The Yale Law School Guide to Research in American Legal History

By John B. Nann & Morris L. Cohen. (2018) 349 pages, ISBN: 9780300118537. $35 (print), $16.99 (Kindle)

Subject: Subject-specific legal research (American Legal History)

Useful for: Useful for instructors or researchers who want to teach or learn more about conducting legal research in historical materials.

Format: Chapters with index, with suggestions for further reading and recommended databases at the end of each chapter.

Reviewer's Comments:

Nann and Cohen's Guide begins as all good research guides should: at the beginning. The Guide introduces the research process and legal materials in a succinct and informative fashion designed to quickly familiarize both legal researchers and history researchers.

The Guide provides an intensive survey and bibliographic history of legal publications and sources of American law in a chronological context from the English foundations of American law to what the authors call "The Administrative State," or modern era. Of particular interest is the chapter on 19th century law, which includes tables of historical state law reporters—a particularly opaque area of research. Also included are tables showing the changing composition of federal court circuits over time.

In addition to exploring the vagaries of early and Colonial-era case law research, the Guide does a fantastic job of illustrating some of the complications to early statutory research. One of the primary pitfalls examined in the Guide is the challenge of tracing statutory history when titles or entire codes have been rewritten or renumbered—a challenge familiar to any researcher who has attempted to locate the original language of tax provisions pre-dating the 1954 Internal Revenue Code, or historical provisions of a state code that was entirely rewritten during every decade of the last century.

The Guide to Research in American Legal History is a useful text for brushing up on bibliographic research methods and instruction. It has utility both as a text to assign for student reading, with its concise explanations of legal materials and publishing and the research process, and as a reference text when designing a legal research course with a heavy bibliographic or historical component. I found the way that the authors described key legal resources, and their history and utility, to be informative and easy to grasp, and I can easily imagine assigning selected readings from this text to my own legal research students.

Reviewed by: Abigail Deese, Emory University School of Law, in 2019.