

Off the Beaten Path: Small Local History Collections and Genealogy Research

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Small historical and genealogical society archives and collections are often hidden gems with materials unique to their community. They can provide sources to help break down brick walls, and context, and history to flesh out the story in your research.

Collections

The places I'm talking about are largely non-profit local or community organizations—often labeled as museums, archives and/or libraries.

Meriam Webster definitions:

Museum—an institution devoted to the procurement, care, study, and display of objects of lasting interest or value.

Archives—a place in which public records or historical materials (such as documents) are preserved.

Libraries—a place in which literary, musical, artistic, or reference materials (such as books, manuscripts, recordings, or films) are kept for use but not for sale.

Regardless of their titles, there is a lot of blurring across the three types of collections and a *wide* variation in levels of organization and funding—from volunteer run to paid professional staff.

Archives and Libraries have a slightly better chance of finding details on individuals—unless they were the “town fathers” or otherwise notable—whereas a museum collection can be very useful for background, history and color, giving you an idea of the spaces and times in which your ancestors lived.

Remember: Not every collection is set up with genealogy in mind—most aren't. But that doesn't mean you can't find fabulous information.

Where do you find these?

A few great resources:

- Cyndi's List: <http://www.cyndislist.com/>
- FamilySearch Wiki: https://familysearch.org/wiki/en/Main_Page
- PERSI at FindMyPast: <http://www.findmypast.com/> -- Under Quick Links → Newspapers & Periodicals → Under “Choose from our collections” → Periodical Source Index (radio button)
- WorldCat: <http://www.worldcat.org/>
- ArchiveGrid: <https://researchworks.oclc.org/archivegrid/>
- GoogleBooks: <https://books.google.com/bkshp?hl=en>
- The USGenWeb Project: <https://www.usgenweb.org/>

Don't overlook searching Google in general.

What *might* be there?

Local historical materials including newspapers, business information, home histories, family papers, surname files, photograph files, items previously owned by area families (ex. the medical bag and tools of a known early physician or a farm book that mentions him), information on area societies and organizations.

Once You Have Found an Institution

Many places have clearly laid out rules and a lot of collection information on their websites. Most have phone and email listed and you can request more information, inquire about records ahead of time, and in general get your bearings—open hours, directions, parking, and suggested places to stay or eat might be useful depending on the scope of a trip.

Don't forget to email or call ahead!!!!

Familiarize yourself with collection policies... Does the institution collect materials related to the city, township, county? Remember collections may be organized in a wide variety of styles from notebooks and files, to detailed finding aids, or online catalogs. And staff can range from devoted volunteers to paid trained professionals. But an institution of any size might had tidbits if information that could be key to your research.

While You Are There... Play nice.

- *Know the rules (and follow them)*
- *Be patient*—even the best staffed institutions can be overwhelmed with researchers and most places do not have the funding to properly staff or equip optimally for demand.
- Take careful notes (or organized copies/scans) and keep track of your sources. It's galling to find yourself having to figure out where you found a clue or accidentally searching the same sources repeatedly.
- Keep a list of other locations that come up in your research (for future planning or to expand your current trip).
- Make a list of what you didn't get to—either for your next trip or so you can get back in touch with the institution or a researcher to get more information.

An incomplete list of records that *might* exist

Organizational/Institutional

- Actual business records
- Minutes
- Rosters

Occupational-related

- Actual business records
- Company bulletins
- Community newsletters
- Company photo collections
- Farm books
- Store ledgers
- Correspondence
- Doctor's ledgers
- Marks and brands registrations

Memberships, Societies

- Minutes
- Business records
- Show programs
- Dues books
- Library member lists/rosters
- Team pictures

Educational

- Yearbooks
- School records

Other possibilities

- Realtor cards
- Medical records
- Pet Registrations

Anything that you would normally scour your family's papers for *could* end up in a library, archives, or museum collection.

- Certificates (Birth, Death, etc.)
- Journals
- Bibles
- School records
- Obituaries
- Deeds, wills, legal papers
- Photographs
- Crafts (Samplers, etc.)
- Newspaper clippings
- Funeral books, programs, cards
- Account books
- Baby books
- Applications
- Reunion gear
- Autograph book

Note: Not everything survives but I want people to come away with an open mind about what might be available.

More questions? Contact me!

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