

# Navigating the Rabbit Hole: Painless Historical Research

Presented by Laurie Marr Wasmund

## What do you need to *know* for your project?

- What do you want to discover from this project?
- What do you want your reader to learn from your work?
- What is your soapbox issue?
- How will your choice of themes determine the research that you do?
- What image or idea from the period that you're writing about has captured your heart?

## What do you need to *research* for your project?

- Event/history (duh!)
- Political and social movements
- Local events that surround your character
- Famous/well-known people who lived at that time
- Customs, manners, fashions, trends, etc.
- Transportation
- Religious beliefs and practices
- Products used in the home and business
- Collective historic attitudes/motivations
- The "size of the world" for your characters
- Language

## Primary Sources

- Diaries
- Letters
- Those who lived through the event
- Government documents
- Photographs

## Historic and Targeted Newspapers

- Check for free historic newspaper files for the state in which your events occurs
- Look for specialized historic newspapers from interest or advocacy groups and causes

## Secondary Sources that Rely on Primary Sources

- Check out the author's credentials and bio
- Sources written shortly after the event(s)
- Compilations/analyses that rely on interviews and letters from witnesses/survivors
- Wikipedia (general information)
- Footnotes of articles and other sources
- Bibliographies in books and on Wikipedia
- Organizations: ACLU, Red Cross, etc.
- Novels/Magazines of the Time

## **Almost Everyone is Willing to Talk**

- Museums have great libraries. Visits can usually be arranged in advance.
- Collections at libraries/Archives
- Cemetery Tours: You can pick up on names, stories, and scandals.
- Historical and Other Societies: Local and national organizations have collected a wealth of information
- Find the people who knew the people

## **Think Beyond the Usual**

- Catalogs: These can tell you about the possessions your characters might have had at the time, e.g., Sears, Montgomery Wards
- Almanacs, Cookbooks, Manuals, Record Books, Maps, Cookbooks, etc.
- Garage, Estate and Library Sales: Make a beeline for the books with hardback covers that look old. Libraries often cull their “old” or outdated books.

## **Consult Higher Education**

- Colleges: MOOC, podcasts, syllabi of professors
- Lecture Series: Tesoro, Colorado Endowment for the Humanities, Ted, etc.
- Masters and Ph.D. dissertations—usually published online in PDF format

## **Online Sources**

*Your best friends are .edu, .gov., and .mil. Type in your search term and then type “site:.edu” (or one of the others).*

*Look beyond the initial results when “googling.”*

- Online Etymology Dictionary [www.etymonline.com/](http://www.etymonline.com/)
- Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps (Library of Congress) [www.loc.gov/rr/geogmap/sanborn/](http://www.loc.gov/rr/geogmap/sanborn/)
- Family Search.org and/or Ancestry.com
- Google Books [www.books.google.com](http://www.books.google.com)
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