

Research as Relationship



Anyone who has engaged in archival research knows the drill. You arrive at the repository in the morning and move through a security checkpoint where you are asked to divide your belongings between what is suitable for the reading room and what is not. The latter you stow in a locker similar to the one you used in junior-high gym class. You then find a seat and begin to fill out call slips so that a hopefully friendly employee can retrieve the material you wish to examine. You return quietly to your chair, wait patiently for your materials to be delivered, and spend the rest of the day in splendid intellectual dialogue with your sources. You break only to eat lunch, to fill out new call slips, or to briefly (and subtly) inquire as to the nature of the research being conducted by the person sitting across the table, just to make sure that no one is mining your scholarly field.



Fig. 1. County Route 623 in Salem County, New Jersey

While most early American historians tend to do their work at large research facilities where the experience is similar to what I have described, some of us are engaged in projects that require visits to local historical societies and other out of the way repositories. We do not enjoy the creature comforts afforded to those who happily labor in temperature-controlled facilities with welcoming staffs. Work in local research libraries places unique demands on the historian. It requires learning a whole new set of skills that one does not

normally pick up in graduate school. For example, I do not remember my mentor telling me how to deal with an eager genealogist who is unwilling to surrender the only microfilm reader in the building. Nor do I recall a lecture about what to do after driving sixty miles into the countryside only to find out that the local librarian went home sick for the day and had to close the shop. I must have been absent on the day my historical methods seminar focused on how to manage the frustration that comes when the research room at the town library changes its hours, without telling you, from Tuesday and Thursday mornings to Monday and Wednesday afternoons.



Fig. 2. Approaching a one-lane bridge somewhere in Salem County, New Jersey

In addition to cultivating the virtues of patience and endurance, the historian doing this sort of research must learn how to build relationships and earn the trust of people—usually historical society volunteers—who might be skeptical of outsiders and inclined to protect their cherished local history from professional revisionists intent on rewriting it. This kind of relationship building can reap immeasurable benefits for the early Americanist, but it also demands a reorientation of how we think about research productivity and the use of our time.



Fig 3. Turtle Crossing Sign on Route 49 in Salem County, New Jersey

Much of my experience with this type of research came in 1997 when I was beginning a dissertation on the impact of Protestantism and the Enlightenment in the eighteenth-century Philadelphia hinterland of southern New Jersey. The manuscript collections I needed to use were housed in a dozen or so local and county historical societies in what colonial-era Philadelphia travelers often

referred to as the “wilds” of New Jersey. I was intrigued by this prospect, thrilled about the possibility of uncovering manuscript resources that had never been examined by professional historians or appreciated by their local guardians. Now *this* seemed to be real research. *This* was why I had always wanted to be a historian. My vocation was renewed further when I won a grant that would enable me to rent a car for the summer and travel through the New Jersey countryside in search of a dissertation. I gathered my legal pads, packed my laptop, bought a road map, and set off to do what real historians do. The first stop on my journey was a visit with Bill (not his real name), the interim director of a local South Jersey historical society, with whom I had been exchanging long e-mails about the region’s eighteenth-century resources. Bill is an expert on South Jersey history—he made it clear that he is not interested in the history of *any* other region—and he uses his knowledge to make a decent living as an historical consultant. I was a bit apprehensive as my midsize Chevy Cavalier pulled up to the curb in front of Bill’s house; we had never spoken face to face. When I approached the door, a quiet but friendly man welcomed me, introduced me to his mother and then asked if I wouldn’t mind taking a quick drive so he could get some lunch. It was becoming clear to me that the day would unfold on Bill’s terms, not mine, so I decided to climb in his van and make the best of it.



Fig. 4. Produce Stand on Route 49 in Salem County, New Jersey

After we left the drive-through (he treated!) we returned to Bill’s house where he escorted me to a basement library complete with a computer station, a long seminar table, and the largest collection of books about the history of southern New Jersey I had ever seen. We spent the day chatting about his books, how my work intersected with some of his own interests, and the primary sources that would be available to me in this region. Throughout the course of the conversation the topic of how my project might fit into the literature of my discipline never came up. As I left, Bill offered me the use of his library whenever I needed it, lunch included. As I drove away from Bill’s house, I felt glad to have met him but also disappointed that I had not made any headway into *serious* archival research. The next day, however, I would travel to a county historical society where I knew there were some manuscripts I could consult. I found a cheap hotel and arose early, ready for action. The Smith County Historical Library (not its real name) is tucked away in a remote corner of the Garden State. The reading room consists of two tables, a card catalog of

3 x 5" index cards with family names handwritten on them, some old microfilm readers, and a collection of pamphlets and books on local history. When I arrived, some genealogists—all around retirement age and clearly regulars—were already hard at work. Their notes and charts covered most of the space at the tables. It was clear from the looks I received when I entered the room that I was a stranger in these parts. I introduced myself to the director of the library—who was expecting me—and then managed to stake out the last seat left at one of the tables.



Fig. 5. Field adjacent to the Cohansey River in Cumberland County, New Jersey

I quickly realized that the Smith County Historical Library is more than just a historical society. It doubles as the village's community center. Each morning, a steady stream of residents wander into the reading room, coffee in hand, to chat about the weather, converse about local happenings, and complain about everything else. This daily ritual was certainly not conducive to my serious research, but I quickly got used to it. After a few days I found myself joining in, explaining to my new friends that I was not there to uncover my family lineage, but to do research for a doctoral thesis on the early history of the area. They seemed intrigued, but the topic of conversation changed quickly to auto repair or the menu at the local restaurant. After several weeks at the library I too was becoming a "regular." I was given unlimited access to a host of valuable (at least to me) eighteenth-century letters, diaries, and other manuscript sources and had even received a few "historical tours" of the region organized around places the characters in my research had walked and slept. I was also put to work. I helped move a filing cabinet, reorganized an attic full of old account books, and even minded the library while one of the volunteers went out to get the mail. This was not the National Archives, but I left the Smith County Historical Library feeling a bit more human than when I arrived.



Fig. 6. Hay field somewhere in Salem County, New Jersey

My final stop on this initial leg of my research journey was a small Protestant church that possessed some old records that I thought might be of use to my project. As I approached the tiny stone structure, built in the early 1800s, I was greeted by a herd of screaming children pouring out of its doors, searching frantically for their parents who were waiting to pick them up from vacation bible school. When I finally found an adult in the crowd, she directed me to Susan, the clerk of the church "session." Susan had spent her entire life in this small South Jersey town; she was baptized in this church and had just recently become its most important lay leader. I followed Susan to the balcony of the church, which was used as a storage area. She dusted off an old, rusty, filing cabinet and opened one of the drawers to reveal a set of original church records—session minutes, membership lists, disciplinary records, and even some sermon manuscripts—dating back to the mid-eighteenth century. I looked at the records with mixed emotions. I was glad to have made such a find, but, I asked, wouldn't the church feel better about donating these documents to a repository—such as the denominational historical society in Philadelphia—that had the resources to preserve them properly? The answer to my question was an unqualified "no." These were "our records" Susan informed me, and they would never be turned over to an archive where they would not be appreciated. Once I realized that there was no convincing Susan on the archive issue, I asked if I could spend a few hours examining these documents. She took them and me to a classroom that still bore the remnants of a morning of vacation bible school. There I was, a budding historian, sitting at a table filled with half-drunk plastic cups of fruit punch and partially eaten cookies, reading original eighteenth-century sermons and trying to link their content to trends in early modern Scottish moral philosophy. Warner Sallman's portrait of Jesus was looking over one of my shoulders, and a stuffed animal of some sort glancing over the other! Somehow this was not what I had in mind when I thought, romantically, about the things historians do.



Fig. 7. Eighteenth-century house in Cumberland County, New Jersey

After a summer of roaming the South Jersey countryside, I spent the next year based in Philadelphia where I enjoyed access to some of the country's finest archival facilities and a community of young scholars willing to dialogue with me about my work. This was research Nirvana, but I missed the unpredictability and sense of adventure that life in the local historical communities of South Jersey had afforded me. Every now and then I get an e-mail from one of my acquaintances in South Jersey asking me when the book based on my dissertation will be published. They ask not because they want to keep track of my professional development, but because they are actually looking forward to reading my book and learning more about the history of the place that they and their families have called home for generations. As I stare at my computer screen and continue my musings about "rural Enlightenment," "moral philosophies of everyday life," and "communities of benevolent criticism," I think about these people and hope my finished project will not disappoint them.

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