

UCLA

UCLA Historical Journal

Title

Voices from the Field: A Collection of Personal Experiences and Advice to Graduate Students

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/57z8172j>

Journal

UCLA Historical Journal, 27(1)

ISSN

0276-864X

Author

Bride, Tania

Publication Date

2016

Peer reviewed

Voices from the Field: A Collection of Personal Experiences and Advice to Graduate Students

Tania Bride, contribution editor

Leaving the familiarity and routine of campus life to source primary materials for individual research is arguably the most challenging, exciting, and crucial process in an academic career. The following articles by faculty members and graduate students from the UCLA History and Archaeology departments offer individual experiences in the archive or on an archaeological dig—including practical and methodological advice based on their own encounters so far. As both students and staff recall, the first trip into an archive or on a dig is a formative moment, sometimes inspiring a budding historian or archaeologist to pursue the discipline as a career. Many had their expectations both exceeded and confounded by the realities of archival procedure, dig conditions, and foreign travel. Yet even subsequent trips brought new trials and revelations. In these diverse episodes, from torrential rain in Tokyo to insect infestations in Greece, a principal lesson is to expect the unexpected.

These articles do, however, present useful measures to be as mentally and physically prepared as possible for any foray into the field. For archival practice, a resounding consensus holds that the more prior planning, such as research into the archive itself, as well as the materials you aim to find there, the better. Another equally important step is to become acquainted with and respect the archivists. For the archaeology student, the dig presents other challenges of professional and social dynamics, requiring specific information to help manage. The physical and technical exigencies of a dig also call for more specific packing lists, with pointers provided here. Yet, the need to embrace change, adapt, and

throw yourself into each new place and activity is universal. At any stage in a person's career, sifting through and making sense of material emerging from the stacks and the soil is an exhilarating, but often daunting, activity in which personal well-being is as crucial as the work itself. Tips to care for the researcher's most important tools—the body and mind—are also included in the following personal stories.

Let us begin with Dr. Ghislaine Lydon's contribution—a theoretical framework for research bolstered by her personal experiences and the variety of people which shape the future of research.

“Foxes in the Field” or Close Encounters in African Historical Research *Ghislaine Lydon*

Janet Ewald, historian of northeastern Africa, wrote one of two useful methodological pieces I read as a graduate student and now regularly assign. She derives her subtitle from the following verse of a Greek poem: “the fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing.” It conveys the benefits of a perspectival approach to research. By perspectival, I mean a method emphasizing the plurality of the historical experience of groups and individuals. Unlike the singular vision and focus of the hedgehog, the fox moves on various planes, seeking to capture multiple perspectives. It is the task of the historian to uncover manifold actions, behaviors and patterns of humans; the most enigmatic, unstable, and destructive of beings on earth. To better grasp the past, we strive to be foxes, gathering information from as many angles of the recorded and recordable history as possible. I would add that to be comprehensive and single-minded, a fox-historian must also be a hunter-detective, a point I return to below. Another insight Ewald offers is that a scholar's fieldwork is not only educational, it is an experience in a new kind of upbringing. This remark is particularly salient to those whose research entails international travel, and who take up residence as foreigners in local communities.

Our formative experiences invariably occur at the dissertation stage. This is when many of us discover that there is something quite random about historical research. Encounters with texts in the archive are just as unpredictable as street encounters with key informants. When I set off to Senegal, Mauritania, Mali and Morocco to carry out research on trade networks in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, several encounters closely shaped the course of my two years of fieldwork. Two of these occurred during my very first visit to the Islamic Republic of Mauritania. I had traveled there by “taxi brousse,” so-called bush taxi (in this case a jam-packed station wagon that broke down on two occasions), via the somewhat bewildering border post of Rosso on the Senegal River. Serendipitously, the only other woman onboard was from a well-known family (Shaykh Sa'adi Buh) my advisor had studied in his book on Muslim *marabouts* or religious leaders in the early colonial period. Khadaija shared a great deal of

information in the course of our long and arduous journey. When we arrived in Rosso, her moneychanger was on hand to take our Senegalese francs, and return our currency in Mauritanian ouguiyas once we cleared customs on the other side of the river. I thanked her when we parted ways on the road as she headed in the direction of her desert oasis. Although our paths have not crossed since, I never forgot her lessons in history, and her calm, assertive kindness, which became a model in Saharan decorum.

But it was another close encounter that would indelibly mark the trajectory of my historical inquiry. It occurred a few days after my arrival in the capital on my first visit to the University of Nouakchott, after I was introduced to the former director of the campus library. When discussing my research project on regional commerce, he immediately arranged a meeting with his “uncle,” a retired merchant. That afternoon I met Mawlay al-Hashim who imparted his life history. He began by describing his initiation into the caravan trading profession at the young age of 11 by his father, a Tikna Berber who immigrated from southern Morocco. Eventually, when camel caravans lost ground to truck transportation, he would move from Mauritania to Senegal to pursue a career in retail and then the wholesale business, selling everything from matches to fuel. Mawlay al-Hashim’s story, and that of the Tikna caravanning trade network that once extended from Marrakech (Morocco) and Timbuktu (Mali), to Saint-Louis (Senegal), became the subject of my dissertation. I ended up following in the footsteps of my historical subjects, guided by information derived orally from members of the Tikna and other lineages. Learning about the genealogies of these extended families enabled me to identify names of relevant historical actors in written sources encountered in both family and public archives.

Philip Curtin’s “Fieldwork Techniques” is the other methodological article still relevant almost half a century after its publication. A historian of Africa, Curtin would become a leading scholar of trans-Atlantic and world history. His article describes the art of collecting and processing oral data; a category of source material upon which scholars of African societies rely in particular. Curtin discusses how historians of Africa are not only “archival animals,” mining the dusty documentation of the past. They also are “archive creators,” recording and cataloguing personal collections of oral source material. He then provides tips on how not to record over precious interview material, and how to classify and use various forms of oral history. Today, in the age of digital photography and personal archiving, Curtin’s distinction between the animals and creators of archives no longer applies simply to those scholars whose historical subjects relied primarily on memory and mnemonic traditions for recording the past. Here comes to mind Jacques Derrida’s warning about the dangers of the archon encoding the archive with meaning.

Encounters with oral and written sources ultimately determine the direction of any historical investigation. Conversations with your advisor and other “elders,” librarians and archivists, to say nothing of interviews with targeted communities,

such as the descendants of historical figures, generate historical data. One brings the written word to the consideration of the oral informant and/or trained historian, when seeking to identify names or elucidate a particular event. This dialectical process is how the fox-historian thrives when engaged in an investigation; an investigation that should always remain perspectival, even when dealing with “one big thing,” as in the case of a biography or the history of a corporation. At the same time, historians must take on the role of hunting dogs tracking down various historical targets, completely focused, like an Agatha Christie or a Sherlock Holmes, on carefully collecting and weighing the evidence. Still, the hunter-detective of the past must not lose sight of the fox’s forté, which is to “know many things.”

* * *

Karen Wilson’s contribution is much more concerned with the practicalities of collecting and collating the massive amounts of data which research produces. Read below for a proven technique to get through the dissertation phase.

Managing the Anxiety of Archival Work

Karen S. Wilson

My research focuses on social and economic relations in the American West, using formal social network analysis to understand the processes of transforming a sparsely settled frontier into an internationally influential region. As a PhD student in the UCLA History Department, I worked in twelve different archives located in the Los Angeles area, Berkeley, San Francisco, and Cincinnati, Ohio. The archives ranged from those located at major and minor universities, to historical societies, a synagogue, large and small museums, and even a major national corporation. The collections I used included: personal documents of individuals, city, county, and state records, scrapbooks of clippings from newspapers no longer published, business correspondence and ledgers, dictated memoirs, land deeds and wills, club membership lists and board of directors minutes, photo albums, manuscripts, and galley proofs.

Of all the tasks and challenges of dissertation work, visiting archives is my favorite part. Reading diaries, letters, documents, and ledgers that perhaps have not been touched since they were created is a guilty pleasure. I feel a direct connection across time to the travelers, pioneers, bureaucrats, and storekeepers who left these traces behind. Visiting archives also is a very anxiety-producing experience, especially early in the research phase. When I began my research in earnest for a dissertation about social networks in nineteenth-century Los Angeles, I had to rely on collection descriptions and finding aids that often provided minimal information about the holdings. Once at the archive, I sometimes found it to be a feast or famine situation—too much material to review properly in the allotted time or too little material to warrant the expense of the trip. I learned quickly to do more digging about the collections prior to going and to discuss my research

questions and subjects with archivists ahead of and during visits. While digital access to finding aids and items in collections has vastly expanded since my original work between 2006 and 2009, archivists remain extremely helpful in suggesting collections that are relevant but not obviously related to one's topic. Discussing my project with an archivist has never failed to yield more—and sometimes better—sources than my presumed thorough review of information about specific collections.

The sense of being overwhelmed by too much material and too little time I think is a common feeling, especially when one's project is still in its formative stages. Nowadays it is standard practice to take digital photos or scans (when allowed by the archive) of archival documents and review them later, rather than try to get through a huge number of folders or collections during a time-limited visit. That does alleviate some of the pressure to see everything or take Xerox copies (which are usually very costly in archives). But one has to process all those digital versions at some point, so there is still the challenge of trying to be thorough and efficient in selecting what to capture, and also the need to at least do a cursory examination of each potentially relevant document and name and label digital files so they can be found later with minimal effort. Otherwise, one easily can end up with a huge collection of digital files and no effective system for searching them. The approach I took initially, when digitalization was not so common, proved to be useful later when I started substituting Xerox copies with digital photos.

As I prepared to visit an archive, I set up a dedicated electronic notebook on my laptop. I copied and pasted links to finding aids for convenience. I also copied and pasted collection names and entries from finding aids of those items I thought I should review—that became my “request” list. As I reviewed each item, I made notes on the master “request” list of when I requested it, received it, and reviewed it (some archives such as the Bancroft at UC Berkeley required at least 24 hours' notice for many items). With a quick look, I could see the progress I was making on my list. If I found an item was not useful, I simply noted that on the master “request” list, saving myself from wondering later if I had skipped over something important.

If I found an item useful, I created a new page for notes with the detailed finding aid information copied and pasted there as well. I always had the proper and complete citation with any notes. The notes consisted of a basic description of the item and something about its significance to my project. In the days before digital copies, I would transcribe anything I thought important from the document. Sometimes I also would capture my initial impression of the information or some immediate association with another document so I could cross-reference them later. If I requested a copy, I noted the date of the request and the short name used on the request form. If I made a digital photo, I noted that and the name of the file. That way, if I had a hard or digital copy, I could match it to the notes.

The notebook application (NoteTaker) allowed me to make a plan ahead on my visit, track my progress against that plan, and adjust my priorities for requesting copies or taking photos as necessary. Two features were especially useful while at the archive and later when I begin my analysis and writing phase – the automatic creation of a table of contents and of indices. Every new section and page was added to the contents page and every word was indexed. I always could find all the references to any given subject using one or both of these features. I also appreciated that a given “page” could be as long as I wanted, with no arbitrary limits. All the notes for a given folder could be on a single page, with citation information at the top. When it came time to create footnotes and a bibliography, it was simply a matter of cutting and pasting from the appropriate notebook page.

* * *

Janira Teague, who recently finished her PhD, provides insight into the regional differences of visiting archives, but reveals how even in cities across the country, some things, such as communication, remain the same.

Conducting Research at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture: Communication is Key

Janira Teague

There are very few neighborhoods in the United States as rich in black history as the Harlem community in Manhattan, New York City. During the early twentieth century, with its’ diverse black population of native New Yorkers, southern migrants, and immigrants who were mainly from the Caribbean, the community was the black Mecca of cultural and political activities. It birthed the Harlem Renaissance, saw the rise of the Garvey Movement, and housed many influential black artists, politicians and intellectuals. Beyond Harlemites, black men and women who lived throughout New York City from the colonial era to the present made history with their art, activism, culture, finances, and hardships. The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture (the Schomburg) in Harlem, which is arguably one of the leading archives for primary sources regarding African American history and culture, preserves sources regarding the Harlemites, as well as people of African descent around the world.

In 2013, I decided to visit the Schomburg to gather primary sources for my dissertation. Before I went, I visited the Schomburg’s website. Subsequently, I called the Manuscripts, Archives, and Rare Books Division to discuss information about the Schomburg’s policies and holdings that I read online. In regards to their research policies, a librarian provided specific details, not available online, about the use of laptops, cameras, and copier machines. In regards to their collections, the librarian noted that one collection that I wanted would not be available while I was there, but the librarian suggested other collections to view. Finally, we spoke about nearby housing options and whether food and beverages were permitted on the premises (I am not providing specific details about the

policies because they may change). After our discussion, I felt prepared for my upcoming trip.

Once inside of the library, I applied for my library card and made my way to the Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Divisions. I followed the procedures that I had discussed during my phone call and conducted my research in the comfortable library without a hitch. Overall, communication with many archivists and librarians was key to my success there. As we discussed my research, they pointed me to different collections that I had not considered. Furthermore, they suggested different libraries, archives and museums within New York City to visit to gather more information. In addition, they invited me to attend events at the Schomburg that I found extremely informative. One archivist even introduced me to fellow researchers with knowledge about aspects of my research that was as rich and informative as the documents that I collected at the Schomburg.

* * *

The final contributions to this article come from peers at UCLA, graduate students and PhD candidates, who have varying levels of experience in archives and fieldwork. These last five stories are full of their advice and humorous mishaps.

Myles Chykerda

My own archaeological experience has spanned more than ten years and numerous countries. I joined my first ever project in the summer after my first year at the University of Alberta, where we excavated a Plains Indian bison procurement site on the Albertan prairies. For six weeks we lived in tents at a small town's campground, rotated cooking shifts, and generally had an experience very similar to an extended camping trip. The next year I began working in Italy at a Roman Villa, as well as a Hellenistic fortified city in Thessaly (Central Greece) where I work to this day. Presently, I also work with UCLA at Methone in northern Greece.

These Mediterranean projects were less camp-like, but still nothing luxurious. Don't expect well-appointed accommodations on a dig, but many supervisors do believe that the army runs on its stomach and therefore provide very good food. You should alert project directors to allergies, but at the same time must abandon any eating pickiness. Experience new food and enjoy the change. You'll be back to your usual repast in a few weeks. Indeed, a necessity of any dig is to leave individual quirks aside. You mom's tuna and your favorite pillow will *not* be available.

Different Types of Participants

Over the course of my excavations I progressed from being a student, to volunteer, to trench supervisor, to director of a particular aspect of multi-pronged project. This progression, in my opinion, is where we can find some of the most

difficult aspects of being on a dig, particularly if a graduate student is thrown into a leadership position despite having relatively little field experience.

Digs provide opportunities to many different types of people, specifically professionals, graduate students, undergraduates, and volunteers. And while an archaeological project can be an extremely rewarding experience, there are often two classes of students and participants on a project: those that are serious about the archaeological work and those that are looking for an experience abroad regardless of what work is involved. Digs often provide students with a large number of credits, which makes them all the more enticing for students who may not necessarily be looking at the study of the past as a professional career. Recognition of the existence of such a dual nature is essential and makes a dig something unlike any other educational experience. It isn't a classroom lecture, a summer lab project, or an intensive University course. Over the course of 3 to 6 weeks (or more!), a group of individuals live in very close confines and work together to uncover the past. Thus an excavation is equal parts academic research and group social dynamics.

Furthermore, being a volunteer—an individual who is not a student, yet not involved in assessing students—can be a very difficult situation, as volunteers rarely have a hammer of authority to yield in the face of unruly students. Sadly there are projects (or particular years of any excavation) where group composition can create a difficult work and living environment. My advice here is to ensure that you have a very good conversation with a project's director before getting to the field and understand your role with utmost clarity.

* * *

Leading a Team for the First Time

Myles Chykerda and MaryAnn Kontonicolas

If this is your first time leading a team, the most important advice is: stay calm and *never* forcefully exert authority on the basis of education. Treat your team as the hardworking, educated people that they are. You're all in this together. Be sure to work also with the team leadership. We've found that brief team meetings at least once a week are necessary to allow the airing of issues, both professional and social-related. But also remember a few things must be done before you get situated with your team.

Start the process of project design as early as possible. Be sure to review the relevant body of literature to note different methods and techniques, and then decide what works best for your project goals and time-frame. Do not limit yourself to methods solely applied to your area of specialization; review field-work methods applied to other regions and time periods, as they may be useful. Review your budget and think well in advance of the materials and tools you will need to conduct your survey project. We needed to order hand-held clickers, a hand-held Garmin GPS, flags, compasses, notebooks, and flagging tape well before the survey began.

Once you have gathered your gear and participants, arrive early to the field site and conduct an informal, extensive survey in and around your designated survey area. Get to know the landscape before you undergo intensive archaeological field-walking. Decide early on what would work best for your project goals and timeline, and formulate your plan accordingly. Do not solely rely on one map, as landscapes change—cross-check between Google maps, Greek army maps (or the like), and geo-rectified options (e.g., DigitalGlobe). Each survey project team is composed of different members—while some projects involve a team consisting of specialists, many (like ours) included volunteers and field students, many of whom were embarking upon their first archaeological fieldwork and were rotated through various parts of the project as part of their field education. We needed to be extra familiar with the site and its needs before we could put them to work.

Packing

Then there is of course the ongoing question of what to bring. Many projects will hand out a suggested list, but below I highlight some of my ‘must packs.’ First and foremost, bring ear plugs. Sleep is a fundamental necessity when days involve a lot of physical activity, and you never know who in a shared room may be a snorer! A large pack of ear plugs is always the first thing that goes in my bag. You should also learn to pack light, although check to see what is the project’s clothes washing situation. Be prepared to wear ‘dig clothes’ most days and casual attire during lab work and dinner. There is no need to take a full season’s worth of clothes, although careful consideration of your work clothes is important. Surplus stores are my favorite stop as ACU pants have wonderful pockets to store bags, tags, and notebooks. They’re also very durable and light-weight (Propper is my brand of choice). I also invest in high quality work boots and bring along runners (tennis shoes) for all other affairs. Try to bring along one nicer ensemble as there is often a need to dress up a bit. It’s very useful to pack all this stuff in a camping backpack as these are much easier to transport than a suitcase (stairs in metro and train stations are your worst enemy!). REI or a similar store is an archaeologist’s friend!

Finally, there is the matter of tools and electronic knick-knacks. I’ve seen some archaeological packing lists online that list everything from a camera to cell phone to laptop to tablet. Be very careful in deciding what to take along. Electronics are expensive and the first thing thieves will go after. I generally bring a compact SLR, my laptop, and an iPod nano. Tools are very site specific, but you should always bring a trowel. Items that often become hot commodities on a dig are line levels, string, and black Sharpie markers. I am not kidding. Bring plenty of Sharpies.

Regardless, be sure that all your tools go in the checked luggage. Plumb bobs in a carry-on will cause undue attention at any security checkpoint. Also be sure to never misplace your trowel in a backpack side pocket. It’s very embarrassing to discover it at the Uffizi security check!

* * *

Iris Clever

My first archival experience was working with early 19th century criminal court cases in Amsterdam. For my bachelor's thesis, I researched how the city used a law against public indecency to put homosexual couples behind bars and how witness testimonies were deployed in their trials. My time in the archive was quite a bizarre experience. I felt a combination of voyeurism and excitement while I was peeking into the lives and struggles of people who had been long gone. Moreover, the court records had severe water damage due to a flood in the early 20th century. They disintegrated with every turn of the page while I collected the remains in a scarf on my lap. The location of the archive—a renovated medieval church—and the eccentricity of the archivist, who helped me with the paleography (with his remarkably long and spooky fingernails), definitely added to an overall sense of mystery. Although this research was frustrating at times (it took a while before I figured out the organization of the documents and the handwriting), it also was the moment that I decided to pursue a graduate education in history. I loved being in the archive for a couple of weeks, diving into another world and gaining potentially unique insights into themes I had only read about in the secondary literature. I could see myself doing this professionally.

Not every archive or archival experience, however, is romantic. We all know that our dissertations require us to do a lot more than spend a week here and there. Often you find yourself in a windowless basement of some governmental building, not a church. While I am gearing up for another summer of archival research, I find myself panicking over housing, the pressure of finding something that ranges from potentially useful to absolutely groundbreaking, and the thought of spending weeks by myself in a foreign city. Every time I go on archive trips, I cannot help but think about the Carolyn Steedman article on archive fever I read in my graduate History 204 class. Here, Steadman reflects on historians pondering over finding things in the archive, in tiny beds in cheap motels, while they sneeze away the dust of old documents that has accumulated in their nostrils throughout the day. “There is the great, brown, slow-moving strandless river of Everything, and then there is its tiny flotsam that has ended up in the record office you are working in,” Steedman states. “Your craft is to conjure a social system from a nutmeg grater, and your competence in that was established long ago. Your anxiety is more precise and more prosaic. It’s about PT S2/1/1, which only arrived from the stacks that afternoon, which is enormous, and which you will never get through tomorrow.” Spot-on, if you ask me.

Even if you have spent time in the archive before coming to UCLA, dissertation research trips can make you feel like a novice. It is real business now. There are ways, however, to get a little bit more comfortable.

Get organized before you go

I tell myself every time that I should do more research beforehand, about the topic, the archive, the institution, and what I am looking for. Things move incredibly slowly in the archive and you do not want to waste valuable time.

Most importantly, research how the archive is organized and how the institution functions. Can you find indexes online or on-site? Is there a fee for membership or copies? What time is the last call for documents? I had one day in the Staatsbibliothek Berlin last summer to go through a set of letters, and showed up without the required cash to pay for the one-month access card. I lost hours figuring out how to get access to the archive and setting up WiFi to read about the rules and regulations in English on their website. By the time I was set up with an account, WiFi, and my first set of letters, I had missed the last call for documents. This was not my proudest archival moment.

I have also received some great advice on housing. If you are in a city where there is a university or college, check if they sublet student dorms during the summer. Another great option is Airbnb. You can always ask for a discount if you stay a little while, since you are making it easy on the host. I received a 10% discount for my upcoming three-week stay in London simply by asking.

Get help

Besides asking your advisor or mentors for help, you should send an email to the archivist and introduce yourself. Finding out that I am “legitimate” enough as a graduate student to contact archivists has been quite a game-changer. It obviously depends on the person in question, but my interactions with archivists have been amazing and they have had a crucial impact on the sources I study and the direction my project is taking. Oftentimes, they are very willing and excited to think along with your project and give you excellent recommendations. Set up a meeting with them on the first days of your trip. They can take you to the stacks or show you unthought-of collections. They sometimes will even introduce you to other scholars working in the archive and with whom you can exchange materials and thoughts.

Work through the Struggle

Before you descend into the basement of your desired archive, take a look at what you are wearing. Archives are *always* cold because of document preservation, so I like to bring a scarf and a sweater. I usually also pack a lunch, just in case there is nothing inside or around the building.

Take some time to get familiar with the archive, the indexes, or the handwriting of the personal papers you are exploring. Extreme frustration at not being able to do anything productive for the first couple of days is apparently a struggle for everyone. And it does not disappear after the first days. I have heard many colleagues complain about feeling unproductive throughout their weeks or months of research. Talk of imposter syndrome has surfaced in many conversations with

graduate students where they felt guilty about receiving summer fellowships and walking away with just a few documents. Crossing certain archives or particular documents you were looking for off your list, however, is part of doing dissertation research. I thought I would write a dissertation on colonial encounters between Indigenous research subjects and anthropologists, based on a remarkable set of letters I found in the Dutch national archives. I quickly realized, however, that, as a unique find, I would probably not find enough material for an entire book. It has forced me to take a broader perspective, which has turned out to be even more interesting.

One way to cope with frustration, loneliness, or other qualms is to explore the city that you are in. You are—most likely—getting a break from emails, deadlines, students, talks, and other on-campus activities. We are so busy during the academic year that we sometimes forget that it is not only okay, but also very important, to do absolutely nothing at times. Most of the archives I have worked in had limited hours which meant that I got to sleep in and was able to do weekend-activities that I often did not have time for during the academic year. Going to museums, botanical gardens, bars, and forests have often given me inspiration and energy to continue working my way through the mudslide of documents.

The Aftermath

After the archive comes the organization of documents, photographs, and notes. I think we should have a conversation about how to organize our archives and how to work with databases. I prefer to work with written notes and easy programs, but feel a little bit silly when I hear others talk about the incredible software that organizes your data in ways that you hadn't thought of. Judging from conversations with some professors, they can feel the same way. As technology advances, it becomes increasingly important to consider the relationship between the documents we find in dusty windowless basements and the computers we use when we go back home. Pick what works for you. Embrace the pen and paper method or the high tech programs. In the end, it's your work and you need to be comfortable with it.

* * *

Preston McBride

Archival trips are integral to the graduate school experience. At some point, every history student takes the sometimes-dreaded steps of uprooting their lives at the university, ceases teaching and grading, and hits the road (or air) for an extended period of solitude, aggravation, and confusion in the archives. But it does not have to be this way. With some planning and creativity, archival visits are fulfilling, fun, and productive. These tips, tricks, observations, and suggestions have been drawn from my many visits to the United States National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) branches in Washington, DC and

Riverside, CA, as well as a half dozen local, county, and museum archives. But, hopefully, they may be more broadly applied to archives around the world (even though international travel provides additional challenges and requires different strategies!).

Do Your Research

Likely already apparent for those of you who have done some archival work—all archives are unique. Although the regional branches of NARA belong to the same network, they cannot be more different. Each comes with particular challenges in the geography, from where to live, what to eat while you're there, to different rules for obtaining and observing records. There is even more diversity and uniqueness with local archives (they may have antiquated policies or be overly protective of their collections). Regardless, each archive has a particular way they hold and catalogue records, and each will be drastically different. My archival experience has proven this again and again. While I suppose all historians wish that archivists would ideally catalogue the collections based on our projects—that will forever be wishful thinking. You really have to understand how and why the collection was processed and what material was important to them at that moment. From that base, you can triangulate where information that is useful to you might be located. The quickest way to unlocking the secrets of the archival collections is simply the archivists. Do not be afraid to talk to them! They hold the keys to the information and it will be necessary to rely on them heavily.

Follow the Rules

From my accrued archival time I've not only learned how to operate more efficiently in the archives, but consequently how to be a better person. I'll constantly reiterate this point: being nice and respectful always gets you further. That, and follow the rules. For three months, I was a fixture in the archival records room in Riverside. Dozens of “professional researchers,” students, research teams, and individual family genealogists came through the building. For nearly all who requested original documents, the staff berated them until they followed the rules. I used to call it “hazing” and, like clockwork, it would happen. The first half-day, orders would be barked from behind a desk in the front of the room. “Don't do that!” “Keep the documents flat on the table!” “What are you doing?!” “Don't bend that!” And so on. More orders were barked in the afternoon. “You will not be able to use that wand scanner to look at documents! It says so on our website, if you would have bothered to read it before coming in.” Archivists are truly the gatekeepers of knowledge. You do not want to do anything that rubs them the wrong way. You will undoubtedly get reprimanded for something. Try to recognize that archivists care about the documents you're looking at and deserve to be grumpy for being underpaid and overworked.

Before having gone to the archives, I wish I would have taken my preparation more seriously and changed some practices while researching. First, spend time talking to the archivists before you get to the location. Emails, phone calls, or preliminary trips (if you're going to be at one archive for a long period of time, or need to deal with extraordinary circumstances) will help. As I mentioned, the archivists are the gatekeepers to knowledge held in the material sources. They are also historians in their own right. Many may know your topic, so tell them what your topic is and at what kinds of records you plan on looking. Most importantly ask them for their advice. You may have an idea of what you preliminarily tagged to look at, but they may suggest additional series that will benefit your research (although sometimes it will be a dead end). Ask them where you should focus, what kinds of records they think would help, and where they would look that you wouldn't think about.

Expectations vs. Reality

I arrived with expectations that differed wildly from reality. What I expected—neatly organized folders in boxes arranged chronologically or thematically—clashed with what I experienced. Consistency does not exist in the archival world. If anything, they are consistently inconsistent. Even different branches of the same archive have completely different ways of doing things and idiosyncratic methods for storing files. Keep your expectations in check. It is also helpful to think about the sources themselves like the historical people of events we study. In addition to piecing together dissertations, we also have to piece together the sources. Sources are often separated from one another and a particular source may even be in an entirely different archive. The archivists may be helpful in locating incomplete or separated sources.

Source limitations are another important subject I wish I knew about before going to the archives. Be mindful of the specific limitations. Some archives provide photocopies of delicate or sensitive sources. Others require gloves for photographs. These variations are to be expected. But some sources cannot be viewed at all. For example, all of my records deal with personal information and therefore fall under the US government privacy laws, meaning that I cannot look at any records for people still alive and younger than 75 years old. That seems easy. Although my dissertation stops in 1930 and all of my subjects are over 75 years old, the entire series is less than 75 year old and so all of the records need to be screened before I can gain access. This process can take weeks or months depending on the size of the series. Screening tens of thousands of folders is not an archivist's ideal work, so I try to remember that they've suffered for my benefit and I'm appreciative for that.

If I was to go into the archive for the first time all over again, I would do some things differently. First, I would be sure to mine the sources that I can get elsewhere. I would see what microfilms and sources I could get sent to the Charles E. Young Research Library (YRL) from another institution. You might

be able to save yourself a good deal of money by sitting in YRL than buying airfare, lodging, etc. for an archival trip. When I first got to the archives, I would spend more time talking to the archivists and strategically going through the finding aids and collection guides. Think of them as your treasure map. They are not optional. Finally, I would take more breaks and explore the city and surrounding areas. Some of the locations you will visit are well known for their architecture, BBQ, Indigenous communities, or art scenes. Take advantage of being in a new place. And while you are in the archive, pace yourself or else you may burn out.

Show Gratitude

For graduate students spending considerable amount of time in the archives, here are some pieces of advice. First, if the archivists were nice and helpful, reward them. They have helped you find the information that you need; the least you could do is respect them. All relationships are reciprocal. Get them something nice at the end of your stay to show your appreciation. They will remember this and be more likely to help you in the future.

Similarly, you will undoubtedly need your archivists again. Maybe you forgot to look at a document or lost your copy. Maybe your research took you in a different direction. Your relationship with archivists will be ongoing, so build a strong relationship.

Finally, go into your archival trip with a detailed plan of attack. Research everything you can about the collections before you get in there. Make a list of all the things you want to look at. I typically use an excel spreadsheet to list all the information I can find about the documents including the call number so that the archivists can find them. But you should also expect all of this preparatory work to be incomplete! New documents are always being processed and entered into collections. And the internal search engines on archival websites are notoriously incomplete. Still, you will be rewarded in time and productivity for the work you put in before you get there.

* * *

Toulouse Roy

My advice for conducting archival research stems from a brief trip I took to Japan in the fall of last year. In September of 2015, I went to the University of Waseda in Tokyo to gather sources for my project. While I had gone to Japan before, this was my first trip there as a PhD student. The experience was useful for a number of reasons. First, I only had about five days to conduct my research, so I definitely had to take some time to plan ahead. Second, it was my first time going to the archives, so I learned a few things about the protocols that are required to navigate this sort of work. And finally, I learned a lot about handling a few unanticipated events.

Plan, Plan, Plan

This may seem obvious, but having a clear plan for your trip to the archives is a must. In my case, I took about a month to figure out everything. This included where I would stay and which books I would consult. For lodging, I chose an Airbnb approximately thirty minutes walking distance from the University. While this may seem like a bit of a walk to some, I can't stress enough how this was much-needed downtime after standing next to a photocopy machine all day. Archival trips can also be great opportunities to visit new places, so be sure to plan a few activities that have little or nothing to do with your research.

In terms of gathering research materials, I would say the more preparation the better. Especially for those who can only spend a limited period of time in the archives, having a list with call numbers and location information can be tremendously useful. The University of Waseda has a great online library catalogue, so it wasn't really difficult tracking down the materials I needed. I prepared a fairly lengthy list of works. About half the list I told myself I absolutely needed to get through, while the other half was not of immediate importance, but still worth checking out if I had time. In the end I managed to not only get through everything, but also had some time to conduct additional searches on my last day.

Though I had put a lot of thought into the flight booking, room and board, and which works I would be consulting, there were a few things I could have never anticipated, so be prepared to "lose out" on a few hours here and there during your trip.

Protocol Problems

One of these unanticipated elements was the process of settling into your archive and getting the work started. When I first got to Waseda, I first had to register for a library card, and then I had to make my way to the library itself, figure out the floor layouts, and how the printing machine worked. These little details can take up a bit of time on the first day, so be prepared to lose a few hours when you get there. Don't panic over that loss. When I arrived at the library, I also found out they had no scanners, so it would be photocopies only. While I had set aside some money in my budget to cover those costs, it's important to look into what device you'll be using to make copies of your documents. Luckily, I work on late-nineteenth century Japanese colonial history, and my sources were already in bound multi-volume collections just sitting on a library shelf.

Now, as for the archive itself, there were a few protocols that I wasn't entirely aware of. Being a University Library, I figured most of the materials at Waseda would be within easy reach. When I first arrived though, I quickly realized that some of the late-nineteenth century books I needed had to be requested from the research desk in the first floor basement area. While this wasn't too complicated of a process, it still took me a bit to figure out the form. After handing it in, the wait was only a few minutes. After receiving my books, I was then told that any photocopying required a separate form (with book-markers indicating the page range you wanted photocopied). Some books were also off-limits for

photocopying. While this little hiccup did slow down the research process, I was still able to get what I needed so it wasn't a problem.

But there were also books from the rare collection room to which my library card did not grant me access. Luckily none of the documents from that part of the library were necessary for my project. I would advise anybody making a trip to the archives though to first verify their access. Especially if you are going to be conducting work at a university research library, be sure to look at whether your library card or institutional affiliation covers all the bases or only certain segments of the library.

Weather Advisory

Another unexpected element during my trip was the weather. Although Japan in September is pretty mild, my trip happened to coincide with an unusual rainy period. An additional weather event during my trip was a 5.0+ earthquake (which I most definitely felt). There were also major floods in a few prefectures down from where I was. It was bad enough that the Japan Self-Defense Forces were called in and evacuation shelters were set-up for the victims. On my end, the torrential downpour forced me to keep a steady supply of plastic bags to protect my precious cargo of photocopied documents. Every day before leaving the university I would painstakingly stuff my documents in plastic bags, making sure not an inch of them would come into contact with the constantly wet interior of my backpack. I also spent most of my time in Japan in jeans rolled up to my knees and flip-flops. I'm sure the distinct sound of my wet flip-flops squishing up against the carpet drove the other patrons crazy. I would therefore advise PhD students to keep weather (and its anomalies) in mind when planning a research trip. Unless your room and board is minutes away from the archive (which I doubt is the case), be mindful of basic necessities like an umbrella, changes of clothes, rainproof gear, and protection sleeves for whatever copies you make.

Although I am not a seasoned "veteran" of the archives, my first trip abroad taught me two important lessons. First, no amount of planning can ever account for all the contingent elements that will take away precious time from whatever it is you are trying to accomplish. And second, don't forget about simple precautions when it comes to climate, weather, etc. It can be easy to lose sight of basic necessities, especially when you are so focused on mining the archives.

* * *

Deborah Sneed

The first thing you need to know is this: how you feel about your first dig experience depends almost entirely on you. If you lose perspective, it won't matter whether you are in Rome, Italy or the middle of the forest in Panama, because your memories will always be tainted by how you felt each day, working under the sun, nursing blisters, and hearing the same jokes from the same people for the *entire summer*.

Problems Can Begin Early

My first experience digging was in 2008. That summer, I arrived in Athens, Greece without any of my luggage, any knowledge of the Greek language, or any idea about where I was going. I missed my bus stop, but decided that I could find my destination on foot, despite the fact that I didn't have a map. Why I didn't just get in a cab, I'll never know. My lack of luggage was good though, because I wandered for over an hour before I found someone who "spoke English." He said he could help me, but all he could do was smile, give me a thumbs-up, and say "Hillary!" (This was in June, so Hillary was still a candidate for the 2008 Democratic nomination). My luggage didn't arrive for almost a week and I only had one change of clothes, so I worked that first week in one set, then changed into the other after work (now I pack several days' worth of work and play clothes in my carry-on). This was an inauspicious start, but I was so excited to be working in the shadow of the Acropolis that it really didn't matter what I was wearing. And that's the point: if you maintain the perspective that you're having a new experience in a fresh and exciting place, then it doesn't matter what else happens. You'll be happy with the flavorless pasta dish because you're eating it in Florence, Italy (true story) or content sleeping on the deck of a ferry, spattered with cold mist, with only a towel to warm you, because you're on your way to Santorini.

Cicada Attack!

Perspective can be difficult to maintain in the field. Digs are stressful and let's be honest, they can be gross. While working at a site near Corinth, Greece, I was in the middle of a grove filled with cicadas. I was milling around my trench, minding my own business, when a cicada dive-bombed me. I wear glasses, and this fat cicada wedged itself in between my eyebrow and the frames, and got stuck right up against my eye. Fun fact about cicadas: they spray their urine (called "honey dew") almost constantly. Including when they've taken up residence on your eyeball. It was disgusting enough that it could have ruined my day, maybe even my week. But if you get down about every cicada that pees in your eye, you'll spend a lot of time unhappy.

These "tips" are relevant, I think, regardless of what you're doing in life, whether you're at home or abroad. But when you're abroad, you're spending a lot more money to maintain negativity. Embrace the heat, the paste that forms when you put sunscreen over your dirt-caked legs, the sweat, and the blisters. There are worse ways to spend your summer.

* * *

Hopefully, these stories and tips have provided relevant and interesting material for anyone planning a trip to an archive or dig. It seems that no matter the end goal of the trip, a first foray or a much longer project, the best advice is to stay calm and keep a sense of humor about the wondrous variety of moments that make up your research experience.