

Reading Between the Lines: Searching for Family in County Histories and Mugbooks

Upstate New York Research Tour 2026

Melanie McComb, Senior Genealogist, melanie.mccomb@americanancestors.org

Introduction

County histories were popularized in the United States around the centennial celebrations of the United States (1876). President Grant endorsed a congressional resolution where he recommended that every town and county produce historical sketches of the town or county from its formation.

These histories are often called “mug books” or “vanity books,” due to the historical and genealogical sketches included on their notable residents. These often included a photograph of the person described. Large, national publishers would send out employees from their company to interview the most informed residents of a community. These usually included local businessmen, newspapers, town clerks, etc. Their main goal was to find residents who would purchase a history that would include a biography or drawing of them.

The layout of the county histories usually consists of the following chapters:

- History of the County (Native American Tribes, Adoption of Name, Counties Formed From)
- History of Individual Townships (Settlement, Migration, First Houses of Worship, First Schools)
- Military Honor Roll Lists by War (usually ended with Civil War)
- Biographies of Notable Residents

The biographies would often include the following details:

- Place and Date of Birth
- Names of Parents, Siblings, and Children (sometimes grandchildren)
- Ancestry
- Political Affiliation
- Occupation and Place of Residence
- Migration History
- Military Service
- Marriage Information
- Fraternal Organizations

Many of these county histories are out of copyright and can be found on online web sites like the Internet Archive (www.archive.org), HathiTrust (www.hathitrust.org), FamilySearch (www.familysearch.org/books), Google Books (www.books.google.com), and more.

TIP: Many county histories are uncited with no reference to where the writer obtained the information. Consider the county history as a hint while doing additional research.

Resources at New York State Library

- Franklin B. Hough Papers – #SC7009 – Series 7: Historical Research and Writings
 - He wrote many county histories including the following:
 - *A History of St. Lawrence and Franklin Counties* (1853)
 - *A History of Jefferson County* (1854)
 - *A History of Lewis County* (1862)
- Selected New York State Town and County Histories that have been digitized - <https://www.nysl.nysed.gov/scandocs/towns>

Publications

Casper, Scott E., *Constructing American Lives: Biography and Culture in Nineteenth Century America* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: The University of North Carolina Press, 1999)

Currie, C.R.J. and C.P. Lewis, *English County Histories: A Guide* (Sutton Pub Ltd., 1994)

Filby, William P., *A Bibliography of American County Histories* (Baltimore: Genealogical Pub. Co., 1985)

Hanna Jr., Archibald, “Every Man His Own Biographer,” *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* 80 (October 1970), 291-298.

Peterson, Clarence Stewart, *Bibliography of Counties of the 3111 Counties in the 48 States* (Baltimore: Genealogical Pub. Co., 1946)

_____, *Consolidated Bibliography of County Histories in Fifty States in 1961* (Baltimore: Genealogical Pub. Co., 1963)

Shakshober, Jennifer, “The Origins of County Histories, Biographical Sketches, and Mug Books,” *Vita Brevis* (10 Feb. 2026), <https://vitabrevis.americanancestors.org/the-origins-of-county-histories-biographical-sketches-and-mug-books>.

Taylor, Joshua D., "Vanity Sketches: Mugbook Sources and Truths," FGS Forum, 18:2 (Summer 2006), 13-15.

Websites

- Ancestry.com "U.S., County and Regional Histories and Atlases, 1804-1984" <https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/4078/> (Includes eight states: California, Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin)
- Ancestry.com "U.S., County History Catalog" <https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/3227/>
- FamilySearch Books <https://books.familysearch.org>
- Google Books <https://www.books.google.com>
- HathiTrust <https://www.hathitrust.org>
- Internet Archive <https://www.archive.org>
- Open Library <https://openlibrary.org>
- Smithsonian Libraries Digital Library <https://library.si.edu/digital-library>