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Regional Archives in France and Challenges for the American Researcher

Kristine M Wirts*

Before the fifties Americans working on French history generally preferred to conduct research at the national level. Their research underscored intellectual trends of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in that a great number of their monographs centered on national politics, intellectual developments, institutional history, and military and political profiles. Their research interests also reflected their social origins. Many were from prosperous families, perhaps, not far removed from the most influen-

*I was welcomed everywhere I went in France and found the French helpful, informative, and most courteous. I thank the staff at the *Bibliothèque municipale de Grenoble* and the *Archives Départementales d'Isere* especially. Greatest thanks is extended to Marie-Francoise Bois-Delatte, Yves Jocteur-Montrozier, Catherine Collomb, Monique Samé, Magguy Pénicaud, Marie-Christine Hébré, Marie Thérèse Imbert, Yvonne Coindre, Luis Bustos, Elizabeth Marce, Krystyna Mossan, and Olivier Cogne.

tial centers of American political and educational life.¹ Undoubtedly, they interpreted historical events, the making of history, as the business of powerful white men—which was, in the United States, certainly the reality of the time. Their orientation and conceptual framework, of course, contrasted sharply with that of the *Annales*, the school of French historians who saw the power brokers on top less as movers and shakers, and more as a function of the greater historical forces of climate, geography, economics and culture—all reverberating from below.²

What is important to note is that the American approach to French history changed radically with the dawn of the Civil Rights and other social movements of the fifties and sixties. After World War II American historians were less inclined to interpret French history in terms of just political profiles and power relations emanating from the capital. Rather, as the gains of the Civil Rights and other social movements became more apparent, so Americans began to recognize the contributions of popular movements and mentalities in the shaping of French history. After World War II, new studies focusing on the people—their religion, customs, habits of life, and political culture—became more common.

The postwar trend in social history precipitated the growth of new monographs less inclined towards Paris and more regional in focus. As American historians began to appreciate the gains of popular social reform movements at mid-century, many looked to the French provinces, as opposed to Paris, with the hope of gaining new insight into certain segments of the French population, previously unexamined. For the first time, American historians be-

¹ Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob, *Telling The Truth About History* (New York, 1994), 146–51.

² Peter Burke, *The French Historical Revolution, The Annales School, 1929–89* (Stanford, 1990).

gan to work outside of Paris, some choosing to center their studies on a specific city or province. For some, the answer to new historiographical questions concerning the nature of religious worship or popular culture, for example, rested with documents preserved in municipal repositories.³ Others, by contrast, looked to the provincial holdings of the *Archives Départementales*. For them, cultural variation among provinces warranted greater examination of French history at the regional level.⁴ While their studies demonstrated the regional uniqueness of French culture, certain institutional historians, for separate reason, found the provincial holdings of the *Archives Départementales* equally essential to the study of France's provincial institutions. Their work on the provincial estates, municipal government, and vertical ties (bastard feudalism), in particular, significantly altered traditional perceptions concerning the absolutist system.⁵ Likewise, those working on political and/or religious culture also have turned to local repositories, in an effort to assess the transmission, communication, and reception of new political or philosophical belief. By pursuing such topics regionally, historians have helped explain how and why certain movements, such as the Protestant Reformation and the French Revolution, gained momen-

³ Natalie Davis, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (Stanford, 1975); Philip Benedict, *Rouen during the Wars of Religion* (Cambridge, 1981); James R. Farr, *Hands of Honor: Artisans and their World in Dijon, 1550–1650* (Ithaca, 1988).

⁴ Donna Bohanan, *Old and New Nobility in Aix-en-Provence, 1600–1696* (Baton Rouge, 1992).

⁵ J. Russell Major, *Representative Government in Early Modern France* (New Haven, 1980); _____, *The Monarchy, the Estates and the Aristocracy in Renaissance France* (London, 1988); Sharon Kettering, *Judicial Politics and Urban Revolt in Seventeenth-Century France: The Parlement of Aix, 1629–1659* (Princeton, 1978).

tum and spread in some areas of France but failed in others.⁶

Although American historians still produce national monographs, the trend towards regionally constructed histories has continued unabated. It is important, therefore, for those contemplating research outside Paris, to consider the full range of provincial archives and libraries at their disposal. Of central importance is the *Archives Départementales*, the official state repository for all record-producing public agencies at the local level.⁷ The *Archives Départementales* came into existence during the late eighteenth century, when French revolutionaries, wishing to preserve their place in history, founded the *Archives Nationales*—the National Archives of France. In creating the National Archives, France's revolutionaries centralized all state records under a single system of administration. All national records, of distinctly separate provenance and institutional ancestry, became physically absorbed into the central repository of the new National Archives. Simultaneously, the French transferred all local records residing outside Paris to the *Archives Départementales*, a central

⁶ Suzanne Dezan, *Reclaiming the Sacred: Lay Religion and Popular Politics in Revolutionary France* (Ithaca, 1990); Raymond A. Mentzer, "The Persistence of 'Superstition and Idolatry' among Rural French Calvinists," *Church History*, 65 (1996): 220–34; Mack Holt, "Wine, Community and Reformation in Sixteenth-Century Burgundy," *Past and Present*, (1993): 58–94; Natalie Davis, *Society and Culture*; Philip Benedict, *Rouen during the Wars of Religion*; David L. Rosenberg, "Social Experience and Religious Choice, a Case Study: The Protest Weavers and Woolcombers of Amiens in the Sixteenth Century," Ph.D. Thesis, Yale University, 1978.

⁷ Ernst Posner, "Some Aspects of Archival Development since the French Revolution," *American Archivist* 3 (1940): 161.

archival agency that emerged within each respective department of France.⁸ Like the National Archives, each *Archives Départementales* combined all public records and documents, existing within its corresponding domain, into a central administrative unit. Each of these administrative units became located within each department's respective capital.⁹

The primary finding aid to the *Archives Départementales* remains the *Inventaire sommaire des archives départementales*, a multivolume set of published indexes that exists for each department unit.¹⁰ While the *Inventaire sommaire des archives départementales* can be found in the *Archives Départementales*, where all corresponding collections are kept, published indexes for the same are also located in municipal libraries in France and in some major university libraries in the United States. Many departmental archives carry indexes of neighboring departmental archives as well.¹¹ Unfortunately, none of the departmental indexes have been made available in electronic format. In addition, many of the indexes, though invaluable, are incomplete. More often than not an "etc." appears at the end of a collection's description. The "etc." means that more documents reside within a particular collection than are mentioned in the collection's description.

⁸ The French *département* is the central administrative unit that was created during the French Revolution. Each province in France consists of several departments.

⁹ Michel Duchein, "Archives in France: The New Legislation of 1979," *Archivaria* 11 (1980/81): 127–33.

¹⁰ Each departmental archives possesses its own published *Inventaire sommaire des archives départementales antérieures à 1790*.

¹¹ The *Archives Départementales d'Isère*, for example, carries indexes to their archives and the departmental archives in Gap. The municipal library in Grenoble, *Bibliothèque municipale de Grenoble*, also carries separate sets of indexes for neighboring departments.

The *Inventaire sommaire des archives départementales* is organized according to *institutional* subject headings, a feature most helpful for those exploring social or institutional research from a regional perspective.¹² The decision to categorize departmental materials by institutional subject headings is understandable given that the *Archives Départementales* served, and still serves, as the official repository for all locally generated state records. It is in the *Archives Départementales*, for example, where one encounters old tax rolls, court documents, inventories, notary records, and many other official documents relating to the local functions of *state institutions*. Additionally important, the French compiled and published the departmental indexes during the nineteenth century, a time when French nationalism sought new expression through public works and national building projects. No doubt the nineteenth-century trend towards public building projects greatly inspired the institutional categories one finds today in the published indexes to the *Archives Départementales*.

The preference for institutional categories makes even greater sense, if examined in the context of French archival history. Before the creation of the *Archives Départementales*, state records remained located in the institution where they originated.¹³ This practice finally changed in the nineteenth century when French law called

¹² Daniel Hickey's use of *parlement* records, for example, has led him and others to reconsider conventional perceptions about seventeenth-century absolutism. See Daniel Hickey, *The Coming of French Absolutism* (Toronto, 1986). Likewise, Donna Bohanan has found the notary records in departmental holdings helpful for reconstructing social relations among French elites. See Donna Bohanan, *Old and New Nobility in Aix-en-Provence, 1600–1695* (Baton Rouge, 1992).

¹³ Michel Duchein, "Archives in France: The New Legislation of 1979," *Archivaria* 11 (1980/81).

for the consolidation and centralization of all state records at the local level. Consolidation and centralization of local collections coincided almost simultaneously with the production and publication of departmental indexes—both events occurring side-by-side during the nineteenth century. Incoming batches of documents, ongoing and sporadic throughout the nineteenth century, necessitated the centralization and organization of local documents into institutional categories. Put simply, the organization of documents into institutional subject headings was the easiest and most efficient way to deal with the mammoth amount of materials that required immediate identification and management.

Besides the *Archives Départementales*, the French house manuscript and rare book collections in other regional libraries and archives as well, though most of these holding institutions generally do not carry published indexes to their materials.¹⁴ The majority of France's municipal libraries prefer to rely on an independent card cataloging system that is retained within the library itself, separate from the library's general collection, and designated solely for rare manuscripts or old books, or both.¹⁵ Some university libraries follow this pattern by retaining a separate, internal card catalog for their rare books.¹⁶ Unlike the municipal libraries, the *Archives municipales* consists primarily of old documents relating directly to the city's his-

¹⁴The *Bibliothèque municipale de Grenoble* is an exception in that it does possess published indexes to its *Fonds précieux* collections.

¹⁵This was the case for me at the *Bibliothèque municipale de Lyon*, *Bibliothèque municipale de Grenoble*, and the *Bibliothèque municipale de Montpellier*.

¹⁶The *Bibliothèque de la Faculté de théologie protestante* in Montpellier keeps an in-house card catalog of all its rare books.

tory. Such holdings typically include local government records and records left behind by municipal corporations or other groups doing business with city officials.¹⁷ For this reason, municipal archives will often house two separate sets of indexes: one set of finding aids for the primary documents and a separate card catalog for secondary materials relating specifically to the city's history.¹⁸

In contrast, larger municipal libraries may designate two or more separate card catalogs outside the main catalog for their rare manuscripts and books (*Fonds précieux*). The *Bibliothèque municipale de Grenoble*, for example, possesses one catalog for old books and another for rare manuscripts; both catalogs exist independent of the library's main card catalog.¹⁹ In most cases, the *Fonds précieux* catalog resides in a specific location within the municipal library and usually cannot be accessed via an on-line database within or outside the library itself.²⁰ By contrast, smaller municipal libraries may make no distinction between their *Fonds précieux* and general holdings whatsoever. Neither the *Bibliothèque municipale de Valence* nor the *Bibliothèque municipale de Vienne*, for example, possesses an individual catalog for special collections. In both libraries, rare books and original manuscripts remain in-

¹⁷ Many of the sources of the Municipal Archives of Lyon, for example, revolve around the records left behind by Lyon's municipal corporations. See Natalie Davis, "Strikes and Salvation in Lyon," in *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (Stanford, 1975), 1–16.

¹⁸ This was at least the case for me when I visited the *Archives municipales de Lyon*.

¹⁹ *Bibliothèque municipale de Grenoble*.

²⁰ Old books residing in the *Bibliothèque municipale de Montpellier* do appear in their on-line system within the library. Some rare books can now be accessed at the *Bibliothèque municipale de Grenoble* via the local collections segment of their on-line catalog. Visit the web site of the *Bibliothèque municipale de Grenoble* at <<http://www.bm-grenoble.fr>>.

dexed and fully integrated within the libraries' general collections.

Other challenges one may encounter in trying to locate relevant materials may stem from the indexes and card catalogs themselves. As with the published indexes to the *Archives Départementales*, important subject headings for certain topics may not exist in the card catalogs to the *Fonds précieux* of France's municipal libraries. In the catalog to the rare manuscripts at the *Bibliothèque municipale de Grenoble*, for example, few sources are listed under the subject heading of *Protestant Sermons*—even though the library is replete with them. In fact, nowhere in any of the indexes or card catalogs of most municipal libraries in the province of Dauphiné are Protestant sermons listed under the subject heading, *Protestant Sermons* or just *Sermons*.²¹ To locate primary materials, like Protestant sermons, it is necessary to consult several secondary sources that provide exact biographical information.²² Precise knowledge of the author's name or the book title is essential because the French organize their *Fonds précieux* catalogs more rigorously by author and title, than by subject. That is not to say that French libraries do not employ subject headings in their indexes because they most certainly do. Scholars are advised, nevertheless, to compile a list of specific names and

²¹ A great deal of my research has centered on early modern Protestant sermons. Nowhere in any of the indexes or card catalogs of the municipal libraries of Dauphiné did I find sources listed under the topic heading of *sermons*—even though the municipal libraries where I had been working possessed such items.

²² In order to locate Protestant sermons, I consulted several secondary sources published during the nineteenth century. Most were biographical and statistical compilations of Protestant ministers who lived or resided at one time during the seventeenth century in the province of Dauphiné. Because I could identify ministers *by name*, I had no trouble locating their sermons and other devotional pieces within the library's *Fonds précieux* catalog.

old-book titles to be used when consulting the municipal catalogs of the *Fonds précieux*. French secondary works published during the nineteenth century seem to be the most helpful for providing such information.²³

When searching for old documents, scholars must also remember that not all municipal libraries in France maintain a special collections department. Because the extent of manuscript and rare book collections in holding institutions other than the *Archives Départementales* varies, scholars may want to refer to the *Adresses des bibliothèques publiques* for locating libraries that do maintain special collections departments.²⁴ Most important, the *Adresses des bibliothèques publiques* specifically names those municipal libraries the French have charged with maintaining rare manuscripts and old books, or *Fonds précieux*. The catalog additionally provides other details concerning the age of collections, library hours, and phone and address information. The hours listed in the catalog may not be accurate. Library hours in France vary from library to library and fluctuate with the summer and holiday seasons.²⁵ Since variable library hours hold true for most departmental and municipal archives as well, it may be best to contact the library or archives before departing the United States.

For the most part, foreigners are free to consult French documents and books, as any French citizen, although they may be required to provide certain credentials that verify

²³ I had greater difficulty locating Protestant sermons in Montpellier and Lyon, than in Grenoble, because fewer biographical sources for the seventeenth century exist in either of these cities and their surrounding regions.

²⁴ *Adresses des bibliothèques publiques 1999: bibliothèques départementales de prêt, bibliothèques municipales* (Paris, 1999).

²⁵ Many French libraries and archives close or have restricted hours during the summer months to accommodate seasonal work schedules.

their professional status and place of residence while in France.²⁶ Most French archives and libraries do require doctoral students, upon arrival, to present a formal letter from their major professor that explains the scope and nature of their work. This letter should attest to their doctoral status and should be in French.²⁷ Most French institutions, including the foreign office, or prefecture, additionally require foreign students, if applying for a student visa (*Carte de Séjour*) to present a *Lettre de domicile*.²⁸ The *Archives Départementales* and *Bibliothèques municipales* are no exception and will demand proof of this letter before issuing any access privileges. Once access privileges are obtained, there are usually no limitations to the number of book and manuscript requests one can make at any given time or day in most archives and municipal libraries.²⁹

Any questions regarding access may be directed to the *conservateur directeur*. Most provincial archives and municipal libraries, depending on the size of their holdings,

²⁶ French master's or doctoral theses are available for viewing at the *Archives Départementales d'Isere*. It is important to note, however, that French law requires the author's permission for access to theses that are less than thirty years old.

²⁷ While most *conservateurs* are either fluent in or familiar with English, it is best to make formal presentation in French. Only the staff at the *Bibliothèque municipale de Valence* insisted that my papers be in French, which they were.

²⁸ Usually provided by one's landlord, this handwritten letter confirms arrival date and place of residence while living in France. The *Lettre de domicile* serves in the same capacity as a driver's license by providing proof of residence and identity.

²⁹ Some restrictions apply at the *Bibliothèque municipale de Montpellier*. There are no request limitations at either the *Bibliothèque municipale de Lyon* or *Bibliothèque municipale de Grenoble*. At the *Archives Départementales d'Isere*, the total number of daily requests remains unlimited, although patrons are restricted from placing more than two orders at any one given time.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR AMERICAN STUDENTS IN FRANCE

Other questions concerning the French archives, for American students especially, may encompass economic considerations. For the most part, preliminary and/or extended research in France is possible for American students who have limited financial resources. Indeed, the French outlook regarding student poverty stands in stark contrast to the American. French sensitivity is most evident in the number of services the French provide at a reduced rate to both French and international students. Almost all institutions that provide microfilm or photocopy services, for example, do so at a reduced rate for students. At the same time, accommodations in France are also affordable. Students conducting preliminary research in France can stay at youth hostels for a relatively inexpensive fee (\$8–\$15/per night). Usually (though not always!), the hostel is clean and provides breakfast and may come equipped with a kitchenette. The hostel is also a center for social activity, where the researcher may want to interact with others after spending all day working solitarily in the archives. Hostels may be within walking distance to the archives (as was my case in Lyon) and if they are not, can usually be reached via public transportation, which also offers reduced rates for students. For extended stays, one may be able to arrange to live with a family or stay in a student dormitory for a minimal monthly fee. American students may also qualify for rent subsidy. Inquiries concerning rent subsidy should be made at one's local (in France) *Allocations Familiales* office. One should refrain from making formal application for rent subsidy until receiving the *Carte de Séjour*, which may take a few months. Other documents, such as the *Lettre de domicile*, are also necessary when applying for rent subsidy. Students with an International Student I.D., which should be obtained before departing the United States, may also qualify for student tickets at campus cafeterias. Most cities that have universities will probably have one or more student cafeterias where both French and foreign students, upon demonstrating student status, can obtain healthy meals at a reduced student rate. Along with student cafeterias, many hair salons, museums, and some movie houses also honor the International Student I.D. Foreign students may be surprised additionally to learn that checkout privileges are obtainable from most municipal libraries for a small fee. Checkout privileges may be secured from university libraries as well, but only if one is registered as a student at the French university where such privileges are sought. Registration is not a difficult task and tuition is incredibly low in comparison to most private (and many public) universities in the United States.

retain a *conservateur directeur*, who, trained in the arts of archival management, is qualified to answer specific questions concerning special collections and other holdings. Foreign researchers will be pleased to know that the French are as patient, attentive, and professional in dealing with foreign requests as they are sensitive to the economic woes that currently plague American students in the United States.

This aside, foreigners conducting research in France should recognize that regional research may pose certain unforeseen challenges. Foremost, the French house their primary sources, at least in the provinces, in a variety of places—not just the *Archives Départementales*. Besides the departmental archives, one may encounter rare provincial documents in the municipal libraries, municipal archives, and university libraries.³⁰ Like the National Archives, each departmental archive abides by a central indexing system, while municipal and other regional libraries, in contrast, entertain their own indexing procedures. Some municipal libraries are better organized and have significantly greater holdings than others. Most municipal libraries just hold old books, but any one may possess an important manuscript or other document that is not housed at either the departmental or municipal archives.

Many of the various finding aids that do exist for official records and manuscripts both, may or may not be organized in a manner that reflects current historiographical trends in the United States. The finding aids of the *Archives Départementales*, for example, are invaluable, but arranged according to topics more consistent with the institutional focus of the nineteenth century. In addition, no central index, or electronic database, exists for all primary materi-

³⁰While the *Archives Départementales d'Isère* theoretically holds all official state records, one can find at the *Bibliothèque municipale de Grenoble* official royal edicts and *arrêts* applicable to Dauphiné during the seventeenth century.

als residing within a given region of France. Only recently, of course, have European governments endeavored to create an electronic index that is accessible via the World Wide Web.

Like other European governments, it will be the challenge of the French, in the coming century, to devise a central database that includes all primary documents existing within a specified geographic area—no small feat indeed. Until then, American historians should construct a plan for pursuing research within the current constraints of French indexing. Those who do will encounter greater success in locating remote, yet important, provincial documents that might otherwise remain undetected.

Kristine M. Wirts is a doctoral candidate at Auburn University, where she is a student of Donna Bohanan. Majoring in early modern French history, her dissertation is a study of the rhetorical techniques French ministers employed to communicate political and religious ideas to rank-and-file members of the Huguenot movement. Ms. Wirts spent nearly ten months in France conducting dissertation research in Dauphiné in 2000; that research also took her to Geneva, Switzerland and Montpellier, France.