

## Introduction

In years of public presentations for history enthusiasts, tours for museum visitors, consultations for research clients, and conference sessions for professionals, I have eagerly responded to requests for advice on research methods, reliability of sources, and evaluation of evidence. In my view, sharing what I have learned along the way is “paying forward” the guidance received from countless librarians, archivists, and curators of generous spirit encountered in my own research travels. In your hands is this “paying forward” – expanded, formalized, and finally sandwiched between the covers of a book.

**Rationale.** *The Micro-Historian's Guide to Research, Evidence, & Conclusions* imparts useful guidance to motivated historians, genealogists, special-interest researchers, and local history enthusiasts. As long-buried sources become available via the internet, more regular folks without a Ph.D. in history are joining in the fun of information-gathering and shining new light on under-explored history – yet often with no foundation of method. This book ramps up the fun, and answers the need with a compact and straightforward overview of the foundational theory, practice, procedures, and standards of professional research and evidence analysis. The aim is to help the new history practitioner build a foundation of research skills that leads to evidence-based conclusions.

**Microhistory.** This book addresses and inhabits the realm of *microhistory*, the genre of interpretive history that seeks understanding through the study of ordinary lives and under-the-radar subjects. At best, it is the “micro” investigations within a given topic that lead to an elevated understanding of the “macro” big-picture history of that topic. The sub-specialty of microhistory coalesced in the latter decades of the 20th century as a refinement – or methodological offshoot – of the “new social history” approach to historical interpretation. The first wave of micro-historians found that some large-scale quantitative studies by their social science colleagues arrived at generalizations that were at odds with the up-close reality of the ordinary lives from which they sought to draw universal conclusions.<sup>1</sup>

Early microhistory scholars such as Carlo Ginzburg (b. 1939) and Laurel Thatcher Ulrich (b. 1938) narrowed their observational scale, and focused their studies on small units and relationships within individual social settings. An earlier standard was set by George R. Stewart (1895-1980), with his 300-page description of a 20-minute battle in *Pickett's Charge: A Microhistory of the Final Attack at Gettysburg* (1959). The works of Stewart, Ginzburg, and Ulrich still stand out as masterful examples. Ginzburg's *The Cheese and the Worms* (1976) tells the micro-detailed story of a Menocchio [Domenica Scandella (1532-1599)], an ordinary miller brought to trial during the Inquisition and executed in 1599. Ulrich's *A Midwife's Tale* (1990), the real-life-as-lived story crafted from the diary of Martha Ballard (1735-1812), a midwife in rural Maine, won the Pulitzer Prize in 1991.

In the last 20 years the best-seller list has been routinely populated by general-audience books with a sociological or technological microhistory component. Perhaps the best-known is *Cod: A Biography of the Fish That Changed the World* (1997) by Mark Kurlansky (b. 1948). His books on salt, milk, and paper followed, which encouraged other ambitious scholars to research and write comprehensive, engaging micro-histories on everything from beer to bananas.

To the avid local historian or family genealogist who may have tuned out of history way back in the 8th grade, understandably stupefied by a fusillade of dry-as-dust names, dates, and served-up "facts," it may come as a welcome reassurance that there is far more to our human history than just generals and wars. Fortunately, out there to be chronicled by historians are the gamut of chalk-talkers and chocolatiers, prostitutes and proslytizers, screwdrivers and screwballs. There is no shortage of raw material.

**Organization & content.** The foundation of method is presented in five sections: (1) Research Planning, (2) Research Execution, (3) Evaluation of Evidence, (4) Formulation of Conclusions, and (5) The Summary Narrative. Subsections break down the method for easy understanding of the developing process. Each major topic is enriched by practical examples from personal experience that take the reader behind the scenes of the historian's craft.

It is important to note here that the foundation of method advanced in this book is not intended to be a confining straitjacket. The step-by-step method is intended to be more like a set of training wheels. Among the real-world examples are instances of serendipitous discoveries made possible by following a "hunch," breaking free from the research plan, and exploring blind alleys. As many a fellow

jazz player has learned through hands-on experience, one's improvisational creativity is ultimately based on one's instrumental mastery. That mastery is the solid foundation of one's craft attained only through disciplined repetition and practice. In any craft, the basis of *freedom* is *discipline*. So it goes with the craft of research. Build your foundation. Be disciplined. Have a plan. Master your craft. And then you will know when and how to improvise down those blind alleys.

This book's amalgamated content draws theory from, and pays tribute to, dozens of history, genealogy, historiography, and research notables through the ages, including (in alphabetical order): Robert Charles Anderson; Wayne C. Booth, Gregory G. Colomb & Joseph M. Williams; Fernand Braudel; Donn Devine; Val D. Greenwood; Herodotus; Martha Howell & Walter Prevenier; Donald Lines Jacobus; Carol Kammen; Ibn Khaldun; Dom Jean Mabillon; David McCullough; Elizabeth Shown Mills; Leopold von Ranke; Barbara Tuchman; Thucydides; and others. Recommended writings of these giants and near-giants are included in the bibliography.

This foundation of method is packed with the italicized terminology of the research process. Other books, other experts, and other systems might define terms differently, or use different terms altogether. But more important than memorizing specific definitions is understanding the research process. When you understand the process, you can think like a researcher – which is one of the aims of this book.

**Point of view.** This book is informed not only by my research experience for books, articles, consultations, exhibitions, public programs, and conference presentations, but by the totality of three separate but interrelated careers: investigative journalist and editor; performing artist and scholar of early 20th-century music, vaudeville, and circus; and museum professional with specialties in 17th-century New England architecture and domestic life. The perspective of experience, especially as a no-nonsense old-school newspaper reporter and editor, occasionally prompts a good-natured tease of the buttoned-down genealogy proof standard, a deflating poke at puffed-up historical interpretation, or an editor's snarl at flabby academic writing.

**Appendices.** The book includes three appendices that serve as introductions to local history, genealogy, and source citation. The first two appendices are adapted in part from my own previous publications on the respective topics. Much of the content of Appendix I: Local History 101, is drawn from insights gleaned while working on *A Micro-History of the Tannersville Four-Corners (2011)*, a social, cultural, and economic history of a small town in the High

Peaks region of New York's northern Catskill Mountains. The content of Appendix II: Genealogy 101, is adapted from an introduction to genealogy of the same name prepared for experiential "walk in the footsteps of ancestors" programs at New England historic house museums (2005-present). Appendix III: Source Citation 101, presents the principles of source citation, with examples of formats from the *Chicago Manual of Style* (17th ed., 2017), the *MLA Style Manual and Guide to Scholarly Publishing* (8th ed., 2016), and *Evidence Explained* by Elizabeth Shown Mills (3rd ed., 2017).

**Topical bibliography.** The bibliography includes the following categories: historiography, general history theory & practice, local history theory & practice, genealogy theory & practice, the craft of research, source citation, and the craft of writing. As a self-directed learning resource, the bibliography expands the modest 112 pages of this book to thousands of pages of wisdom from the masters.

**Parting thoughts.** The foundation of method is followed by a chapter of selected parting thoughts, a catch-all of observations, tips, warnings, and exhortations. The dozen parting thoughts were conceived as pithy reminders of *timeless* principles relevant to the topics of research, evidence, and conclusions. But during the course of assembling this book, circumstances have pushed these best practices, especially those related to the evaluation of evidence, to a front-and-center position that has made them *timely* as well as *timeless*. In this era of disparagement of the free press, assault on truth-seeking scholarship, threats to freedom of speech, and a national crisis of failing media literacy, all of our citizens, young and old – not just wanna-be historians – might benefit from a refresher course on research, evidence, and conclusions. The long-established principles of evidence evaluation advanced in this book align almost exactly to the most up-to-date principles advanced in media literacy education, and as such may be more *timely* than ever.

My hope is that this compact guide proves useful to those who value evidence-based discoveries. May *your* research yield a fortune of priceless insights to share. To those who embrace the principles and ideals within this volume: Go forth and multiply! Happy reading.

– **Reginald W. Bacon**  
Newburyport, Mass.  
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(1) Carlo Ginzburg. "Microhistory: Two or Three Things That I Know About It." *Critical Inquiry* 20 (Fall 1993). (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1993), pgs. 10-35.