Primary Proof: Finding and Identifying Primary Sources for Documentation

Association of Public Historians of New York State
Annual Meeting · October 3, 2018
Who We Are

Our two main initiatives:

• To help diversify the Be the Match Registry by supporting bone marrow drives in diverse communities

• To help people celebrate their community’s history through fully funded Historic Signage Grant programs
Historic Signage
Grant Programs

• Historical Roadside Markers
  over 500 markers in 53 counties
• Legends & Lore
  over 36 markers
• National Register of Historic Places
  144 markers and plaques
• Historic Canal Markers – NEW!
Marker Examples

“Gorton Turtle” in Madison County
Historic Canal Markers

National program in all 50 states
Grant Schedule

- 4 grant rounds each year based on APHNYS Regions
  - Check our website for your county’s deadlines

- Deadline to submit Letter of Inquiry (LOI) to verify Primary Source
  - Submit your proposed marker inscription & list of the primary source documentation you have assembled to verify the historical accuracy of your text.

- Application deadline – source materials due with application

- End of each fiscal quarter – awards granted
Primary and Secondary Sources

*Primary sources* provide first-hand testimony or direct evidence concerning the subject being researched. They are usually created at the time the events occurred. Examples include diaries, photographs, census records, deeds, legal filings, and newspaper reports published at the time of the event.

*Secondary sources* analyze, report, summarize or interpret data. These sources are one or more steps removed from the event. Examples include reference books - such as encyclopedias and local history publications - textbooks, magazine articles, commemorative booklets, and newspaper articles analyzing past events.
Primary and Secondary Sources

What do we need to prove?

- Fort Edward Collegiate Institute existed
- It opened 1854 and closed 1910
- Dr. Joseph E. King was a principal
- Institute was destroyed by fire in 1877
  - Was it rebuilt?
- Institute was destroyed by fire in 1910
Primary and Secondary Sources

- Fort Edward Collegiate Institute existed
Primary and Secondary Sources

• It opened 1854 and closed 1910
Primary and Secondary Sources

• Dr. Joseph E. King was a principal

Report of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, p. 615
Primary and Secondary Sources

- Institute was destroyed by fire in 1877
  - *Was it rebuilt?*

1877 1881
Primary and Secondary Sources

- Institute was destroyed by fire in 1910
Primary and Secondary Sources

New York Public Library Digital Collections
Digitalcollections.nypl.org

New York Heritage
NYHeritage.org
Primary and Secondary Sources

Library of Congress
www.loc.gov/collections/
Primary and Secondary Sources

Google Books
Books.google.com
Primary and Secondary Sources

Tired of restrictions and paywalls around public data? So are we.

Reclaim The Records
ReclaiimtheRecords.org
Primary and Secondary Sources

Family Search - not indexed
FamilySearch.org
Primary and Secondary Sources

U.S. Army Center of Military History
www.history.army.mil

Medal of Honor Recipients

The President, in the name of Congress, has awarded more than 3,400 Medals of Honor to our nation’s bravest Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, Marines, and Coast Guardsmen since the decoration’s creation in 1861. For years, the citations highlighting these acts of bravery and heroism resided in dusty archives and only sporadically were printed. In 1973, the U.S. Senate ordered the citations be compiled and printed as a Committee on Veterans’ Affairs report. This book was later updated and a reprint published in 1979.

Primary and Secondary Sources

Historical Newspapers

Fulton History/Fulton Postcards
NYS Historic Newspapers
Brooklyn Newsstand
Chronicling America
Records in the County Clerk’s Office

- County Clerks: elected 4-yr term
- Most are clerks of their respective Supreme and County Courts
- Manage the security and maintenance of county records, especially land and associated records – 2013; close to 70,000 documents, 21 tons
- Collects and manages state and local monies. Took in $13 million, $1.7 million was put into the general fund
- Other varied roles dependent on the local government’s needs:
  - 51 of the 62 counties operate as agents of the NYS Department of Motor Vehicles
  - Many serve in the following roles as well:
    - Commissioner of Jurors
    - Public Information
    - Pistol Permit Application
    - Passport Application
    - Administration of elections (this is very rare)
    - Registrar of licenses-business names, veteran
    - Records, oaths of office, coroners’ reports, notaries public, religious societies, professionals, maps, road designations, firemen exemptions, hazardous waste site information, naturalization papers, and archival documents, etc.
What record can a County Government have?

The records typically start when the local government was formed, including many records linked with national events:

- Military Records including American Revolution
- Land Grants, local militia records
- Records, WWI & WWII Military files
- County Minutes
- Court Records
- Photographs
- Appointment Letters

Documents corresponding to local events:
- Church and Religious incorporations
- Business records
- Deeds
- Maps
- Mortgage information
- Chattel Mortgages
- Naturalization Records
- Scores of miscellaneous records unique to that county
Oddball local documents...

- Stallion Pedigrees
- Physicians & Surgeons Books
- Dentists Records
- Chattel Mortgages
- Religious (not for profit) Incorporation Books
- Business Indexes (DBA’S)
- Canal Records
- Railroad Bonds
- Maps
- Farm names
- Fruit Juice Permits
...and naturalizations

- Naturalizations are a Federal Government record and as such each county has to follow the guidelines set by the federal government.
- County Clerks who work in a county that still actively takes part in the naturalization process have a different set of laws to follow than those that stopped processing naturalizations in the 1950s.
County A has this why don’t you?

County A Has:
• Land grants
• Pension Records
• Church Records
• Vital Records
• Census Records
• Different Miscellaneous Records

Why don’t you???
• Not every county was a land grant county
• Not every county handled pensions
• They are not a public record
• Village/Town/City Record
• Not always were kept
• Each and every community has records that are unique to it
What does a City/Town/Village have?

- Town meeting minutes
- Civil War Registers
- Amusement Device Licenses, solicitor licenses, animal licenses, etc.
- Vital Records (Birth/Marriage/Death)
- Tax Records
- Local election information
Other local source hideouts

Historical Societies
- Artifacts
- Genealogies
- Journals/Letters
- Business Ledgers/Journals
- Photographs
- Oral Histories

Libraries
- Census Records
- Local newspaper microfilm
- Local History Texts
- Artifacts
University libraries, and specifically “special collections” can house vast collections of journals, personal papers, etc. from people pertaining to the universities but also to the local communities or important events that took place in said communities.
Some local governments have specialized offices. Montgomery County has the “Office of History.” Livingston, Niagara & Wayne Counties have offices that actively collect items such as church records, genealogical files and more in an effort to preserve them.
Museums that specialize in particular collections may also be a resource of things like letters, military papers, medical papers, etc., etc. In particular the New York State Military Museum houses collections pertaining to most of the military conflicts in New York History. The Erie Canal Museum in Syracuse houses journals, letters etc. tied to the Erie Canal employees, stake holders and more.
Other potential locations

Organizations such as the Library of Congress, the New York State Archives, the New York State Library and the Fenimore Library (formerly the New York State Historical Association) all have large collections that are searchable via online databases. Many military records (specifically pensions) are kept by the National Archives, microfilmed versions can be viewed in satellite offices.
Religious record centers commonly hold records pertaining to churches that are no longer operating. The Catholic dioceses houses significant records. The Presbyterian Historical Society in Philadelphia has a digital database and other organized faiths have large historical collections throughout the U.S.
Ancestry New York

Residents of New York State can look at select collections that ancestry.com has digitized from the New York State Archives.

These collections include but are not limited too Civil War Muster Rolls, Civil War Town Clerk Journals, New York State censuses and many more.

How to Use Ancestry.com New York

Several New York repositories have formed a partnership with Ancestry.com to digitize family history records and make them available online for free. The list of records available is located in the bottom left corner of the Ancestry.com New York web page. Descriptions of the records as well as the holding organizations are provided through the links and logos on the Ancestry.com New York web page.

How do I sign-up?

Free access to Ancestry.com New York is available to New York State residents. This access requires a free Ancestry.com New York account.

You can learn how to create the account by watching the video or by following the step by step instructions below.
Thank you!

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