. Navigational areas should be kept entirely free of these elements while the main content area of a page should employ these judiciously and only when they directly relate to a page's topic.

section III

the plan

project plan

We propose to follow a multi-phase project plan to meet NARA's internal goals and ensure the site design reflects the optimal user experience for the largest number of users.

- **Phase I: March 15, 2010 – November 15, 2010**
  This phase will focus on the redesign of the home page, military records and veterans, genealogy and consolidated holdings sections. Based on the top task analysis, addressing these sections will improve the experience of over 80% of site visitors. A detailed project plan may be found on the following page.

- **Phase II (launch Spring 2011)**
  This phase will immediately follow Phase I and will address sections related to the other top user tasks including: records management and FRC, education, events, locations, publications and The Federal Register, jobs and grants. Addressing these sections will accommodate the needs of virtually all of the remaining site visitors. This phase will also involve migrating the site into a content management system which will support more efficient content publishing and provide a number of web page plug-ins for delivering new web site features including dynamic calendars, programming-free forms, user personalization, page rating and comment fields, user-created FAQs and content tagging.

- **Phase III (TBD)**
  The remainder of the site's content areas will be redesigned and new web site features will be added on an as-needed basis.

information referenced

Site Traffic and User Feedback

- ForeSee ACSI Survey (12/1/2008-12/31/2009)
- ForeSee Cluster Data Analysis (12/1/2008-12/31/2009)
- ForeSee ACSI Survey—Records Managers (10/01/08-03/31/09)
- WebTrends Traffic Analysis Summary (1/1/2009-12/31/2009)
- WebTrends Home Page Click Path Report (4/2009)

Publications and Webinars

- Krug, Steve. *Don't Make Me Think: A Common Sense Approach to Web Usability*. Berkeley, Ca: New Riders, 2006
- McGovern, Gerry. *Three Essential Tips for Creating a Task-Focused Website*. Webinar, 13 Jan. 2010
- Nielsen, Jakob. "Mega Drop-Down Navigation Menus Work Well." *Useit.com: Alertbox*. 23 Mar. 2009. < http://www.useit.com/alertbox/mega-dropdown-menus.html>
- Spool, Jared M. et.al. "Designing For the Scent of Information." *UIE Fundamentals Report*, 2004

key deliverables

For more detailed information on the topics covered in this summary report, please refer to the following documents:

- "Archives.gov Web Site Analysis and Recommendations" 02.24.2010
  Detailed presentation of the overall web strategy along with supporting data from WebTrends and ACSI surveys and usability reviews of related archival, government and commercial sites

- "Archives.gov Site Inventory Overview and IA Analysis" 10.25.2009
  Summary of the site inventory process and deliverable components accompanied by extensive suggestions for improving the current site's information architecture

- "Proposal to Consolidate Research Content on Archives.gov" 02.12.2010
  Overview of the rationale supporting the consolidation of holdings on the redesigned site with wireframes of sample pages from the consolidated holdings section

- "Analysis of Top Tasks and Related Subtasks for Archives.gov" 03.02.2010
  Description of the key user tasks and related sub tasks with supporting rationale based on WebTrends click path and ASCI survey data analysis

- "Archives.gov Site Map" 10.25.2009
  Poster-sized diagram illustrating key content areas and interconnections for the entire site

report by:
KGS/Viderity