

5 Steps to Getting Started with Local History

1 Define your research question

Local history research journeys usually start with a simple enough question--for example, "I wonder who built my house?" or "Why does this street bear this name?"--and end with a much more robust understanding of a place's complex social, political, and economic history. By defining your question you can focus what would otherwise be an overwhelming task into a much more manageable research project.

2 Read published local histories

Your local library is a great place to begin your research and has access to hundreds of published local histories. Older histories may be available digitally; check out DLG's Georgia Historic Books collection, browse the Internet Archive, explore HathiTrust, or search Google Books to find digitized sources about your area of interest. Check out the author's citations for additional hints on where to look.

3 Locate original records

From maps and building permits to digitized newspapers and estate records, local history is everywhere! Your local library has resources for starting your research, and may have indexes to or original city and county records. Other sources to check for original records include your local courthouse, permitting or zoning office, and city planner's office.

4 Talk to longtime residents

Oftentimes your neighbors and town elders are your best resource for local history information! Not only do they have firsthand knowledge of the community's stories, they may also be able to provide you with suggestions for who to talk to next. Be sure to treat these interviews as you would any important conversation: make an appointment, come prepared with basic knowledge and further questions, be respectful, don't take up too much of their time, and send a thank you note after your interview. You can always follow-up later with additional questions!

5 Analyze your findings and draw conclusions

Now you'll want to gather all your notes, resources, and findings and look at them with an historian's critical eye: are your sources credible? Is the information well-researched or verified by cited sources? If so, what conclusions can you draw based on your research? If you need more help, your local library has plenty of resources on researching, writing, and publishing local history!