

Informal Guide to Mining Local History Archives in the U.S.

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This sheet offers a general orientation for how to locate and make the most of archival and primary source collections relating to the history of a specific city, community, or region. The fun and frustration of local historical research is that relevant records are inconsistently divided up, and are in various stages of accessibility, depending on the specific community. In my opinion, you need to find only one or two entry points into local historical research. The archivists, librarians, and local historians know the relative collecting strengths of the other institutions, and the expertise of various people in the community. They will pass you along to the right people, once you have introduced yourself and your interests. A fantastic 25 page research paper might be based on two thick folders in one historical archive. Or, you might need to locate three different collections in three different archives. The goal, then, is to get in the door of one of the organizations, and begin to ask good questions.

Before you get too deep into a specific collection, make sure that it isn't available on-line in either a free database, or a subscription database found at Princeton. Two examples of on-line records would be Sanborn insurance maps and local newspapers. But increasingly, you might find 70 text-searchable years of city agency reports, municipal ordinances, even hundreds of years of deed records. Brush off your detective skills.

Local and County public libraries In most communities, no matter how small, one of the public libraries has an "archive." Some are staffed by volunteers two hours a week, others have professional historians and long hours. Most have at least some sort of "clippings file," where over the years the librarians have assembled information on various local topics. Such files can provide a snapshot, making a good starting point. In major cities, the historical room of the public library can be extraordinarily helpful, not to mention responsible for major archival collections. County archives can also be a goldmine. During the New Deal, some county libraries were re-organized by unemployed librarians and have sophisticated catalog systems and holdings that seem unlikely given their often rural locations. They often have devoted and knowledgeable staff.

Historical societies--of all kinds. These range from 100 year old marble-clad repositories with Boards of prominent citizens, to local groups with a web presence and boxes of records stored in the basement of an old downtown office building (bring a flashlight and cell phone). After searching the catalogs (if they exist and if they are on-line), begin with one of these societies and open a conversation with an archivist interested in your topic. They can direct you to other institutions, and can tell you the story about why the city planning department materials are in City Hall, deed records are in the city historical society, and mayors' papers are in the public library. From local archivists you will learn things impossible to know from the outside, such as the fact that a Black History Archive has been in unreachable storage since a hurricane, with no prospect for relocation. There may be other specialized historical societies in maritime history, ethnic or religious history, etc. You have to ask. State archives, obviously, might be located elsewhere, but should be at the top of your list. Finally, you can ask whether there is a local historian who might be willing to be contacted.

University libraries, including special collections. Underutilized city-related materials are buried in these collections, including faculty records. You might find a professor, for example, who served on the local town planning and zoning commission in the 1950s and retained copies of meeting minutes. Most colleges and university have kept clippings files on their alums. This search can be worthwhile if you are tracking down someone who is a bit obscure, but you know their alma mater. Master's Theses often lean towards documenting the region of the institution. Certain fields, such as sociology and anthropology, produced extraordinarily rich local studies in the mid-twentieth century. Often these studies sit on university archive or library shelves.

Local institutions, organizations, and businesses that keep their own boxes of "old stuff." Approached with respect and thoughtful, specific inquiry, these working organizations can offer unique materials. This can potentially be a murky area in terms of permissions to use materials, so it is best to consult with your advisor.

Local records held in national collections. Into this category would fall correspondence from local housing/urban renewal authorities to federal agencies (National Archives); or local chapters of national business organizations (from the National Negro Business League to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce). A variation on this is when an important national archive happens to be near your community of study; there is a strong chance that over the years a disproportionate amount of local materials ended up in the nationally-important archive. The world-class Hagley Museum and Library (business and technology), owing its existence to Dupont and thus located in Wilmington Delaware, holds a disproportionate amount of Wilmington, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and other regional materials.

Oral history collections. Some U.S. regions are especially well-documented because of powerhouse oral history organizations—California, North Carolina, New York City, Mississippi, etc. Some are transcribed, but untranscribed older collections are underused resources.

Most cities have partially-digitized collections of **local newspaper photograph archives**. These collections can be huge. Two to sample would be San Francisco (hosted at the main public library's history center, <http://sfpl.org/index.php?pg=0200000301>), and Philadelphia (<http://digital.library.temple.edu/cdm/> AND <http://diamond.temple.edu:81/>), both hosted by Temple University. Recently, the Bancroft Library made available to serious researchers another enormous newspaper photo archive.

At an archive. To maximize your time, read the finding aids (covered in another presentation) in advance. After checking the library policies, bring a digital camera if possible, but make sure to take detailed records of where each page comes from. When you know that an item or a folder is essential to your project, either take the digital image, or order scans/ Xerox reproductions. Archives range in their policies. Sometimes you will need to wear gloves, or handle one folder at a time. Almost always you have to lock belongings in a locker, and only carry in your computer and a pencil/paper (no pens). After you have investigated a few folders and have a sense of the collections, do not hesitate to go to the desk and ask further questions. A set of informed questions on-site often provokes another round of fresh leads.