Finding Primary Sources in New York

A good start in researching at the local level is to contact your **town, village, city and/or county historian**. The Association of Public Historians of New York State (APHNYS) has a list of historians grouped by County at [http://www.aphnys.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/APHNYS-2014-Historians-by-County.pdf](http://www.aphnys.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/APHNYS-2014-Historians-by-County.pdf). Be forewarned that sometimes the information is out of date. Also keep in mind that from locality to locality, the availability of a historian can vary considerably. A good local historian should be able to direct you to the right sources for records.

**Town, village and city governments** will have a variety of records but their existence and availability will vary widely. Most towns should have their town minute books, which can contain some useful information, but, especially in the early years, given that towns met only once a year, will not contain a lot of information. Some will have tax rolls, which can be useful in placing people, especially between censuses.

The **County Clerk’s Office** can be a rich source of information. The county clerk is the registrar of deeds, so land records, including deeds, mortgages, and maps may be found there. The county clerk is also clerk of the county and supreme court, so various kinds of court records will be there. The clerk’s office also will have records related to local businesses, including records known as DBAs (Doing Business As) and some related incorporation records. A list of the county clerks in New York State may be found at [http://nysac.org/county_clerks/directory.php](http://nysac.org/county_clerks/directory.php).

Another governmental unit that will have important primary sources is the **Surrogates’ Court**. The court is actually an agency of the state, but each county has a Surrogates’ Court. It is here that wills and other estate filings are kept. The New York Unified Court System has an on-line tool for finding the location of each Surrogate Court in the state at [http://www.courts.state.ny.us/courts/index.shtml](http://www.courts.state.ny.us/courts/index.shtml).

**Local historical societies and libraries** can be a good resource for items of a more person nature or for records related to businesses. But again, these will vary widely from locale to locale. The New York History Net has a list of some...
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societies at http://www.nyhistory.com/links/historical_societies.htm. It is by no means complete, so it wouldn’t hurt to check local directories.

There also are archives and/or manuscript collections in a number of colleges and universities. They may be limited to just records of the institution, but many actively collect historical records in other fields, often related to courses of study. A prime example is the Rare and Manuscript Collections at Cornell: http://rmc.library.cornell.edu/ This is not the only archives at Cornell. The Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives is another to check out at Cornell at http://www.ilr.cornell.edu/library/kheel/index.html And look at other universities to check out their manuscript collections.

An on-line resource that can be very useful in locating primary material statewide is the Historic Documents Inventory (HDI). Started in the late 70s, it is now accessible through the New York State Archives catalog. Go to http://www.archives.nysed.gov/aindex.shtml then choose ‘Online catalog’ at the top. When typing in a search term, you need to use the drop down menu to limit the search to just the HDI. This catalog also allows you to search the NY State Archives catalog and the catalog of the New York State Library, including just the Manuscripts and Specials Collections (MSC), or you can search all. [Note: the HDI can be quite out of date, though work has been on-going for several years to update and add information.]

Repositories of Primary Resources: A listing of over 5000 websites describing holdings of manuscripts, archives, rare books, historical photographs, and other primary sources for the research scholar. All links have been tested for correctness and appropriateness.

http://webpages.uidaho.edu/special-collections/other.repositories.html

Local Government Records Useful in Family History Research is a publication from the New York State Archives. Though geared to genealogy, it does provide useful information concerning primary sources located in local governments in the state: http://www.archives.nysed.gov/a/records/mr_pub31.pdf
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