

Becoming A Historian  
By Lynda Vernia

I am an undergraduate history student interested in studying the long-term effects of Imperialism/colonialism as it relates to present day issues of slavery, racism, income inequality, and poverty. My research paper “Race, Riot, and Recovery: Identifying Motive and Methods of Response to the Violence of the 1863 New York City Draft Riots” was written for a historical writing and research class, a requirement for my major. I chose to research and write about the 1863 New York City Draft Riots because of my interest in the intersection of racial, economic, and political issues that led to the violence of the riots.

Initially I wanted to write my paper on the aftermath of the riots and the repercussions on the rioters, the black victims, the Draft Act, and to the City of New York. Specifically, I wanted to analyze the success of the rioters in their goals to stop the Civil War draft and to displace the black population from the city, as well as identify the legal consequences, if any, faced by the rioters. In addition, I wanted to understand how the black community reacted to and recovered from the violence of the riots. I soon realized that my topic was much too broad for a 15 page paper; I needed to narrow the scope of my research topic.

I have written many papers in my educational career, but I had no experience in the kind of in-depth research required for this semester-long project. The assistance of the History Librarian was essential in learning the research methods and tools used by scholars. The most important lesson I learned was how to choose scholarly, peer-reviewed sources to develop credible references for my paper, utilizing sources with a range of viewpoints to provide deeper insight on the topic. I began my research by using CSUSM Library OneSearch to find secondary source books and articles that gave me a broad overview of the major societal issues relative to the period including emancipation, abolitionism, and the Civil War, as well as nationalism and

related immigration issues. I then expanded my search to identification of primary source materials. I used various research tools and databases including JStor, Google Scholar, Readex, NYC Archives, Proquest, the US Census, and others. In addition, I used bibliographies to guide me to further research material. As I continually refined the focus on my research, I evaluated and prioritized my reading tasks to eliminate texts that were not relevant to my subtopic.

Another important lesson was the inclusion of a wide range of different types of sources to develop my research more thoroughly, to include photographs, illustrations, newspapers, autobiographies, poems, sermons, eyewitness accounts, reports, and letters. Of course, one of the drawbacks of choosing a research topic that is not locally based is the lack of access to non-digitized archives. Unfortunately, the historical societies I contacted were unable to provide me with resources because of my unfamiliarity with their collections and finding guides. I am currently continuing to expand my research on this topic outside of the classroom; the next step to further research for graduate studies would be travel to New York City to gain access to municipal, court, church, property, and personal records and archives to uncover details needed for further analysis to support my thesis.

My approach to this research project is an example of allowing the research material to guide in the development of an argument, rather than formulating an argument in advance to which supporting material is selectively applied. When I began my research, I had only a general idea of the direction I wanted to go with the topic. As I analyzed my sources, I began to see that in the midst of the disorder and brutality of the riots, there were numerous episodes of compassion and goodwill towards the black victims of violence. My research led me to identify a perspective that others have not considered in stating motive and method of assistance given to the black community both during and after the riot. This process of research – aquiring,

evaluating, refining, analyzing, questioning, and formulating new perspectives about historical events - is how I became a historian.