

# The Reasons Why?:

## Coming to Terms with Local History in a Public Library Setting Preliminaries: A Somewhat Short Test

*Assessing the library's responsibility to maintain a local history collection for the public: a reality check*  
Why a Public Library Might Want to Consider a Local History Collection, Archives, Room, and Specialist?

Note (below): A Yes is a Yes to all segments of the numbered question.

Treat a No to any segment (of a numbered question) as a No to the entire question. Honesty yields greater accuracy in results.

### Answer YES or NO:

1. Are there (one or more) historical associations to cover *each* of the villages within your library's service district; and are they active in publishing and encouraging new research, providing lectures, programs, special events, historical tours for adults, young adults, and children; and web-accessible local history materials?  Yes  No
2. If so, do they have an organized, reasonably comprehensive, accessible, and user-friendly library and/or archives, regularly open to researchers?  Yes  No
3. Are they generally receptive to public requests (not just those from established historians, genealogists, and scholars, but from history buffs, students, teachers, journalists, authors, and others from the general "unwashed" public, and from your librarians)? Is the historical society's library or archives routinely staffed by knowledgeable, receptive individuals [or by random volunteers, of variable knowledge and user-friendliness]?  Yes  No
4. Is there a contractual or tacit agreement or understanding, between your Library and the Historical Association, that the latter agrees to field local history questions posed by your patrons, or referred to them by your reference staff? If so, has their volunteer staff been made fully aware of the arrangement, and is your staff comfortable in contacting them?  Yes  No
5. *Something critical, often overlooked:* If, for some reason, the historical association(s) or their facility were to go into a *lengthy hiatus* (say fire, flood, major repairs or construction, financial difficulties); or those *key experts*, on whom your Library most relies, *were to suddenly disappear from the picture* (e.g., leave the region, retire, become incapacitated, or die, all of which can happen with or without notice), *is your library staff prepared to field or capably refer resultant questions* that are likely to be redirected to the Library? (Does your staff have any *in depth* local history training? If you have an expert, in their absence, can others at your reference desk comfortably and competently field basic local history queries?)  Yes  No
6. Is your staff familiar with (municipal, town, county, regional, state, and federal) *government historical agencies* that bear on your service area's history, esp. those serving your vicinity; and are they familiar with those agencies' collections and services? Can your staff effectively and routinely provide government agency researchers with local historical information when asked (e.g., for a special exhibit or commemoration), or offer them *appropriate* referrals?  Yes  No
7. If a newspaper *editor, reporter, or media team* calls or simply shows up at your library – asking for everything you have on a local individual (past or present), for local historical background information, or for an interview with the person who knows the most in the library about local history – whether for that night's news, a series, a special article, or a book they're doing (all on deadline) is your staff (& administration) inclined and prepared to help [or resist]?  Yes  No
8. Is your professional staff familiar with the historic *districts, historically significant houses, museums, museum villages, cemeteries, historic trails, routes, & parks within (and near) your service area*? Are they conversant with major historical personalities, movements, events and places that shaped the community past, or can easily find material on these topics?  Yes  No
9. Have your librarians, been on an *historical tour* in each of the villages that your library serves, within the past 5-7 years (interpretations change)?  Yes  No
10. Is it agreeable or acceptable to your library board and administration that the professional staff need know little or nothing of the history of the communities served by the library?  Yes  No

**Grade this as you would any other 10-point test.** If you answered **Yes to 7 or more** of the questions (or sets of questions), congratulations (if you answered them honestly). Give yourself a pat on the back. You passed. But, look more closely at those that received a No. If you answered **No to more than 3** questions (or sets of questions), your library has essentially flunked its local history test. You should probably be doing a little soul searching about how the library might better provide for its community in this subject area. Take a closer look at those questions. But, don't feel too badly. Local history does not generally come with a guidebook. Its absence from a library can be a source of community alienation from the library. Its presence can create a stronger public bond & sense that library takes an active interest in the community it serves.



Almost inevitably, most people who live in a community, no matter how foreign it may feel, sooner or later want to know something of what went on in the past of the place in which they have been or now find themselves living.

The first library survey of the Patchogue-Medford area's large Spanish-speaking population revealed that (after practical-matter-oriented English-language instruction) information on local history *en español*, was listed as the #2 community priority. This is good news for local history, better news for its potential for the Library helping to build bridges of shared sense of community.

When people come to the library's local history section, and find something that interests them, they often want to dig further. You need to be prepared for that.

Remember, also, that ***the library past is also part of your communities' past***, and not separate from or divorced from its larger context. *People are surprisingly quite interested in the history of their local institution.* So don't neglect researching it, with gusto, esp. in a *library commemorative year* (special anniversary). People are more interested than you may think, and it can be wonderful for generating public good will and a better understanding of how the library came to appear, how it works the way it does, while highlighting all it offers now, as compared to in its past.

Taking an active interest in your community and its history can forge a stronger bond between the community and the library, and prove quite unexpectedly, fascinating. For the truth is that the more you dig, the more interesting it becomes. Stories that have fallen into silence emerge, one after another, along with surprising connections, contexts, implications, lives, meanings, events, places, pronouncements, sometimes altering our very concepts and preconceptions of what was then, and is today. Showing the Library as an essential, active, functional part of the community, rather than letting it be viewed as something detached and alien, and having its staff taking an interest in what the community is now, and has been in the past, forges closer stronger bonds, and passes them. That's what local history can bring to the Library, and to the reference table.

– Mark Rothenberg, 3/2008, rev. 1.2015