

Town Historian Information Packet

Compiled by the Livingston County Historian's Office, NY

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1) Town Historian Responsibilities

a) **Mission.** The mission and purpose of the town historian revolves around collecting, interpreting, and preserving information about the history of their town and, if applicable, village.

b) Laws and Expectations.

(i) The provision for town and village historians began in 1919 with the passage of the NYS [Arts and Cultural Affairs Law, Section 57.07](#) (see Appendix, page 7), known as the “Local Government Historian Law.” The law is broad, and therefore open to interpretation, but provides certain guidelines. The historian’s law is a mandate, but not enforced.

(ii) There are no strict laws regarding activities of the town historian, but general professional expectations include actively collecting, preserving, educating, and responding to inquiries. These activities can include:

1. Researching and creating social media/media, publishing books, newsletters, or other print/online materials
2. Presenting programs on local history to school groups and/or the public
3. Receiving donations, proactively collecting photographs or other physical/digital materials, conducting oral histories or surveys
4. Organizing, cataloguing, indexing, and digitizing physical collections
5. Responding to research inquiries in person or by phone/email to assist patrons with accessing the town historian’s holdings. This does not include doing all the research for someone (ex. being a genealogist), but leading them to relevant resources.

(iii) The town historian, as a public town official, has authority to manage the historical records of the town other than those protected by state retention and access laws (for instance, vital records kept by the town clerk). The historian is overseen by and answers to the town supervisor and council members as well as taxpayers.

(iv) The historian’s law makes no provision for a salary. A budget is necessary to accomplish work as a municipal historian, so a new historian is encouraged to justify a budget, including some compensation, and negotiate with their town board.

c) **Historical Societies.** The town historian, as a government official, is a separate entity from any local historical society, which is usually defined as being a non-profit organization. Some towns combine the position of town historian with positions within the historical society, and in rural places sometimes this is inevitable. Professional ethics advice cautions against mixing the two positions, however. The town historian answers to the supervisor and all taxpayers, whereas the historical society, in theory, may be influenced by the wishes of its membership. Financial considerations, fundraising activities, and

possible influence or obligation are where conflicts of interest can arise. Town historians are strongly discouraged from holding a leadership position in a historical society. Be extremely mindful of wearing separate “hats” if it is necessary to be involved in both entities.

2) General Collection Guidelines

- a) Most town historians **do collect**: diaries, record books, reference papers (clippings, etc), published history books, photographs, postcards, maps, personal/business collections, and similar paper items or relevant digital files that provide information about people, places, and events in your town.
- b) Most town historians **do not collect**: Objects and other 3D items such as textiles, artifacts, tools, etc. These may be best donated to the historical society or another entity which manages collections for display.
- c) The town historian’s mission can help guide your collection policies. Items that detail events, people, and places in the town are central to the collection. Some general reference items about eras, events, etc. outside of your jurisdiction may be relevant on a case-by-case basis if they directly support the town historian’s work. Focus on items relating directly to the history of your town and which can be used for research. The “cool factor” only goes so far!
- d) Preserving information is at the core the work of a town historian, and in some cases the artifact itself may not need to be kept. If the condition of an original document prevents its long-term preservation (ex. It is too moldy/musty and threatens other items in the collection or it is too fragile/crumbled and its information is being lost) a facsimile (digital or physical) can serve in its place.
- e) If items are donated together, keep the collection together as much as possible to preserve context. This means either house collection items together physically or institute another system that links individual items.
- f) More than one duplicate is generally not necessary to keep.

3) Collection Management

a) Environmental Condition

- i) Climate control, where possible, is vitally important (heating/cooling, light control, humidity control, and air circulation/ventilation). At the least, a dehumidifier can help reduce humidity in a storage room/office and window shades can prevent sunlight from damaging collections.

- ii) According to the Documentary Heritage and Preservation Services for NY (DHPSNY), a temperature between 59-77 degrees F should be maintained year-round and relative humidity of 45-55% is best for records storage facilities.
- iii) Monitor collections spaces with a simple thermometer/humidity gauge to understand the fluctuation range and address any issues.

b) Security

- i) Ideally, the town historian's collections should be a room(s) that can be secured and access limited to only necessary staff.
- ii) If possible, work with the town to securely back up all digital collections and necessary working files on your computer, if you have one.
- iii) Ideally, get your computer networked and backed up automatically and regularly.
- iv) If this is impossible, obtain at least one quality external hard drive. Regularly back up all files and store off-site in a secure location.

c) Filing

- i) A subject filing system works well for most town historians. For example, organize reference material and series by broad subjects, such as business, education, churches, military, people, etc., then make subfiles on major individual topics. For example, under Churches, make a subfile for Methodist Episcopal Church and one for Baptist Church.
- ii) It can be helpful to create family surname files organized alphabetically by surname.
- iii) Subject filing can work for series (such as photographs) also.
- iv) It is recommended to file reference material and fragile original materials separately. Photocopies can be utilized for quick cross-reference.
- v) When filing original materials that are to be catalogued, it may be helpful to number files or boxes and start numbering over for each subject. Example: Homes 1, Homes 2, etc. and Churches 1, Churches 2, etc. This will help with retrieval if you have a detailed inventory of items in each box and/or folder.

4) Proposed Workplan for a New Town Historian

- a)** Determine any short- and long-term storage needs for collection (appropriate climate control, security, and access for town historian)
- b)** Familiarize yourself with and conduct a rough sort of all items in town historian's collection
 - i)** Categorize items into series and collections (i.e. subject reference files, school records, maps, Doe Family Collection, etc.)
 - ii)** Identify and remove items to be disposed of/rehomed, such as duplicates and irrelevant materials
- c)** Organize series and collections
 - i)** Arrange collections and series by subject, chronological, or alphabetical, etc., depending on contents. Arrangement by subject is generally a good method, but personal or business collections may be better organized chronologically, and surname files may be easier to use if alphabetical
 - ii)** Unfold and flatten original documents, remove staples and clips, and house in appropriate archival sleeves, folders, and boxes
 - iii)** Label boxes and folders
- d)** Create broad inventory of entire collection by box/cabinet and folder
 - i)** Use a spreadsheet to enter all details (see template)
- e)** Prioritize items for further description, indexing, and/or digitization
 - i)** Fragile items, photographs, heavily used original materials, items that richly detail life in your town, and significant unique items that cannot be found elsewhere are common priorities
- f)** Further processing of priority series and collections
 - i)** Label individual items
 - ii)** Describe individual items or groups of items in spreadsheet inventory
- g)** Digitization and indexing
 - i)** Create plan for storage and retrieval of digital items
 - (1) It is recommended to mirror your physical storage methods to make retrieval easier
 - ii)** Scan/photograph priority items and label digital files consistently (numbering recommended)
 - iii)** Index items that provide valuable information about people, places, or events (see template for index)

5) Next Steps

- a) Consider applying for a DHPSNY (Documentary Heritage Preservation Services of NY) assessment grant. A professional preservationist and archivist will work closely with you to address needs, develop recommendations, and consult on your specific situation. A few years ago, the county historian's office applied and received free consultation from DHPSNY for environmental assessment of our building and found it extremely helpful. The application process can feel daunting, but the County Historian is more than happy to assist you with submitting the application. More information here:
<https://dhpsny.org/planning-assessment>
- b) Contact the Livingston County Historian's Office with any questions and for consultation assistance!

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APPENDIX

Local Government Historian Law

Arts and Cultural Affairs Law, § 57.07

Local historian; appointment; maintenance of historical edifices

1) A local historian shall be appointed, as provided in this section, for each city, town or village, except that in a city of over one million inhabitants a local historian shall be appointed for each borough therein instead of for the city at large; and a county historian may be appointed for each county. Such historian shall be appointed as follows: For a city, by the mayor; for a borough, by the borough president; for a town, by the supervisor; for a village, by the mayor; for a county, by the board of supervisors.

Such historian shall serve without compensation, unless the governing board of the city, town, village or county for or in which he or she was appointed or in the city of New York, the mayor, shall otherwise provide. In a city having a board of estimate, other than the city of New York, a resolution or ordinance establishing compensation or salary for such historian shall not take effect without the concurrence of such board.

Each local government historian shall promote the establishment and improvement of programs for the management and preservation of local government records with enduring value for historical or other research; encourage the coordinated collection and preservation of nongovernmental historical records by libraries, historical societies, and other repositories; and carry out and actively encourage research in such records in order to add to the knowledge, understanding and appreciation of the community's history.

The local authorities of the city, town, village or county for which such historian is appointed, may provide the historian with sufficient space in a safe, vault or other fire proof structure for the preservation of historical materials collected.

Such local authorities and also the board of supervisors of each of the counties of the state are hereby authorized and empowered to appropriate, raise by tax and expend moneys for historical purposes within their several jurisdictions, including historical edifices, the erection of historical markers and monuments, the collection of war mementos, and, either alone or in cooperation with patriotic or historical organizations, the preparation and publication of local histories and records and the printing and issuing of other historical materials in aid of the work of the local historian.

2) Such local authorities and also the board of supervisors of each of the counties of the state are hereby authorized and empowered, in their discretion, to contract with the trustees of an historical association for the support of any or all historic edifices situated within the boundaries of such municipality; or may share the cost of maintaining the same as agreed with other municipal bodies; or may contract with the trustees of such historical associations to maintain said historic edifices for public use under such terms and conditions as may be stated in such contract. The amount agreed to be paid for such use under such contract shall be a charge upon the municipality and shall be paid in the same manner as other municipal charges, except in a city having a board of estimate, other than the city of New York, such contracts and any payments made thereunder shall be approved by such board of estimate. In the city of New York, such contracts and any payments thereunder shall be approved by the mayor.

3) Such local authorities are hereby authorized to establish and collect reasonable charges to defray the cost of searching for and reproducing copies of written or printed historical materials collected.

Arts and Cultural Affairs Law, § 57.09
Duties of local historian

It shall be the duty of each local historian, appointed as provided in the last section, in cooperation with the state historian, to collect and preserve material relating to the history of the political subdivision for which he or she is appointed, and to file such material in fireproof safes or vaults in the county, city, town or village offices. Such historian shall examine into the condition, classification and safety from fire of the public records of the public offices of such county, city, town or village, and shall call to the attention of the local authorities and the state historian any material of local historic value which should be acquired for preservation.

He or she shall make an annual report, in the month of January, to the local appointing officer or officers and to the state historian of the work which has been accomplished during the preceding year.

He or she shall, upon retirement or removal from office, turn over to the local county, city, town or village authorities, or to his or her successor in office, if one has been then appointed, all materials gathered during his or her incumbency and all correspondence relating thereto.

It shall be the duty of the county historian to supervise the activities of the local historians in towns and villages within the county in performing the historical work recommended by the state historian, and also to prepare and to present to the board of supervisors a report of the important occurrences within the county for each calendar year.

The state historian, at regular intervals, not less than once a year, shall indicate to the local historians the general lines along which local history material is to be collected.

There have been several amendments to this law including Ch. 737, Laws of 1987, effective August 5, 1988, that partially clarified historians' records-related responsibilities. Under the Local Government Records Law, local government historians have three areas of responsibility: programs, records, and research. Section 1 reads as follows:

Each local government historian shall promote the establishment and improvement of programs for the management and preservation of local government records with enduring value for historical or other research; encourage the coordinated collection and preservation of nongovernmental historical or other research; encourage the coordinated collection and preservation on nongovernmental historical records by libraries, historical societies, and other repositories; and carry out and actively encourage research in such records in order to add to the knowledge, understanding, and appreciation of the community's history.