

# Digging for Garbage in the Archives

an in-archives exercise by Leah Dilworth

featured on [TeachArchives.org](http://www.teacharchives.org) at <http://www.teacharchives.org/exercises/rubbish>

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**In an interdisciplinary honors elective called “Rubbish!”, students examine and analyze historical documents on various aspects of garbage and waste.**

## Introduction

In this one-visit exercise, students interact with primary source documents about various aspects of garbage and waste in order to practice skills of close analysis and inference. Students then formulate questions they cannot answer without doing external research.

The exercise enables students to understand and articulate the “meta” connections between the documents we examine in the archives and our course, “Rubbish!,” which explores the social, political, ethical, and cultural significance of trash.

Students also consider the very concept of the archives and reflect on its purpose in the context of the course. By visiting an archives, students see first-hand that things which might have been discarded are instead preserved. Students make important observations about how value is determined and about how we define garbage.

The archives visit allows me to elicit intense focus and attentiveness from my students. In small group work in the classroom, students often rush through assigned tasks or wind up chatting instead of pursuing questions more deeply. In the archives, however, students are engrossed in the materials as they gently handle the photographs and documents, use magnifiers, and ask questions of their professor and archives staff.

The students work remarkably well together. They collaboratively mine information from the document, and instead of just filling in the blanks on the worksheets, they have actual discussions, and prompt each other’s valuable observations.

## Objectives

Students should be able to:

- Attentively read and make observations about historical documents
- Make inferences based on their close observations about the author, subject, and audience of each document
- Formulate questions for further research

## Context

The narrative arc of this course begins with cultural and theoretical questions about how people define “dirty” and “clean” and about how they categorize different kinds of

matter. Then we study our “personal waste.” Students bring to class 48 hours worth of their own garbage. See assignment [here](#).

The archives visit is part of a unit which focuses on the history of sanitation in New York City. Prior to our visit to the archives, students read a selection of secondary sources about the management of waste, primarily in New York City (see Further Reading below). These readings, along with class discussions, provide both historical context and theoretical tools that help students better understand the archival material.

## Visit

Number of Visits: 1

Duration of Visit: 2 hours 10 minutes

### Agenda

15 minutes	<b>Standard introduction</b>
60 minutes	Small group work
10 minutes	<i>break</i>
30 minutes	Wrap up: group presentations
15 minutes	Wrap up: class discussion

In groups of 4, students examine a suite of primary source documents. Handouts guide groups through the step-by-step process of making observations, formulating inferences, and posing questions about their documents.

#### Group 1

Students examine a folder of materials from the **Arnie Goldwag Brooklyn Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) collection** which contains newspaper clippings, flyers, and letters documenting CORE’s efforts in 1962-63 to increase the frequency of city garbage pickup in the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood of Brooklyn. See handout [here](#).

#### Group 2

Students examine one photograph circa 1915 of the interior of a second-hand shop run by the American Legion of Kings County. See handout [here](#).

#### Group 3

Students examine a selection of 5 photographs (taken over a period of 50 years) which document the Gowanus Flushing Tunnel in Brooklyn. The tunnel, which opened in 1911, was designed to bring relatively fresh water from Buttermilk

Channel into the Gowanus Canal.  
See handout [here](#).

#### **Group 4**

Students use a light table to examine four lantern slides created by the Brooklyn Bureau of Community Services to document local slum conditions. The photos depict backyard privies and dumps.  
See handout [here](#).

#### **Group 5**

Students examine two photographs depicting the construction of sewers in Brooklyn. In addition, they read a 1910 newspaper clipping from the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* in which an editor describes life in Brooklyn in the 1850s before there were sewers.  
See handout [here](#).

Each member of the group is assigned a role: document handler, reader, photographer, and note-taker. The notetaker is required to write notes directly on the handout and to record the group's observations about each document's size, physical properties, subject, author or creator, date, and audience. The photographer uses a camera (without flash) to take pictures of the collections.

### **Wrap Up**

Each group summarizes their activities and research questions in a 3 – 5 minute presentation to the rest of the class. The instructor then leads the whole class in a discussion reflecting on the experience working with primary sources.

## **End Products**

### **Blog Posts**

After the visiting the archives, students write a 2 – 3 page reflection on our class blog.  
See prompt [here](#).

## **Archival Material Used**

### **Group 1: Congress on Racial Equality (CORE)**

[Student selects individual item and fills in description of item here], 1962; Arnie Goldwag Brooklyn Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) collection, ARC.002; folder 5 "Garbage [Bed Stuy]"; Brooklyn Historical Society.

Operation Clean Sweep, 1962, v1989.22.17; Bob Adelman photographs of Brooklyn Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) demonstrations, 1989.022; Brooklyn Historical Society. [click for image](#)

## **Group 2: Waste Collection Bureau**

[Interior view of, / WASTE COLLECTION BUREAU of the / American Legion of Kings County / 71 Douglass St. Brooklyn, N.Y. /], circa 1915, v1973.5.2465; Brooklyn photograph and illustration collection, ARC.202; Brooklyn Historical Society. [click for image](#)

## **Group 3: Gowanus Flushing Tunnel**

Opening of the Gowanus Flushing Tunnel, v1986.2471.20, 1911; Brooklyn sewers construction photograph collection, ARC.209; Brooklyn Historical Society.

Top line of outlet pipes 180" Sewer Head of Gowanus Canal, circa 1905, v1986.242.113 a,b; John Farnsworth Hammond, Jr. photograph album and other materials, v1986.242; Brooklyn Historical Society. [click for image](#)

Views of the Gowanus Canal, circa 1960, v1974.4.1332, v1974.4.1333, and v1974.4.1334; John D. Morrell photograph collection, ARC.005; Brooklyn Historical Society.

## **Group 4: Brooklyn Bureau of Community Service**

Devereaux View Company, circa 1920, v1991.110.350; Brooklyn Bureau of Community Service records, ARC.129; Brooklyn Historical Society.

Dirty toilets, circa 1920, v1991.110.396; Brooklyn Bureau of Community Service records, ARC.129; Brooklyn Historical Society. [click for image](#)

Dirty cellar, circa 1920, v1991.110.403; Brooklyn Bureau of Community Service records, ARC.129; Brooklyn Historical Society.

Dirty yard, circa 1920, v1991.110.407; Brooklyn Bureau of Community Service records, ARC.129; Brooklyn Historical Society.

## **Group 5: Brooklyn Sewers**

Avenue F looking E. from E. 33rd, 1903, v1986.2471.11; Brooklyn sewers construction photograph collection, ARC.209; Brooklyn Historical Society. [click for image](#)

Broken sewer, 1903, v1986.2471.33; Brooklyn sewers construction photograph collection, ARC.209; Brooklyn Historical Society.

"Brooklyn's Dark Ages." Brooklyn Daily Eagle 22 Oct. 1910. Found in Brooklyn and Long Island Scrapbooks, vol. 3, p. 84; Brooklyn Historical Society. [click for image](#)

## Further Reading

Miller, Brian. *Fat of the Land: Garbage of New York, the Last 200 Years*. New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 2000.

Rathje, William and Cullen Murphy. *Rubbish! The Archaeology of Garbage*. Tucson: University of Arizona, 2001.

*A study of the Fresh Kills landfill on Staten Island.*

Royte, Elizabeth. *Garbage Land: On the Secret Trail of Trash*. New York: Little, Brown, 2005.

*A meditation on the various waste streams of present-day New York City.*

Strasser, Susan. *Waste and Want: A Social History of Trash*. New York: Henry Holt, 1999.

*This excellent social and cultural history shows how for Americans trash became a real problem only in the 19th century, when industrial production and increasing markets for consumer goods created a surfeit of stuff.*

## This Exercise Was Used In

**Honors Elective 171: Rubbish!** An interdisciplinary elective seminar for honors students in their sophomore year or beyond.

## Course Materials (included)

Group 1 Handout  
Group 2 Handout  
Group 3 Handout  
Group 4 Handout  
Group 5 Handout  
Blog Prompts  
Personal Waste Assignment

## Cite This Exercise

Leah Dilworth, "Digging for Garbage in the Archives," *TeachArchives.org*, accessed [insert date here], <http://www.teacharchives.org/exercises/rubbish/>.

# In-Archives Handout

by Leah Dilworth



Part of an in-archives exercise at <http://www.teacharchives.org/exercises/rubbish>

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## Group 1: Congress on Racial Equality (CORE)

[Fill in description of individual item here], 1962; Arnie Goldwag Brooklyn Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) collection, ARC.002; folder 5 “Garbage [Bed Stuy]”; Brooklyn Historical Society.

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This folder contains assorted documents, including newspaper clippings, flyers, and letters. For each item, take detailed written notes using the guidelines below.

### 1. Care and Handling

Please put on gloves before handling any photographs. You may use your cell phone or digital camera to photograph the documents, but TURN FLASH OFF.

### 2. Observation

Inspect each document, front and back. Note its approximate size and other physical properties.

Describe any marks you notice:

Date of document:

Author (or creator) of document:

For what audience was the document written?

### 3. Inference

List three things the author said that you think are important:

Why do you think this document was written?

What evidence in the document helps you know why it was written? (Use quotations.)

### 4. Questions

What questions does this document raise in your mind?

Where could you find the answers to these questions?

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## Group 2: Waste Collection Bureau

[Interior view of, / WASTE COLLECTION BUREAU of the / American Legion of Kings County / 71 Douglass St. Brooklyn, N.Y. /], circa 1915, V1973.5.2465; Brooklyn photograph and illustration collection, ARC.202; Brooklyn Historical Society.

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Take detailed written notes on this photograph.

### 1. Care and Handling

Please put on gloves before handling any photographs. You may use your cell phone or digital camera to photograph the documents, but TURN FLASH OFF.

### 2. Observation

Inspect the photo, front and back. Note its approximate size and weight and what it is made of. Describe any marks you notice. Transcribe any writing on it.

Describe what you see in the photograph:

People

Objects

Activities

### 3. Inference

Based on what you have observed above *and* in the BHS catalog description, list things you might infer from this photograph.

In addition to the subject of the image, think about how and why it was made, e.g. Who took the photo? Who was the intended audience? What do you think the photographer wanted to capture?

### 4. Questions

What questions does this document raise in your mind?

Where could you find the answers to these questions?

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## Group 3: Gowanus Flushing Tunnel

Opening of the Gowanus Flushing Tunnel, v1986.247.1.20, 1911; Brooklyn sewers construction photograph collection, ARC.209; Brooklyn Historical Society.

Top line of outlet pipes 180" Sewer Head of Gowanus Canal, circa 1905, v1986.242.1.13 a,b; John Farnsworth Hammond, Jr. photograph album and other materials, v1986.242; Brooklyn Historical Society.

Views of the Gowanus Canal, circa 1960, v1974.4.1332, v1974.4.1333, and v1974.4.1334; John D. Morrell photograph collection, ARC.005; Brooklyn Historical Society.

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Take detailed written notes for each photograph in your group.

### 1. Care and Handling

Please put on gloves before handling any photographs. You may use your cell phone or digital camera to photograph the documents, but TURN FLASH OFF.

### 2. Observation

Inspect each photo, front and back. Note its approximate size and weight and what it is made of. Describe any marks you notice. Transcribe any writing on it.

Describe what you see in the photograph:

People

Objects

Activities

### 3. Inference

Based on what you have observed above *and* in the BHS catalog description, list things you might infer from this photograph.

In addition to the subject of the image, think about how and why it was made, e.g. Who took the photo? Who was the intended audience? What do you think the photographer wanted to capture?

### 4. Questions

What questions does this document raise in your mind?  
Where could you find the answers to these questions?

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## Group 4: Brooklyn Bureau of Community Service

Devereaux View Company, circa 1920, v1991.110.350; Brooklyn Bureau of Community Service records, ARC.129; Brooklyn Historical Society.

Dirty toilets, circa 1920, v1991.110.396; Brooklyn Bureau of Community Service records, ARC.129; Brooklyn Historical Society.

Dirty cellar, circa 1920, v1991.110.403; Brooklyn Bureau of Community Service records, ARC.129; Brooklyn Historical Society.

Dirty yard, circa 1920, v1991.110.407; Brooklyn Bureau of Community Service records, ARC.129; Brooklyn Historical Society.

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Take detailed written notes on these photographs.

### 1. Care and Handling

Please put on gloves before handling any photographs. You may use your cell phone or digital camera to photograph the documents, but **TURN FLASH OFF**.

### 2. Observation

Inspect the photo, front and back. Note its approximate size and weight and what it is made of. Describe any marks you notice. Transcribe any writing on it.

Describe what you see in the photograph:

People

Objects

Activities

### 3. Inference

Based on what you have observed above *and* in the BHS catalog description, list things you might infer from this photograph.

In addition to the subject of the image, think about how and why it was made, e.g. Who took the photo? Who was the intended audience? What do you think the photographer wanted to capture?

### 4. Questions

What questions does this document raise in your mind?

Where could you find the answers to these questions?

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## Group 5: Brooklyn Sewers

Avenue F looking E. from E. 33rd, 1903, v1986.247.1.1; Brooklyn sewers construction photograph collection, ARC.209; Brooklyn Historical Society.

Broken sewer, 1903, v1986.247.1.33; Brooklyn sewers construction photograph collection, ARC.209; Brooklyn Historical Society.

“Brooklyn’s Dark Ages.” Brooklyn Daily Eagle 22 Oct. 1910. Found in Brooklyn and Long Island Scrapbooks, vol. 3, p. 84; Brooklyn Historical Society.

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Take detailed written notes on these photographs.

### 1. Care and Handling

Please put on gloves before handling any photographs. You may use your cell phone or digital camera to photograph the documents, but TURN FLASH OFF.

### 2. Observation

Inspect each document. Note its approximate size and weight and what it is made of. Describe any marks you notice.

*For the photographs:*

Transcribe any writing on each item. Describe what you see in the photograph:

People

Objects

Activities

*For the article:*

Date of document:

Author (or Creator) of document:

For what audience was the document written?

### 3. Inference

*For the photographs:*

Based on what you have observed above *and* in the BHS catalog description, list things you might infer from this photograph.

In addition to the subject of the image, think about how and why it was made, e.g. Who took the photo? Who was the intended audience? What do you think the photographer wanted to capture?

*For the article:*

List three things the author said that you think are important:

Why do you think this document was written?

What evidence in the document helps you know why it was written? (Use quotations.)

### 4. Questions

What questions does this document raise in your mind?

Where could you find the answers to these questions?

# Blog Prompts

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Reflect on your experience during our visit to Brooklyn Historical Society.

What were your expectations before your visit?

What was it like handling and interacting with historical publications?

What questions did the visit raise?

Post your response to the class blog, under the heading **Reflections on our Visit to Brooklyn Historical Society**.

You are also required to post a substantive comment (more than just, “I Agree”) on at least two of your classmates’ posts.

# Assignment: 48 Hours of Trash

by Leah Dilworth



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At our next class meeting (Sept. 28), you will bring to class all the trash you generate in 48 hours. The clock starts at 6:00 p.m. Monday, Sept. 26, and runs till class time on the 28<sup>th</sup>. Use the black plastic bag distributed in class.

## **What goes in the bag:**

Everything you would normally put in a trash can. Everything. If you eat out or get food to go, put the leftovers, wrapping, etc. into your bag.

## **What does not:**

Anything you recycle or compost.

You do not have to carry the bag with you everywhere, but you will need to carry the trash you create away from home back to your black bag.

## **In Class (Sept. 28)**

I will cover the seminar table with newspapers and ask for volunteers to share what's in their bags. As a class we will describe, discuss, and interpret the trash.

## **Response Paper (due Oct. 5)**

Write 3 - 4 pages reflecting on the experience of keeping your own garbage and discussing it in class. Think about the amount of trash you made and the kind of things in it. How did you feel about keeping it? About showing it to the class? What would an urban archaeologist learn about you and the society you live in? Did this exercise prompt you to examine your trash habits?