

WHO USES A LOCAL HISTORY COLLECTION, ANYWAY?

Introducing the Local History Audience: Or a Goodly Portion of It

Historians – usually seek fairly specific information and illustrations, often to prepare their next article, essay, pamphlet, chapter, book, program, academic course, student assignment, web site, web page, blog, wiki, podcast, etc. They may be a guest editor on a theme for an historical journal, or be attempting to documenting an exhibit. They want citations and sources, more than most, so their scholarship is traceable, and may contribute to that of future scholars, as a jumping off point for new studies, and for the growth of the field. The best seek to advance the state of historical knowledge on a chosen theme or aspect of the past, and write well. They are often on deadline, thought that is not always the case. Their current labors may contribute to or result in a work of many years' scholarship, perhaps the next landmark study in local (or more general history, using local examples),

Historical Societies & Many Varieties of Associations (local to international) – are usually trying to flesh out some aspect of the local past, often on deadline, for their newsletter, for a pamphlet or brochure, or to create or expand a museum exhibit, video or DVD presentation, to document the history of a field, to show reason and local precedent for their type of philanthropy or pursuit, to entertain and inform the membership, via presentations, exhibits, publications, and encourage membership participation. They may also be working to help teachers further develop a local history curriculum. Changing or prevailing thematic interests of the individual association predominate. (Sometimes you may be invited to do a talk, to provide an overview of your library's local history or historical resources, or those on a theme. It's good public relations to do so.)

History Majors, Ex-history Majors, Buffs (History, Local History, & Military History, Members of Recreated Historical Military Units) pursue a specific niche, or general interests, ranging from scholarly to general interest inquiries and works, in print, electronic or microform format. Subject is usually more important than format.

Architects – Interested in architectural history, design features of a structure or series of buildings, blueprints, biographic material on architects, on their techniques, and design chronology

Archeologists & Anthropologists – May be preparing a report and are seeking related geologic, historical studies or documents, extant period illustrations, biographic clues, or cultural information to evaluate their findings broader context. They may be trying to identify a material object, place it within a range of objects, be seeking reports on related earlier digs, be comparing their findings with the historical record, to draw comparisons or identify anomalies that require explanation (or shed new light on a period or site), or e.g., reevaluating the wording of an historical record and or review of aerial photographs, to help locate or pinpoint a promising site for an excavation.

Artists, Art Collectors, & Art Historians – May be interested in well-known or obscure artists, works, techniques, methods, themes, or valuation

Authors, Publishers, Reporters, & Editors – are usually working on deadline, preparing an article, essay, pamphlet, book, magazine, website, blog, wiki, podcast, etc. Some are more concerned than others with precision and accuracy, some more with deadline than fine tuning for accuracy.

Poets, Poetry or Literary Enthusiasts – may be seeking a poem or volume of poetry, inspiration from a locally-written work, to identify local authors, works that fit into a literary genre, or be seeking a period setting (historical atmospheric) to help them better evoke the sense of a specific time, place, person.

Novelists, Playwrights & Screenwriters — often seek local historical backdrops, to elaborate or provide added period and place atmospherics, and generally to establish a more solid, convincing context for their latest work.

Videographers – may be making a movie or documentary, or be seeking material for a commemorative event, period, people, locale, period costumes. They may simply seek a good story or yarn, or series of images, or interviewee, to incorporate into their work.

Contributors' descendants – Some people want the simple reassurance that their relative's or friend's donations (books, art work, aerial photos, postcard photos) are still in your collection, and are treated with respect. Good will can mean new material, and useful background information. Ill will, the reverse.

Genealogists – Are forever in pursuit of their own missing link. Many are local, some have traveled from afar (across L.I., visiting from upstate, arriving from out-of-state, or from out-of-country, often with little time to spare, and sometimes without prior notice). They may appear without warning in-person, by letter, E-mail, fax, or phone. Some may provide unpublished copies of difficult to find or newly published material, adding more depth to the collection, or they may suggest that you link to their websites, web page, wiki, or blog, or their social media. Expect a barrage of varied requests. Remember: A genealogist is pursuing a basically endless multiple-lifetimes degree of research, tied to history, to local history, often with surprises that await to be unearthed by research. But, to be able to point them in the right direction(s), lead them to resources on hand, and resources further afield, can afford them a great service, and generate good will. They are often very well connected electronically, sometimes politically, and are great allies.

The General Public – Range from casual interest browsing, to high school yearbook gigglers, to passers-by engaged or engage-able; to people with a background or pre-existing interest in some form of history; to people who have begun to wonder about the history of the area in which they live, the history of their house (often another research project): in all, good reason to have a web page or pages, occasional exhibit(s), perhaps a newsletter or occasional article in the library newsletter, bookmarks, commemorative materials (focusing on local aspects of the commemoration theme, whenever possible and prep time permits), to draw the public further into the collection. Some people may simply be looking for good referrals to local historical contact people & organizations, other to good overview readings.

Librarians & Library Officials – May be interested in having the library's history at hand and searchable (e.g., for precedents), as well as histories of the communities that it serves, which demonstrates a tie with those communities, gains some pro-library votes, reinforces a sense of library as community center; as well as answering local history queries posed; and rounding out the Dewey 900's (History) collection; or, helping a trustee, or friend of the library. Making the local past come alive, in collaboration with local history people, can generate much local good will. So can a rollickingly good history of the library.

Musicians – Interested in an historical opus, sheet music, or lyrics, written on L.I., by a composer who lived at some time on Long Island (e.g. J.P. Souza, Irving Berlin).

People Seeking to Know the History of a House – It's usually one that they've just purchased, generally locally, or nearby, though there have been some more distant surprises. Other than the few listed in the SPLIA Survey (no survey was done for Patchogue, proper) very few houses will have a readily available survey of its history, and tracking it down will usually be through many sources, institutions, and agencies, as well as recollections of neighbors, if feasible, that can be substantiated. In short, a research project for each house.

Public Officials – Village, Town, County, State, & Federal officials (of the executive, legislative, and/or judicial branches of government) – may frequent the collection, or make contact in some form, on anything from, e.g.: what took place locally during a timeframe of history, what old maps that might show the course of an otherwise uncharted underground stream that's now overflowed into a building, to plans for a former historical building, or business, factory or mill, local erosion or pollution patterns, to help with the creation of a background study to flesh out the specifics to help qualify a structure or place for one of the many types of historic designations, or for a preservation grant or historic site sign. Their time is usually (but not always) short. They may be fishing for ideas, for some activity that might make an historic celebration seem historic, preferably at little or no cost. Some have little concept of history, others are better or well-grounded. The former are usually in the majority. Some of the former may be political appointees, running an historical agency. There are often additional places, institutions, organizations and agencies beyond the walls and sources held by the library, to find them further help.

Scientists & "Tech'ies" – May be studying development of a scientific concept, mechanical principal, method, or type of technology. They may be seek a report; or information on someone who worked, invented, or vacationed on L.I. (e.g., Tesla, Marconi, Einstein, Nobel Prize winners), as well as historical information on L.I. scientific, technological, medical, and psychiatric historical developments, institutions, associations, or businesses, or partnerships. They may want to know what remains of a now outmoded technology or institution, and in what forms or formats the information occurs. They may be seeking records of an institution or individual, technical drawings, or other archival notes and records.

Students – NYS Education Department's History curriculum mandates local history be taught/studied in the 4th & 7th grades. Advanced Placement (AP), in higher grades students may receive or elect to do a local history project assignment. Children & Young Adults will beat a path to your door, so you need to be prepared to answer questions posed by teachers and students, and to point them to resources for their projects, or be prepared to answer to incensed parents, attempting to do their child's assignment or attempting to get them moving on it. We get older students, as well, often focusing on local aspects of some larger event, or on a individual hailing, from Long Island. Library school students have appeared at our doorstep, usually to analyze the collection or library, or to do an internship project, advancing the presentation or interpretation of our collections. College, and university graduate and post-graduate students have "darkened our doorstep", referred to us by reputation, on a broad range of topics, e.g., seeking help or direction to resources, in preparing a thesis or dissertation, or simply having an assignment to read and be prepared to discuss or summarize any 20 articles that appeared in the *Long Island Forum*, 1938-2004.

Teachers, Professors (Elementary to Post Graduate) – The reverse picture. Teachers may be seeking classroom or curriculum-driven ideas, or primary material to give students a more immediate sense of the presence of the past. Professors may be rounding out a course, working to correct or reinforce earlier conceptions, or may be seeking probing assignments and research materials for student projects, for a new or old course, and be looking for new hooks to capture students' attention, arouse their critical faculties. Or, they could be researching their own interests, for their own purposes, with an eye to future projects, publications, including revising and updating a traditional account, or preparing a conference presentation.

Fascinating Obsessionists (Weirdos) – The Montauk Experiment, UFO, Ghost-hunter / demonic possession / conspiracy theorists (the paranoids-are-after-us) / psychologically bizarre crowd, in part; also very intense people with extremely tightly & narrowly wound and focused historical interests, concerns, and life's-work; and those who forgot to take their medication today. These can be among the most unusual, challenging, & sometimes frightening, or strangely compelling patrons. They will come for you. When they do, try to remain calm, in self-control, treating them and their topic with respect, as you would any other. Go with the flow, seeking out resources available on their topic(s), hope they go away, and maybe pick up some tips on sources or pointers on what they claim to have found, and where – expect it to resurface in print. You may feel the need for someone else, feel claustrophobic, need a break, want an eyewitness, or to call security or someone in authority. But, first try to stay with it. You will likely gain the benefit of information, book and article citations, and sometimes a better sense of standard beliefs, that will aid you in serving other patrons with similar perspectives, regardless of your own takes on these matters. A variation on the similar theme is the “Here's my thesis. Now I want you to prove it (substantiate it in print or online).” The stranger the thesis, the more likely the majority of sources, if any, may prove to be in odd places quarters online, though not necessarily. It is generally harder to prove someone else's thesis, for them, than to answer most other types of question. By nature, a thesis requires research. And in a public library, responsibility for research resides with the patron. The librarian's role is to help guide the patron to potential sources, and to remember that not everything for which a question can be posed, has necessarily been researched or an answer found, in or appears or matches the form of query posed.

These are just some (perhaps most) of your potential audiences for local history materials, and an admittedly much simplified, impressionistic, view of each, and of their true ranges of interest.

Your collections may be general, or focused, targeted to a specific audience (or audiences), or a combination of audiences. Local history collections are often supported by wider ranging or age group-related collections within the library, as well as electronic resources. They can build cordially community bonds, encourage local cooperation, collaborative effort, boost a spirit of community, and a proper sense of community participation in the library, generating in good will and trust that can translate into more passed budgets, resources better in tune with community wishes and aspirations, and better communication with community and its needs.

– Mark Rothenberg, 2/5/08, rev. 1/31/11