

Maximize Research & Time at the Local Genealogical Library

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When planning a research trip to another state, we often organize our research to make the most of the time we plan to spend there. After all, airfares, gasoline, and hotels are no small coins out of our genealogical pockets. Yet, many of us, who carefully and minutely plan for the long distance trip, will revert to “grab and go” when the distance is less than an hour by car. The experts all agree that the principles used to plan for a trip to a distant city are the same principles that we can use for the local library. Careful planning can increase your effectiveness as a researcher and maximize your time at the library.

The strategy recommended here is a 5-step process. It parallels, in concept, the strategy used by professional researchers whose expertise focuses around a specific area of knowledge, whether it is in history or science.

START WITH THE ONLINE CATALOG

Perform this task early, whenever you begin researching in any new locality. Construct a bibliography for each library and locality. By identifying all library holdings related to that locality, you can become familiar with the range of books, microform, and indexes.

For example, I research extensively in northwestern South Carolina for the period, 1670-1950. When I began research in that region, I downloaded my library’s catalog holdings for that locality and period into my computer, capturing four essential descriptors.

Four items that are crucial to productive searching are: title, author, call number, and shelf location (See Fig. 1). Even those libraries devoted exclusively to genealogy will have their holdings partitioned into sections. Noting the shelf location helps you or the librarian more quickly locate the item. This bibliography can be stored in a spreadsheet, word-processing document or even specialized software. The form is a personal preference. However, I recommend either a spreadsheet or bibliographic software as both have the ability to produce lists sorted by selected fields.

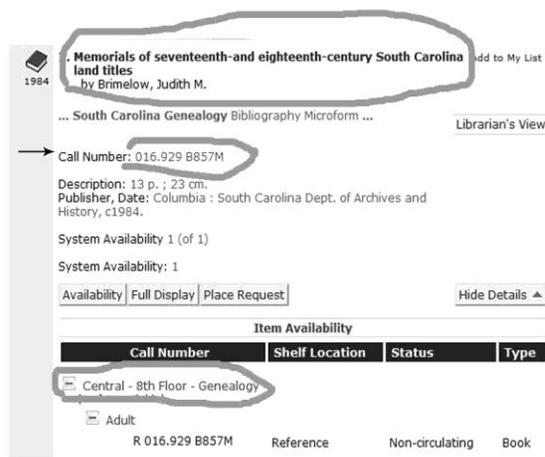


Figure 1

COMPLETE THE BIBLIOGRAPHY OF HOLDINGS

Once the working bibliography is generated from the online catalog, it is not yet complete. You cannot assume that all the library's holdings are found in the online catalog. For example, very few microfilm holdings at the Dallas Public Library, Genealogy Section (DPL) appear in the online catalog. Thus, the first real task of researching *at the library* is to complete your working bibliography.

There is no quick way of accomplishing this step. Often, one must go cabinet by cabinet, drawer-by-drawer, to note labels on the film boxes, entering this information into the working bibliography. Again, focus upon four descriptors: creator, title, coverage, and location. The creator functions as the author. Often, the creator will be the publisher of the microfilm or the repository where the original documents reside. The title should be whatever appears on the box label. The coverage would be information such as range of dates or range of names included on that particular reel. The location is your own designation of where the roll is stored. For example, I created a coding schema for the South Carolina related microfilm, "SC-A-4." "SC," of course refers to the section for South Carolina records as established in the library. "A" refers to the column of drawers related to South Carolina with the letter, "A," in this example as the first column of drawers. The number "4" gives me the drawer in which the roll is stored, starting from the top drawer of the column. The resulting bibliography might look something like:

Creator	Title	Range	Location
U.S. Records of the States	<i>Acts of the General Assembly of South Carolina, Series 4c</i>	1785-1789	SC-D-7*

*(SC section, "D" (i.e., 4th) column of drawers within section, 7th drawer from top)

MAKE NOTE OF SPECIAL COLLECTIONS

Ask the library staff about special collections that may be relevant to your research. Special collections that are good resources for the family historian include the business records of a company or prominent citizen for that locality. They may also be church records, school records, or records kept by prominent citizens with substantial influence in the community. If the library has anything relevant, ask about pathfinders to these special collections. Pathfinders describe the contents of the collection.

Note this information in your working bibliography.

USE FINDING AIDS AND ANNOTATIONS

Ask the research librarian about finding aids for microfilm and special collections. More libraries are beginning to put these documents online—but not yet in the catalog. If these finding aids are not online, ask to copy relevant pages to the locality of interest.

Whenever you examine a book or microfilm for the first time, read the preface or introductory section. For microforms, this is often the first few images on the film. Sometimes those images contain a key that helps you interpret the images, themselves. For books, the preface should tell you where the source of

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the information within the book and, again, any codices that help you interpret the contents. Copy/scan these pages for your records. Within your working bibliography, allow a field or section within the database to annotate this resource. Annotate the condition of the resource, what you were able to find/not find, and anything else that will help your future inquiries of that resource.

MAINTAIN YOUR WORKING BIBLIOGRAPHY

Once the working bibliography is created, it actually takes very little time to keep it current. The local library is continually acquiring new resources. Therefore, I will read the section of the *DGS Newsletter* that reports recent acquisitions. If I find any new acquisitions related to my area of interest, they are added to my working bibliography and I review them the next time I go to the library.

This may seem like a lot of work before you get to the fun work of actually searching through these resources. However, this process is used by many professional researchers with superior results to the “grab and go” method. There are so very many resources and, by comparison, so little time for each of us to view it all. Laying a good bibliographic foundation for searching early in the research process will yield better and faster results in the long term.