



Billie Holiday, Downbeat, New York, N.Y. Photo by William Gottlieb, 1947. Music Division



Katherine Dunham in costume. Photo by Phyllis Twachtman, 1956. Prints & Photographs Division



Coretta Scott King at the Democratic National Convention, New York City. Photo by Warren K. Leffler, 1976. Library of Congress Prints & Photographs Division.



Ella Fitzgerald, New York, N.Y. Photo by William Gottlieb, 1946. Music Division



Shirley Chisholm presidential campaign poster, 1972. Prints & Photographs Division



Susie King Taylor, known as the first African American Army nurse



Althea Gibson, half-length portrait, holding tennis racquet



Frances E.W. Harper. Frontispiece illustration for "Poems," published in 1898. General Collections



Fannie Lou Hamer, Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party delegate, Democratic National Convention, 1964



Charlayne Hunter-Gault, head-and-shoulders portrait



Congresswoman Barbara Jordan, head-and-shoulders portrait



Civil rights march on Washington, D.C.



## Teaching with Folk Sources: Exploring the Civil Rights History Project

A Teaching with Primary Sources Guide by Local Learning



Mary Church Terrell, three-quarter length portrait

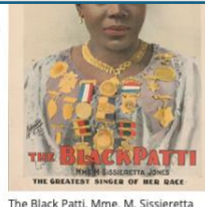
First Negro Nurses Land in England



Junior normal class of Fisk University, Nashville, Tennessee



African American woman being carried to police patrol wagon during demonstration in Brooklyn, New York



The Black Patti, Mme. M. Sissieretta Jones



I sell the shadow to support the substance: SOJOURNER TRUTH



Portrait of Harriet Tubman



Published according to Act of Parliament, Sept. 1877, by Messrs. Bell & Blacklock, 23, Abchurch Lane, London, E.C. 4.



Harriet Tubman, seated in chair, probably at her home in Auburn, New York



Elizabeth Carter Brooks with Emma Azelia Smith Hackley (wearing spectacles)



Images from *Free to Use and Reuse: Images of African American Women Changemakers*, a Library of Congress source set. <https://www.loc.gov/free-to-use/african-american-women-changemakers>



Local Learning is committed to fair use and open access of educational materials. We as Publisher also look to protect the work that we publish from unauthorized, commercial use. Authors grant to the *Journal of Folklore and Education* and Local Learning the right to license

all work with the exception of only alternatively copyrighted media under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0>. This license lets others remix, tweak, and build upon your work noncommercially, as long as they credit you the Author and us the Publisher, and license their new creations under the identical terms.

Local Learning, <https://locallearningnetwork.org>  
56 East First Street  
New York, NY 10003

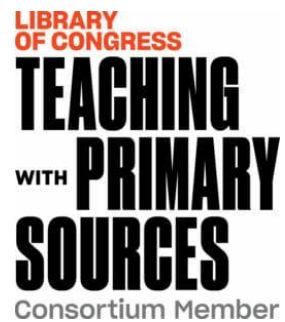
Lisa Rathje, Executive Director, [lisa@locallearningnetwork.org](mailto:lisa@locallearningnetwork.org)  
Paddy Bowman, Founding Director, [pbbowman@gmail.com](mailto:pbbowman@gmail.com)

**The Local Learning Board:**

Flávia Bastos, University of Cincinnati  
Halle Butvin, Smithsonian Center for  
Folklife and Cultural Heritage  
Marit Dewhurst, City College of New York  
Maxwell Kofi Donkor, Sankofa African Drum  
and Dance Ensemble  
Minuette Floyd, University of South Carolina-Columbia

Rosemary Hathaway, West Virginia University, Emerita  
Lisa L. Higgins, Missouri Folk Arts Program  
Jean Tokuda Irwin, Utah Division of Arts & Museums, retired  
Sahar Muradi, City Lore  
Shanetra Nowell, Oklahoma State University  
Reese Tanimura, Northwest Folklife

*This curriculum guide is supported in part by an award from the Teaching with Primary Sources program of the Library of Congress. Any views, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed by authors are their own. Content created and featured in partnership with the TPS program does not indicate an endorsement by the Library of Congress.*



Local Learning Teaching with Primary Sources project team offers teaching tools and materials that engage the digitally available archival holdings of the American Folklife Center of the Library of Congress alongside local and regional collections, bringing them into conversation with each other to create a fuller, more complex narrative of American communities, history, and people.

Learning Tips and Design: Dr. Lisa Rathje, Local Learning

**2025 Core Project Team**



Find additional resources and information generated by this Teaching with Primary Sources project at <https://locallearningnetwork.org/professional-development/tps>.

# Teaching with Folk Sources: Exploring the Civil Rights History Project

A Teaching with Primary Sources Guide by Local Learning

---

Lead Author, Dr. Autumn Brown  
*Oklahoma Oral History Research Program*

## Contents

<b>Introduction</b>	4
<b>What Is the Civil Rights History Project?</b>	5
<b>Why This Matters: Multiple Perspectives and Hard History</b>	5
<b>How Teachers Can Use the Collection in the Classroom</b>	7
<b>Examples from the Collection</b>	8
<b>Why the Civil Rights History Project Matters Today</b>	9
<b>Appendices</b>	
<b>Vocabulary/Glossary of Terms</b>	11
<b>Discovering Primary Sources Worksheet</b>	12

## Introduction

As we approach the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the United States, it is an especially poignant moment for reflection—not only on the nation’s founding ideals, but on the gap between those ideals and the experiences of many Americans. For teachers, the [Library of Congress’s Civil Rights History Project](#) (CRHP) offers one of the richest entry points for doing this work: using voices from those who lived through the movement, especially those too often missing from textbooks, to help students engage with multiple perspectives, understand archives and oral histories, and grapple with “hard histories.”

Tip: Start with your local geography or something personal to you and your students.

My entry point into the Library of Congress’s *Civil Rights History Project* began with a focus on the voices and experiences that emerged outside the more frequently cited geographies of the Deep South. I was particularly drawn to narratives rooted in [Oklahoma City](#), [Arkansas](#), and [New York](#)—places where the Civil Rights Movement unfolded in unique ways, often driven by local educators, community leaders, and grassroots organizers. In exploring these lesser-known regions, I was especially interested in the role of education, the classroom, and teachers as catalysts for social change. Teachers not only nurtured intellectual growth, they also embodied political courage, transforming their classrooms into spaces of liberation and critical engagement. By tracing how education functioned as both an organizing tool and a form of resistance, I sought to highlight how educators’ political power during the movement continues to serve as inspiration in today’s sociopolitical climate.

Tip: Find secondary sources to support learning with the primary sources. Many archives highlight excellent items from their collections through blogs and education-focused features!

In addition to the oral histories, the *Civil Rights History Project’s* [articles and essays](#) provided another rich entry point for understanding the movement’s complexity. These written materials outline key themes—such as the [March on Washington](#), the role of [music](#) in the Movement, and the struggle for [voting rights](#)—and serve as gateways into specific oral histories that illuminate each topic. Pairing thematic essays with first-person narratives allows educators and students alike to examine how national movements were lived locally, and how ideas like justice, freedom, and equality were interpreted through personal experience. Through this approach, the collection becomes not just a repository of memory but also a dynamic resource for teaching and learning, inviting ongoing dialogue about how the Civil Rights struggle continues to shape our collective identity and educational practices today.

## What Is the Civil Rights History Project?

Created by an act of Congress in 2009, the [Civil Rights History Project](#) is a joint initiative between the Library of Congress and the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture. It entailed surveying existing oral history collections relevant to the Civil Rights Movement and creating new interviews with people who participated in the struggle for justice and equality.

The collection now includes over 1,200 items: video recordings, full-text transcripts, digitized photographs, and born-digital video files. Interviewees come from a wide range of roles—lawyers, judges, local activists, students, musicians, farmers. They reflect on events such as the Freedom Rides (1961), the March on Washington (1963), the Selma-to-Montgomery March (1965), voter registration drives, the Orangeburg Massacre (1968), the Poor People’s Campaign, and more.

Importantly, some interviews focus not only on major, nationally known organizations (like SNCC, CORE, NAACP), but also on local activists, less publicized coalitions (for example Chicano activists in coalition with African American groups), children of grassroots organizers, and people working in places not always recognized for civil rights history. When teachers use primary sources such as oral histories and archival documents, their students may access:

- **Voices from the ground.** These allow students to see how ordinary individuals experienced segregation, discrimination, violence, hope, and change. What was it like to register to vote in Mississippi? What did it feel like to be among the first students to integrate a school? How did faith, music, and community culture shape the movement? These are topics often absent from standard texts.
- **New voices.** Women, local community organizers, people in smaller towns, and people from communities of color whose stories are less well known become central. For example, the CRHP collection includes interviews with local organizers in places like Oklahoma City; Saint Augustine, Florida; and Bogalusa, Louisiana—locations that don’t always dominate national histories.
- **Oral histories.** Oral histories bring texture: the sound of voice, emotion, hesitation, what people remember—and what they omit. They allow for “reading the silences,” evaluating bias, comparing recollections, and building historical empathy.

## Multiple Perspectives and “Truth”

Oral histories and ethnographic materials help present complicated issues and topics by comparing and contrasting life experiences, voices, and vantage points. Although they do often reflect historical truth, primary sources are valued as powerful reference points for understanding individual and community perspectives on memory, meaning, and identity. Textbooks often tell a simplified or “dominant narrative” of the Civil Rights Movement: major leaders, landmark legal cases, big marches. But that story, while essential, can obscure complexity found in the wider context.

### *Instructional Scaffolding*

Our testing suggests that students learning perspective through Primary Sources need 3 modules to scaffold learning:

**Context** (know where oral history interviews and documentation come from, and identify prior knowledge student brings to items)

**Engagement** (listen, observe, read, challenge)

**Interpretation** (identify multiple perspectives and the relationships between diverse narratives)

Learning through Oral Histories offers student development of needed skill sets, including:

- Interpreting historical and cultural contexts.
- Knowing that the interview that collects the material which becomes a primary source is not neutral.
- Analyzing diverse texts and viewpoints to interpret multiple perspectives.

Understanding archives and primary sources help students think like historians—seeing how evidence is collected, how narratives are constructed and contested, and where gaps might exist. For instance, when siblings Marilyn and Calvin were interviewed, both provided details about downtown Oklahoma City, but their narratives offer two perspectives.

<p><b>ACCESS DENIED</b></p> <p>“</p> <p>If you could walk with me through the streets of Oklahoma City [...] You could not try on shoes. She [grandmother] had to take some thread and tie a knot in it to determine the size shoe that she would buy for me to wear. (Marilyn Luper Hildreth)</p>	<p><b>MOBILITY BRIDGE</b></p> <p>“</p> <p>And the shoes, the way Big Mama used to have to do it, but I think she left out the part about how Big Mama would—the buses would change there in front of John A. Brown’s [...] and she’d ride the bus down there and then change over to catch it. [...] And that’s early in the morning and in the evening. (Calvin Luper)</p>
--	---

Marilyn Luper Hildreth [Oral History Interview](#) and Calvin Luper [Oral History Interview](#) conducted by Joseph Mosnier in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, May 24, 2011.

Another form of multiple perspectives that inform student learning come from the characterizations of a historical event, person, or movement. In the case of the CRHP, teachers may want to access the interview with Ruby Nell Sales who shares a perspective students may find surprising:

I prefer to call it, in retrospect, the Southern Freedom Movement, because it was not only a movement for civil rights, but it was also a movement for human dignity. [...] I think that when you limit it to ‘civil rights’ you obscure, first of all, the horrors of segregation. [...] you obscure the long hard years of Black struggle and the blood and sacrifice that we have poured into that struggle.

(Ruby Nell Sales Oral History Interview conducted by Joseph Mosnier in Atlanta, Georgia, 2011. <https://www.loc.gov/item/2015669106> View 01:04:20-1:08:20 to hear full response.)

## How Teachers Can Use the Collection in the Classroom

Recommended teacher-tested strategies:

Tip: See our **Discovering Primary Sources** worksheet to learn more about picking primary source excerpts at the end of this Guide.

### 1. **Anchor units around oral history clips.**

Pick a few short excerpts from CRHP about an event students are studying (e.g. a Freedom Ride or school integration in a particular state). Have students watch without transcripts first, then with transcripts. Ask: What emotions, attitudes, and perspectives are visible? What does the speaker emphasize? What tensions or contradictions are there?

### 2. **Compare sources.**

Use archival documents (newspaper reports, letters, photographs, court decisions) alongside oral histories. Let students see where official records agree with or differ from lived recollections. For example, a court ruling might say a school desegregation policy was legally valid, but an interview might describe how token implementation or resistance made the lived experience very different.

### 3. **Localize the history.**

Students can investigate civil rights history specific to their community. Perhaps a local activist was involved, or there was a school integration case, or a protest. Use CRHP to show how those national dynamics played out locally, then pair with interviews from people in the area. This helps students see that civil rights history isn't "somewhere else," it's part of their own place.

Tip: Access a standards-aligned lesson (middle/high school) where students will learn skills central to good listening and conducting interviews to better understand and analyze primary sources that are primarily audio, like a Civil Rights oral history interview.

[Download here!](#)

### 4. **Project-Based Learning with oral history.**

Encourage students to conduct interviews with family members or community members who lived through the 1950s-70s, or whose lives were shaped by civil rights era policies (voting rights, school integration, housing, activism). Teach them the ethics of oral history: consent, trust, memory, verification. Then compare those new interviews to those in the CRHP.

### 5. **Develop thematic or issue-based units.**

Pick themes like "nonviolence vs. self-defense," "faith and religion," "youth activism," "role of women," "music and culture," "labor and economic justice," or "coalition across racial/ethnic lines." Use CRHP interviews that touch on those themes—not just from major figures but also people whose lives embodied those issues but are not as widely known.

## Examples from the Collection



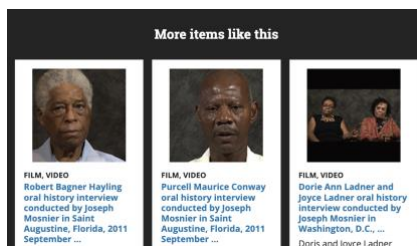
**Dorothy Cotton**: An interview in the CRHP recalls her involvement in the Citizenship Education Program, teaching reading, writing, and literacy for voting—especially for African Americans. Her story connects activism, education, faith, and grassroots organizing. In the following clip (**51:29-1:03:59**) Cotton recalls her decision to move to Atlanta to accept an invitation from Martin Luther King, Jr., and Reverend Walker to join the Southern Christian Leadership Council (SCLC). She moved to Atlanta days after earning her master's degree from Boston University to begin work as an administrative assistant. Her role eventually evolved into director of education when she began working for the Citizen Education Program. The program and its role in the community are explained further in the clip.



**Gertrude Newsome Jackson**, quoted in LOC blogs as an activist and school organizer, helps students examine not just what was done but also how: how did local figures organize, how did they face challenges, and how was their perspective shaped by their local and/or national context? This clip (**1:12:30-1:16:12**) underscores how Jackson and student activists boycotted their public school's integration plan. Jackson recalls the plans being leaked and how white citizens responded to the group's boycott. This clip explains how the group organized and carried out their plan, and the role of the church.



**Marilyn Luper Hildreth**, included in the collection, reflects on growing up in a segregated Oklahoma and her involvement in the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) youth council, led by her mother, teacher activist, Clara Luper. In this clip (**1:37-10:33**) Hildreth speaks about her mother, Clara Luper, and her leadership in Oklahoma City's sit-in movement. She begins by describing the play “Brother President” that acted as a catalyst for the movement, and how Luper's role as both teacher and activist lit a spark for her student activists ranging in age from 6 to 16.



Interviews with people who worked in “lesser known” locales or smaller roles: for instance, people in Oklahoma City, or reflections from the children of grassroots activists like Clara Luper, Robert Hicks, and Gayle Jenkins. These interviews help students see widespread and varied activism beyond certain iconic places. The “more items like this” links associated with an interview may encourage your students to explore the site to discover new primary sources!

## Why the Civil Rights History Project Matters Today

As the United States approaches its 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2026, educators are being called to think carefully about how we tell the nation’s story. Anniversaries tend to inspire celebrations of achievement, but they also provide critical opportunities for reflection. Who is included in the story of the United States? Whose voices are heard? Whose experiences have been silenced? The Civil Rights History Project (CRHP) becomes especially valuable at this moment because it helps students and teachers confront these questions directly.

The project emphasizes that American democracy has always been contested, negotiated, and expanded through the actions of ordinary people. While the nation will rightly highlight its founding ideals—liberty, equality, and justice—the CRHP allows classrooms to also examine the distance between those ideals and the lived reality of marginalized communities. In this way, students are not only learning history, they are also reflecting the unfinished work of democracy.

This work is urgent for several reasons:

### 1. **Countering Simplified Narratives**

As the 250<sup>th</sup> approaches, there will be a surge of media, curriculum, and public history projects about the founding and growth of the nation. These often risk flattening complexity into a single heroic story of progress. The CRHP helps counterbalance that by offering nuanced, firsthand accounts that complicate and deepen understanding. For example, while the Civil Rights Act of 1964 is often framed as a triumph, oral histories reveal the struggles that continued long after its passage—school integration battles, economic disparities, and ongoing voter suppression.

### 2. **Centering Marginalized Voices**

Many communities that shaped U.S. history have not been given equal space in conventional narratives. The CRHP highlights women’s roles, youth voices, and local leaders. For instance, interviews with [Gloria Richardson](#) of Cambridge, Maryland, or [Charles McDew](#) of SNCC, present alternative visions that differ from the more familiar narrative centered on Martin Luther King Jr. and national organizations. These perspectives remind students that history is not only about charismatic leaders but also about grassroots action and diverse strategies for change.

Tip: Access [this article](#) published by Local Learning for classroom activities and lessons to teach hard history today.

### 3. **Teaching Students How to Engage with “Hard History”**

The Civil Rights Movement includes moments of violence, backlash, and trauma. By using oral histories, teachers can guide students in grappling with difficult truths without reducing them to abstract facts. Hearing someone recount being beaten for attempting to register to vote or describing the fear of sending

children into newly integrated schools personalizes the risks of pursuing equality. This process helps students develop both historical empathy and civic responsibility.

#### 4. **Connecting Past and Present**

The 250th anniversary is not just about looking backward. It is also about considering the future of American democracy. Many issues that oral histories discuss—voter suppression, racial violence, educational inequality, economic justice—remain pressing today. Students who listen to these voices are better prepared to see connections between past struggles and contemporary movements for justice. In this way, the CRHP bridges historical memory and civic engagement.

#### 5. **Building Critical Media and Research Skills**

The anniversary will bring a flood of commemorative media: documentaries, museum exhibits, political speeches, and classroom resources. Students need the tools to assess these critically. Oral histories give them a framework for questioning: Whose voice is included? Whose is missing? How is memory shaped by time and perspective? These questions are essential to becoming thoughtful citizens in a media-saturated democracy.

The Civil Rights History Project is more than a historical archive—it is a living resource for understanding America’s democratic experiment. As the nation celebrates 250 years, teachers can use this collection to remind students that progress has never been automatic or guaranteed. It has always depended on the courage, creativity, and persistence of people who insisted that this country live up to its promises.

By placing these voices at the center of classroom instruction, teachers ensure that the commemoration of America’s anniversary is not just celebratory, but also reflective, honest, and forward-looking.

#### **Conclusion**

The Library of Congress’s Civil Rights History Project is not simply another archive—it is a gateway. It allows students to hear from those who were there, to see the movement beyond its icons, to wrestle with conflicting perspectives, to build empathy, to understand how ordinary people shaped history, and to see how their own communities are part of that continuing story. As we approach 250 years as a nation, this kind of teaching is not only academically valuable—it is essential to a fuller public memory.

## Vocabulary

*Use this Glossary of Terms to support your learning activities.*

### Civil Rights

1. **Desegregation:** Ending the separation of people by race in public spaces.
2. **Jim Crow:** Laws enforcing racial segregation in the U.S. South.
3. **Nonviolent Protest:** Demonstrations resisting injustice without physical violence.
4. **Disenfranchisement:** Denial of the right to vote.
5. **Grassroots Activism:** Local, community-led movements for social or political change.
6. **Civil Disobedience:** Refusal to obey unjust laws as a form of protest.
7. **Systemic Racism:** Racism embedded within laws, policies, and institutions.

### Primary Sources

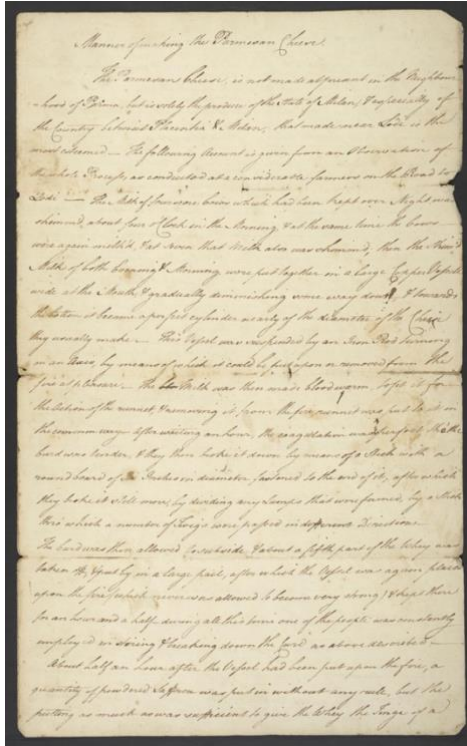
1. **Firsthand Account:** A story or record told by someone who was actually there.
2. **Artifact:** An old object that shows how people lived in the past.
3. **Manuscript:** An original handwritten or typed document.
4. **Correspondence:** Letters, notes, or other written messages.
5. **Ephemera:** Everyday items like posters, flyers, or tickets saved from the past.

### Archives

1. **Repository:** A place where records and documents are preserved.
2. **Finding Aid:** A guide that describes the contents of an archival collection.
3. **Collection:** A group of related materials preserved together.
4. **Provenance:** The origin or source of an archival item.
5. **Cataloguing:** The process of organizing and describing archival materials.
6. **Preservation:** Protecting documents and artifacts from damage or decay.
7. **Access:** The ability of researchers or the public to use archival materials.

### Oral Histories

1. **Testimony:** A spoken account of personal experience.
2. **Narrative:** A structured story that conveys lived experience.
3. **Interviewee:** The person being interviewed.
4. **Interviewer:** The person asking questions and guiding the oral history process.
5. **Transcript:** The written record of a spoken interview.
6. **Transcription:** Creating a written record from an audio or video interview.
7. **Preservation:** Safeguarding recordings so that future generations can hear them.



“Manner of making the Parmesan cheese.”

This Undated manuscript, signed by Benjamin Franklin, was sent to Catharine Ray Greene, wife of Rhode Island governor William Greene. Includes a recipe and the process for making Parmesan Cheese.

Find the full letter at the Library of Congress.  
<https://www.loc.gov/item/2018664676>.

## Discovering Primary Sources

Some may recall an episode of Schitt’s Creek (S2E2) when a mother and son are reading a recipe that instructs them to “fold in the cheese.” It is soon obvious that they don’t know how to follow this instruction that sounds easy, but proved confounding when attempted by two people who didn’t have prior cooking knowledge to draw upon. Similarly, the instruction to “find primary sources” may sound easy, but when faced with the huge collections available at the Library of Congress and beyond, can quickly become daunting.

Here are tips we have assembled to support you and your students in finding Primary Sources that are interesting and useful for your learning goals.

- The Library of Congress offers [Primary Source Sets](#) and [Free to Use and Reuse](#) items that can be a good starting point. You may search by Topic, Era, and Grade Level. The top three topics, with over 50 sets each include

City and Regional History

Culture and Folklife

Arts and Culture

The top four eras, with over 20 sets each include

Progressive Era to New Era, 1900 to 1929

Great Depression & World War II, 1929 to 1945

Civil War and Reconstruction, 1861 to 1877

Rise of Industrial America, 1876 to 1900

- The Library of Congress ([loc.gov](http://loc.gov)) homepage has a search bar at the top. Starting there, and refining using the format filters on the left sidebar can be helpful. If you too many items aren’t a good fit, try searching for only online items, only images, or refining your search term!

- Teachers can select prompting questions from a [Teacher’s Guide](#) as needed to support students through an analysis process of observing, reflecting, questioning and investigating further. The [Civil Rights Resource Guide](#) provides links to LOC materials, and to outside sources.

- [Ask a librarian!](#) The Library of Congress offers direct access to librarians via their website. The responses are often swift, helpful, and interesting. Don’t be afraid to reach out.