The Ohio History Connection's collection of county histories in its third floor research room. Photo courtesy of the Ohio History Connection.

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Getting to Know County History Books

The county history books of Ohio are familiar resources for experienced local historians and genealogists. These encyclopedic books were published primarily around the nation's centennial in1876, although many have been created since then. While they can prove to be useful resources for researching the people, places, and institutions of Ohio's past, they should be consulted with caution. It is easy to be misled by the age of these books, which are commonly 100 to 150 years old. Their age may seem to give them authority. Yet, many of their authors were writing about events that had already occurred many years in the past, such as the War of 1812. Like pre-internet versions of Wikipedia, they can contain great overviews and nuggets of information. However, they may also contain errors in dates and other details. Occasionally they mislead the reader by presenting local legends as objective facts. County histories can be great guidebooks in steering researchers toward primary source materials like deeds, wills, and vital records; however, they should not be taken as the definitive truth.

County histories are an easy place to start a research project, whether it concerns an ancestor, a local business, or an important event that happened long ago.

Many of these books were divided into sections by township and then subdivided into specific towns, making them easy to navigate. Keep in mind that there were only nine counties in Ohio at the time of the Constitutional Convention of 1802. Many of the current eighty-eight counties, like Fulton, Mahoning, and Ashland, were not created until the mid-1800s. If you are researching a county that was created later, it is important to check the histories of surrounding counties if you are researching Ohio's early history. This may yield additional information about early settlers and their communities.

There are a few potential snares that you will want to consider when using county histories. Some involve the identification of specific people. These volumes often contain indexes. However, not every person in the book will necessarily be listed in the index. Women are more likely than men to be identified in the book's text but not in the index. Even in the text, sometimes women are identified only as "Mrs." before their surnames. It is best not to assume that such a limited description refers to a particular person without supporting evidence. Before the twentieth century, people frequently died young and it was not unusual for a man or woman to have several successive spouses. Families

also commonly had many children whose births could be spread out over decades. If an older child died, the parents sometimes gave a new child the same name as one who had perished. This tendency can be confusing, especially without the benefit of additional identifying information.

Other problems are the products of the authors' prejudice. Early volumes were often sold by subscription and contained large biographical sections dedicated to noteworthy citizens. Often, these same citizens were among those financing the printing of the book and submitted their own biographies. While this does not mean that their accounts were not accurate, you should be wary of taking them at face value. Also, when narrating encounters between settlers and Native Americans, early county histories almost always presented them solely from the perspective of the settlers. It is a good idea, particularly before reproducing the terminology used in these accounts, to evaluate them for fairness and objectivity.

If your collections do not have any of these county history books, you can check with other local libraries, genealogy societies, and historical societies. The Ohio History Center also has a large collection available in its third-floor research room. In addition, a growing number of books are becoming available online. For more information on finding and using county histories, the subscription site Accessible Archives has a free guide available online at http://www.accessible-archives.com/collections/american-county-histories/a-white-paper-american-county-histories/ ■