

# Historians, archives, and the stories we create

---

 [openaccessgovernment.org/article/historians-archives-and-the-stories-we-create/184940](https://openaccessgovernment.org/article/historians-archives-and-the-stories-we-create/184940)

## Learning about history through archives can help historians expand the way they acquire and interpret information. Cecilia Morgan, from the University of Toronto, discusses how archives have influenced her own research

---

All historians have archive stories, although not all historians experience the archives in quite the same way. So, it's fitting to start this article with the oft-quoted line from fellow Canadian Joni Mitchell's song, Big Yellow Taxi: "You don't know what you've got 'till it's gone." Or, in my case, not so much gone as (fortunately temporarily) inaccessible. From March 2020 until the spring of 2022, the pandemic caused by the COVID-19 virus closed the two university archives that hold the two large collections of family correspondence on which my research project – a study of two middle-class settler families in nineteenth-century Ontario – depends.

While archivists did their best to help – scanning some correspondence themselves or allowing a research assistant who was enrolled at one institution to do so – such efforts could only go so far. Given the size of the collections with which I was working, they could not scan all the material I needed to read. Nor could scanning compensate for the knowledge a researcher gains from being 'in place' at the archive: being able to discuss the collection with an archivist and benefit from their knowledge of it, and to visit the historic homes of their creators and link the spaces they created, the artifacts they collected, and their neighbourhoods with the textual remains of their lives.

I was not alone. During the pandemic, fellow historians around the world found their research halted, reshaped, or even derailed. Archives had to shut their doors, and international travel to them either was curtailed or completely halted. We still don't know what the long-term effect of such closures will be on our discipline, although we do know it has made our students' lives as young researchers more complicated.

### The reopening

---

It's hard to describe how invigorating it was to return to the archives, to see once again those staff members with whom I had developed collegial relationships before the pandemic, and to immerse myself in my research. Unlike conducting online work, which can be done anywhere with a reliable internet connection and can take place at a time of (ostensibly) one's choosing, archival research means substituting daily routines and rhythms for those shaped by the archives' schedules and the demands of the documents.

### Archival histories

---

Being deprived of the archives also reminded me of the long-standing and complicated relationship that historians have had with archives, one that, over the last few decades, scholars have been exploring. Far from being a straightforward repository of documents, archives have been the products of the same kinds of relationships of power – gender, race, class, empire, sexuality, to name some of the more prominent – that we analyze in our own studies. Archives are not neutral repositories but, rather, mediate and organize the narratives historians create. As historian Peter Fritzsche argues, ‘The archive produced certain histories, but at the same time, certain ways of looking at and believing to have experienced history also produced archives.’<sup>(1)</sup> While historians are trained to look for and focus on the tangible, archives, we know, have their own gaps and silences.

The experiences and voices of many – women, enslaved people, Indigenous people, workers, LGBTQ people, for example – may be absent or represented only through the records of those who sought to dominate them. Moreover, although we often speak of ‘the archive,’ historians have long known that the plural is more accurate. Many archives range from those of the nation-state and province to the regional and local, the institutional, organizational, and private. Archives are as diffuse as those who engage with them: archival trips can mean anything from a visit to a large, well-appointed building with various levels of bureaucracy and security to a small room with irregular hours and volunteer staff.

## Letters in the Archives

---

To return to my own archival story. When I was able to resume my research, I was reminded of the richness and expansiveness of the collections I was using. These family letters, sent over a span of approximately seventy-five years, testify to the complicated and intertwined family networks that members of the Hamilton and Harris families. They tell us much about their experiences of social mobility, both upward and downward, and of their aspirations to attain genteel status in a settler colony—and beyond. They also alert us to their writers’ extensive geographic mobility, as they moved around southern Ontario and the Great Lakes region (Wisconsin, Illinois, Ohio, and New York State), to Mississippi, across the Atlantic to Britain and Europe, and British colonies and South America. What’s more, the letters testify to the vast range of emotional states of these correspondents, ones that range from pleasure, contentment, and joy to irritation, anxiety, anger, and great sadness.

They tell us how this particular group of people marked life passages: childhood, education, courtship and marriage, birth, illness, and death, the latter an all-too-frequent event in this time. The letters also have much to say about material culture, such as home furnishings, décor, and clothing, the different ways it was acquired, and its meaning for middle-class men and women. We also learn much about leisure and entertainment, both in these families’ hometowns and beyond, as well as the networks of friends these writers cultivated. But these letters are not just portraits of domestic life and intimacy. They also tell us much about their authors’ – men and women – thoughts about political and diplomatic matters and the economic vicissitudes that could threaten middle-class

stability. While these family letters cannot tell us everything about their authors' worlds – they say little about the worlds of the Indigenous nations whose lands they occupied – they allow me to interpret them in new and creative ways.

## References

---

1. Peter Fritzche, 'The Archive and the German Nation,' in Antoinette Burton, ed., *Archive Stories: Facts, Fictions, and the Writing of History* Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005, 184-208. 186

## Contributor Details

---

- Article Categories
  - Social Sciences
- Article Tags
  - Digital Transformation
  - Education
  - History
- Publication Tags
  - OAG 045 - January 2025
- Stakeholder Tags
  - SH - Department of History and Department of Curriculum Teaching and Learning - University of Toronto