

GenGuides | LOCAL AND COUNTY HISTORIES

by *Genwriters* | Every Town has a Story

County histories were prolifically written during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Many were written to coincide with the country's centennial celebration in 1876. A burst of interest in genealogy helped to fuel the population's interest in the past. Writers and publishers quickly seized the opportunity to create tomes of widespread interest.

Most early county histories were written with two distinctly separate sections. The first provided a history of the county usually arranged alphabetically by town or township. The geographic and political background of each municipality was included. The second section was biographical and contained profiles of founders and prominent citizens at the time the book was published. Often, maps were included to illustrate the writings. These maps are particularly useful to genealogists because they show the area at an historical point in time.

The twentieth century has seen a resurgence of interest in writing locality histories. Many newer publications fill the shelves of libraries and bookstores. These tomes, written at a time further removed from the actual events, rely heavily on previous histories, letters, diaries and word of mouth. Take a few moments to check the sources and documentation used to write the book to assess its validity as a reliable source.

HOW LOCAL HISTORIES ARE HELPFUL

By researching local history you are learning about your family's community. These details add context to your family history and provide clues to aid your genealogy journey. Don't toss aside a local history just because your ancestors' surnames are not in the index. Rather than searching for names, use the tomes to search for the place to learn about your ancestors' home and uncover little-known facts unique to the area.

Biographies of prominent men are usually included. A lucky genealogist will find an

ancestor's biography. Many of us are not so fortunate. Much can still be gleaned from these biographies giving insight into the era and locale at an historic point in time.

Stories of founders are passed along. These stories provide interesting anecdotes for genealogists by giving background about the circumstances surrounding the settlement of the communities.

Most local and county histories provide details of the histories of churches, cemeteries, schools, hospitals, and businesses. These histories can be valuable for those "lost" institutions.

The topography of the region is usually given with much detail. Soil conditions, elevations, and natural geographic features

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are all included in the description. This detail can help you to learn the "lay of the land" and can provide insights into difficulties your ancestors might have faced because of a particular geographic setting.

Many local and county histories include maps of the area. Some may be small and include just a neighborhood of focus while others may depict the entire area of the book's focus. These maps are particularly valuable when you find a county history published at the time your ancestor lived there; the maps will provide an accurate depiction of the time and place you are researching.

Political and economic situations are included in the municipality profiles. Details of local industry and population statistics are often presented in text and table format.

The county demographic details together with the biographies can provide insight into the everyday lives of the residents.

Pictures, drawings, and illustrations are typically found in many local and family histories. Take the time view them; look for hidden details and clues that might help with your research.

CAUTION AHEAD

Many biographies included in these histories were solicited and a fee paid by the family for inclusion in the book. This situation lent itself to embellishment of accomplishments and status within the community. Many biographies were unedited and unverified by the publishers, so they went to print exactly as the family wrote and submitted them.

The indexes can often be incomplete and are often not an "every name index." Not finding your ancestors' names in the index of a county history does not necessarily mean that they won't be mentioned in the pages of the text. Often, only the most prominent of men were indexed. Reading, or scanning, through the pages of the book might lead to fascinating discoveries.

Not all municipalities were fortunate to have a local history compiled. In these situations, look for histories for the next largest or nearest municipality. If a history does not exist for your town or a neighboring town, look for a county or a state history. Many state histories have separate chapters/sections for each county or region of the state.

WHERE TO FIND LOCAL AND COUNTY HISTORIES

Historical and genealogical societies typically have local histories in their holdings. To locate an historical or genealogical society in your research area, visit the State Pages at the U.S. GenWeb Project. Most state pages include a list of societies with links to their webpages. *The Handy Book for Genealogists*, by George B. Everton, has lists of genealogical societies, libraries, archives, and county seats to assist you.

Local public and academic libraries may hold local and county histories in their collection. To find a library in your locality, visit the Library Spot web site at www.libraryspot.com/librariesonline.htm.

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After you locate a library, a quick check in their online library catalog will identify the extent of their holdings. You might, also, contact the library directly via email or snail mail to ask if they have local and/or county histories in their holdings. Not all libraries catalog all items.

The **Family History Center** in Salt Lake City has many local and county history books in its microfilm holdings. The online catalog can be searched at www.familysearch.com and the microform can be loaned to your local Family History Center for you to use.

There are many online resources from the **Library of Congress** at www.loc.gov/.

The **U. S. GenWeb Project**, located at www.usgenweb.com/thestates.html features state information and links to county websites within each state.

Heritage Quest Online provides a collection of 20,000+ searchable books. Many of these books are local histories. Heritage Quest Online is available at many libraries and may be accessible from home through your library's website. A call to the reference desk at your local public library will provide that answer to you.

Search for local and county histories on eBay (www.ebay.com). Set up a habit of checking eBay on a weekly basis and you might be surprised what you'll find.
