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Uncovering the Lesser Known Stories in History with Archives

How did archives from decades ago affect today's research and publications? Johanna Parker, PhD candidate at the Australian National University, shares her experience of accessing historical archives to shed light on the research problem she resolved.





As more and more archival collections are digitised the lesser known characters stories are becoming more widely known.

I would recommend the Wiley Digital Archives to people looking for a digitising provider, especially material that requires analysis to understand its linkages to other documents. Having a uniform approach is a massive advantage when you work across collections. The system is easy to use and it is attractive for the content consumer, especially for those thousands of miles away from the material, searching for snippets of information about some of the fascinating characters that inhabit the world's important archival collections.

Johanna Parker, PhD Scholar

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About Johanna Parker



Johanna holds a Master of Arts in Museum Studies (International Scholarship) from the University of Leicester, UK; and a Master of Arts in Public History from the University of Technology, Sydney, Australia; and is currently a PhD candidate at the Australian National University researching the methodologies and motivations of private collectors of Indigenous human remains. Based in Australia, Johanna's research interests are museological ethics, collecting and scientific history.

Researching into the British Human Skull Collector

In April 2018, I visited the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland (RAI) in London. I needed to access the RAI archives as part of my PhD research into the British human skull collector Joseph Barnard Davis (1801-1881).

The research problem I was hoping to resolve was how did Davis record his collecting activity and how did he work with the Victorian anthropological community? Was there something in Davis' notebooks that would provide insight to support or rebut the information I found in other collections?

Who was Joseph Barnard Davis?

Davis was a medical practitioner, craniologist, author and highly effective international networker. Through his dedicated collecting ability, he built one of the largest, if not the largest collection of 'race' crania in the mid-19th century that rivalled many institutional collections.

Before the Davis papers in the RAI archives were digitised by Wiley Digital Archives, the RAI had supplied high-level summaries of their content online. It was enough to make me interested in the records but not enough to assist with my research. I knew the only thing to do was request access.

Facing Disappointment after Travelling Thousands of Miles

Being based in Australia has its challenges for a researcher of Western history. Much of the paper-based material I require (or am yet to discover) is located on the other side of the world. When you are travelling from Australia with limited time the preliminary work is vital to ensure the correct material is requested, as I often do not have the luxury of waiting for additional material if I have missed a resource.

I was travelling to the UK to present my research on Davis at the British Society for the History of Science Postgraduate Conference in Manchester and I put in a request to the RAI to view the Davis records after my presentation. Sadly, there was a problem. The RAI were in the process of digitising their collection and the Davis records may not be back in time for my visit. This disappointment was quickly resolved by the kind offer to view the Davis records online during the testing phase. Finally, I was going to see the records whose descriptions I had been pondering over for a year.

Did the digital access and the subsequent visit to the RAI archives answer the questions about Davis motivation and methodology?

Yes, I was given insight into Davis' personality, professional training and financial affairs, which had not been given in depth analysis by other scholars.

Image:
Joseph Barnard Davis' MS 145 Notebook

Davis' Notebooks from the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland

The Davis notebooks in the RAI were used by him to record various activities relating to his professional medical career and his consuming passion to acquire human skulls, especially those of the world's Indigenous populations. For example, in notebook MS145, the early entries about his medical training in 1821 are left behind as the pages become more about his life, financial records and collecting interests.

MS145 was my most important find in the RAI because I was able to determine from the entries, it was in part the earliest draft of Davis' most significant published work *Thesaurus Craniorum: Catalogue of the skulls of the various races of man*, in the collection of Joseph Barnard Davis, published in 1867. I was not able to make this determination from the original high-level descriptions, however after seeing the notebook I was able to confidently make this claim.

Enhancing the Research Experience with Digital Archives

Did access to the digital access and the subsequent visit to the RAI archives answer the questions about Davis motivation and methodology?

Yes, I was given insight into Davis' personality, professional training and financial affairs, which had not been given in depth analysis by other scholars. Was I provided with further understanding of his link to the Victorian anthropological community provided? Only in that it has cemented my opinion that Davis was a personality known to the growing community and the fact that his records dwell in the collection of the RAI, and were deemed important enough to be digitised, acts as reminder of the diversity of opinions that flourished in the early development of this scientific field.

Digitising does not replace the need to see the original, it complements an onsite visit and provides a reference image in context to go back to again and again. Having this interactive digital resource also reduces the time needed to spend onsite searching, transcribing bad handwriting and checking for related material. If I had not viewed this material online and physically, I would not have been ready to submit and be accepted to publish this chapter of my thesis in *The Routledge Companion to Indigenous Repatriation: Return, Reconcile, Review*, (eds) Fforde, C., McKeown, T., and Keeler, H., to be published late 2018, early 2019. My first major peer reviewed article.

Bringing to Light the Lesser Known Characters of History

As more and more archival collections are digitised the lesser known characters stories are becoming more widely known. Davis has received scholarly attention in the past but there have been errors in published information about his work and life, likely due to the wealth of information about the collector only now slowly becoming more known and accessible.

I would recommend the Wiley Digital Archives to people looking for a digitising provider, especially material that requires analysis to understand its linkages to other documents. Having a uniform approach is a massive advantage when you work across collections. The system is easy to use and it is attractive for the content consumer, especially for those thousands of miles away from the material, searching for snippets of information about some of the fascinating characters that inhabit the world's important archival collections.



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Wiley Digital Archives is a dynamic, continuous program of new partner products and collections, comprised of unique and rare historical primary sources that are being digitized from leading societies, libraries and archives around the world. Available for institutional purchase, these collections are made discoverable and accessible in ways that can tie directly to advancing research outcomes and the educational goals of many organizations.

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