



## Doing Good History: Brainstorming and Narrowing Topics

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What does it mean to undertake a history project? The word *history* comes from the Greek *historia*, meaning learning or knowledge based on inquiry and investigation. “Basically, historical questions seek answers that will help fulfill three purposes,” writes David Kyvig and Myron Marty in *Nearby History: Exploring the Past Around You* (AltaMira Press, 2000). “Description of the past, measurement of change over time, and analysis of cause and consequence.”

But making your historical inquiry *good*—or even *great*—is another matter altogether. When doing any historical project—from selecting items to digitize, to researching a topic for an online exhibit, to developing an entire local history website—it is important to approach the project with the outcome in mind. How will the end result be most compelling and useful?

At the most basic level, "good" history is engaging, informative, based on documented evidence, and it makes a point. Students of good history think and look broadly, leaving no stone unturned in their effort to tell a thorough, fact-based, and compelling story.

There are many approaches to brainstorming and narrowing historical topics for your projects. The following suggestions are intended to apply specifically to winnowing topics to select items thematically for digitization; to write online exhibits; and to write lengthier community history narratives.

The questions and prompts that follow assume you have done at least a cursory inventory of historical resources in the community and have reviewed what is available. You can use these questions and prompts just among your team members, or with a larger gathering of community members. Be sure to record the answers!

### GETTING STARTED: BRAINSTORMING

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Ask some initial questions:

- Why are you doing this?
- What are you trying to accomplish?
- What point(s) do you want to make?

- Who is your audience?

Then, think about:

- What do people have to know about the past to understand this community? Why?
- What is unusual about the community?
- What have you read, seen, or heard about the community's history that is surprising or interesting? What about these things makes them compelling?
- What about your community is similar to other communities in the region or state? Is it important to point out the similarities?
- The larger context is important. Consider how events, issues, and people in your community fit into regional, state, national, or even international trends, etc. For instance, you might focus on the railroad coming to your town and transforming its economy. More specifically, ask yourselves:
  - What was going on in Maine (and in your region of Maine) at each of the important moments in our town's history? How did this affect your town?
  - What was going on in New England at those times? Was your community representative of the region or an outlier? How has the "New England" identity affected your community?
  - What larger forces in the United States impacted your community?
  - How has your community been connected to the world at large over time?
- What is important to feature that might be different from or add to what people can find in published histories of the community?

Also think about:

- Who and what are you including in your history project?
- Are there people or groups or events that need to be included? For example, if you're writing about industries in your town, have you included stories of or information about the workers? About women and children who might have worked in the industry? About immigrant groups? About unions and their activities?
- Have you thought about the broad range of topics that might be important in your town: politics and political leaders, economics—business, industry, occupations, etc.;

community organizations, including Granges, churches, etc.; things that bring the community together (such as festivals, disasters or weather events, heroic actions, etc.)

- Remember the ordinary people who have helped to make the town what it is—men, women, children, business owners, teachers, etc. If you've got some information, these "ordinary" stories often are captivating to readers and provide information that often cannot be gleaned from other histories of the town.

## PARING IT DOWN: NARROWING YOUR TOPICS

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You can't include everything you know, everything that happened, everything that you have information about, everything that's interesting. So decide right off that you'll create an A list, a B list, and a C list:

- On the A list are your top 2-5 topics (depending on how many you need for your project).
- On the B list are a few runner-up ideas that will be the back-ups if you need them, if you get lucky and have extra time and capacity, or ideas for the following year.
- On the C list are long-term plans that your organization or team can work on in years to come.

Another great metaphor to explain this compartmentalizing of ideas is a "parking lot." Your second and third lists are the outer lots where the ideas will sit unattended until you need them. Don't be afraid to abandon those cars for a while. You have enough to worry about back in the main lot!

Speaking of which, in order to get a workable "A" list (or fill your "main lot") consider these tips:

- Go back to the earlier question of what people *have* to know to understand this community. Once you've focused on why those things are so important, you can begin to select *some* topics you need to cover.
- People will learn more from a *few* good stories and brief accounts of something than from long, detailed, and complex explanations of events, people or ideas. For instance, suppose your community was adamantly opposed to Maine's separation from Massachusetts in 1820. Was there a leader of this effort? Was there a big gathering in which opposition was voiced? A flyer or pamphlet published? A couple sentences of background about separation, and a couple of paragraphs about the who or what and

why of the town's opposition will suffice to make the point and let people know about this event. A bibliography will lead them to further information.

- Along these lines, if you're writing an online exhibit about the town's founders and important citizens, you don't need lengthy biographies of all of them. Talk briefly about the people who are most significant. For example, "The high school is named after Mary Smith, a native of this community, because she was the town's first full-time teacher and taught three generations of children in a one-room school house." Sure there's more you could say, but you may lose your audience if you go on and on. If there's a lot more and images or documents to accompany it, and you've used the illustrated exhibit format (in ExhibitBuilder), create a simple slideshow (with the Album tool) or Gallery via a sidebar to offer the additional information in an unobtrusive way. But keep the mention in the main part of the exhibit brief.
- Make sure you go through several draft stages and include the things you think are most important, remembering that you don't need to repeat everything known about the topic, nor re-create what's already been published. Have several people read the draft and suggest things that could be left out (or need to be added).
- Remember, in a short space—and with short attention spans of many web users, you want to be quite selective. Try cutting things out and re-reading to see what can be removed and still leave the important information.
- For more details on the actual writing process, see the companion document **Writing Good History** on the MMN Resources page.

## EVALUATING SOURCES

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All good history, and especially that on Maine Memory Network, is based on primary sources—things that were created at the time period you're focusing on. Obviously, your digitization, online exhibit, or website-building project is not something for you to spend years doing research on. Nevertheless, the basis of all of these projects is the selection of items to digitize, so it's important to think about those items as primary sources and evaluate them as such.

Evaluating sources obviously assumes you have sources to evaluate. It should go without saying that each of your “A list” topics must have primary source materials—ideally of varying kinds—to go along with them. Topics with scant or no primary sources will not work for Maine Memory projects because you won’t have anything to digitize and present visually online.

Once you have your primary sources in place, use these questions and prompts to evaluate and analyze them. (Some of these questions can also be found in the document **Conducting a Community Inventory and Evaluating Your Resources** on the MMN Resources page.)

Things to think about:

- Can you verify the authenticity of the source?
- Who created it? When? Why?
- Was it created for the public or as a private document? How does that affect its message and reliability?
- What does it tell you? What questions does it raise? For instance, what does the source not talk about or not represent that would be useful to know?
- Is it neutral? Objective? (This applies to both photographs and documents.) If not, that does not make it a “bad” source; it just means you need to think about it in a different way. What are the clues that it is or is not objective?

## MORE INFORMATION

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Visit the [Share YOUR Local History](#) section of the Maine Memory Network website, [www.MaineMemory.net](http://www.MaineMemory.net).