

Lecture #2: Wonders of Libraries, Joys of Information, and Winding Paths to Knowledge

Suggested Readings:

Wayne C. Booth, et al, *The Craft of Research*, 3rd ed., 2008

Thomas Mann, *The Oxford Guide to Library Research*, 3rd ed., 2005.

Jenny L. Presnell, *The Information-Literate Historian: A Guide to Research for History Students*, 2007.

Outline

I. Why Take the Place Paper Seriously?

This is not just a library research assignment, but an exercise in reading the landscape

Best papers usually select a reasonably small place, and 1-3 themes that can be explored thoroughly there

Identify historical features of your place that interest you, while also seeking documents that show how your place

has changed over the decades: find the intersection of these two and you'll have the makings of a great paper

Remember that no matter what question historians are seeking to answer, their second question is always *what are the documents?* Because the past no longer exists and we can't explore it directly, we depend on scraps of

information that were usually created for some other purpose, and have to turn them to our own ends

Without documents, we can't say anything about the past, so finding documents is a core craft of doing history

II. Perils of the Digital World: A Loss of Structured Knowledge

Although Google is the most powerful tool for finding information the world has ever known, it hides as much as it reveals, and is much harder to use well than it appears

Much of the Web cannot be indexed by Google, and a great deal of knowledge isn't on the Web

Range of primary sources you can use in your place paper is endless: newspapers, letters, diaries, photographs, maps, business records, government records, digital sources, interviews, and, not least, books

Paradox of Helen C. White: a library that has lost 90% of its books in recent years: the digital revolution

A danger of Google and the Web is that information skills for navigating and structuring knowledge are degrading

III. Libraries at the University of Wisconsin-Madison

When the University of Wisconsin opened in 1848, it had no library; faculty collections held most books on campus

1878, building now called Old Music Hall was constructed as assembly hall and first library

Wisconsin Historical Society founded in 1846, and under leadership of its first two directors, Lyman Copeland Draper and Reuben Gold Thwaites, began collecting in all fields of North American history as necessary context for understanding Wisconsin; by 1890s, its quarters in the State Capitol were overflowing

Both the Society and the University needed a new building, so cooperated to build Historical Society in 1900: for next half century, it held the entire collections of both organizations, were managed together under one roof

By 1940s, Society Headquarters Building was overflowing, so Memorial Library constructed in 1950

Two collections split: North American history remained with Society; everything else to Memorial Library

Helen C. White Library constructed as Undergraduate Library in 1969, held quarter million volumes at its peak

Today, UW-Madison libraries hold on the order of 8.3 million volumes: 11th or 12th largest research library in U.S.

IV. Even the Order of Books on Shelves Has a History

The heart of Memorial Library was its card catalog, which filled an entire room: author/title catalog primary, but also subject catalog and, for use by librarians, shelf list catalog showing sequence of books on shelves

Library catalog classification systems we now use originated in second half of nineteenth century

1876, Melvil Dewey invented Dewey Decimal Classification System, which used purely numeric call numbers

1880, Charles Ammi Cutter begins developing the Cutter Expansive Classification System for Boston Athenaeum, with capital letters indicating subjects; this was initial system adopted by UW, which still has Cutter Class books

1897, Herbert Putnam modifies Cutter's scheme to create new Library of Congress ("LC") Classification System

Most major research libraries in the U.S., including UW-Madison's, now use the LC system: worth getting to know

UW-Madison moved toward digital catalog in 1970s, added last card to catalog in 1976

Core dilemma of library catalogs is that although a single book can deal with many subjects, it can only occupy a single location on a shelf, so choosing the correct location and cataloging it properly is crucial; this also requires

numerous finding aids and strategies for figuring out which books in which call letters are relevant to one's topic

Google was founded in 1998 by Larry Page and Sergey Brin, rapidly became most successful of emerging search engines because of algorithm ranking search results by number of websites that point at each other

Crucially, digital search did not require a single cataloging hook for information: single web page can have virtually limitless keyword hooks, obviating need for structured hierarchies of library classification systems

BUT: a great deal of vital knowledge, *especially about the past*, remains undigitized and unsearchable by Google

SO: learning to navigate structured hierarchical knowledge of library classification schemes remains a vital skill

V. Wisconsin Historical Society Collections

From its beginning, Society has collected all U.S. and Canadian history, so that it today describes itself as the largest freestanding library in the world devoted solely to the study of North American history: a treasure trove

Under LC system, works of Wisconsin history are concentrated in F576-F590 classification, so browse these shelves

Never forget that every book, every document, every piece of information is created at a particular moment and so

has a date that reflects the state of knowledge at that moment: always ask the date of a book or document and

reflect on what that date tells you about the perspectives and biases of that particular document

Remember too that many books relevant to Wisconsin topics do not appear in the F576-F590 classification sequence, since they may instead be part of the “General Collection,” which includes whole rest of LC letters. This is why getting a general sense of the LC system is so important: are you interested in farming? Then you need to get to know the “S” class; Geography? then the “G” class; Technology? then the “T” class. And so on. Remember too that oversized books are shelved in different locations, so you have to check there too. Want to know who lived on a particular street in a given year and what they did for a living? Check city directories. Historical Society is second only to Library of Congress in size of its newspaper collections, most of which are now on microfilm, located in the middle of the main floor of the library; microfilm holdings are vast. Government documents are among the most challenging of all library holdings to navigate because their organization is so arcane, but they contain information about virtually every imaginable topic, so are well worth exploring. See, for instance, special thematic volumes of 1880 census, which are fascinating. Historical Society is a Federal Depository Library, receiving all publications produced by Government Printing Office. Manuscript census documents enable you to reconstruct family, worker occupations, and farm production. Wisconsin state agencies cover many topics of interest to environmental historians, and many city depts. Too. Society’s Archives includes many unpublished documents that may be relevant to place papers; its “iconographic collection” of photographs includes more than 2 million images.

VI. A Potpourri of Other Campus Libraries

Don’t imagine that Memorial Library and Historical Society exhaust wealth of UW-Madison collections. Numerous others are of great potential interest for study of environmental history and possibly for place papers. Geography Library in Science Hall holds many atlases and volumes surveying environmental themes for many places, including Wisconsin. Map Library in Science Hall holds many thousands of maps and aerial photographs documenting change over time. Steenbock Library serves College of Agriculture and Life Science, so has all publications pertaining to farming, food, and agriculture—including Federal Depository publications that Historical Society does not retain: federal and state government documents relating to agriculture and land use thus often end up in Steenbock. Especially valuable for Wisconsin land-use history are the Land Economic Inventory maps (the “Bordner Survey”) that cataloged land use for almost all Wisconsin counties in 1930s; these have now been digitized and are accessible at <http://steenbock.library.wisc.edu/bordner/>. UW Archives on 4th floor of Steenbock is a treasure trove for all documents relating to campus history. The Aldo Leopold Papers at UW Archives are of special interest to this course, and are now being digitized: see <http://digicoll.library.wisc.edu/AldoLeopold/>. Chazen Museum of Art and Kohler Art Library for artworks and books relating to history of landscape. Birge Hall holds Wisconsin Herbarium and Biology Library for books about ecosystem types and functions. Weeks Hall houses Geology Library, with full publications of Wisconsin Geological Survey and many maps. Wendt Library has large collection reaching back to nineteenth-century for history of technology: water, sewage, electricity, public works, transportation, civil and environmental engineering, and so on. Wisconsin Geological and Natural History Survey (UW Extension) at 3817 Mineral Point Road sells topographic maps and many thematic maps relating to geology and natural history.

VII. Ask a Librarian

It takes a lifetime—many lifetimes, actually—to learn how to navigate the vast informational structures that humanity has been accumulating and organizing for centuries. Don’t imagine Google can take the place of all this—or that you can rely on Google instead of your own knowledge and ingenuity to think your way through this fascinating labyrinth of information. And don’t imagine you can do this by yourself either. If you need help—and you will—ask a librarian. They spend their entire lives inhabiting and caring for these amazing treasure troves, and are always eager to help others get to know libraries better.