

Careers for Historians: Research Historians

By Beth Crist

Researching the past is like putting together a jigsaw puzzle. Historians look in many places to find information on subjects, people, or time periods. They fit the pieces of information together to make a complete picture. If you like to hunt for answers to historical questions, you might enjoy a career as a research historian.

Research historians work for state and federal agencies, historical societies, archaeological firms, and museums. Others work as contractors on various projects. For example, someone wanting to know the history of a house might hire a research historian. A state planning to erect historical markers along a highway might also employ a research historian.

Just how do historians conduct research? They look at court records, books, photographs, diaries, letters, government documents, census data, news files, and other materials. They also interview people having knowledge of or connections to the subject or person. After organizing their information and making sure it's accurate, they prepare a report.

Most research historians have a master's degree in history. They must be detail oriented, patient, and organized. Getting a job as a research historian can be challenging, but it can be a rewarding career for people with a love for the past.

To learn more:

- Check out the following links to learn more about becoming a research historian:

Career Spotlight: Historical Researcher/Archivist

<http://www.schoolfinder.com/careers/interview.asp?Interview=12>

Archaeology Careers: Historian

<http://archaeology.about.com/od/alternatecareers/p/historian.htm>

- Arrange an interview with a research historian. Come prepared with a list of questions: What do you do on a typical day? What is your favorite part of the job? Why did you want to be a research historian? What is your educational background? What projects are you working on?

Try it out:

- Try out the activities at <http://americanhistory.si.edu/kids/springer/> and <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/ndlpedu/lessons/psources/source.html>.
- Research the history of your school with help from a teacher or parent. Find the answers to these questions: When was the school built? How many students attended the first year? Who was the first principal? What were the school's first clubs and sports teams? How has the building changed over the years? How many students attend the school today? What are some popular after-school activities? Photographs of the school or old yearbooks might help you answer some of the questions. Write a report detailing your findings.

Interview with Dennis Daniels

Dennis Daniels has been a researcher for the North Carolina Office of Archives and History in Raleigh for two years.

Beth Crist: What is your educational background?

Dennis Daniels: I have a bachelor of science degree in history from Methodist College in Fayetteville and a master of arts degree in history from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

BC: When did you become interested in working as a research historian?

DD: I've always had a love for history, starting in the fourth grade when I first studied North Carolina history. I first learned about the job of research historian when I began working for the North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources. I thought it would be a great job. When a research historian position opened, I applied for it.

BC: Have you had any other history-related jobs?

DD: I was a microfilmer for the North Carolina Newspaper Project, a program to locate, catalog, and microfilm North Carolina newspapers. I was a tour guide and curator at Mordecai Historic Park in Raleigh. I worked as an archivist at the North Carolina State Archives. Most recently, I was a curator at the North Carolina Museum of History.

BC: What do you do at work on a typical day?

DD: My main job is to help the Department of Cultural Resources answer history-related questions. I also help the public and other state agencies. Sometimes these are lengthy projects that result in research reports. For

instance, I recently completed a report about Polk prison in Raleigh for the North Carolina Museum of Art. Other times I research and write shorter histories.

BC: What do you like best about your job?

DD: Researching. I really enjoy going through material to find the information to tell a story.

BC: What advice do you have for students who are interested in becoming research historians?

DD: Have a love for history. If you do and it's your passion, you'll follow it. It's not easy to find a job, but it's worth the effort if it's what you enjoy.

BC: What has been your favorite project?

DD: I really enjoyed researching the history of the town of Haywood in Chatham County for the North Carolina Office of State Archaeology. At one time, it was proposed as the site of the University of North Carolina and also the state capital. I didn't know this little town had so many grand plans that never materialized. I also like researching proposed highway markers in my native Cumberland County.