

10 Things Genealogists Should Do Before Leaving a Library or Archives

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Those brick and mortar buildings that we call libraries, archives, courthouses, genealogical societies, historical societies and museums are all around us. They hold the records that we are searching for as genealogists. Do you know how to use these repositories for the utmost benefit to your research?

This presentation will give 10 action items to do before you leave a library or archives to help make your visit a success!

#1 Ask about Vertical Files or Subject Files:

-Vertical Files, sometimes called Subject Files, are a collection of miscellaneous records usually stored in filing cabinets and cataloged by surname and/or subject. These files are a hodge-podge of all kinds of records such as newspaper clippings, compiled family histories, business letterheads, etc. The archive should have an index of what is contained in their Vertical Files.

#2 Ask about Manuscript Collections:

-Manuscript Collections are some of the most valuable and useful records to the genealogist. Again, the repository should have an index or master list of their Manuscript Collection.

-Each collection is assigned a specific name such as "The John Smith Papers 1648-1772".

-Ask to see the Finding Aid for the specific collection which will give you a box by box, folder by folder description of what is contained in the collection. Be aware that not every document will be listed in the Finding Aid. A listing will look something like, "Box #1, Folder #3: Correspondence 1762-1772".

#3 Ask about School Records (even for your ancestors that did not go to school)

-School records are a great resource for finding your ancestors. Whether the records include school registers, yearbooks or school photographs, these records are a must for any genealogists. Do not discount these records if your ancestors did not attend school. It's quite possible that they could be mentioned in the School Board Minute Books for various reasons.

#4 Ask about Scrapbooks

-Scrapbooks are a gold mine for genealogists. They are one-of-a-kind records source that are unique to the person who compiled them. Even if your ancestor didn't make a scrapbook, maybe their neighbor or friend put one together and mentioned your ancestor or clipped a newspaper item and pasted it in their scrapbook. It's always a good idea to scour scrapbooks of local people from where your ancestors lived.

#5 Ask about Diaries or Journals

-Diaries and journals can be a great place to find your ancestor or to learn about their community to add to your ancestor's story. These records are in every archive and contain some wonderful genealogical and historical information that genealogists should be seeking.

#6 Cite Your Sources

-Citing your sources can be a tedious task for some but a necessary one. Before you leave the research repository be sure to record the source information for the documents you have retrieved. That way, when you get home you will know where you found them and you can do a complete source citation. If you need help with source citations, you can consult the excellent book by Elizabeth Shown Mills entitled *Evidence Explained: Citing History Sources from Artifacts to Cyberspace, Third Edition, published by Genealogical Publishing Company.*

#7 Ask for a Tour of the Facility

-Each archive is different. They hold different kinds of records depending on what was saved, preserved and housed in that particular archive. One of the ways to get to know that archive and what they hold is to ask for a tour of the facility. Most of the records are housed in back rooms and we may not know what the archive has unless we ask about the records or ask for a tour of the archive itself.

#8 Leave Your Contact Information and Surnames

-Once you have completed your time at an archive and you are ready to leave. It's always a great idea to leave your name, contact information and the surnames your researching with the archives staff. Many archives have sign-in sheets or books where you can leave this information. Because you have left your surnames, it's possible that researchers can come behind you and see your surnames and want to contact you and connect. Also, please leave this information with the archives staff or person you worked with so if they happen to run across records after you are gone, they can contact you and let you know what was found.

#9 Get a Contact Name and Email Address of the Facility and Staff

-After you have left your name and contact information, get the name and contact information of the archivist that you worked with while you were visiting. It is always a great idea to have this point of contact so that once you get home you can reach out to that person if you need something else looked-up or researched.

#10 Ask about Unprocessed Collections

-All archives have unprocessed records collections. These are records that have been transferred or donated to the archives and are sitting on shelves in backrooms waiting to be processed. These records are not normally open to researchers but if you talk to the archivist and show how serious you are with your research, you may just gain access to unprocessed records collections that could have records about your ancestor that are not online or microfilmed.

So, the next time you get to visit an archive, be sure to do these 10 things and hopefully your genealogy visit will be a successful one!

Here is where you can find Melissa Barker!

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