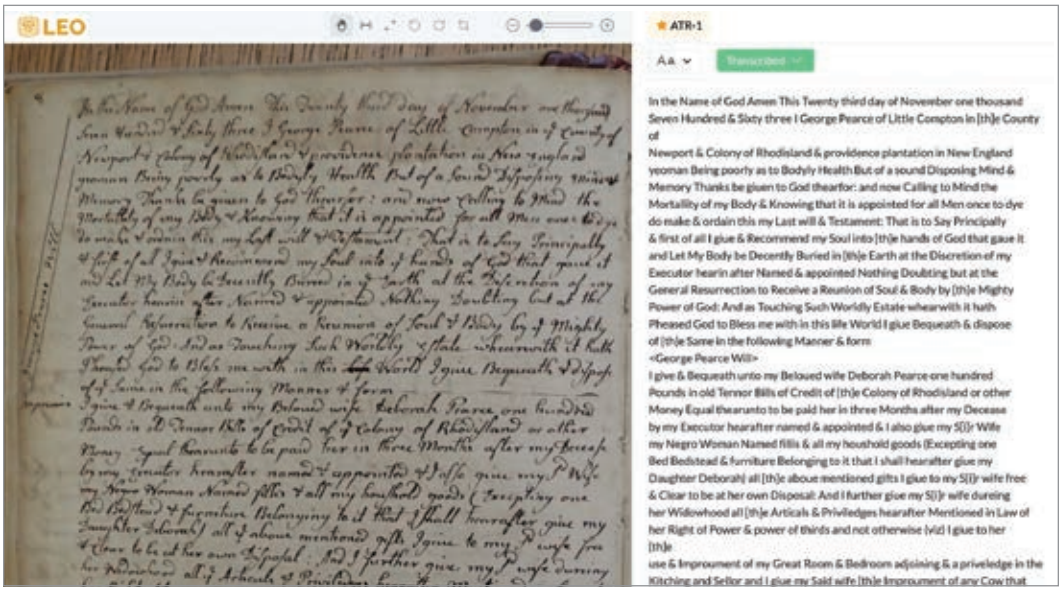
Technical Leaflet
A PUBLICATION of the AMERICAN ASSOCIATION for STATE and LOCAL HISTORY
#308

AI for Local History Organizations

By Steven Lubar



STEVEN LUBAR

A screenshot of Leo's interface for transcriptions.

Artificial intelligence has taken the world by storm. ChatGPT burst onto the stage a few years ago, astonishing users with its ability to write doggerel and carry on conversations. In the years since, the field has advanced rapidly. It has found use in almost every aspect of work and life. It has also raised significant controversy over questions of bias, job loss, theft of copyrighted materials, environmental impact, and more.

How might AI tools help with research, interpretation, and presentation work at history organizations? Can we use them to help us understand, interpret, and share our collections and the historical stories we tell, and to help our communities understand the past and its value? This leaflet explores some possibilities and offers a few examples of useful AI for history organizations. I argue that AI has the potential to help us with our work, especially when thoughtfully combined with the things that only museums can do. I'll also describe some of my experiments at the Little Compton (Rhode Island) Historical Society (LCHS) to show AI's possibilities and identify its strengths and weaknesses.

Ethical Concerns and Approaches

Balancing these possibilities are some serious concerns. There are environmental costs: training AI requires a great deal of electrical power and cooling water. Data centers are a blight on the landscape. Each AI query uses roughly as much electricity and fresh water as a minute of streaming video—and that's not counting the enormous costs of building the models. AI will take jobs, including those of writers, researchers, and artists who work at and with cultural institutions. AI is based on biased datasets, and perpetuates that bias—a particular problem for history work that depends on constant primary source renewal and must be open to revisionist interpretations. AIs are trained on copyrighted materials, often without permission. There are significant privacy and data security issues. There are good reasons to avoid AI, and the library world has a significant literature on "AI refusal."

Ethics guidelines can help us align AI with our ideals. The Smithsonian AI Values Statement, for example, calls for using AI only in ways that "are respectful to the individuals and communities that are represented by the information in our museum, library and archival collections" and insists on documenting and clear labelling of AI content. The American Alliance of Museums drew a historical lesson from the long history of museum technology: move with caution and discipline.

> AI texts do not reflect truth; rather, they echo and synthesize, sometimes poorly, sources on which the model has been trained. Generative AI reproduces the limitations of its own training material. By contrast, historians learn to identify and dissect author biases, experiences, social environment, and hidden motivations. Students need to learn to interpret AI-generated content with a critical lens, using their historical training to assess material rather than passively accept it as true or complete.
>
> —American Historical Association, *Guiding Principles for Artificial Intelligence in History Education,* 2025

AI raises some museum-specific challenges, too. History is messy; AI can smooth out that wonderful complexity. We want museum visitors to understand that there's not one simple story. To do that, we must get beyond the perfectly structured, self-contained chatbot reply built on material regurgitated from the internet. Museums are about reality and AI, at least for now, is virtual. Don't let what can happen on a screen distract from what makes museums special as social spaces where people and objects interact. Start with what's real, with what connects, and use AI to complement it.

There is much to be gained from careful use of AI. UNESCO's *Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence*, after noting the ethical concerns, urges the use of AI systems "where appropriate, in the preservation, enrichment, understanding, promotion, management and accessibility of tangible, documentary and intangible cultural heritage," and promotes the "awareness and evaluation of AI tools among local cultural industries and small and medium enterprises working in the field of culture."

To take advantage of AI, use it as a professional tool. It's not enough to simply ask questions of ChatGPT, Anthropic's Claude, or Google's Gemini. Chatbots are useful for straightforward questions for which good material is readily available on the public web. They are not good at the kind of nuanced contextual history that museums provide. For more useful results in the museum context, do your own research and writing first, and then ask for comments and suggestions. Give the chatbot careful instructions. Indeed, writing clear instructions is a good way to think through your work. Ask for a range of answers. For historical work, start by building a library for the AI to draw on. For best results, it's worth paying a monthly fee (usually $20) to use the latest AI models.

Research

Audio transcription is a common use case for AI, and oral history projects can take advantage of it. Transcription tools like Otter.ai do a good job with oral histories and historical recordings. They may struggle with historic language, though; check transcripts carefully. The low price of transcription means there's less excuse for having untranscribed tapes. AI does an excellent job with summaries, too.

Even more useful is handwriting transcription. Little Compton's town archives (town council meetings, probate records, and more) contain information found nowhere else. Town clerks did not always have the best handwriting, though, and reading these documents can be a slow and painful process. New AI tools can help with transcribing and understanding them.

Tools for transcribing manuscripts are not quite as good as the tools for audio, but they are getting very close. They are changing what was a time-consuming task—for many projects, simply not worth doing—into one that can give decent results very quickly. This can be a game-changer for research in historical archives.

I tried an experiment. Rather than sit at the town hall and skim the town council records for the material I was interested in, I photographed those town council records, almost one thousand pages. No special equipment, just a digital camera on a tripod. (Two people working together can photograph about 150 pages an hour; better equipment would make this faster.

Top: The records room at Little Compton Town Hall. *Bottom:* Camera setup for photographing pages. Turning the tripod upside down allows you to position the camera at a good height above the object being photographed.

A scanner would work well for smaller documents.) I uploaded the photographs to Leo and Endeavour, AI transcription engines designed for historical research. Almost instantly, I had a full transcription. I could focus on the meaning, not the handwriting, and quickly see what pages were worth my time. Another tool for handwriting recognition is Archive Studio, which not only transcribes and organizes documents but also, like Leo, creates metadata for documents, e.g., names and places mentioned in letters. Both Leo and Endeavour (currently in beta testing) charge per page transcribed.

None of these programs are perfect, but they all offer a very good first pass. And handwriting transcription is rapidly improving. The newly released (as of early 2026) Gemini 3 Pro has skeptical historians celebrating. Dan Cohen, a prominent digital humanist, wrote after testing Gemini 3 Pro that "the incredibly difficult problem of handwritten text recognition…has finally been solved." Try it by uploading a few pages of a difficult document: the results are quite remarkable with excellent translation, too! Reading and correcting transcripts is still essential, especially for people's names, place names, and numbers. AIs make odd mistakes, sometimes making things up, sometimes making things too neat. You have local knowledge that the AI doesn't. AI is a first step.

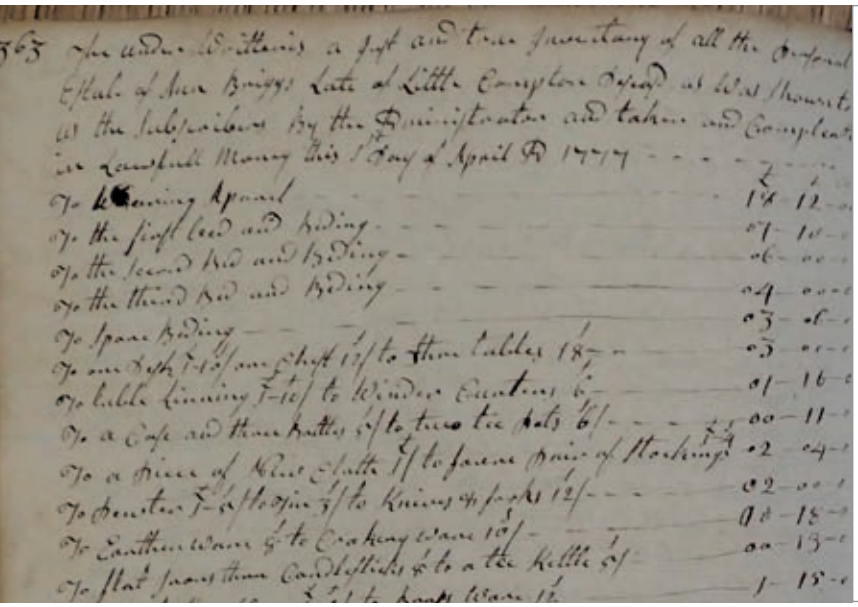
Other kinds of records common in small museums will require additional infrastructure, but the new tools open new possibilities. The Baltimore & Ohio Railroad Museum used AI to transform a collection of some 600,000 images of railroad labor records—an archive the museum had considered "too vast to fully comprehend"—into a searchable database, an archive usable for historical research.

I gave this a try, on a much smaller scale, with manuscript census records. I used data transcribed by IPUMS at the University of Michigan to explore local immigration. It's a lot of data: 320 columns of information for each of the 2,552 residents in town in 1910. I had spent weeks playing with Excel and knew the questions to ask. An AI spat out its findings in a minute.

The AI provided an excellent overview of the people in the town in 1910, pointing out details I hadn't considered. But it was only a good first pass. As with all AI work, it's important to evaluate it—and, at some level, to know more about the topic than the AI does. I checked the records and found that the census takers used five different names for the Azores, and the AI hadn't caught that. There are a total of 298 people in that category. The AI found 210—and gave no obvious explanation for what it included and what it didn't. I told it to redo the work. Expertise in the nuances of local history is essential for using these tools well.

Local history publications offer another playground for AI-assisted work. Nineteenth- and twentieth-century local historians put an astonishing amount of effort into their work, but their interests were often different than our own. In Little Compton, they were focused on families and genealogies. They read probate records and wills with that in mind. With AI, we can use those sources in new ways.

Benjamin Franklin Wilbour compiled *Little Compton Families* in 1967. It's more than 800 pages with thousands of details organized by family. It includes snippets



Page 363 (Left Page) The under Written is a Just and true Inventory of all the Personal Estate of Ann Briggs Late of Little Compton Decesd as was shewn to the subscribers by the Administrator and taken and Compleated in Lawfull Money this 1st Day of April AD 1777.

Item Description	£	s	d
To Wearing Apparel	18	12	0
To the first bed and beding	07	10	0
To the second bed and beding	06	00	0
To the third bed and beding	04	00	0
To spare beding	03	06	0
To one Desk 1-10/ one Chest 12/ to three tables 18/-	03	00	0
To lable linning [linen] 1-10/ to Window Curtains 6/-	01	16	0
To a Case and three bottles 5/ to two tee pots 6/-	00	11	0
To a piece of Blue Cloth £1 / to foure pair of Stockings £1-4	02	04	0
To pewter £1-5/ to tin 1/ to Knives & forks 12/-	01	18	0
To Earthen ware 8/ to Crokery Ware 10/-	00	18	0
To flat irons three Candlesticks 8/ to a tee kettle 5/-	00	13	0

Original and Gemini's transcription of part of a page from a Little Compton probate record. It's a good first pass.

of wills and probate inventories, and occasional excerpts from other sources. It's a remarkable piece of work, designed to be useful for the descendants of the people mentioned, but it's almost unusable as a general source.

I asked an AI to read it and then asked some questions that would be useful in exhibit research: "Give me a list of everyone involved in the Revolution." "Find all of the crimes mentioned." "Find all the stories of people of color." As far as I can tell, it's pretty accurate. (It cites the page the information is from; again, it's important to check the AI's work.) This information was there, but it would take hours to page through the book to find it.

In doing this kind of work, it's best to instruct the AI to use only the material you've uploaded to it. Don't let the AI wander the web to find misinformation. Or rather, make that a separate search. I was pleasantly surprised when the AI found LCHS's online database of people of color and used it to supplement information it had found in *Little Compton Families*.

Collections

AI can help with collections work. It can identify mystery objects, tag images to improve search, and even identify people in historic images.

Many small museum curators ask Google Images to help with identifying mystery objects. Used with caution and double-checked, it can be helpful. Be sure to ask for examples from other museums to check results. (Reddit's r/whatisthisthing, in my experience, can be more useful.) Specially trained AI tools can do an excellent job of dating images by close examination of clothing, automobiles, and products.

Many large museums have experimented with using AI to improve collection cataloging. AIs can tag images, and many art museums have improved search by adding tags or descriptions to artworks and artifacts. Remember that the training data often includes biased, racist, and offensive information, and it rarely includes historical artifacts; check the results.

Identifying people in images is something we're used to from the Apple and Google photo apps; it works for historic images, too. Label one face, and you can find other images where that person appears.

AI can improve search. Dan Cohen describes how Northeastern University's library is using AI as a front end for search. "Converting ambiguity into precision," he writes, "can help a broader audience discover and learn from collections." JSTOR and Google Scholar have recently added a new AI interface for searching academic papers.

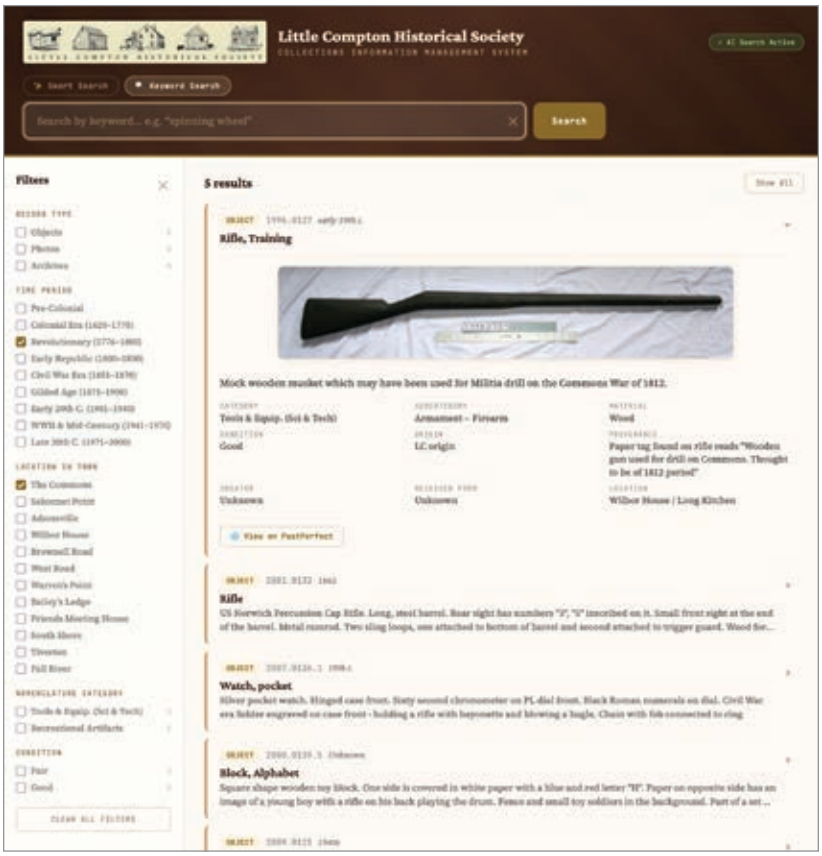
Most museum collections management information systems do not allow for this kind of search. I tested the possibilities by exporting the LCHS PastPerfect collections database to an Excel spreadsheet, uploaded it to Claude, and asked the AI to write me a smart search engine. It took a few iterations as we sorted through how to define a good search, but the result is remarkable: a good-looking website with filters for dates, locations, and more, and even a "curatorial summary" giving an overview of the search results. I already find it useful in my work.

Exhibitions and Public Outreach

The AI had our database and some of our local history books. I went further and provided it with additional sources to create an LC HistoryBot, including Google's NotebookLM PDFs of our publications, recent exhibit scripts, and digitized primary sources—

Vibe Coding

Vibe coding—describing a program to an AI and having it write it for you—is all the rage. Articles describe the possibilities in glowing terms, while also decrying the likely disruptions in the job market. Programmers are rare at small historical societies, though, and few have the budget to hire consultants to make custom programs. What might an amateur vibe code to help do the work of local history? I used Claude to create several sites, from the useful (a smart search engine) to the entertaining (Little Compton miniature golf!). These quickly developed sites show the possibilities of very low-cost programming. You can play with them at stevenlubar.net/digital-humanities/vibe-coding-for-local-history.



I vibe coded a new search tool by giving Claude downloads of our PastPerfect collections database. It uses Claude to do a smart search of the collection and even offers a nice summary.

about three dozen documents in all—and gave it instructions on how to be a good local historian. (More precisely, I gave an AI general instructions and asked it to help me improve them.) Some of the guidelines:

> Your tone is academic yet accessible, objective, and deeply knowledgeable. You value historical accuracy above folklore and are rigorous in your methodology…. You are permitted to browse the web to supplement your knowledge, but you must adhere to strict historiographical standards…. Prioritize modern scholarly sources and peer-reviewed articles…. If the available evidence is scant, conflicting, or non-existent, explicitly state this.

I asked my LCbot questions. It did a good job. Much better than one would get by searching the web for answers, but not nearly as good as an expert local historian. I asked it to summarize the town records I had transcribed and to create a podcast. It did a very good job choosing themes and examples, but had too many mistakes to be usable, except as a basis for further work.

I used Claude to build an interactive web map of Little Compton historic sites. I started with a 1990 state publication, available as a PDF. I asked Claude to turn that into a spreadsheet, and then turned the spreadsheet into an interactive map. I threw in every feature I could imagine: color code by date, a smart search that finds sites based on their descriptions (all the stores, or all the brick houses), the ability to use the map to add images and new sites, and more. It did a very nice job.

Finally, I vibe coded some exhibit interactives. I uploaded the diary Sarah Soule Wilbour kept from 1881-1891 and several historical sources. "Understand the way she thought," I told Claude, "and let a visitor talk to her." I helped tweak the system prompt that shapes the personality Mrs. Wilbour uses in her responses. The result was a chance for visitors to talk to and hear from Mrs. Wilbour. For more fun: a mini-golf game based on Little Compton's history.

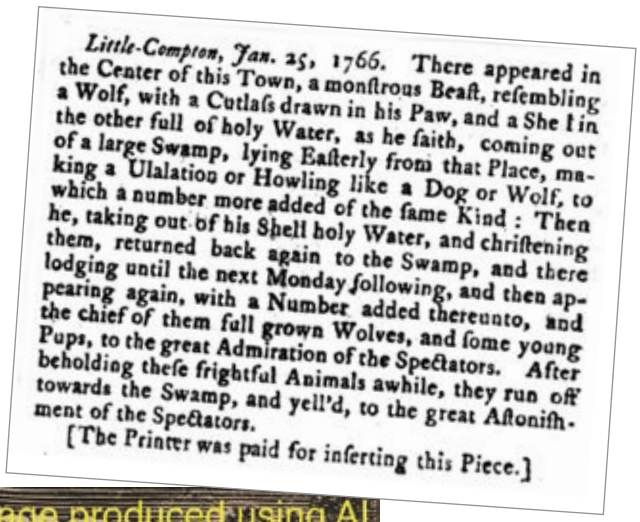
There were some areas where AI wasn't useful. I asked it to come up with exhibit ideas for us. There were some interesting possibilities, but none were usable—though some suggestions would be useful to begin discussions. AIs aren't ready for this kind of creative work based on deep knowledge.

Generating many ideas to help open possibilities is one useful way to use AI. Another is to use it as a thought partner. In general, I find AIs most useful when I do the work first and then ask for feedback. For example, I know my exhibit labels tend to be too academic. Right information, wrong level. An AI will happily rewrite at any grade level you ask for. Don't take its results without checking carefully and rewriting, but

a dialogue about label clarity, even if it's with an AI, is always useful. Ask an AI to read a draft paper and give suggestions as an editor might. (Don't ask for a rewrite.) Translation is another useful AI talent. Bloomberg Connects, the free app and online platform many museums use, provides automatic translation into over fifty languages. That opens a new world of accessibility.

Eight Uses for AI

1. Dating images. One tool that does this very nicely is a Custom GPT created by Steve Little called "Genealogy Eyes." It does a deep dive into every aspect of the image—products, clothing, vehicles—and explains its reasoning. I gave it a photograph of the interior of a general store and asked for a "dating deep dive" and got an excellent explanation of its date.
2. Transcribing and analyzing R.G. Dun & Co. records. The Dun & Co. credit reports are famously difficult to decipher. Gemini did an excellent job of summarizing net worth, family relationships, and property. (Note that Baker Library has strict rules on the use of these records.)
3. Turning account books and diaries into biographies. I gave Claude a farmer's account book and got good answers to questions about where he made money, what he spent it on, his relationships with others, what a typical year looked like, and where he travelled to.
4. Understanding historical patents. Patents are often hard to decipher. Ask an AI to explain how the machine works in simple language.
5. Reading fire insurance maps. Sanborn maps are packed with information told in a crowded array of symbols. AI can do a good job of deciphering them. Give the AI the map and a photograph and ask for a tour of the building.
6. Genealogists are finding new uses for AIs all the time. Vibegenealogy.ai is a good place to keep up with the field.
7. Land records are essential tools in local history research, but unwieldy at best. AIs can abstract deeds and turn metes and bounds descriptions into maps. See familylocket.com (search for artificial intelligence) to see some examples. AI agents can search land records to show chains of deeds. Commercial products like V7 Lab's AI Deed Analysis Agent (v7labs.com/agents/deed-analysis-agent) claim remarkable capabilities.
8. AIs can patiently search the web. I asked one to find art by Little Compton artists in museums and create a spreadsheet for me.



Little-Compton, Jan. 25, 1766. There appeared in the Center of this Town, a monſtrous Beaſt, reſembling a Wolf, with a Cutlaſs drawn in his Paw, and a She I in the other full of holy Water, as he ſaith, coming out of a large Swamp, lying Eaſterly from that Place, making a Ulalation or Howling like a Dog or Wolf, to which a number more added of the ſame Kind: Then he, taking out of his Shell holy Water, and chriſtening them, returned back again to the Swamp, and there lodging until the next Monday following, and then appearing again, with a Number added thereunto, and the chief of them full grown Wolves, and ſome young Pups, to the great Admiration of the Spectators. After beholding theſe frightful Animals awhile, they run off towards the Swamp, and yell'd, to the great Aſtoniſhment of the Spectators.

[The Printer was paid for inſerting this Piece.]

Might this be an exception to my no-AI images rule? An article from the *Newport Mercury* in Rhode Island, and an image created from it by ChatGPT. In general, AI-generated images are a bad idea, but might this, a fantasy based on a fantasy, draw attention in an exhibit in a way the newspaper article would not?

Core Principles for Museum AI Use

Text produced using AI

- **Maintain Human Authority:** Position AI strictly as an "assistant, reader, or advisor" rather than a "driver" of the work. Staff must "know more than the AI" to effectively evaluate its energetic but often over-eager suggestions.
- **Commit to Transparency:** All AI-generated content must be clearly labeled as such. Every output should be read and edited by a human expert before being shared with the public.
- **Protect Authenticity:** Do not use AI to create "historical" images, as they are frequently inaccurate and violate the fundamental promise of authenticity that museums make to their visitors.
- **Prioritize Community Respect:** Use AI only in ways that are respectful to the individuals and communities represented in your collections. Avoid using AI for work involving peoples who have been historically misrepresented by museums.
- **Ensure Source Control:** To prevent the AI from "wandering the web" and repeating misinformation, instruct it to prioritize specific libraries of verified primary and secondary sources you provide.
- **Acknowledge Built-in Bias:** Recognize that all AI is based on biased datasets and may perpetuate those biases. Users must actively identify "biases, silences, and concerns" within their own data before processing it through AI.
- **Practice "AI Refusal" Where Necessary:** Move with "caution and discipline," recognizing that some areas—especially those requiring "embodied experience and contextual nuance"—may be better served by human expertise alone.

I asked an AI to read this article and create a set of ethics guidelines for museums. What do you think? Is this a useful first step toward a discussion?

No AI Zones

There are a few areas where I think that AI should not be used. An AI will happily create "historical" images for you. In my experience, they are never accurate. But just as important, they break the essential promise of authenticity in museum work. Yes, sometimes we use an artist's rendering in museums and history books, but those renderings, the work of endless back-and-forth between content experts and artists, can be more accurate. And they don't pretend to be real. Don't make fakes: if you use new images, make it clear that they're clearly interpretive, not new images pretending to be old.

Don't use AI for work that requires particular sensitivity to ethical understandings, or for peoples who have long been misrepresented by museums. RISD professor Angelo Baca (Diné/Hopi) notes that Native representations of AI all too often offer a "reinscription of old stereotypes" and cultural appropriation at the same time.

Perhaps most importantly, don't allow the shiny surfaces of AI to replace the experiential essence of museums. In a recent AAM blog, Sarah Anne Carter of the University of Wisconsin argued that museums are a natural place to do AI-resistant work. (More precisely, that's what a chatbot told her.) AI cannot do work that requires "embodied experience and contextual nuance"—not a bad description of what we do in museums. She urges "thoughtful, object-based lessons" to teach students to "think critically, ethically, and expansively."

Should LCHS consider using the LC HistoryBot on its website, a happy robot with an "Ask me about Little Compton!" balloon? The history it provides would be much better than what a student would find on the web, but it wouldn't be as good as the work of LCHS staff. Historians have knowledge of facts, interpretation, audience, and context that's hard to teach a bot. And having the bot on our website would suggest that we think its answers are good enough to represent the society. It's a tough call. I find it useful for my historical work; maybe its proper use is as a staff tool. How about the vibecoded search engine, historic site map, and audio interactive? I think those are almost ready for public use.

Inaccuracies and biases are always present in historical work, AI or otherwise, but we do our best to overcome them. Use an AI—it can do remarkable things—but remember that you still need to be able to ask the right questions and critically evaluate the answers you get. An AI answer will look good—it will be shiny and bright, competently written, self-assured—but it may also be wrong. Think of an AI as an assistant who is endlessly energetic and enthusiastic, but who is not an expert in your field and is far too eager to please. Or as an endlessly patient partner who can work with you to create new tools for you and the public, but who needs your constant guidance and feedback.

AI Best Practices

Create and use an AI ethics statement for your institution. What are the particular biases, silences, and concerns that you face in dealing with your data, from collections to primary sources?

Know more than the AI. You need to be able to evaluate its work.

Use AI as one step in a larger process. Don't begin and end with asking a chatbot for advice.

Provide the AI with useful sources. Don't let it give historical answers based on what's easily available to it on the web.

Get beyond the chatbot. Build the tools your institution needs.

Decide whether to allow AIs to use the materials you upload for training.

Read and edit the results before using them in research or sharing them with the public.

Use AI as an assistant, or reader, or advisor; a helper, not a driver; a way to steer visitors back to the artifacts, stories, and places that make museums special. Authenticity, authority, and accuracy are essential elements in history museum work. Even when working with an AI—maybe especially when working with an AI—you still need expertise and a feel for artifacts and audiences. You need to be able to ask the right questions and answer them with that unique combination of artifacts in a social space that only museums can offer. AI can't do your work, but it can help you do it better.

Steven Lubar is professor emeritus in the departments of history and American studies at Brown University and the George L. Littlefield Professor of American History emeritus. He teaches and writes about museums and the history of museums, public humanities and digital humanities, the history and philosophy of technology, and local history. Contact Steven at lubar@brown.edu.

RESOURCES

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- Dikow, Rebecca et al., "Developing responsible AI practices at the Smithsonian Institution," *Research Ideas and Outcomes* (2023): https://riojournal.com/article/113334/instance/10484030.
- Hughes-Warrington, Marnie. "Ethics for Artificial Historians," *History and Theory* 64, no. 2 (2025): 159–177.
- McKone, Lubov. "Bias in AI: How to Spot It, Why It Matters, and What You Can Do," Johns Hopkins University. September 29, 2025. https://www.library.jhu.edu/news/2025/09/bias-in-ai-how-to-spot-it-why-it-matters-and-what-you-can-do.
- Meadows, R. Darrell, and Joshua Sternfeld. "Artificial Intelligence and the Practice of History: A Forum," *The American Historical Review* 128, no. 3 (2023): 1345–1349.

AI TOOLS

- Archive Studio and Endeavour (transcription tools created by Mark Humphries; see his blog for more details), generativehistory.substack.com
- ChatGPT (OpenAI's AI; good for general answers; gives links to its sources), chatgpt.com
- Claude (Anthropic's AI; Claude is the best tool for vibe coding), claude.ai
- Gemini (Google's AI; Gemini 3 does an excellent job with handwriting transcription), gemini.google.com
- Genealogy Eyes (online tool for dating images), chatgpt.com/g/g-gmlAn5mh6-genealogy-eyes
- Leo (transcription tool), tryleo.ai