

# What is Vaudeville? The Brooklyn Experience

an in-archives exercise by Peter Catapano

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

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**In a single visit, students in a U.S. history survey course examine historical maps and guidebooks to learn more about early 20th-century Brooklyn theaters.**

## Introduction

This single-visit-to-the-archives model incorporates an engaging primary source experience into my very busy survey course. (To learn more about the challenges and benefits of visiting the archives with a survey course, read my [article](#).)

The exercise addresses the topic of mass culture and vaudeville as an extension of our course unit “Cultural Struggles during the Gilded Age.” Groups of four students are assigned one of the following Brooklyn vaudeville theaters: Hyde & Behman’s, Columbia, Orpheum, Gayety, and Novelty. In the archives, students use maps and guidebooks to learn more about these theaters.

To build students’ basic web publishing skills, I assign a follow-up group assignment on a class website. This experience, along with the group work in the archives, reinforces a sense of community and collaboration among my students.

## Objectives

Students should be able to:

- Locate pertinent historical information about a particular theater in Brooklyn using maps and guidebooks
- Compile information gathered from archival research to craft a short descriptive entry on a Brooklyn vaudeville theater
- Write for the web, upload images, and publish a blog post to the course web site

## Context

I give an in-class lecture on urbanism and mass entertainment prior to the visit.

Students also read Chapter 18, “Cultural Struggles of Industrial America,” from *Of the People* (the course textbook) as well as articles on the rise of vaudeville from the website [Vaudeville: A History](#). Students are required to complete a Blackboard quiz based on these secondary readings.

## Visit

Number of Visits: 1

Duration of Visit: 1 hour

### Agenda

5 minutes     **Standard introduction after a pre-visit**

45 minutes    Group research

10 minutes    Wrap up

In the **project overview** handout, students are given task-based prompts to guide their work in the archives. Groups are encouraged to move freely between two stations during the visit:

#### **Station A: Opera Glass**

*The Opera Glass* was a weekly entertainment guide for New York and Brooklyn which included a chart of vaudeville attractions with prices and advertisements for each theater. In order to have enough material for my students to simultaneously conduct research, at least ten bound volumes from the years 1901 – 1903 are pulled for each visit.

#### **Station B: Transit Maps**

This station is comprised of three maps that show trolley, elevated train, and proposed subway lines. Students should note the proximity of theaters to changing mass transit infrastructure between 1896 and 1910.

### Wrap Up

Because of limited time in the archives, I conduct a very brief final discussion in which students describe and reflect on the experience of handling original documents.

## End Products

The next class meeting is held at a computer lab on campus. During this session, students bring their notes from the archives and begin creating a group post. Students are required to upload an image and integrate it into a descriptive narrative of their theater. This gives students an opportunity to collaborate on their assignments and to become more familiar with the WordPress interface.

## Assessment

The blog assignment is assessed with a letter grade based on the following criteria: observation, historical interpretation, bibliographic skills, and timeliness and style. Students are provided [a grading rubric](#). This assignment counts as 15% of the final grade.

## Archival Material Used

*The Opera Glass*; closed stacks PN2277.N5 O65; Brooklyn Historical Society. [click for image](#)

Guide Map of the Borough of Brooklyn, Kings County, 1898; Flat Maps B A-1898.FI; Brooklyn Historical Society. [click for image](#)

Pocket Map of Greater New York, circa 1896; Flat Maps NYC-1896.FI; Brooklyn Historical Society.

Rapid Transit and Development Map of the Boroughs of Manhattan, Bronx, Brooklyn and Queens, circa 1910; Flat Maps NYC-1910.A.F; Brooklyn Historical Society.

## Further Reading

David N. Gellman and David Quigley, 52-55. New York: New York University Press, Oakes, James, et al. *Of the People: A History of the United States*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010.

[“Vaudeville: A History.”](#) *University of Virginia American Studies Group*. Accessed December 2013.

## This Exercise Was Used In

**HIS 1111: History after 1865** A survey of the major topics in U.S. history from the Reconstruction era to the Vietnam War. Fulfills general education requirements.

## Course Materials (included)

Project Overview  
Rubric

## Cite This Exercise

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# Project Overview

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

**Meet at the lobby of the Adams Street entrance, near the College Bookstore. We will leave promptly at 2:30 and walk to Brooklyn Historical Society.**

At BHS, you will be introduced to the historical collections by members of the staff. In the library, there will be two research stations with maps and guidebooks which you will use to write a post on one of the many vaudeville theaters in Brooklyn at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Each of you will be assigned a group and the name of a theater. You and your partners will be instructed to move through the archival material placed in various stations in the BHS library.

Your goal is to gather information to write a short theater description to post on the “What is Vaudeville?” website. In your responses, do not limit yourself to the questions below. Feel free to provide any other impressions about vaudeville that you discover in your research.

In your response consider the following:

- Where was your theater located? Describe the area the best you can. What was the proximity of mass transit?
- What were ticket prices? (Translate to current dollars by using the inflation calculator at [http://www.bls.gov/data/inflation\\_calculator.htm](http://www.bls.gov/data/inflation_calculator.htm))
- Who performed at the theater? Who would you imagine the audience for these types of performances? Why?
- Is there any other evidence that the theater catered to a different audience than a typical vaudeville theater?
- Be sure to take notes. You can use your digital camera to take photos of the archival material. I would also like for each group to take a photo in the library to post on the “Reflections” page. You are encouraged to collaborate during the research of the project, but each of you must post your own page describing the theater.

You are encouraged to work together at the archives. However, each of you is required to write your own 250-300 word post that includes an uploaded an image.

You are also required to write a paragraph post on the reflection page of the website. This post will not be graded, but must be completed to receive a grade for the assignment.

This assignment will count 15% toward your final grade for the course. Each post will receive a letter grade based on the quality and effort of your post.

**REMINDER: Next class session, bring your notes and photos to the computer lab at G604 (on the 6<sup>th</sup> floor of the General Building). We will meet there at the usual time.**

# Grading Rubric

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Criteria	Outstanding A (90-100)	Proficient B (80-89)	Basic C (70-79)	Below Expectations D/F (0-69)
Observation	Insightfully notes multiple elements of documents, photos, and other sources (e.g. physical features, details, form, language)	Refers to one of two specific elements of a source.	Offers only basic description of the sources, and may include errors.	Makes a very brief or erroneous attempt at identifying the basic characteristics of the sources.
Historical Interpretation	Organizes and synthesizes evidence (primary, secondary, and course info) to reveal insightful patterns, differences, or similarities.	Organizes evidence to reveal patterns, differences or similarities.	Organizes evidence, but the organization is not effective in revealing important patterns, differences, or similarities.	Lists evidence, but it is not organized and/or is unrelated to the assignment.
Bibliographic Skill	Uses both primary and secondary sources. Embedded images or clips that are captioned. Sources cited properly in the text.	Uses both primary and secondary sources. Some sources, including images and clips, cited in text.	Uses primary or secondary sources. No embedded images or clips. Some sources cited.	No embedded images or clips. Citations missing or incorrect.
Timeliness and Style	Assignment is posted on the due date. Few grammatical or spelling errors.	Assignment is posted on the due date. Several grammatical or spelling errors.	Assignment is posted on the due date. Obvious grammatical or spelling errors that makes understanding content difficult.	Assignment is posted after the due date. Obvious grammatical or spelling errors that makes understanding content impossible.