
This study describes the access issues and organizational practices of three local history organizations in Chapel Hill North Carolina, each of which covers a different sector of Chapel Hill history. The goal of the interview was to determine how they provide access, who uses the resources, and trends that exist in the area of access in local history organizations. The interviews reveal that the organizations are looking for ways to increase access to and public awareness of their collections. The organizations also expressed interest in using technology to digitize materials and provide digital access to materials and catalogs.

Headings:

Local history materials

History Libraries

Libraries -- Societies, etc.

Local history & records -- Cataloging
ACCESS IN LOCAL HISTORY COLLECTIONS IN THE TOWN OF CHAPEL HILL

by
Alexandra J Mitchell

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Approved by

______________________________
Claudia Gollop
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**Introduction**

Local history organizations, such as historical societies, were long the main source of historical information and archives for an area. With the creation of national, state, and local archives much of this collecting was moved out of the local organizations and into state or federally funded organization. Over time the collecting goals of local history organizations has changed, but local history organizations still exist to provide historical information to a community about a specific geographic area on a town, city, or county level.

These local history organizations provide valuable information to community members and other researchers willing to travel to use their library resources. Traditionally, local history organizations have received much criticism about the lack of access to materials within their organizations, with criticism dating back to their heyday in the early 1900s. One of the main complaints is about the fact that many local history organizations do not have a record of the materials that they have, which in turn does not allow for outsiders to know what is in their collection. Access comes in many forms and also includes physical access to research materials through an organization’s library, archive, or exhibit space. This leaves us with the question of how local history organizations provide access to their collections today and how are people using them. There are trends across organizations and the three organizations that are interviewed in this case study will provide a picture of some of the trends that may be developing.
specifically in the Chapel Hill and Triangle area, but possibly also on a state and national level.
Literature Review

Local history collections, like other archival and library collections, are found at a variety of levels from federally operated organizations to the state, county, or town level. The size of the organization and type of records they collect varies depending on the geographical area, the size of the area and the population they serve, and the level of funding the organization receives. Local history collections can be found in university libraries, museums, public libraries, and in independent organizations such as historical societies and historic preservation societies. Their main purpose is “the collection and preservation of historical materials.” (Josephson 194) Without the collection and preservation efforts of local history organizations there is the potential for loss of historical materials that organizations at the state or national do not have the room to save, are not within the collecting scope of larger organizations, or that have not been deemed important enough to save at a state level.

According to the Directory of Historical Organizations published by the American Association for State and Local History there are approximately 13,000 entries for local historical organizations across the United State and Canada. (6) In the state of North Carolina, the Association for State and Local History documents 290 state or local historical organizations as of 2001. The entries were dependent on response to a survey, so it is possible that they have missed organizations that did not respond or that some organizations have closed since the last available printing. These organizations come in a
variety of shapes and sizes, but generally cover the history of a specific town, county, or region. Most are historical societies or historic preservation associations, but some also cover the history of a prominent figure and their impact on the area or a specific subject area such as maritime history in the coastal regions.

As an example, there are museums that highlight a specific aspect of an area’s history such as the Maritime museums found in coastal cities in North Carolina, which are state operated, or battlefields that keep records and artifacts from Civil War battles in a county, which are usually state or federally funded. Other organizations include historical societies for towns or regions as well as historic preservation and genealogical societies. These societies are usually nonprofit organizations and do not receive any federal, state, or local funding. Most of these organizations, regardless of funding, collect a variety of information such as books about the area, archival materials, artifacts, and even the buildings themselves can be historical sites. For the purposes of this paper, I will be focusing on local history organizations that operate independently of local libraries or state and university archives and libraries. This means that these local history organizations do not have any funding coming from any level of government. For these case studies, the organizations collect books, papers, and other records that document information about different aspects of Chapel Hill and its history.

History

Historical Societies were prominent collectors of historical records in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Most of the literature about historical societies and related organizations originates in the 1920’s to 1940’s, with a minimal amount of
recent writings about local history organizations. As Richard Cox notes “historical societies were part of a major shifting by Americans to develop a usable past for their young nation, developing in tandem with historical novels, museums, autograph collecting, and other such activities and trends.” (209) The development of historical societies to collect records of importance allowed the preservation of records before there were collecting institutions such as state and local archives to keep local records of enduring value. As Cox mentions, “these [historical societies] were the main protectors of American’s historical records before the advent of government, institutional, and university and college archives.” (209) These organizations saw the loss of their own history and organized to protect potentially valuable historical information and “in the eighteenth century were developed simply to preserve the documents of local history that were being lost.” (Salter 1197) Before state archives and libraries and even the National Archives existed, historical societies were collecting information. Many sources note that these weren’t the most focused collections as far as subjects were concerned, but they still helped to preserve information. Today it is more common for these organizations to collect based on a specific geographical area and the influential people, places, and events that occur within that community.

Over time, historical societies become more common in every part of the country. Some of these organizations were established very early on after the American Revolution. For example, “the earliest historical societies were established in the first years of the American Republic. The Massachusetts Historical society was the first historical society, formed in 1791, and it was followed by a few others in the subsequent decades.” (Cox 209) The New York Historical society came next, and as they gained
popularity, many more came after. As the need for preservation of materials was recognized, the number of collecting organizations began to grow. There was an explosion of growth in the early to mid twentieth century and “between 1920 and 1960, historical societies were established in nearly every hamlet, major urban center, and certainly every state.” (Cox 209) As recognition of the importance of certain records gained steam and national and state repositories became more common, those institutions became a more common place to deposit some records and are now required repositories for public records. The creation of government repositories limited, to a certain extent, what local history organizations are able to collect.

The centers of these historical societies were their research libraries and archives, which allowed public access to the records and books collected. Salter mentions, “The newly formed historical society libraries provided a place for safekeeping, documentation, and public access to documents.” (Salter 1197) Previously documents were kept in homes, in old musty attics or basements, and in businesses and churches. These documents may have been thrown away by the owners if not collected by the historical societies, and would not have been publically accessible to researchers since they resided in private hands. These organizations made documents more easily accessible. Historical societies and other local history organizations “offer a wide variety of primary and secondary sources often not available elsewhere…they often emphasize a genealogy or family history collection or are allied with a similar organization.” (Salter 1198) Those that do have library and archive collections have a range of books and documents that cover a number of topics.
In their early history the researchers that used their libraries was usually limited to traditional historians. The view that they didn’t need to advertise their holdings or attract a wider base of users lasted until around the mid 1900’s. Around this time,

“Many historical societies began to adapt their missions in order to provide funding and staff support for programs aimed at public audiences interested in national and local history. In the process, some historical societies learned how to connect history with popular museum exhibitions and ultimately donor solicitations.” (Sgambettera 2066)

This was an important turning point for these organizations. In the mid 1900s historical societies collections became more focused and their library and archive collections became more organized. With this trend there came a realization that the general public may also be interested in the information that they hold and they began to look for ways to increase public involvement. This recognition of what they have and their potential user base is a trend that continued to grow.

Challenges

Funding can be a challenge to any library or archive and it is no different for local history organizations. Most are not funded by the local government and operate using limited funding. These organizations “often compete directly with other nearby government funded archival repositories for personnel, financial support and new collections.” (Purcell 31) If there are a large number of organizations in a small area, there may be competition for support from the community, both financially and for volunteer work. In addition, finding funding is often more complicated since these organizations rarely receive government support. For example, “securing funds for new construction or restoration usually means petitioning donors and spearheading development campaigns.” (Purcell 41) A local history organization located in a large city
does not guarantee increased support. The New York Historical Society, despite its location and size, experienced its own financial issues in the 1970s and 1980s, and nearly closed. (Salter 1999) Outreach to community donors for funds to start programs or accomplish goals is usually necessary. Much of the funding for organizations such as historical societies and preservation societies comes from local donor support and rarely is provided by the local or county government. Fundraising and donations are often largely the source of support received by historical societies.

In some cases there are grants available to organizations. For example, in the late 1970’s Indiana distributed a list of organizations that could potentially provide resources to local historical societies for programming and to support the gathering of materials. “Both private organizations and governmental agencies offer a multitude of services and information and make available a moderate level of funding such that an historical society should be able to progress in various programs ranging from archives and oral history to historic preservation.” (Bennett 74) At this time there were organizations from the state to the national level that could provide grants in order to help organizations meet specific goals. This is still true today, but organizations have to know where to look to find grant money and the number of grants available is dependent on funding in federal organizations or in the smaller organizations that provide grants.

Limited funding is also connected to limited staffing and “although some historical societies have large endowments to secure the institution’s future, many more are understaffed and inappropriately funded. Limited funding oftentimes results in a small staff overburdened with responsibilities.” (Purcell 32) Unlike a university or state library or archive, local historical societies and organizations are usually limited to a few
employees with many responsibilities. The staff often wears many different hats, from fundraiser, accountant, and customer service provider, to records organizer and intern and volunteer supervisor. It’s rare that staff members have a narrow job description in local history organizations and employees may end up taking on roles they did not expect and were not necessarily trained for.

Many historical societies and other small local history organizations have only one or two people on staff and rely on volunteers or college interns, if there is a university or secondary school nearby that the organization has a relationship with. The lack of funding limits the time and duties of staff and creates challenges when it comes to dedicating time and money to organizing and making their collections available to the public. In these situations, the staff and volunteers may not have extensive experience with organizing and describing records, but organizations work with what they have and usually find these volunteers very useful. The other responsibilities of staff members may lead to organization and description of books and records being secondary to community programming and daily running of the organization until there is demand from the users or demand within the organization to create a way to provide more access to and awareness of the materials the organization holds. Many of the challenges in staffing, access, and awareness can be linked to limited funding in these organizations.

Access and Criticism

Access comes in many forms and can mean physical access to documents through a reading room and digital items, physical access through exhibits, and intellectual access through finding aids, catalogs, or indexes. Historical societies and local history
organizations receive criticism for lack of access and the fact that their collections are not necessarily well known to the public. Even if the organization is well known within a small town, it is possible that their materials are valuable to people outside of that geographical area, though people may not know what they have or how to find it. For example, “many historical societies are not very well publicized outside of their immediate geographical vicinity and their current users.” (Allen, 71) This may have something to do with the goals and mission of the organization or, as Allen mentions, it is possible that they are “satisfied with their current attendance figures or don’t include outreach beyond their county in their goals.” (71) If serving a broader research base is outside their goals, they may not see the need to more widely publicize their materials. The usefulness of the collection outside a geographic area is dependent on the perceptions of the board members and employees of the local historical organization. Scope and the audience are questions that have to be considered by the board members and employees of the local history organization.

In the 1960’s Gordon wrote an article about the organization of archival materials in Historical Societies. As background, this article was written in the sort of heyday of historical societies, at a time where these organizations had a large quantity of materials they had been collecting over the years. He said, “Little is known about these holdings; there are few published guides, calendars, or inventories. Because of their lack of physical inaccessibility and the lack of adequate finding aids the professional historians tend to bypass them.” (Gordon 29) It has been over fifty years since his article, but some of the same complaints about physical or intellectual access are still around today. In 2008, Allen’s survey results led her to conclude, “The library and archival
collections are generally not as well publicized as the rest of the collections. Many societies focus on publicizing their museum, exhibits, programs, and tours on their websites instead.” (71) Some local history organizations mention on their website that they have library and archive materials, but others focus more on their mission, contact information, and current events. Even though many organizations have important local history records, they may be inaccessible either due to limited hours or a lack of a catalog or index to help users find materials.

Websites are often a starting point for researchers. At the very least, mentioning that there are archives and library materials available for use in local history societies would help make potential users aware of the existence of a collection for use. Adding digital scans of items to the website would allow the organization to provide greater levels of access to the materials. Allen suggests,

“Adding text that highlights the contents of the archives and library so that potential long-distance users can assess whether it is worthwhile for them to make a trip to the facility. Another twist on this idea is to provide a link on the website to a text version of a collection inventory or collection guide in a PDF format.” (72)

Access via the web is low risk and requires a minimum investment from the researcher. If there is a way for researchers to become aware of potential research materials or acquire them without the investment of travelling or even contacting someone, they are likely to take it. Providing catalogs, finding aids, and resources themselves online could increase access to the collection and increase the number of users of an organization’s resources.

Access issues and search preferences of patrons have changed since Gordon’s article was written and if anything, access needs have become more demanding since the
1960’s. Many people prefer a digital finding aid or catalog record since they can look for information in the comfort of their own home and it allows them to do research without traveling to an institution that may or may not have the information they’re looking for. In addition to providing easier access, “web access to collections provides instant gratification to researchers and speeds up the interaction between the researcher and the library” and allows for faster customer service and access. (Salter 1201) Many people do not just want access to a finding aid online, but also like access to pictures or documents, which is another way to expand the level of access. Sgambettera notes, “Over the course of the last decade, historical societies have developed digital libraries as a means to reach out to larger communities of users…” (2067) Online access to documents may allow the collection to reach a larger audience limited by geography and help to satisfy users with high expectations for what they can find and use online.

Adding documents and collections on the organization’s website is not the only way for an organization to increase access to their materials. Exhibits are also a common way for organizations to increase interest without people using the reading room and library collection. As Josephson points out there are a variety of ways in which historical societies or other organizations collecting local history can make their materials available to the public, not just limited to providing research access to books and documents. She says, “In an effort to promote interest in history and make the public acquainted with the work they are doing, [many] have museums where selected articles are put on exhibit… [or] libraries where investigators and writers may delve into the printed and unprinted collections preserved there.” (Josephson 194) Museums are a common way to increase awareness of a collection and provide a way for people to view parts of the collection
without doing research in a formal setting. If the organization itself does not have the space to do an exhibit, they could join forces with a local museum or university to create and exhibit to increase awareness of and access to their materials. Reading rooms are another common feature, where researchers can sit down and sift through boxes of documents or books. The reading room can be as little as a table and chairs or can be as formal as a reading room at a large organization such as a University Library or the Library of Congress.

The collection scope and mission of local history organizations, especially historical societies, has changed over time. The literature about local history organizations is limited, but the consensus is that there is a lack of access in many of these organizations. There are many ways for local history organizations to provide access, but they are hampered by issues with funding and staffing. Despite their issues, many local history organizations do their best to provide as much access as possible to researchers.
Methodology

This paper will focus on local history collections found in organizations that are not affiliated with a larger local or state funded body, such as a university, state or local archive, or a local history collection in a town or county library. The main research questions are as follows: How do local history organizations provide access? How do users use their collections? Are there changes or trends emerging for local historical organizations?

The research for this paper is qualitative, specifically focusing on in depth interviews as the method of data collection. These interviews yielded a detailed description of practices at local historical organizations. In order to gain more in depth information, three local history organizations in the Town of Chapel Hill were interviewed using face-to-face interviews. Each organization was contacted by e-mail to ask for permission to conduct and interview and a date and time was set up after each organization agreed. The primary investigator has had previous contact with all three organizations, and was an intern or volunteer with two of the organizations.

The interviews serve as the basis for the case studies about local history organizations located in Chapel Hill. “A case study focuses attention on a single instance of some social phenomenon, such as a village, a family, or a juvenile gang” (Babbie 309) or in this case, specific organizations in a geographic area. The important characteristic of a case study is “the limitation of attention to a particular instance of something.”
(Babbie 309) This project is a series of mini case studies done in order to gain insight into trends and access issues across multiple organizations.

The interview format was chosen since it would result in answers that give more insight into what organizations do and why they have made their decisions than a survey would provide. The interview format allows for more detail than a survey, and I was interested in the history of the organization and the reasoning behind decisions. The interview also offers other advantages over a survey. For example, “the presence of an interviewer also generally decreases the number of “don’t knows” and “no answers.”” (Babbie 274) Though the subject is free to decline to answer a question, they are more likely to provide detail to an interviewer instead of skipping a question in a survey. If the question is not clear to the subject, the interviewer can clarify if the subject “indicates that he or she does not understand.” (Babbie 274) This allows for more clarity and opportunity to gain detail than a survey would allow.

Due to the fact that people were going to be interviewed about their organizations, the online form was submitted on January 14, 2014 to the Institutional Review Board with all signatures from the primary investigator, advisor, and department. An e-mail response with approval of the project was received the same day from the IRB. The IRB number is 13-3850.

The organizations chosen were three different local history organizations in Chapel Hill. All three organizations have a different collecting scope and have multiple board members, staff, and officers to choose from as interview subjects. In order to complete the research, consent was gained from each individual. The name of each
participant and the organization they are associated with is being kept confidential, as agreed to in the consent form. An example of the consent form can be found in Appendix A. Each subject was asked if they consented to the interview being recorded and all three subjects agreed. All subjects were also asked if it would be okay to provide a paragraph of description about the organization and their mission, to give the reader a better picture of each organization. Each organization agreed and suggested their mission statements as a source of material to provide a description of the organization. All interviews were conducted during the week of February 16-22, 2014.
Findings and Analysis

Background Info.

The first organization, Organization A, is a resource for researchers looking for general history information about the town. Their goal is to “encourage and assist in the study of local history, and to provide public programs and publications related to the heritage and traditions of the community.” Rather than focusing on one aspect of the town, the focus is the history of the town as a whole. The collection includes books, yearbooks, pamphlets, scrapbooks, newsletters, bound copies of local newspapers such as the Chapel Hill Weekly, and other newspaper clippings. Though the newspaper publishers have likely kept the originals and the books can be found scattered in libraries and bookstores across the state, they do not believe there is much overlap with other organizations in the Triangle area. They have a very broad collecting scope, but it is limited in the sense that the materials they collect must be about the Chapel Hill area. While Organization A covers a wide range of subjects about the town, the other two organizations are more subject specific.

Organization B is a resource for individuals seeking information about the architecture and structures in Chapel Hill. Organization B has three goals, which are to preserve historic structures in Chapel Hill, create programming and projects to promote their goals, and to educate the public. They have two types of information they collect: their organizational records, which are not publically accessible, and cabinets full of
historical material and original research done by the organization that available for public research.

Organization B collects information about individual buildings and neighborhoods, including pictures, maps, survey records, newspapers, and original research about properties. They also collect information about their events such as tours and holiday events, as well as concerts and exhibits held at the historic home where the organization is located. There is a minimal amount of overlap with other organizations. The newspaper clippings overlap with the Chapel Hill News collection, and there is some overlap in the survey records since the state organization also holds those records. The original research done by members of the organization and the records about the organization and events held by the organization are original are not held by other organizations. Most of the information found in their collection is unique and cannot be found in other locations.

During the interview with Organization A, they emphasized that there is a strong connection between the two organizations.

They state, “In 1972, members of [Organization A] recognized the urgency to protect and preserve the historical homes and buildings of Chapel Hill, and Organization B was established…[Organizations A and B] continue to collaborate to keep local history before the public.”

While Organizations A and B are independent organizations, they have a history of being involvement and collaboration. At times they may work together to accomplish goals and may collaborate on certain projects that fit within the scope of both organizations.

The last organization is Organization C, which collects information about an influential individual from the Chapel Hill community. Researchers seeking information about history of the arts in Chapel Hill would consult this collection. They strive to keep
the work and humanitarian efforts of this individual alive and to educate the public through outreach and events about the work of this individual. They collect a variety of books, programs, journals, awards, microfilm, archival ephemera, and organizational records. This organization has some overlap with other organizations associated with the individual’s work including conferences, organizations that gave awards to the individual, and some of the other local historical organizations have information related to the individual. The focus of this organization is even narrower, focusing on the influence, writings, and humanitarian efforts of the individual on the local community as well in North Carolina and the United States.

Each of these organizations is independent of each other, but the small community environment leads to connections between the organizations. These connections might include working together and communicating with each other about the community and events. They also may keep some materials that overlap with each organization. Most of the organizations have similar experiences when it comes to access and budget issues.

Funding

As discussed in the literature review, organizations like these usually struggle with funding or at the very least have a tight budget for programming, events, and staffing the organization. All three organizations are non-profit organizations that do not receive any public funds from federal, state, or local government. Organization B largely relies on donations. According to the interview, their budget consists of “94% charitable contributions and 6% endowment distribution.” Organization A’s funding comes
exclusively from membership, and the money they gain from those dues is not extensive. Organization C’s funding comes “almost exclusively from royalties,” though in the past they have applied for grants. Charitable contributions and organization memberships can change from year to year, and likely depend on the state of the economy and how much extra money people have available to donate or to join organizations. Endowments and royalties are slightly more stable, but royalties in particular can vary from year to year. The funding for these organizations isn’t extensive and no set amount is guaranteed every year, particularly when they are relying on external donations.

The amount of funding appears to be proportional to the number of full or part-time employees that they are able to employ. The two that receive less money only have one or two paid employees, while organizations like Organization B, which receives more funding, have four paid employees, though only one is full time. Due to the fact that they do not have the resources to hire a significant number of full time staff members, these organizations also rely on their board members, officers, interns, and volunteers for assistants.

These volunteers help with activities ranging from research and helping with mailings and event planning, to organizing and working with the library and archive collections. Each organization has had at least one intern in the last year to help with research and organizing the collection. Organization C had three who organized the collection, created a finding aid and catalog, and helped to determine which materials should be transferred to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill’s Southern Historical Collection. Organization B has a formal internship program and usually has 10-12 interns each semester who do research projects or work with the archival materials.
In addition, they have a handful of regular volunteers who are able to come in weekly, but also have around 40-50 who volunteer to help with programming such as special tours and events. While each organization has at least one staff member or officer, they do rely on volunteers to help with events and to help organize the collection. Interviewees at each of these organizations spoke very highly of their volunteers and said that they could not do as much work as they do without the assistance of the volunteers. They also appreciate the fact that these volunteers often bring different points of view and new insight to the organization, particularly in the area of cataloging their library collections.

Generally speaking, most of the members of each organization were not trained in librarianship or archival studies, but many have found providing service to researchers and organizing the collection to be a part of their job. Since 2012, each of the organizations has had interns from the School of Information and Library Science at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. These interns have been tasked with helping to create indexes, finding aids, or catalogs that assist with access to their materials or to offer ideas on how to do these tasks. The interns and staff members work together to make the materials more accessible and to provide service to researchers.

The funding of these organizations is limited, but they have found ways to hire employees or find interns and volunteers to help them put on their programs, perform community outreach, and provide information to the community. Their regular staff members have learned about organizing and providing access to the collection, something they may not have foreseen as being a part of their future job when they were in school. They also recruit volunteers and interns from within the respective organizations and the
community to help with projects, outreach, and accomplishing the goals of the organization. The resourcefulness of the organizations allows them to accomplish more than they would be able to do on their own.

*Researchers*

People who come to these organizations looking for information are usually researching a certain aspect of local history. Organization A provides services to a variety of people. In the interview I found out that there is a professor at the University of North Carolina that assigns a project to students every year that involves research about the community. The students have to research a person whose gravestone they found in the Chapel Hill Cemetery and Organization A frequently receive requests when this assignment comes around every year. They also receive requests from students from universities in the Triangle area who are looking for information about Chapel Hill or a specific aspect of its history. Other requests commonly come from local schoolteachers and historians. For example, they recently had a request from a teacher for a tour and information for their class centered around the architecture on Franklin Street. Organization A also receives requests from historians looking for information about the town and its history. The audience they serve is quite varied and the experience of the researcher ranges from student to professional historian.

The resources from Organization C are used by people looking for information about the life of the individual, correspondence, and published and unpublished materials. The books are still available through the organization or through publishers, so people do not usually request those. They occasionally receive requests from historians looking for
information about the individual and they are referred to the collections that have been transferred to the Southern Historical Collection or the organization looks through their materials to see if they have information. This collection is also very heavily used internally by the organization. The materials are used to create presentations and talks for outside groups. The focus of this collection is very narrow, so the requests are generally about the life of the individual or their works and requests are not received frequently.

Organization B’s focus is architecture history of historic homes and businesses in Chapel Hill. Most of their requests come from people who want to know information about the historic home they live in. They also get some requests from people who are considering buying a home in the area or who just want to know more about the history of the historic homes and architecture in Chapel Hill. Occasionally they get requests from people doing large projects outside the area. Recently they had a request from the people who are considering the light rail project in the area and the organization found information about a home they wanted to know information about. This organization also uses the collection internally for research. There are projects assigned to interns and research done for tours and programs that are organized. In general, their audience is local, though on occasion they receive requests from people outside the community.

For the most part, the requests these organizations receive come from local community members who want to know about the history of the town or certain aspects of it or have a research project they are working on. Occasionally the organizations receive requests from people doing large projects or requests for information from those farther away. The collections are also frequently used by the organization itself to create
programming and events. The groups that these organizations serve most frequently are students, homeowners, historians, and members of the Chapel Hill community.

Access Issues

Access in local history organizations is not going to be the same as one might expect to find in a local library, university library, or state archive. Those organizations usually have a larger dedicated staff and a reading room where people can request and use materials. Regular weekday and sometimes weekend hours are also common features of many of these larger organizations. While these organizations likely have their own access issues, each local history organization has created their own approach to overcoming physical and intellectual access to their collections.

Access issues, as may be expected, get somewhat complicated, especially where regular hours and availability of a reading room are concerned. Organization C in particular has unique circumstances. They shared offices at a previous location where they had the space to provide access to the materials, but the building closed in 2010. While located here they received occasional requests for information. When the location closed, they had to move the organization into the home office of the director. Because it is now located in the homes of the board members, there is understandably a reluctance to provide access out of the homes of board members. For this reason, in 2013 they decided to transfer materials that are not frequently used by the organization to the Southern Historical Collection. This gives the public greater physical access to the items through longer hours and access through an internet accessible finding aid to inform people of the materials that exist. The organization does not use the donated materials often, so they
see donations to a location that can provide more access as a better use of the materials. It is a different approach than the other two organizations, but if an organization finds that they can no longer provide access to materials they want provide to the public, it is a valid decision to see if other organizations in the area would have an interest in taking them so that the general public can use the information.

In addition to losing office space when the building closed, they also lost an exhibit space. While they didn’t have their own location like Organizations A and B, partnering with another organization with office and exhibit space provided them with a way to create and exhibit and reach more people. Organization C had an exhibit that was temporary, but later shrunk down to become a permanent exhibit.

They emphasized the importance of the exhibit saying, “We had a major exhibit. It was shrunk later… It was the parts of [the individual’s] life with lots of display things. We provided money to…curate the exhibit. We had robes, busts…[the individual’s work] table, books, [information about his home]. What was really cool was that the group at the…[location] had developed a program for [elementary school students]…they went through five stations [at the exhibit about the individual and some of his works].”

The loss of the exhibit impacted their outreach abilities and access to information, especially to school children since they had this program set up to go through the exhibit and teach them about the individual and his work. It also affected the ability of community members and tourists to have low-key access to information through an exhibit. An exhibit is different from formally sitting down to look at materials, but still provides access to information and the closing of the building caused them to lose this access point. Despite the loss of space where they could allow use of the materials and an exhibit, they continue to recognize the importance of access to materials and sought a different route to make their materials available to the public.
Organization B has more open access to their materials and also has a permanent space in a historic home. Their hours are Tuesday-Friday from 10-4. When asked if they allow the public to use their materials for research they said, “yes we want them to! We’ve only had a few requests since…[they] did the summer project [to create the finding aid] but we have had a few requests.” After they created a finding aid to make the resources more discoverable, they have had some requests and want the public to use what they have. They are able to provide a space similar to a reading room for those that would like to sit down and do research on site. They have received requests through phone, e-mail, and people just walking in looking for information. They are enthusiastic about people using their materials and are able to provide access through regular hours and a reading room space.

Use of the materials is important to Organization B. When asked how often people request access to their records, the answer was that it’s “very occasional, but I hope that answer changes.” They have detailed resources about the architecture and homes in the area and welcome people to access their information, but people many are not aware that the materials exist. They mentioned that promoting the materials “may be part of some new branding and marketing…and [it is time to] put a reminder in the newsletter” to remind members of the organization that the resources are there and to spread awareness to the community about their resources. This is an important point. While they do not necessarily receive the level of use they would like to, they are looking for ways to make people aware of the information they have. Without awareness, people will not use the collection because they do not know that it even exists. Lack of awareness can be another way that access becomes limited.
Organization B also has their own exhibit space, but for nine months out of the year the space is reserved for local artists to display their work. For the three months they have it, the organization said, “we don’t really have the kind of documents that you would put on display…we are going to do an exhibit on the history of the [one of their annual tours] so we’ll pull all of the programs out and some old photos of tours we have in the collection.” This doesn’t necessarily increase access to their materials, but does allow them to tell a story about the organization or possibly a specific neighborhood or era while using some of the photographs and programs they have. It’s a different kind of exhibit space, but still one that can provide opportunities for sharing information about the organization and even about the local artists who display their work in the exhibit space. If they had more funding, they said they would like to do more exhibits. Increased funding would allow them to do the research, build an exhibit, and hire someone to help create the exhibit, but the funding limits what they can do with their exhibit space. The space provides a picture of the community but does not utilize the type of collection display you would see in a museum or library exhibit space.

Organization A also has regular hours and is open to the public for research. This is a fairly recent development and only in the last couple of years have they been able to provide regular access to their materials. Like Organization C, for a time the materials were stored in people’s homes, and in the 1980’s the materials were even at the Southern Historical Collection at the University of North Carolina for a time. Now they are able to provide access 16 hours per week, Tuesday-Friday, and have a space similar to a reading room with a large table where people can sit and look at the books or other records kept by the organization. “Previously, the office hours were on an irregular basis” and the
hours were organized around board members schedules and other commitments, so the hiring of staff members and regular hours has given the public more opportunity to use the resources. “Since the dedicated hours began, there have been 76 requests in 17 months,” which indicates that the resources are being used by the public and the organization “usually has five or six requests being researched at any one time.” They are receiving requests more often than the other two organizations, but their broader focus on the town rather than a specific access may allow for more inquiries.

They have a display space in the reading room and office area in their building, but like Organization B, they do not frequently display items from the collection. Currently they have a “university related permanent display” which walks visitors through the history of some of the University’s architecture. They have a Sunday Talks series and occasionally presenters will have displays in the reading room/office for people to look at. While they aren’t exhibiting any original materials, the exhibit space does provide a look at the history of the architecture in the town. The books in the space, while not on exhibit, are freely accessible on bookshelves in the space for people to look at when they come into the room. The exhibit space isn’t used as extensively or nearly as large as the spaces used or formerly used by the other two organizations, but it does provide a look into the town’s past.

Access is not just limited to physical access to items through reading room, business hours, and exhibits. There is also a question of intellectual access. Without a finding aid, catalog, or index available, it is not only difficult for members of the organization to find information for research, but it makes it nearly impossible for members of the public to find information. Recently these organizations have begun to
recognize the importance of a catalog of the materials they have. While the creation of a catalog usually began as an internal need for organization, it will benefit the public when they can be provided with a picture of the materials available for research. Generally, background knowledge and institutional memory serve as the primary resource for providing information.

In late 2012, Organization C realized that they wanted to organize their collection and determine what materials they possess. This had been done on a small scale by relatives of board members, but there had never been a formal catalog of the items. The records that have been transferred to the University will eventually have a finding aid, which the organization can link to from their website like they do with other materials that were donated in the past. Organization C’s interns also recently completed a project arranging, describing, and cataloging the books and archival items kept by the organization for their use. This allows the organization to know what they have in the collection, where it is, and the extra copies they have of books, programs, and other materials. Because the use of this information is largely internal and there is limited access for the public right now, the catalog is not posted online for public viewing, though it could be one day if they acquire a space outside of people’s homes.

Organization B initially created a finding aid during the summer of 2011 and are currently in the process of updating their finding aid by processing materials from the backlog so that people have the full picture of the resources available to them. The finding aid was initially created due to an internal need for organization. While doing research, members of the organization found that there was little organization of the records and it was difficult to find the items they needed. The interviewee said that at the
time they were “a part of the organization and can’t find what I need so how can we possibly be a resource to anybody else.” This is a very important point. If the organization cannot find information, it is going to be difficult to provide service to people who come looking for information or valuable or information will be missed while doing research. After enough use, members of the organization are able to locate materials more easily, but there is a serious learning curve for new members of the organization and a source of information is lost when people leave the organization. The creation of the finding aid gives easier access and a complete view of what the organization has not only to members of the organization, but also to researchers.

Eventually archives students were brought in as interns and helped to organize the collection, decide what to keep, and create a finding aid that the organization could use internally and to provide service to the community. This made it “possible for [the organization] to find what we needed,” which is key in any organization that wants to use their own collection or provide service to researchers. Now they are easily able to find files, which was not possible three years ago for anyone doing research from interns to members of the public to staff. The finding aid has been available online over the last year but because it was being overhauled and constantly updated by members of the organization and the archives interns, it was temporarily taken down. Online access allows people to search for information and decide if an organization has the kind of information they’re looking for from the comfort of their own home without having to contact anyone to learn the kind of information they collect. The online version will allow freer access to information about the organization and its collections. The
organization anticipates that the finding aid will be reposted again in the next few months, which will again increase the access that researchers have to their materials.

In 2013 Organization A, like Organization C, moved toward creation of a catalog of the books in an Excel file and creation of an index or finding aid for their more archival records. Like the other two organizations, it is being created out of a desire by the organization to know what they have and how to find it so they can use the resources better and more efficiently. Organization A actually had a travelling archivist from the state come in to make suggestions to help them organize their materials, and the intern last year provided more insight into how they could go about organizing and describing their materials. The finding aid is in the process of being created and they have “lists of the research files and are working on the book inventory…It’s getting closer to being done and when it’s closer to being done it can go on the website as a resource for the public.” It’s important that all three of the organizations have recognized the need for a digital version of the catalog or finding aid. In a digital age, people expect easier and faster access to information. A paper finding aid is not necessarily useful to people who will have to travel a long distance to do research. Again, displaying this information online will allow the public to be more aware of the materials available for use through the organization.

All three of these organizations have moved toward greater organization in the last three years to provide more efficient ways to find information. The creation of these resources was initially driven by and internal desire for organization of their materials, but will benefit the public and allow people to have a full picture of the information available through each organization. Creating a digital copy of the finding aid and
making it available through the organization’s website, or in the case of Organization C, a link to the finding aid at the Southern Historical Collection, will allow for greater access to the collection.

Each organization provides access to their resources, whether it’s through the organization itself or materials have been transferred to a larger local organization to allow for greater public access. Exhibits allow for access to information and catalogs of materials give potential users intellectual access to the information. All of them have some level of accessibility to their materials and are working to make the means of access and the level of access to the public greater.

*Trends*

As can be seen through the story of each organization, there are trends that have emerged within these organizations. One of the most important is that they want people to use their collections and are looking for ways to advertise their materials. Organization B is considering a new marketing program to help raise awareness. Organization A runs a short column in the newspaper every week that highlights an aspect of local history, and they are hoping it will draw attention to the organization and their materials. Periodically, each organization reminds their board members of the materials available for their use and they add a reminder in the newsletters that go out to members or “friends of the organization.” These local history organizations do not want their resources to sit in the dark, unused. They truly want the community and researchers from outside the community to use their materials.
Not only do they want people to use their materials, in the last three years they have decided independently of each other that they need to gain control of their respective collections through organization and description. This helps the organization because they are able to do their own research for programming and outreach. It also helps increase the quality of customer service they provide to researchers and the turnaround time to locate items. A finding aid or catalog will allow researchers to explore the collection without relying on the organization. Two out of three intend to post these resources on their own websites while one will link out to the finding aid created by the Southern Historical Collection. The creation of these resources may increase awareness of the collection, but it will certainly increase the level of intellectual access to the materials.

There is another trend in the area of digitization. The consensus is that they would all like to digitize some of their materials, especially those valuable or more heavily used. This would allow for access to materials online rather than just physical access during in person trips to the organization. At Organization A, just a few things are digitized, mostly items that have been scanned for individual requests and “There is discussion underway with the University [of North Carolina] about digitizing [some of the materials].” They have an interest in digital access and are communicating with other organizations that have the resources to assist with digitization. Even though they don’t have the resources to digitize on their own, there may be others willing to help them, or they may be able to find an intern to come in and digitize the information.

Organization C also expressed interest in digitization. They would like to have an intern come in and digitize the pictures, which they could then post to the website for the
public to view and use. The audiotapes they have were also turned over to the Southern Historical Collection so that they could be digitized and more easily accessible without using obsolete equipment such as tape players. Digitization of the tapes will also potentially allow them to last for longer as a digital file rather than on an audiotape, which could become obsolete. While they don’t have the funds to hire somebody to work on digitization projects, they are planning on looking for an intern from the University to help them do some digitization work over the next year.

Organization B does have some information digitized, such as most of the photo collection, easements, and the legal documents for the organization. They “would really like, as we’re moving forward, once we get what we have [processed into the collection], to start digitizing what’s most useful to people.” The information that is digitized, such as the photographs and the easements, are not currently located online. Digitizing these materials would allow them to post the information to their website if they choose, or to send information from requests directly to people without requiring them to come into the office to get the information.

Many of these trends have just started to emerge within the last few years as the organizations gain a greater understanding of the services they can provide to the public and acquire the resources to do so. These trends work toward greater access to their materials, and over time, will hopefully allow for greater access to and awareness of the information these organizations hold.
Conclusion

The situation in local history organizations has changed since the 1950’s. Local history organizations, particularly historical societies, are not at the height of their collecting but are still places where people can acquire specific information about an area. Local history organizations may not be as prominent as they were, but the access issues are not as dire at the literature makes it out to be. There are concerns about funding in each organization, like most libraries and archives are currently experiencing, and this isn’t likely to go away any time soon. Despite the fact that they are not able to provide many staff members, they all use volunteers or interns in some capacity to help the organization achieve their goals. The amount of funding limits what each organization can do, but they do their best to provide access to materials even with their limited funding.

Much of the available literature is 5-10 years old or older and the environment has changed in the last few years, especially with technological advances and expectations of the public. Just in the last few years, each of these organizations has looked for new ways to provide access. Two out of three now have regular business hours during the weekdays, which allows researchers regular hours to seek information at each respective organization. Each organization has created resources such as finding aids and catalogs to determine exactly what they have. These catalogs and finding aids will provide the public with background information about the organization and knowledge of the
collections they hold. Each of these steps was made with the goal of increasing access to their respective collections.

Digitization has emerged as a trend, and each organization has expressed interest in providing digital access to materials. Each organization is interested in finding ways to digitize photographs or other materials, particularly materials that are heavily used or valuable to the organization and the public. Two of the organizations also intend to upload their finding aids and catalogs to their websites once they are complete. This gives potential users knowledge of the materials each organization has and gives them access to this information at any time from any location. The use of technology to increase access has become more common, particularly in the last few years, as expectations of users and the needs of the organizations change. Over the next ten years things will continue to change as new technology develops and the access preferences of users change. Limited funding effects access to technology such as scanners and cataloging programs, but the organizations have found or are exploring ways to work around their limitations.

Over the last three years access conditions have improved at each respective organization but, in addition to struggles with funding, challenges still remain. Two of the main hurdles that local history organizations will face include increasing digital access and awareness of their collections to users. As indicated by the interviewees, they are seeking ways to increase public knowledge of their organization and the resources they hold. Increasing awareness may help increase the number of research requests they
receive and the level of use the collection receives. Local history organizations are seeking ways to provide more digital access and as technology expectations change, users may expect increased online access. Overall, the access conditions in these organizations have improved recently and researchers have more ways to access information than ever. There is no telling what the future holds for local history organizations, but as the climate changes local history organizations will continue to adapt and find new ways to interest users and attract them to their research materials.
Bibliography


Organization A. Personal Interview. 20 Feb. 2014.


Organization C. Personal Interview. 7 Feb. 2014.


Appendix A

Access In Local History Organizations in Chapel Hill

Research Subject Consent Form

This project, which is the basis of the researchers Master’s paper, involves research concerning local historical organizations and their practices. The interview subject has agreed to participate in an interview about their local history organization. The questions cover access issues in the organization, trends in local history organizations, and information about how the collection is used. The subject’s participation will last about one hour during an agreed upon date and time for the interview. The subject will be asked a predetermined set of questions approved by the UNC Institutional Review Board and does ___/does not ___ give consent for the interview to be recorded. This research involves minimal risk and will include information about the organization but not information about the subject being interviewed.

The name of the interview subject will be kept confidential and will not be used in the master’s paper. If naming the organization will identify the interview subject, the goals and mission of the organization will be described without naming the organization. Participation in the interview is voluntary and refusal to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which the subject is otherwise entitled. The subject may discontinue participation at any time.

__________________________________________________________  _______________________________________
Signature of Participant                                      Date

__________________________________________________________
Participant print name

For further information or questions about the study, contact:

Primary Investigator:
Alexandra Mitchell, Masters student
School of Information & Library Science, UNC-Chapel Hill
alexm217@live.unc.edu
210-382-6864
Faculty Advisor:
Claudia Gollop, PhD
gollop@email.unc.edu
919-962-8362

IRB #13-3850
Appendix B

Access In Local History Collections In Chapel Hill

The Organization:
1. How long has your organization been collecting materials and how large is the collection? How much, if any, of the collection is digitized?

2. What kind of funding does your organization receive? (Federal, state, local, donations, grants, etc.)

3. Number of Staff:
   ____ Full time  ____ Part time  ____ Interns (paid/unpaid)  ____ Volunteers

4. Does anyone have cataloging or reference duties as a part of their job description? Are there any advantages or disadvantages to using interns or volunteers?

5. Is there any overlap in the collection with other local history collections in the Triangle area?

Cataloging of materials:
1. Is there a catalog or finding aid that describes the materials in the collection? When and why was it initially created?

2. If a catalog is not available, have you seen any demand for one from users?

3. How often are materials added to the collection and what is the average wait time for cataloging these items?

4. Do you adhere to library or archive cataloging and description standards? If so, do you know which ones you follow?

Access:
1. How many times a month does the organization consult the collection for research purposes?

2. How do you locate and access materials? (Use the catalog, knowledge of the collection and where items are located, etc.)

3. Do you allow the public to use your materials for research? How do they contact you with reference questions?

4. How many times a month do people request access to or information from your collections?
5. Is your finding aid or catalog located online or available as a paper copy? Is there a preference from your users?

6. Did you ever have items on display at the Old Chapel Hill Museum? If yes, did this have any effect on the use or awareness of your collection?

7. Do you have your own display space for records or do you have activities that emphasize materials in your collection?

8. Do you transfer materials to larger institutions such as Wilson Library? If so, when and why? Would you consider transferring materials if approached?

9. How does the budget affect access and organization issues in your collection? If you had increased funding, is there anything that you would change in these areas?