



A White Paper: American County Histories

Their Uses, Usability, Sources and Problems with Access

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Abstract: County histories have long formed the cornerstone of local historical and genealogical research. Encyclopedic in scope and virtually limitless in their research possibilities, they provide a wealth of information for researchers of all types as well as for general interest readers. The advent of computerized versions of county histories, as in almost every other field, has enhanced research in this field. The general cleaning up of these digitized versions and the creation of indexing have markedly improved access to this information. Not all electronic access is on an equal level, however, and the methodology provided by *Accessible Archives, Inc.* offers a number of advantages not found on other sites. This paper will provide an analysis of the value of the information available in American county histories, an overview of current sources of this information, and a discussion of the inherent superiority of the access and retrieval capabilities provided through *Accessible Archives*.

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County Histories — their origin

County histories have long formed the cornerstone of local historical and genealogical research. Encyclopedic in scope and virtually limitless in their research possibilities, they provide a wealth of information for researchers of all types as well as for general interest readers.

County histories date from at least the sixteenth century as exemplified by the English topographer John Norden and his complete series of county histories and gazetteers. Locally-oriented histories for North America have existed since the seventeenth century in the story of the early years of the Pilgrims' Colony with William Bradford's *Of Plimoth Plantation*.

Researchers have estimated that some 5,000 county histories have been published covering at least 80 percent of all counties in the United States. These numbers continue to grow. In his late-1990's *A Guide to Published Genealogical Records* Kory L. Meyerink counts 4,929 published county histories. At that time only Alaska and Hawaii were recorded as states without any county histories. This is no longer true, and today every state now has at least one published county history. As recently as twelve years ago, only a dozen states had one-hundred percent county history coverage. That is to say, there was at least one county history for each county within that state. The impetus of the nation's centennial and bi-centennial, as well as encouragement through government programs such as the WPA, induced the creation of many additional county histories. Clearly, this is a growth genre and a usually valuable resource.

Publishing 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.

Content and Uses

Local historical and genealogical research

County histories are a rich information resource covering where one's ancestors lived. Obviously not all families are included, especially since many of these histories were published on a subscription or fee basis. Additionally, content often was submitted on a voluntary basis. In spite of these limitations, county histories offer the genealogist an overview of a region, the economic well-being of an area and the general conditions of a community. Researching general information about where one's ancestors lived can often yield information about other available resources. Neighbors, friends and associates of a researcher's family can often be uncovered and/or developed utilizing much of the information traditionally found in county histories.

In addition to the traditional uses of county histories (e.g., finding ones roots, gaining a perspective on ancestor's living conditions, etc.), there are many more applications in which county histories may be employed. Examples of some of these additional uses can include:

Non-traditional uses

Aboriginal Populations

From Clayton's *History of Bergen and Passaic Counties, New Jersey, with Biographical Sketches of Many of its Pioneers and Prominent Men* (pp. 24+) the narrative describes the Wolf (or Minsi) tribe of the Delaware Nation as being the most warlike and powerful of all the tribes that occupied the region in and around the county of Hunterdon, New Jersey.

Archeology

From Scharf & Wescott's *History of Philadelphia, 1609-1884* (pp. 30+) we find a description of the housing systems and building types of the Andastes or the Iroquois of the Susquehanna.

Associations

William Shaw in *History of Essex and Hudson Counties, New Jersey* (pp. 540+) gives a detailed description of the various organizations and associations in existence in the late 19th Century.

Banking

T. J. C. Williams in the *History of Frederick County...* (pp. 470+) lists the original directors of the Citizens' National Bank of Frederick, Md.

Buildings & Construction

Snow's *History of Cayuga County* (pp. 19+) describes in detail the structure and accoutrements of the new prison in Auburn, New York. He also details the impact of this new structure on the economic and physical growth of the town.

Celebrations

Captain C. H. Ellis in *History of Faulk County South Dakota* (pp. 261+) discusses the various "settlers' picnics held in the county." In the first decade of the 20th Century, one of them at Miller's Grove in DeVoe Township had an attendance of about 3,500.

Community Development Programs

Edmund Halsey's *History of Morris County New Jersey* (pp. 66) discusses the development of the first turnpike company in the region and its impact on regional growth.

Crime Statistics

Scharf and Wescott in their *History of Philadelphia, 1609-1884* (pp. 1819+) report that one of the prisons within Philadelphia housed "two hundred ten persons on the criminal side and twenty-one in the debtors' apartment..." They then go on to describe the outbreak of cholera in the prison as well as other conditions within the institution.

Educational Programs

In *History of Caroline County, Maryland* (pp. 256+) there is a discussion of the earlier need for a parochial school to serve the larger German population that had migrated into the region. This was followed by a summary of the demise of the parochial school because of the integration of the German population into the general community.

Elections

Benjamin Whitman's *History of Erie County* (pp. 340+) summarizes most of the elections in Erie County, Pennsylvania from 1788 through 1800, including local, state and national elections.

Entertainment and the Arts

A summary of the 1850-51 national tour of Jenny Lind (the "Swedish Nightingale") is provided in Scharf and Wescott's *History of Philadelphia, 1609-1884* (pp. 1075+).

Ethnic History

John T. Horton in his *History of Northwestern New York...* (pp. 307+) reports that by 1890 Buffalo, New York had a total population of 255,664. Of these, there were 6 Greeks, 15 Czechs, 80 Hungarians and 610 Russians.

Firsts (births, deaths, transportation systems, automobiles, etc.)

Bradsby's *History of Bradford County* (pp. 576+) list six "first settlers" in this northeastern county of Pennsylvania.

Geological Descriptions

In James Quinlan's *History of Sullivan County* the author relates the southeastern New York county's lore of "a half-breed Indian named John Johnson" who had discovered such a rich lode of lead that he could "cut [it] from the vein with a hatchet, and was nearly pure" as it was smelted without difficulty and had a very small percentage of dross.

Growth of the Press

In the *History of Caroline County, Maryland* it is reported that by mid 1918 *The Greensboro Enterprise* was produced on a "cylinder newspaper press" which was "run by electricity."

Health and Vital Statistics

In the county history for Mercer County, Pennsylvania (pp. 271+) the epidemic of dysentery (sometimes called "bloody flux") is described, including the attending medical professionals, as well as the ancillary hardships witnessed by the population when it occurred in 1847.

Native Fauna

Andrew Long's *History of Chautauqua County* (pp. 81) lists the "native animals" existing at the time of settlement. The animals listed are deer, wolf, bear, wild cat, fox, otter, porcupine or hedge-hog, raccoon, woodchuck or ground-hog, skunk, mink, muskrat, opossum, rabbit, weasel and squirrel.

Native Flora

Morton Montgomery's *History of Berks County in Pennsylvania* (pp. 26+) has a catalog listing of native flowering plants and seedless plants in the county.

Participation in Revolutionary & Civil Wars

The *History of Wyoming County* [New York] (pp. 93+) provides a report on all of the battles in which the 1st New York Dragoons participated. These engagements ranged from the January 1863 battle at Deserted House, Virginia to Lee's surrender at Appomattox in 1865.

Photographs of Enterprises

Captain Caleb F. Ellis in his *History of Faulk County, South Dakota* intersperses the text with numerous photos of individuals, settlements, business establishments and other noteworthy scenes. [This is a tradition of many of the county and territorial histories!] An example of one of the enterprises is a photo on page 331 of several Percheron draft horses from the DeVoe Stock and Grain Farm owned and operated by Alex Miller.

Photographs of Events

Ellis' *History of Faulk County, South Dakota* (pp. 29, 111+) gives a detailed description of the agricultural excellence available in this region and summarizes the various awards won by the county at state fairs in 1887, 1903, 1904 and 1905. This description is accompanied by a photo of the county's exhibit from the 1904 Yankton State Fair.

Photographs of Individuals

In the *History of Jerauld County South Dakota* by N. J. Dunham (pp. 236+) relates the story of an artesian well-drilling machine that was constructed by W. P. Schultz. The machine (valued at \$4,000) was such a success at several farmsteads that the people of the county "by tacit consent" exempted the machine from taxation and it was never listed on any assessor's rolls. A photo of Schultz accompanies the story.

Political Events

Harry Landon in *The North Country A History...* (pp. 322+) reported that William Morgan, a Batavia, New York resident, as part of his support of the Anti-Masonic Party announced he was going to break his vows and publish the secrets of the Masons. These "secrets" were published and shortly thereafter Morgan disappeared. The mystery surrounding his disappearance was never solved and some believe this incident — and surrounding events — gave rise to the growing strength of the Anti-Masonic Party.

Population Shifts

From Horton's *History of Northwestern New York Erie, Niagara, Wyoming, Genesee and Orleans Counties* (pp. 31-32), we find a summary of the movement of Tuscarora Indians. From the early 18th Century this tribe was almost exclusively located in southern Virginia and northern North Carolina with a population of about 8,000. Horton's narrative traces the various migrations of the Tuscarora to their eventual occupation of the Tuscarora Indian Reservation in Niagara County with a population of barely 450 individuals.

Religious Trends and Migrations

L. H. Everts in *History of Cattaraugus County...* (pp. 71+) reports on religious organizations, structures and membership from the county's censuses of 1855, 1865 and 1875. For example there were 18 Methodist Episcopal organizations in Cattaraugus County in 1855 with usual attendance of 2,230. By 1875 they had grown to 30 organizations with a decreased usual attendance of 1,707. In that same time period the collective salaries of the Methodist Episcopal clergy had grown by about \$10,000.

Settlement Patterns

In the *History of Northwestern New York, Erie, Niagara, Wyoming, Genesee and Orleans Counties* (pp. 541+) John Horton provides census information that is not from the nation's decennial census, but apparently is from state-conducted census tabulations. For the counties covered in his history Horton reports area populations for in five-year intervals from 1810 through 1940.

Transportation Systems

Background information on the development of the Erie Canal is given in *History of Niagara County* (pp. 107+). Soon after the initial construction the capacity of the Canal was found to be wanting. An act was passed in 1835 to increase the length, width and depth of the Erie Canal. This work progressed over the next 25 years at a total cost of \$30,000,000.

Urban/Rural Migration

John T. Hall's *History of Atlantic City and County, New Jersey* (pp. 111+) relates the development of Egg Harbor City, New Jersey. This village was incorporated in 1858. Soon after the formal opening of the Camden & Atlantic Railroad, in 1854, the attention of parties was attracted to the vast expanse of unsettled lands adjacent to this line. An association was formed to promote Egg Harbor City. In 1858 the total population was 873. By 1895 it was 1,557.

Weather Patterns

Most county histories offer (sometimes in great detail) the disasters that their region has suffered, especially violent storms, extended weather patterns and other natural disasters. Thomas Cushing takes a different viewpoint in stating "Here we have no tornadoes, but the healthful breezes that cheer and invigorate both mind and body, and a climate that invites to our midst every nationality under the sun." (From: *History of the Counties of Gloucester, Salem, and Cumberland, New Jersey* by Thomas Cushing. Pp. 101+).

Where to Find County and Territorial Histories

Traditional Bibliographic Resources

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.

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. Still others are little more than advertisements for reprints of collections that are available at no cost on the Internet. A few examples follow:

Benie, Joe. Online County Histories, Biographies & Indexes – USA: A Genealogy Guide. Available at:

<http://www.genealogybranches.com/countyhistories.html>

Bloomington, Illinois Public Library. County Histories and Biographies. Bloomington, IL. Available at:
http://www.bloomingtonlibrary.org/find/family_&_local_history/resources/county_histories_&_biographies/

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. "Selected County Histories." Available at: <http://www.prattlibrary.org/locations/maryland/index.aspx?id=2334>

Florida County Histories Bibliography. Compiled by Beverly Pittman Byrd (1988) and revised by Cynthia Wise (2001). Available at
<http://dis.dos.state.fl.us/library/bibliographies> (then click on "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://archives.sc.gov/NR/ronlyres/AC885860-62C1-4609-8988-BF913474F92C/0/biblio.pdf>

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

Newberry Library. "Dakota Territory, North Dakota and South Dakota: Bibliography and Sources." Chicago, IL. Newberry Library, 2006. Available at:
http://historical-county.newberry.org/website/North_Dakota/documents/DAKsBibliography.htm

Primary Source Media. "County and Regional Histories and Atlases." Available on microfilm in 660 reels. Additional information directly available from the publisher and at:
<http://www.gale.cengage.com/servlet/ItemDetailServlet?region=9&imprint=745&titleCode=PSM81&type=4&id=N230>

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=AwluAAAIAAJ&pg=PT310&dq=%22county+history%22&hl=en&ei=rB-6TPLfloOC8gay0fzLDg&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. Also she 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.

Internet Accessibility

There are numerous resources for finding county histories via the Internet. A simple search on any of the search engines such as Google, Yahoo or Bing will offer approaches to many of the older county histories. In some cases comprehensive and full-text access is provided. Many county histories are readily available from the Library of Congress as well as from services such as Internet Archive and Google Books.

A Google Books search for county histories in general very quickly yields over 80,000 entries. Of course, many of these are irrelevant, some being reviews of published histories, others mere pamphlets, still others simply entries to historical society serials publications. Additional entries may lead to complete false drops. However, a majority of the entries seem to be legitimate county histories. Were a person looking for a specific county history the search would be more exact and likely yield a direct hit on the needed history (if it exists). For example, a search for Dana R. Bailey's *History of Minnehaha County, South Dakota* using Google Books yields fewer than two dozen hits. A quick scan of these hits will allow retrieval of the full text of the book. Even without knowing an exact title, a researcher can often find the book in which he or she has an interest. A simple Internet search convention would be:

"<county name> county history"

If that search is unsuccessful another simple search convention would be:

"<county name> <state name>" "county history"

[In both of these examples the quotation marks are essential. This will guarantee an exact phrase search as opposed to individual word searches.]

Internet Archive (<http://www.archive.org/>) yields very similar results to Google Books searching. With Internet Archive it is easier to limit one's search to specific publication-type formats, the logical one being "Texts." This type of search yields barely 300 hits.

There are, of course, many other sites offering access to county histories. Having access to county histories is a valuable resource. But merely having such access does not always serve the researcher's needs. There is limited ability in multiple-text searching, limited capability for comparative research, limited ability for drilling down and limited Boolean functional research.

Online Resources

Generally speaking, the online resources with county history availability all have Boolean search capabilities. Most have image retrieval, as well as various search-limiting features.

Currently, **Accessible Archives, Inc.** has some 150 county histories available online. Their ongoing program will obtain, digitize and load all known county histories published during the last two decades of the 18th Century. Current coverage on the **Accessible Archives** website includes the following counties:

Connecticut

Fairfield	Litchfield	New Haven	Tolland
Hartford	Middlesex	New London	Windham

Delaware

Sussex	Kent	New Castle
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Maine

Androscoggin	Hancock	Lincoln	Piscataquis
Cumberland	Kennebec	Oxford	Sagadahoc
Franklin	Knox	Penobscot	York

Maryland

Alleghany	Carroll	Garrett	Montgomery
Anne Arundel	Cecil	Harford	Talbot
Baltimore	Dorchester	Howard	Washington
Caroline	Fredrick	Kent	

Massachusetts

Barnstable
Berkshire
Bristol
Dukes

Essex
Franklin
Hampden

Middlesex
Nantucket
Norfolk

Plymouth
Suffolk
Worcester

New Hampshire

Belknap
Carroll
Cheshire

Coos
Grafton
Hillsborough

Merrimack
Rockingham

Strafford
Sullivan

New Jersey

Atlantic
Bergen
Burlington
Camden
Cape May
Cumberland

Essex
Gloucester
Hudson
Hunterdon
Mercer

Middlesex
Monmouth
Morris
Ocean
Passaic

Salem
Somerset
Sussex
Union
Warren

New York

Albany
Allegany
Bronx
Broome
Cattaraugus
Chautauqua
Chemung
Chenango
Columbia
Cortland
Delaware
Dutchess

Erie
Genesee
Greene
Kings
Livingston
Madison
Monroe
New York
Niagara
Ontario
Orange

Orleans
Otsego
Putnam
Queens
Rensselaer
Richmond
Rockland
Saratoga
Schenectady
Schoharie
Schuyler

Steuben
Sullivan
Tioga
Tompkins
Ulster
Warren
Washington
Wayne
Westchester
Wyoming
Yates

Pennsylvania

Adams
Allegheny
Armstrong
Beaver
Bedford
Berks
Blair
Bradford
Bucks
Butler
Cambria
Cameron
Carbon
Centre
Chester
Clarion
Clearfield

Clinton
Columbia
Crawford
Cumberland
Dauphin
Delaware
Elk
Erie
Fayette
Forrest
Franklin
Fulton
Greene
Huntingdon
Indiana
Jefferson
Juniata

Lackawanna
Lancaster
Lawrence
Lebanon
Lehigh
Luzerne
Lycoming
McKean
Mercer
Mifflin
Monroe
Montgomery
Montour
Northampton
Northumberland
Perry
Philadelphia

Pike
Potter
Schuylkill
Snyder
Somerset
Sullivan
Susquehanna
Tioga
Union
Venango
Warren
Washington
Wayne
Westmoreland
Wyoming
York

Rhode Island

Bristol
Kent

Newport

Providence

Washington

Vermont

Addison
Bennington
Caledonia
Chittenden

Essex
Franklin
Grand Isle
Lamoille

Orange
Orleans
Rutland

Washington
Windham
Windsor

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. **Accessible Archives** focuses on primary source materials with depth of coverage in Revolutionary War and Civil War era resources. When used in conjunction with these other **Accessible Archives** databases, enhanced search results are regularly retrieved.

An important feature available on **Accessible Archives** is the hypertexting of the 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. Finally, **Accessible Archives’** plan to acquire, digitize and present all county histories of the late 19th Century will result in unparalleled availability, access and searchability.

ProQuest’s Heritage Quest Online also has a large number of county histories from about 22 states across the country. Most of the states represented are along the east coast through the Mississippi Valley. Their collection is digitized from microfilm. Search results will allow table of contents or browsing page-by-page as well as direct access to pages containing the user’s search terms. No hypertext linking is available, nor are title lists or the ability to limit a search solely to county histories. In these situations, the person looking specifically for an unnamed county history will have a strategic task facing them.

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 web-site for the Family History Archives is:
<http://www.lib.byu.edu/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.

Bush’s E-Books (<http://www.bushbooks.com/index.html>) has several county histories, almost exclusively from Pennsylvania, available on CD-ROM.

A Digital History (<http://www.adigitalhistory.com/>) is an on-demand CD-ROM and DVD publisher. Individual county histories are not available per se, but they are contained within state-by-state collections of full-text materials. No access capabilities, other than browser-provided searching is available. When a CD or DVD is purchased one will receive a pre-packaged collection of materials. Some of the collections have several county histories included, but many have none. A complete contents list for each collection is readily available at their web-site.

Gale Cengage Learning has a collection of "County and Regional Histories and Atlases." Included within this 660-reel microfilm collection are titles that include county histories from the following states:

California
Illinois

Indiana
Michigan

New York
Ohio

Pennsylvania
Wisconsin

Difficulties with Access

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. A cursory glance through several Internet search engines, a national bibliographic utility and some of the traditional bibliographies known to contain county histories yielded several titles that, at first glance, appeared to be unique titles. Further analysis of the entries, however, led to the discovery of simple inversions of title words. It is nearly impossible to determine if these occurrences were intentional or just inadvertent errors in bibliographic quality. Regardless, a lack of bibliographic integrity leads to incorrect information, researcher frustration and myriad other problems.

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.

Using county histories for research needs to be “taken with a grain of salt.” It is known that many of the county histories, especially the earlier ones that were produced on a subscription basis, contain errors. 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 have been found to exist in several county histories.

Even though they may contain errors, county histories are often the best available resource for local information. 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.

Summary

County histories provide a wealth of information. There is a significant breadth of coverage, especially when one considers electronic access, content updating, add-on services, reprinting and republishing and new editions. Many holes in county coverage have been filled in. Every state now has some county history information available.

There still remain problems with editorial integrity, especially with the older subscription-based “mug-book” oriented publications. However, in many cases these are the only generally available surviving records. So the adage “some information is better than none” is true, but should be coupled with appropriate researcher caution and an understanding of how and why many of these publications came into being.

The advent of computerized access to county histories, as in almost every other field, has enhanced research. Better indexing and better access in general are partial results of these advances. The availability of auxiliary resources generated from county histories makes usability of the older editions much easier.

In addition to cleaning up earlier editions, having digitized versions of county histories improves access to this information. Not all electronic access is on an equal level, however, and the path that **Accessible Archives, Inc.** has chosen to pursue provides a number of advantages not found in other versions. Yet in the final analysis, the researcher using county histories and similarly generated resources must bear in mind the initial purpose of these publications, as well as any other possible shortcomings. American county histories are a valuable resource, but one that must be used with caution.

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