



Conducting a Community Inventory And Evaluating Your Resources

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INTRODUCTION

As you begin your exploration into local history, one of the most important first steps is identifying the historical resources that exist in your community. Taking an inventory of what's available will become a key reference source for any history-based project, and be a valuable research tool for students and other people in the community.

The resource gathering process also lays the foundation for any work you do in conjunction with Maine Memory Network: the selection of historic items to digitize, the writing of local history stories, the creation of online exhibits. If your community ends up building an entire website on MMN, your community inventory will likely live on as a rich public resource that the community can refer to again and again.

Some of these resources will seem obvious—collections at your historical society, well-known books, a prominent local historian. There may be other resources that you haven't considered that can help expand your understanding of your community—the records of a local business or church, the architecture of a particular building, residents who worked in a local industry or remember your community's involvement in or reaction to a national event, or collections at the Maine Historical Society or National Archives.

This by no means must be an exhaustive process; however, it is in your organization's or team's best interest to document as many resources as possible early on. The following are some of the categories in which communities might find resources. We suggest starting with a small group to brainstorm items under each list, then perhaps expanding outward to collect additional suggestions from other individuals in the community on an individual basis or via a community gathering. (A great place to do this is at an opening "Community Conversation" event as suggested in the document **Building Community Engagement** in the Project Planning section on MMN's Resources page.)

The categories are followed by a suggested format for recording the resulting lists and a discussion of how to evaluate the resources for use in your project.

DESCRIPTION OF CATEGORIES

1. Individuals

People who have in-depth knowledge about the history of your community. Also, individuals who might be a good source of information about a particular topic, or candidates for oral history interviews. These folks can often serve as “guides” and help connect you to other people and collections.

2. Organizations

What organizations might have historical collections related to the history of your town? These might include: historical societies, museums, public libraries, historic preservation commissions, heritage councils, an anniversary committee (e.g. Bicentennial), schools, churches, local non-profits (e.g. a Grange) or businesses.

3. Collections

What collections of historical objects, artifacts, documents, etc. exist related to the history of your community? These might be held by one of the organizations above, or by an individual. List as much information about the collection as you can: how it was created, what kinds of materials are in it, what subjects and time periods it refers to, how much material is in it, and anything else you think might be important. Do the collections above have a catalog or finding aid that accompanies them?

4. Books, Articles, etc.

Has a history of your town been written? Town histories may exist as books, sections of books about the history of the region, state, or another topic, articles, pamphlets, web sites, information sheets created by the town government, tourist brochures, etc. For each history you find, make note of the following: Who wrote it? For what purpose? Is it a reliable resource? Is it up-to-date?

5. Buildings

What buildings in your community might help you understand your town's past? Identify: National Historic Landmarks, homesteads, old school buildings, mill buildings, Grange Halls, etc. Note as much information as you can about the building: when was it built, who built it, and for what purpose was it built; what materials is it made out of, what is its architectural style, and what is its significance?

6. Statues/Memorials

Are there statues, plaques, historical markers, or other memorials in your community? When were they erected, by whom, and why?

7. Landmarks

Are there other significant sites in your community? A geographic feature (e.g. river) that in some way has shaped the history of your community? The site of a battle, flood, fire, demonstration, or other major event?

8. Resources Outside of Your Community

Often you can find information about your town's history outside of your community. University and other special libraries may have regional or state histories that include your town, and larger statewide archives may well have collections related to the history of your community (e.g. the Maine Historical Society, the Maine State Archives, the Maine State Museum).

9. Audio/Visual

Have organizations in your community conducted an oral history project? Were interviews recorded on audio or videotape? What conditions are the tapes in? Have they been transcribed? Is there public access to them? How many interviews are there? How many tapes? What were the scope and goals of the project? How were interview subjects identified?

10. The Internet

More and more historical information has become available through the internet. Are there Web resources that exist related to the history of your community? Who created them? Are they reliable? What are their strengths and weaknesses?

11. Curriculum

Have teachers in your community created lesson plans, activities, research projects, etc. related to the history of the community? Have they been collected anywhere? What grade level are they? Would the teachers be willing to share them?

FORMATTING THE LIST

The following is a suggested format for collecting and presenting more detailed information about your resources. Repeat fields as necessary depending on how many entries you have in each category.

A. Individuals

Name:

Contact Information:

Organizational affiliations (if any):

Knowledgeable about:

Willing to be contacted? Yes / No

Notes:

B. Organizations

Organization Name:

Contact Person:

Contact Information:

Notes:

C. Collections

Collection name:

Owner:

Contact information:

Description of collections:

Is there a catalog/finding aid:

Notes:

D. Books, Articles, etc.

List titles, bibliographic information, and make notes.

E. Buildings

Building name:

Location/address:

Date built:

Description/significance:

Notes:

F. Statues/Memorials

Name:

Location:

To memorialize:

Erected when and by who?

Notes:

G. Landmarks

Landmark name:

Location:

Description:

Notes:

EVALUATING YOUR RESOURCES

Now that you have compiled a resource list, you need to evaluate the individual items on it—particularly those that are part of collections. Are they all valuable resources for using in your local history project? If you are planning to use them on Maine Memory, will they adhere to MMN standards?

All good history, and especially that on Maine Memory Network, is based on *primary sources*—things that were created at the particular time you've chosen to focus on for your project. In selecting items to digitize and material to use in your research, it's important to use primary sources and evaluate them as such.

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?
- 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?

For more on evaluating primary sources, a topic on which much good thinking has been done, please visit this page on the University of Southern Maine's website:

<http://library.usm.maine.edu/howto/primarysources.html>

This USM Library resource offers a succinct introduction to and definition of primary sources, as well as a number of links to websites that help you locate primary sources.

The Library of Congress also has excellent information directed specifically toward use by teachers in the classroom, but the lessons raise great questions for anyone working with primary sources:

<http://www.loc.gov/teachers/usingprimarysources/>

MORE INFORMATION

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