How to Use Our Collection

At the Newberry, an independent research library, readers do not borrow books to take home, but consult rare books, manuscripts, and other materials here. We welcome researchers who are at least 14 years old or in the ninth grade. Visit https://requests.newberry.org to create a reader account and start exploring our collection. When you arrive at the Newberry for research, a free reader card will be issued to you in the Welcome Center on the first floor. Find further information about our collection and public programs at www.newberry.org. Questions? Contact the reference desk at (312) 255-3506 or reference@newberry.org.

The Newberry has an abundance of primary source material documenting the British, French, Spanish and Portuguese colonies of the Americas, particularly relating to interactions between European colonizers and Native peoples. Major collections including a colonial-era focus are the Edward E. Ayer Collection, the Everett D. Graff Collection, and the Rudy L. Ruggles Collection.

British Colonies

The Newberry's British Colonial History collections demonstrate the history of the settlement of the Atlantic coast and the western movement into its hinterland. Highlights among the British colonial history collections include:

Smith, John. A Description of New England... London: Robert Clerke, 1616. The Newberry holds all the early editions of John Smith’s explorations in New England and Virginia. Call # VAULT Ayer 150.5 .N4 S6 1616


A complete set of the 11 pamphlets often known as the “Eliot tracts,” authored by John Eliot and other missionaries and issued between 1643 and 1671. Call numbers vary.

Cochrane, Gavin. A Treatise on the Indians of North America: Written in the Year 1764. A contemporary copy of a manuscript treatise by a British military officer, tracing the history of British relations with the Indians of the Great Lakes region from 1760 to 1763. Call # VAULT Ayer MS 176

In addition to these rare items, we hold a large number of pamphlets on the French and Indian War, extensive material on the Hudson Bay Company and Indian Wars, one of the world’s most extensive collections of Indian captivity narratives, a large collection of material on Indian linguistics, and a great wealth of printed archival material.

French Colonies

The Newberry collection includes many important sources on the history of the French colonies, particularly in the Ayer Collection. Some of the special sources of note:
A complete set of the Jesuit Relations, the reports from Jesuit missionaries in New France and other colonies between 1632 and 1673, in the original Cramoisy editions. Call numbers vary, but many at VAULT Ayer 263 .J512


Hennepin, Louis. Description de la Louisiane… Paris: Sebastien Huré, 1683. Account of the expedition of Hennepin and La Salle to the Great Lakes and Midwest; the Newberry holds many early editions. Call # VAULT Graff 1858

Dumont de Montigny. Memoire… 1747. The manuscript journal of a French military officer and historian, which narrates events of his life between 1715 and 1747, including his experiences in Louisiana from 1719 to 1737. The journal also includes more than twenty drawings and maps. Call # VAULT Ayer MS 257

Spanish Colonies

The Newberry has collected extensively for the history of Mexico and Latin America in the period of Spanish conquest and colonization, and the history of Native peoples in the Spanish empire was of particular interest to Edward E. Ayer. Some of the rare printed works include:


Casas, Bartolomé de las. Brevissima Relacion de la Destructyon de las Indias… Seville: Sebastian Trugillo, 1552. First edition of las Casas’ Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies, publicizing and denouncing the abuses of Natives by Spanish colonizers. This copy is bound with the other eight tracts by las Casas published in 1552 and 1553. Call # VAULT Ayer 108 .C3 1552


Many editions of the works of other early historians of the Spanish presence in the Americas, such as José de Acosta, Pedro de Cieza de León, and Antonio de Solís.

Many manuscripts and transcripts of archives relating to the conduct of the Spanish colonies are available at the Newberry. These collections generally consist of documents from the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries relating to United States territories formerly held by Spain. Transcripts have been copied from the archives of the Indies at Seville, Simancus, Madrid, Nacogdoches, and Matamoras.

Portuguese Colonies

The William B. Greenlee Collection is focused on Portuguese and Portuguese colonial history, with a focus on the growth of colonial Brazil. It is particularly strong for periodicals, gazetteers, and bibliographies; travel literature and special subjects relating to social life and customs; biography; and local history and description. It also includes a collection of over 15,000 pamphlets, nearly all from the colonial period.

This quick guide was created for the Newberry Colonial History Lecture Series, cosponsored with the Society of Colonial Wars in the State of Illinois in partnership with the University of Illinois History Department.

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