

## You must be a historian, right?

Recently, I was called down to the library to assist with a particular patron who had a question about a collection I had processed. During our conversation, he asked me about being an archivist at HSP. What fun it must be, he posited, to roam the stacks looking at various historic wonders of the greater Philadelphia area! I told him that it certainly was an interesting job, but that my days, alas, were not filled with treasure-hunting, but rather a seemingly never-ending variety of duties that, on any given day, may or may not involve finding fun historic stuff. (I thought about directing him to my "[Day in the Life](#)"<sup>[1]</sup> blog post but wasn't able to quite work in the plug.)

The conversation then turned back to his work. He was a historian doing research at HSP for a journal article. I inquired further and then he abruptly asked, "As an archivist, you must be a historian, right?" I paused, politely said no, and he went on to excitedly expound upon some his discoveries.

That question, or rather assumption that "archivist" equals "historian," is one I've encountered frequently. To put it plainly and from what I've witnessed during my time at HSP, historians usually specialize in a particular historical "thing," an era, an event, a person, an invention, etc. Some have advanced degrees in history and have published works on their specialized topics. Others have years of field work under their belts, going from one institution to the next gathering information on a certain topic. One of my jobs is to help the historians find what they're looking for. I am *interested in history*, but I would *not* call myself a historian.

My work at HSP has involved a sizeable amount of historical research for finding aids, research inquiries, and other tasks. I have certainly become more knowledgeable about the history of Philadelphia and Pennsylvania, but that knowledge doesn't magically turn me into a historian. I suppose one could call me a jack-of-all-histories. Whether I'm working on a collection of 18<sup>th</sup> century political documents or a series of posters produced during World War II, I'll need to do some background research to better understand the collections. I therefore know a little bit about a lot of things. If you want information about our collections, I can probably help you. If you want some help deciphering old handwriting, I've might be of assistance. If you want to know the difference between a daybook, journal, and ledger, I can help you with that. But if you want an in-depth discussion on the economical impact of the discovery of oil in western Pennsylvania in the 1850s, well...I know where it happened, but you should probably seek out a historian for real answers. I'm a custodian of history along with librarians, collections managers, museum registrars, and all the other people who work in our nation's cultural history and heritage organizations. I am an archivist. How can I help you direct your search?

### Links:

[A Day in the Life, or, What do Archivists do Anyway?](#)<sup>[1]</sup>

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### Links

[1] <http://hsp.org/blogs/fondly-pennsylvania/a-day-in-the-life-or-what-do-archivists-do-anyway>