

Archival Data Assignment, Part I.

This assignment is worth 1 point in the course scheme as described in the syllabus.

Due: Friday October 8, 2021, by 5pm over Google Forms.

Assignment and submission

1. Find an online item from an archives website. It must be a complete scan.
2. Fill out the form at <https://forms.gle/gQxhTMdDQntQF68x8> to describe your item. (This includes a few short paragraphs; you may want to write them down)
3. Choose an image of a single page (or card, or whatever the relevant unit is) and save it into the Google Drive folder with a filename exactly described in the form on test 2, except for the file suffix. So if you save it as a file called “screenshot1.png” (don’t, if you can avoid it!) put the id in the “Filename in shared drive folder” field as “screenshot1”.

Overview

Earlier in this class, we read Stefan Müller-Wille and Isabelle Charmantier¹ (a.k.a M-W & C) on how Carl Linnaeus stored plant descriptions in various different paper systems, how it connected his scholarly community, and how it shaped his evolving classification. One of the big differences between their work and Ann Blair’s was how firmly M-W & C described the actual paper operations of an individual data collection.

For this assignment, you will practice the same skills by identifying historical datasets from the pre-computer era.

Part I: Describe a digitized file.

Find a pre-1945 organized, unpublished data source in some archival website. and look at it.

Example materials

There’s no universal definition of an “organized, unpublished data source.”

Organized means you should strive to find something more structured than simply (say) all of a person’s letters. It should be organized by its creators, not by the archivists after the fact. And if it is not obviously data, be prepared to argue why you think it should count.

Data is plural. It doesn’t have to be numbers: but I roughly mean, “a record of many things of the same kind.” Or think about it functionally—would this thing live in a database today?

Unpublished means you can’t use a printed volume. Templated forms are fine.

¹Steffan Müller-Wille and Isabelle Charmantier “Natural History and Information Overload: The Case of Linnaeus,” *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science Part C: Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences* 43, no. 1 (March 2012): 4–15, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.shpsc.2011.10.021>.

Some useful keywords to use in your search may be “ledger”, “account book”, “logbook”, “log”, “tables,” or (sometimes) “file.”

In previous iterations of this assignment, students have looked at:

1. ‘Summitting’ slips at the Appalachian Mountain Club archives: pieces of paper kept in glass bottles atop mountains on which 19th-century climbers wrote their names and other information to record their feat.
2. The records of a pharmacy at the Harvard Medical School’s Countway Library for the History of Medicine. This was an overflowing book into which a pharmacist glued the actual scrip every time they filled a prescription.
3. Muster records from the Civil War, stored at the National Archives, showing how the citizens of particular Massachusetts towns enrolled in regiments into the Grand Army of the Republic, in formats that changed as the war went on and the draft began.

Example Archives

Some examples of archives are below. They are not especially likely to have online resources, but if you look at these you may be able to think of similar other items. You may have to look around a bit. Take some time to try and find an object that is interesting.

1. [The New York Public Library](#) has several different research centers, not just the one in the building with the lions. For example, if you want to work at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in Harlem, go to [their website](#), find the Rare Books division, and click on manuscript collections to a sense of what’s there.
2. [Columbia’s Rare Books and Manuscript Library](#)
3. The [New York Historical Society](#) has extensive manuscript records about 18th and 19th century New York.
4. [The National Archives and Records Center](#)
5. The [Municipal Archives](#) collect government records from New York City as far back as the Dutch Colonial Era.

Many organizations have much more specific-purpose collections; either to preserve their own materials, or to collect in just one area. Pretty much every museum along Museum Mile on Fifth Avenue, from [The Metropolitan Museum of Art](#) to the [Museo del Barrio] has some special collections and archives. So do organizations like the New York Philharmonic, the there is an institution or subject area you’re interested in, we’ll see what we can find.

1. If you’re not sick of plants yet, the [New York Botanical Gardens](#) have extensive personal papers and institutional records related to botany and plants.
2. The [Brooklyn Public Library](#) is distinct from the NYPL, and has hundreds of thousands of items related to Brooklyn specifically.
3. [The Wildlife Conservation Society](#), which runs the Bronx Zoo, the Central Park Zoo, etc., has archives.

Müller-Wille, Staffan, and Isabelle Charmantier. “Natural History and Information Overload: The Case of Linnaeus.” *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science Part C: Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences* 43, no. 1 (March 2012): 4–15. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.shpsc.2011.10.021>.