American County Histories

A Unique Research Resource

An Accessible Archives White Paper

American County Histories: A Unique Research Resources

Executive Summary

County histories -- publications that document and commemorate a specific region -- represent a valuable information resource for patrons. They may be useful to the scholar chasing down a familial relationship for a particular historical figure, to the student researching an educational assignment, to the local authority seeking awareness of a particular population's points of pride, need and understanding.

Those studying a local region have a broad diversity of available information resources. These may be found on the open web, as part of a university's special collections, or via commercial services. The issue is not whether the user will find something useful, but rather how best he or she can tap into the specific resource best suited to task requirements.

Because so much information exists in both print and digital formats, examples of useful information resources are included here to provide a better understanding of the range of available materials. It is important that each be considered for appropriateness to the specific needs of the user, whether performing casual or scholarly investigation. That appropriateness may be determined through a sense of the scope of materials included in the resource, the available formats and the functional support for use (such as discovery, search and retrieval).

About the Author

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Why should researchers, historians, and librarians encourage on-going preservation and use of a publication genre like county histories?

The value is threefold: personal, historical and cultural.

- ❖ **Personal:** County histories may prove invaluable in tracing genealogical connections in families. Whether tracing one's own family or seeking to document hidden figures of history, clues to biographical details and relationships may frequently be found in these publications.

- ❖ **Historical:** County histories document local events, personalities, institutions and organizations. The contemporary inclusion of specific data points frequently represents the primary evidence from which researchers must build understanding.

- ❖ **Cultural:** County histories capture expressions of community or regional perspectives at a given point in time. Determining which individuals, events, and dates are worthy (or unworthy) of inclusion may reveal attitudes and values of previous eras that might not otherwise emerge.

County histories have been a form of publication since the sixteenth century when John Norden initially outlined a plan for systematically describing and mapping English counties. As colonists in the New World coped with and adapted to unfamiliar settings and events, William Bradford as governor of the Plymouth Colony maintained his own journal account of noteworthy events as documentation. *Of Plymouth Plantation* is the earliest North American instance of a limited local history.

Currently, Wikipedia notes that the 2016 census in North America documented a total of 3,144 counties or county equivalents in the United States (Louisiana and Alaska refer to such administrative entities as either parishes or boroughs.) From such locally established entities, researchers have estimated that 80% have published histories. These numbers continue to grow. In his late-1990's *A Guide to Published Genealogical Records*, Kory L. Meyerink counted 4,929 published county histories. At that time only Alaska and Hawaii were recorded as states without any county histories; since that date, five from each of those two states have been identified and included in the *American County Histories* resource developed by **Accessible Archives, Inc**.

Publication Histories and Trends

There have been several publishing "bumps" in county histories. These have occurred directly preceding—and at very easily identifiable—events in U. S. history. The largest single "bump" occurred at the country's bi-centennial celebration. Similarly, the centennial celebration of 1876 was another cause for an increase in county history publishing patterns.

Many of the county histories of the late 19th and early 20th centuries were published on a subscription basis. It often is suggested that this is the principal reason that northern county histories are more prevalent than southern ones. The larger percentage of rural populations in southern states as well as the higher levels of affluence in northern states made subscription-based publishing a better financial opportunity for publishers.

Another trend in county history publishing—regularly co-existing with subscription-based publishing—was the concept of "mug book" publishing. To generate sales, the subscription publishers would offer specified pages of biographical information accompanied by photos, line drawings and other illustrations depicting "noteworthy" people. Often these "noteworthy people" were early subscribers to the county history. After having achieved a guaranteed subscription level the county history would then go to press. Regardless of the intent of the publisher, these "mug books" do provide significant information about individuals and the eras and areas in which they lived.

Modern Use Cases

- ❖ A scholar of nineteenth century female authors seeks to document a particular set of family relationships of a single writer. Her particular practice is to work out insofar as possible a complete network of family members and geographical ties as those may have influenced the author's creative formation and published works.
- ❖ An undergraduate is intrigued by the modern concerns surrounding pandemics and their prevention. For one of his assignments, he wants to investigate the spread of yellow fever in the United States and locations historically set aside as areas of quarantine.
- ❖ A marketing professional is seeking to refresh marketing materials or even re-brand a local college in order to enhance its attraction to potential students as well as aid community leadership in attracting new funding and new business to the region.

From the perspective of information professionals, our first concern is whether those individuals think about county histories as a possible resource. Perhaps a second concern is whether they have any notion of where to find such county histories.

The faculty researcher may be aware of the library's wealth of subscription databases, but as she's limited in terms of time before her departmental meeting in fifteen minutes, she decides to run a quick and dirty query on Google. She will probably think to construct a query that incorporates the author's proper name, a town of residence or other known data point. The student and marketing pro may not be sure of what possibilities exist. Without much thought, they too turn to Google.

We live amidst an astounding wealth of available Internet resources. Search of a state historical association site may offer (as in the case of Texas) brief descriptions containing notes as to elevation and geographical coordinates of longitude and latitude. Many county histories are readily available from the Library of Congress as well as from services such as Internet Archive and Google Books.

A simple search on Google (or Bing) will offer approaches to many of the older county histories. The more experienced and aware searchers will think to tap into WorldCat, the Internet Archive or HathiTrust. The issue is not whether the user will find anything, but rather whether what is turned up in such a search is sufficient to the needs of the user. Can the researcher be confident that the search has been comprehensive – that she's picking up all available references to a particular surname tied to a particular location? Will the student find material too unreliable for completion of his assignment? Will the marketing professional be wasting time while working against the clock?

Each is equipped with different elements as a base for his or her search query. The researcher may be equipped with a name and a town. The student has a general phrase "yellow fever" with the additional qualifier of "quarantine". The marketing manager is beginning with an institutional name and a county. Given the wealth of openly accessible content, what will their experiences be?

It's worth noting as well that county histories written at different points in time will provide different facets of contemporary residents' knowledge. For example, Hathi Trust provides access to beautifully digitized versions from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign of the American Aerial County History Series carried out by the State of Illinois in the 1950s. As noted on the title pages of those publications, the intent was to offer histories with "county and township maps and many unique aerial photographs of cities, towns, villages and farmsteads". But searching for the term "farm" in the aerial county history for Adams County on Hathi Trust will reveal a different set of concerns about the region than the same search might yield searching for information about farms in Adams County in Accessible Archives. The narrative written in 1954 varies tremendously from one written in 1879, but both may be valuable to scholarship at different times and for different purposes. The account of the city of Quincy in 1954 notes with pride its population of more than 40,000 citizens, many of whom would have been working in one of the 100 factories there. By way of contrast, the history written in the nineteenth century notes that in 1831 when the community was founded, the population was fewer than a thousand citizens with the sole post office for many miles and with mail delivery occurring but once per week.

Similarly, the [very brief history of Custer County](#) posted to the web by the local authorities notes the severity of the winter of 1880-81 and the impact that the weather had on shifting the local landowners' focus from ranging livestock to crop production. But the history of Custer County contained in the vetted materials housed on the Accessible Archives platform not only notes the severity of that winter and the same shift to agrarian production, but further notes the impact of the blizzard of 1888 on the county:

> *Many lives were lost and everywhere there was a great loss of stock. Custer county was fortunate, however, and no loss of human life was credited to this blizzard in this county. Many blizzards have swept the open prairies of central Nebraska, but the Custerites who weathered the blizzard of 1888 are past masters in the lore of storm, winds, and snow. During this blizzard the temperature fell to thirty-two in this county, but throughout the storm region it ranged from twenty to fifty-two below, which made this blizzard match and overmatch the great storm of 1882.*

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(Reference: *HISTORY OF CUSTER COUNTY, NEBRASKA: A NARRATIVE OF THE PAST, WITH SPECIAL EMPHASIS UPON THE PIONEER PERIOD OF THE COUNTY'S HISTORY, ITS SOCIAL, COMMERCIAL, EDUCATIONAL, RELIGIOUS, AND CIVIC DEVELOPMENT FROM THE EARLY DAYS TO THE PRESENT TIME,* 1919, pp. 146-152.)

Other web search strategies will send the user to a local university's web based catalog to browse the holdings in some special collection, such as this set of results from the University of Michigan (https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/micounty?key=title;page=browse). The digitization activities of libraries in this realm of local and regional information may be somewhat uneven, with the resources of one state's wealthy university being better suited to the creation of digital assets and functional interfaces than a smaller, less well-endowed institution. Additionally, a state system may be charged solely with preservation of that state's county histories. Alternately, the approach may be focus on digitizing and making searchable more specific archival material, such as the University of Wisconsin at Stout offering a finding of county records from Pepin, Barron and Dunn Counties.

The problem faced by the user is how best to piece together information from all of these various resources effectively in order to accomplish the necessary research.

Traditional resources are useful in that task:

Three major bibliographic resources present lists of county histories in the United States. They are:

❖ Filby, P. William. *A Bibliography of American County Histories.* Baltimore, MD. Genealogical Publishing Co., 1985.

❖ Meyerink, Kory L., Editor. *Printed Sources: A Guide to Published Genealogical Records.* Salt Lake City, UT. Ancestry, Inc. 1998.

❖ Peterson, Clarence S. *Consolidated Bibliography of County Histories in Fifty States.* Baltimore, MD. Genealogical Publishing Co., 1961.

Worldcat (http://www.worldcat.org) will serve the researcher in locating copies of those printed resources housed in locations convenient to the individual.

In addition, numerous jurisdictional bibliographies of county histories and state histories have been produced. There are so many that it would be both inappropriate and impossible to begin a listing. While many are in traditional book format, more and more these publications are becoming accessible directly online, with some still available only in various microformats. Many of these sources have been developed by professional researchers and genealogical research organizations. Some of the lists that include locally oriented materials in addition to a locality's county history are public

library bibliographies. Others come from regional organizations or societies that have developed lists of resources. The caveat for researchers is the realization that some web-based resources from these smaller entities may not be consistently maintained in terms of either updated links or security certificates. With regard to the latter, some browsers will alert the user to the lapsed certificate, steering the researcher away from what may be an unprotected server, but still one holding valuable information.

Some examples follow:

Benie, Joe. Online County Histories, Biographies & Indexes—USA: A Genealogy Guide. Available at: http://www.genealogybranches.com/countyhistories.html

Bloomington Illinois Pubic Library, Family and Local History (March 2013), Bloomington IL. Available at: http://www.bloomingtonlibrary.org/Assets/files/local_history.pdf

Collins, Raymond, et. al., "Illinois County Histories at the Illinois State Library." Springfield, IL. Illinois State Library. Available at: http://www.lib.niu.edu/2000/il000292.html

Committee for a New England Bibliography, various editors including Roger Parks and John D. Haskell, Jr. and T. D. Seymour Bassett (10 volumes and various publishers including The University Press of New England, G. K. Hall and the Massachusetts Historical Society). 1976-2003.

Enoch Pratt Free Library, Maryland Department - Available at: http://www.prattlibrary.org/locations/maryland/index.aspx?id=4901#county_books

Florida County Histories Bibliography - Available at: http://dos.myflorida.com/library-archives/research/explore-our-resources/florida-history-culture-and-heritage/florida-county-histories/

Kansas State Historical Society. County Histories. Topeka, KS. Available at: http://www.kshs.org/research/collections/documents/bibliographies/counties/index.htm

Mackintosh, Robert H., Jr. Selected Bibliography of County, City, and Town Histories and Related Published Records in the South Carolina Archives Reference Library. [Columbia, SC.] The South Carolina Department of Archives and History. [n.d.] Available at: http://dc.statelibrary.sc.gov/handle/10827/6996

Mountain Heritage Books. County Histories. [A "catalog" of available county histories.]. Available at: http://www.mountainheritagebooks.com/county_histories.html

Newberry Library. "Dakota Territory, North Dakota and South Dakota: Bibliography and Sources." Chicago, IL. Newberry Library, 2006. Available at: http://publications.newberry.org/ahcbp/documents/DAKs_Bibliography.htm

Note as well the Newberry Library's interactive [Atlas of Historical County Boundaries](#).

University of Michigan Digital Library. Michigan County Histories. Ann Arbor, MI. UMDL. Available at: http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/micounty/

In addition to bibliographic listing—both on the national level as well as on the state and local levels—numerous other finding aids have been generated from the many available county histories. Many local organizations and societies have done comprehensive indexing of selected county histories; others have prepared name indexes to these same publications. Examples of these specialized finding aids include:

❖ Bradford, Thomas Lindsley, Compiler. "The Bibliographer's Manual of American History: Containing an Account of all State, Territory, Town and County Histories Relating to the United States" Edited and Revised by Stan. V. Henkels. Philadelphia: S. V. Henkels & Co., 1907-1910. Available as a reprint from numerous publishers and from Google Books at: http://books.google.com/books?id=AwluAAAAIAAJ&pg=PT310&dq=%22county+history%22&hl=en&ei=rB-6TPLfIoOC8gay0fzLDg&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=6&ved=0CEMQ6AEwBQ#v=onepage&q=%22county%20history%22&f=false

❖ Dalby, John. "Minnesota County History Name Index" Provo, UT. The Generations Network, Inc., 1999 (now part of Ancestry.com). This online bibliography contains information from 33 separate resources with coverage dates ranging from 1860 to 1985. As a part of Ancestry.com's resources, it is available at: http://search.ancestry.com/search/db.aspx?dbid=3721&cj=1&sid=AGLinks&o_xid=0002530104&o_lid=0002530104

❖ "History of DeKalb County Indiana with Biographical Sketches". 1996 reprint of the 1914 edition "plus a modern name index."

❖ O'Connor, Cathy L. EveryNameIndex.com: Free Genealogy Every Name Indexes. Available at: http://www.everynameindex.com/index.html. The publisher states she has made available indexes for Indiana, Illinois, Kentucky, Michigan, Ohio, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin. She also states that new databases and states are regularly added to the collection.

❖ Tyne, John J., Compiler. "Index of Names Appearing in History of Broome County by H. P. Smith" [Sidney? N.Y.]: John J. Tyne. 1973

Name indexing is the most popular add-on resource for county histories. In addition, many other types of specialized indexes have been developed or constructed for the histories that were published in the 18th and early 19th centuries. Indexes have been

published that lead one to information previously "hidden" in the older county histories. These include listings of burial records, business listings, place names, church locations, ghost towns, census/voter lists, legislative memberships, original land ownership, and many more.

Online Resources: Scope

Accessible Archives focuses on primary source materials with depth of coverage in Revolutionary War and Civil War era resources. Currently, **Accessible Archives** has complete coverage of county histories from 33 of the 50 states in the Union available online. Their ongoing program will obtain, digitize and load all known county histories published during the last two decades of the 18th Century, and beyond. Current coverage on the **Accessible Archives** website are shown at American County Histories – County List. (That page notes that some states with extensive lists are still under development. Please check with your **Accessible Archives** representative to see what is available for a particular state. For example, coverage for the state of Indiana now includes Adams, Benton, Boone, Cass, Clay, Clinton, Dearborn, Decatur, DeKalb, Delaware, Elkhart, Fountain, Hamilton, Hancock, Hendricks, Henry, Montgomery, Owen, Warren and Wells. That represents 18% of the 92 counties in the state and work is on-going.)

The Family History Archives at Brigham Young University's Lee Library has a collection of published genealogy and family history books. This collection includes histories of families, county and local histories, how-to books on genealogy, genealogy magazines, genealogy periodicals and gazetteers. The value of this archive is so great that other information resource providers (including **Accessible Archives**) may use it to identify worthy histories for acquisition and digitization. The web-site for the Family History Archives is http:www.lib.byu/fhc/index.php.

Ancestry.com (http://www.ancestry.com/) has the capability equal to any other site for drilling down county histories. Over 1,200 titles are quickly retrieved in a search of Ancestry's card catalog. Their collections also include numerous titles from Great Britain. When searching their catalog, the researcher is able to limit the output by several filters, including location, date, language and several subject areas. In 2015, Ancestry.com and ProQuest announced a partnership intended to enhance the value of the online resource, HeritageQuest Online for those keen to trace a personal family history. (Ancestry holds the rights to the digital assets. However, ProQuest continues to serve as the distributor for the HeritageQuest Online service.) The resource has been carefully tailored to focus on searching for individuals rather than on specific locales or events in history. One key difference in this resource from the American County Histories collection from **Accessible Archives** is that not all of the materials contained in the

28,000 family histories and city directories is actually searchable via HeritageQuest Online.

Gale Cengage Learning has a collection entitled *County and Regional Histories and Atlases* as a part of their Archives Unbound collection. Included in that collection are county histories from the following states: California; Illinois; Indiana; Michigan; New York; Ohio; Pennsylvania; Wisconsin.

It is in the exploration of full text that a user may encounter more specific accounts that further fuel interest in the research. That undergraduate intrigued by the idea of pandemics and the practices of quarantine might after refining a search encounter a striking anecdote from the account of a medical practitioner as in this instance from a chapter on symptoms associated with the final stages of yellow fever (**see** *AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL SKETCHES AND RECOLLECTIONS, DURING A THIRTY-FIVE YEARS' RESIDENCE IN NEW ORLEANS. - SECOND EDITION.*THEODORE CLAPP. PHILLIPS, SAMPSON #x0026; COMPANY, 1858, p. 257)

> *The doctor came in, looked at him a moment, and then taking me one side, observed, "It is all over with him; he will die before sundown; I shall give no further prescriptions; do with him now whatever you please." There was an old French nurse in the room, who had spent her days in taking care of the sick, and was familiar with the Creole mode of treating the yellow fever. She exclaimed, "If you will allow me, I think I can cure this gentleman." We of course consented that she should make the trial. By this time, the respiration of our friend was getting very difficult, and his limbs were cold. She called for ptisans, spirits, warm water, and various other remedies, intended for external application only, whose nature I do not remember. We commenced rubbing his body all over, and using every possible means to excite perspiration. In less than two hours, he began to grow warm; the <u>vomilo</u> ceased; his breathing became easier; he perspired freely, and slept soundly the latter part of the night. In the morning, the doctor stopped at the door in his gig, to ask what hour the patient had died. To his great astonishment, he learned the favorable results of our experiment. In a few days after, the man entered his store, well. He is still living, and enjoys good health.*

The undergraduate's quick scan of a chapter suddenly yields an example of successful alternative treatments in the midst of a quarantine when traditional practitioners have given the patient up for dead. This might lead the student towards further investigation to learn whether alternative treatments were tolerated in other quarantined locales.

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Search and Retrieval in an Online Resource

Searchability

In an online environment, one of the most basic expectations of an information resource is that it include a search function. However, the degree to which various resources have enabled searchability does vary. (As an example, while Boolean search is fairly common, it is not necessarily ubiquitous.) In the context of county histories, most have image retrieval, as well as various search-limiting features.

One of the most important advantages of the *American County Histories* collection is the robust searchability that has been enabled on the platform. The system enables users to search across a single county, a complete state, a region, or the entire country – all within a single search.

The unique non-stop word concept in phrase searching available at **Accessible Archives** allows users to retrieve information much more accurately than at other sites. Other systems have words that cannot be used in a search. These words are typically referred to as "noise words" or "stop words." With no stop words retrieval of such information as company names or organizations and associations becomes much easier and more accurate. When used in conjunction with other **Accessible Archives** databases, enhanced search results are regularly retrieved.

An important feature available on **Accessible Archives** is the functional hypertext applied to tables of contents and the indexes (where they exist). Many online services do not provide this capability. Additionally, linkage to the images from the digitized text provides in-context information and ease of access to any images that may accompany the published text. **Accessible Archives' *American County Histories*** further supports full search functionality across the collection of digitized book materials. Finally, **Accessible Archives'** on-going initiative in acquiring, digitizing and presenting all county histories of the 19th and early 20th Centuries will result in unparalleled availability, access and searchability.

Indexing

It appears that most of the county histories contain some indexing and tables of contents that often are quite descriptive. However, especially in the older histories, only prominent people are included in the index entries. It is common for county histories to neglect the inclusion of a vast number of the individuals included within their pages. Until somewhat recently, indexing was a laborious manual process. Thus, the shortcoming of indexing is not unexpected. In-depth research in county histories, again especially with those produced in the 19th and early 20th Centuries, is best accomplished with computer access to the full text documents.

Occasionally local genealogical societies, research groups and publications fostered by programs such as the thirties-era WPA have enhanced access to selected county histories with specialized indexing. For example, under the auspices of the WPA family name indexing of Indiana's county histories was undertaken. The WPA project went through the letter J. Since the WPA project others have taken up where the WPA left off and finally have completed the full alphabetical run of Indiana county histories.

Bibliographic Control

National bibliographic utilities as well as traditional Internet search engines yield a massive number of available county histories. In a closer look at some of these entries it can easily be discovered that many titles that appear to be new books are, in fact, reproductions of earlier works. This is not surprising given the nature of some county history publishers as well as the tradition of reprinting many of these historical volumes. With lack of bibliographic control and publishers with profit-only motives, a variation of some titles is to be expected. Even with automation, it is to be expected that such variants – frequently originating through human error and carried forward in subsequent citation -- will continue to frustrate scholars and researchers

Caveats, Cautions, Problems and Limitations

First of all, many of the instances cited herein are examples only and not to be construed as the only available resources. There are so many varied types of resources for gaining access to county histories that a comprehensive listing borders on the impossible.

Those scholars and researchers whose on-going investigations require familiarity with these publications are aware of the drawbacks encountered. Such experienced investigators recognize the probability of various types of errors and (frankly) hyperbole to be encountered. These errors include misspellings of names, incorrect life dates, indigenous peoples, misstatements, population errors (possibly done on purpose to exaggerate and aggrandize an area or region), causes of death (lack of information that could negatively affect the impression of an area, especially information on communicable disease outbreaks), boundary demarcation errors and land ownership misstatements that have been found to exist in several county histories.

However, there should be efforts to ensure that undergraduates and others less familiar with the genre are made aware of the potential for encountering problematic vocabulary and stigmatization that would have been common at the time of publication, particularly with regard to indigenous peoples. County histories may unwittingly provide an excellent avenue of approach for instructors of information literacy for examining with their students the concept of intentional and unintentional bias.

Even with those caveats, county histories are often the best available resource for local information, noting contemporary details of social practices and values that might otherwise be dismissed. as unimportant. An error may be included in a primary source such as a county history, and then reprinted without validation in numerous secondary sources. It seems obvious that the majority of information in most county histories is relatively accurate. Moreover, the incidence of erroneous information in county histories is not unique to that genre. The problem for researchers is that no matter what source is being used, determining what is fact, what is partially true, and what is totally incorrect information is very difficult. In the final analysis, however, when combined with proper caution to verify the validity of the material, the use of these sources can be of tremendous value to the researcher.