Episode 26: Nick Foreman

# KL: Katie LinderNF: Nick ForemanKL: You’re listening to *Research in Action*: episode twenty-six.

# [intro music]

# Segment 1:

# KL: Welcome to *Research in Action*, a weekly podcast where you can hear about topics and issues related to research in higher education from experts across a range of disciplines. I’m your host, Dr. Katie Linder, director of research at Oregon State University Ecampus.

On this episode, I’m joined by Nick Foreman, a PhD candidate in American and Latin American history at the University of Florida. Nick also teaches food history in the department of History, Philosophy, and Religion at Oregon State. His dissertation, entitled "The Calorie of Progress" explores the cultural and material significance of food supply in Louisiana during the late colonial and early American periods. His work has been published in *Smithsonian Magazine*.

Thanks so much for joining me, Nick.

**NF**: Sure no problem

**KL:** So Nick I’ve invited you to come in and chat with me on the podcast in part because your work involves working in archives and this is something that I’ve never done. I know very little about and I would imagine that some of our listeners here on the podcast are in the same boat. So why don’t we start out by just talking a little bit about what are some of the research questions that your trying to answer through some of the work that you’re doing. Then we’ll talk a little bit about your work with archives.

**NF:** Ok sure well the research questions that I’m working on currently as I make my way on writing my dissertation, have come hopefully a long way in the right direction from when they started out. I didn’t really when I got into PhD course work you know they tell use ok well use your first you to decide what you want to write about. Then by the time take your qualifying exams you’re ready to do your prospectus and just keep moving forward. I on the other hand had sort of started working in this area. I always studied in Louisiana but was working on free black women as property holders. But then when I started PhD course work and got interested in this idea of how were they gaining accesses to these properties that they’re buying and holding onto and passing down to different generations and one of the answers I keep coming across was food. So I guess to answer your question the initial research question I had was where was this petty accumulation coming from and then it got me into studying market women. I realized you know that the market is obviously a diverse place with all types of exchanges going on. So then I realized that I was going to have to expand my scope to involve a much broader cast of characters. So then from there my research questions have focus on those individual groups. You know how are African men and women dealing with the sort of structures under which they live and trying to find a way to make a living as provisioners in there. Versus Native Americans experience being completely different many of them you know not living in the city and using the city as a destination for exchange. And then of course at the macro level these large scale wheat factors people who are part of the larger macro economy. Each of which you’re going to have to ask different questions and look in different places to find out what their motivations and what sort of conditions under which they operate. But so really once you break it down in to these subcategories of like who am I talking about. Then it becomes an issue of what do I want to show with this. So major questions that I have pulled out of that are sort of logistics the how’s, and who’s, and whys provisioning. So where food coming from? Who’s involved in it? And how do their various role in this larger food supply system which involves local people, and people from far away? People with the you know by the traditional interpretation of things almost no power and people who are traditional seen with all the power. All of them being drawn in to sort of commerce in that way. How does that help us understand the ways in which things like culture and economy are constructed? So then it becomes an issue of like no just where do all these thing come from and whose selling and buying them or growing them depending on what product your talking about but also what does that mean. What can we gleam from that? And in the past most sort of economic histories of lower Mississippi valley which is the region that I study, have been kind of focused on ok how long does it for this arm of trade to innervate and get to New Orleans or how long does it take for cotton to develop for instance or how much wheat is coming down the river by such and such a year. All those things are clearly important you know you get the quantitative data. But what I became more interested in is not so much how and when like how much but what can we know about the institution that made that possible and why does it take so long for things to get to New Orleans from the riverine route and the answer to which is Indians. Or what does it mean that this place who is supposed to be seen as the jewel of the old south took so long to develop. Is it a failure on these other peoples parts because they weren’t thoroughly modern or is it actually something to do with cultural preservation and doing things a certain way that not necessarily worse but just different? So I guess that’s a long winded way of saying I wasn’t so much interested in the mechanics of it as I was in the ramifications of it in a cultural and a societal sense. Obviously the way it effects the economy is important but again I was more interested in the micro economy than the macro economy when it came to those things.

**KL:** It sounds appropriately complicated for a dissertation topic. So one of things that these research questions that lead you to archival work. And I think that some of what you described has pointed us to why you would of looked to the archives for that. But let me just asked you know what kind of archival work is involved in this kind of research? What are some of the kind of things that you’re looking for when you go to archives?

**NF:** Well I’m so focused on this idea of shared authorship and the construction of culture and the economy. I’m having to look at a lot of different things and deal with different subgroups. Obviously enslaved Africans and Native Americans didn’t write a ton down and when they do appear in discursive stuff its maybe just kind of glancing what was actually going on offhand referencing to them here or there. So I’m answering question by using archival documents from institutional records like city council ordinances, or court cases, or regulations of the market, tax receipts, things like that. But also travel accounts of people who traveled through the region during the time. The actual material evidence of these people who didn’t write anything down but were still involved in food trade or preparations for instance cooking vessels that were particularly earthenware maybe constructed within the region by different Native American groups. Those stick around within the kitchens of New Orleans for a long time. So they become these kind of artifacts in their own way. But also archaeological stuff like examining the contents of trash mittens where people threw out food out scraps or cook sites where people used to have a kitchen or whatever. I don’t do that type of analysis but luckily I know some archaeologist who do and their pretty willing to help me understand what they found and how that might be useful for me.

**KL:** Oh how interesting.

**NF:** So you can use the data because a lot of what they do especially when they are doing something for a project that’s you know there just trying to get the idea what’s there so the city or whoever can go ahead with this building renovation or before they can build whatever they have to make sure there aren’t anything of historical significance or whatever. So lots of times that’s end of the road for archaeological numbers but I found a way to use that to help boaster kind of silences and discursive record of what’s actually going on. So in a way I mean it’s absolutely necessary for me to look at really anything that I can find that will point to who’s eating what, who’s growing what, how are they getting it you know. All of these sort of aspects of provisioning as an entire system which is kind of the whole goal you know of my dissertation anyways. Is to sort of examine this scope of this system as a whole and its influence on culture as well as material life. It’s not just about nutrition it’s about people so you have to look at really everything that you can find.

**KL:** Well kind of a tall order. We are going to take a brief break when we come back were going to hear a little bit more about the logistics of archival work based on Nick’s research.

# Segment 2:

**KL:** Nick as I mentioned I have no experience working in archives, it’s not part of my research background. And so when I think about people working in archives I think about things that are crumbly, and I think about glove wearing,

**NF:** Old pieces of paper

**KL:** Yeah and I think about the movie possession which is about finding things in archives that nobody knew and the original novel of course by A. S. Byatt which is also wonderful. These are the things that I think of. This is my experience, so I am interested in hearing from you what are some the logistics that are involved in archival research? What are some of the things that I have mention that are true of it and things that are just mythologies that have been built up by Hollywood or otherwise?

**NF:** I think that it really depends on where you are working. There are places that are like what you just described sort of white glove very kind of stanched, someone watching what you do sterile setting. And somethings that can be overwhelming and uncomfortable. Sometimes that can be actually kind of thrilling depending on what you’re looking for. So for instance I was just in Chicago at a place called the Newberry library and it’s like privately run collection of all different type of things including art and you know the best collection of Native American Documents dealing with the interior of the United States. But it’s in this huge granite building takes up this whole block in the riches part of Chicago. You have to get a reading card ahead of time. It’s very fancy, everything is very regimented and the way you interact with things is impersonal in that you’re not supposed to be like grubbing all over everything but at the same time you and this document or whatever is like on your list. You just like look through each one of them all the time. So to answer the question in a very long winded way. It depends on where your looking to contrast with the Newberry at the beginning of my trip was at the New Orleans public library. Which has again a great holding of things, they got all the municipal council records going back to the colonial period. They have one of the best collection of documents related to Louisiana and lower Mississippi of any place public or private. But since the public library access is completely different and the way you engage with the documents themselves is different. So in those instances instead of having someone you bring out one thing at a time and set it in front of you and explain to you the rules with on how you can and can’t handle it or what you can and can’t take pictures of since now a days the best way to get through your list of sources in a timely manner is to scan everything with your cellphone. You just kind of like are on your own up there and there are people there to help you, librarians but they have a lot of other stuff to do as well. So really you give them your list of things and they’ll tell you where it is and you’re on your own on the microfilm readier or whatever. So the actually act of once you get there depends on a lot on where you’re going. But however one thing that I think when you initially told me to start thinking about the logistics of doing research. The first thing that came to my mind was funding. Funding is the first step, you can’t do anything without it. So especially in the humanities it’s really hard to get funding that’s really where thing begin for me. It’s like ok I know of these documents in this place. How can I get funding to go there to do that? And so for this trip that I just did, I knew there was somethings left that I still haven’t gotten on previous trips and I knew I also need to go up to Chicago at least one time and get the documents related to Native Americans. So I applied for a grant and I wrote and rewrote my proposals. Part of the logistics is learning how to describe your project in a way that it will be interesting to other people but also convince them that you need this money to do it and the work needs to be done. And then after you get that you have a whole list of task ahead of you before you get to the archives like securing your travel, setting up where you’re going to live, you know how much money do you have. You have to create an entire budget before you apply most of these fellowships or grants. So you have to already thought about every single day on your trip when you’re going to be in the archive, where you’re going to stay, how you’re going to get there, how much all this stuff is going to cost right. The logistics go far beyond just the actually act of being in the room itself and that’s really like the point that which finally your free from all the planning that went into it. Cause now your there so if you hadn’t done a good enough job planning I guess could be still be scrambling to get all that stuff together. But that’s why I always view it as a lengthy process so that by the time I get there I know exactly what I am looking at, I know exactly when I am looking at it, I know exactly how long it’s going to take, how big that collection is, etcetera. It just makes everything go much faster. So there are a lot of considerations involved in the logistical side of things for sure.

**KL:** Absolutely, well it sounds like that this is one of those scenarios as is true for many things with research. That the more planning you do up front the easier it is down the line in terms of both of the travel logistics that you mentioned and also just using your time efficiently once you’re in the archive and knowing what it is you need an why.

**NF:** Yeah in a lot of ways this kind of comes back to the money and you got X amount of dollars out of someone lucky for humanities which seems harder and harder to do. And now how are you going to use that to your best of your abilities. So for me that’s why I squeezed that Chicago trip in and I found someone to stay with for free. So I could make that happen right. So yeah it really depends on how prepared you are, how much time all this takes and how enjoyable it can be in certain respects. In many ways it’s going to be you know hard work no matter what because you’re sitting in a room from the time they open until they leave but if you done all your work beforehand it’s much less painful to try to have to find all this stuff in there. The worst thing is to look at something, spending a lot of time looking at something that you can’t even use. So yeah front loading all your preparation for sure is the way to do it. That’s why, like I said early the whole research trip, the whole idea of going to this or that archive begins with identifying a source that they got in the first place. So once you realize something is there then it becomes this task of how do I get there, how do I afford it, and how do I get everything that it’s got to offer in this time frame or budget.

**KL:** Absolutely, one of the things that what you’re saying that leads me to think about is the more planning that you do, knowing what’s in the archive, finding that thing, and tying it directly to maybe a research question that you have, or a specific thing you need to find out on particular kind of data. To what degree does that kind of preplanning and the work that you do in the archive help on the other end when you’re actually analyzing data? What kind of note taking or connections or planning are you trying to do when you actually have those things and you can then fit it into the overall research project?

**NF:** That’s a really good question because when I first started doing this for my MA out in Texas I just went to identified the things that I wanted to look at and I took scans if I needed to and I went back and I was like ok I’m done. When I started writing I realized that I hadn’t always written down all the information where this came from and also I hadn’t done a good enough job of not just saving a file and giving it some kind of title that would tell me like what collection I got or what folder number which is obviously really important information to write down. But also why did I pick this out because you had this on your list for the John Minor Wisdom collection it doesn’t tell you why you cared about it. The John Minor Wisdom collection could have a million different things to deal with all types of topics that you aren’t interested in. You know this is how you find sources in the first place by going on to an archives catalog and looking through a finding aids and they will usually tell you like such and such manuscript collection has such and such date range it goes from 1720 to 1890 or something or whatever it holds X amount of folders. It’ll have maybe some short description of what is handled in there but it is not going to be down to be all these details that help you know like this is the exact document I need the one right after it I don’t need. So writing short summaries is something that I have always since then try to remember to do with everything that I write.

**KL:** We’re going to take another brief break and when we come back we’ll hear a little bit more about some the real world applications of this kind of historical research. Back in a moment.

# Segment 3:

**KL:** So Nick people who are not historians who do not study history may think they are very few you know or very little connection between the historical kinds of research you’re talking about and the contemporary society that we are living in now. But I know something that you are really interested in is the real world applications of the historical research that you are doing. So can you tell us a little bit about that?

**NF:** Yeah well part of that I think convincing people that not just history but that humanities in general are a worthwhile pursuit in something that should be funded in addition to things like STEM. Is that you need to realize that this is actually important in your daily lives still not just as a novelty or something you can say you know about in the past as a factoid at the trivia at your local bar right. It’s really much more deeply embedded in who we are and so I think that part of the task taken on as a history educator since I started doing this and TAing classes a really long time ago to teaching my own and designing courses now. Is that you have to make people care. So how you going to make people care about History when most of them think its names and dates and this is some obscure person from some obscure place from like who cares right. So one of the ways that I do that since food is part of everyone’s lives it’s something you have to do every day. You make decisions about what you going to eat or how you feel things you eat or don’t eat in both conscious or subconscious ways right. Clearly maybe with food more than other sub-fields of history your able to hold people to that notation that this isn’t something that ended in 1812 or whatever. This is something that continues to affect us every day and so that is kind of the task to get them to help them understand this lineage and how we are constantly engaging with the context of the past. So the ways you can do that with the food are to ask them, them being students or your audience in general to engage in a thoughtful way with the ways in which they’re making food decisions or casting judgements on eaters or ingredients in their own lives. And so once you start to introduce this idea in like what’s a good thing to eat, what’s a bad thing to eat. Everyone has a list of foods on both sides but they might not of thought about why. A lot of times the answer to that question seems to be as simple as well I grew up eating it that way. If you’re truly interested in that’s where the history comes in. Why did you grow up that way? And what sort of imperatives shaped that context in which you grew up and the value system that you took those beliefs from. You know people care about food right. People love to talk about food, they love to eat food, and they take pictures of it with their phone all the time, everyone has a favorite restaurant. So it’s easy to get them talking about it and that way you can slip in there by the way this has an academic component to it too and guess what now you’re a scholar. You can use their preexisting interest or maybe put it in a certain way their kind of selfish interest and how does this matter to my life to get them to start thinking about these bigger questions that do have bearing about the present and the future but are clearly rooted in the past as well. And not in a way that likes just a novelty. It’s actually in a way that is applicable to the way that we continue to construct ethics and we continue to think of ourselves as a community or we continue to think of ourselves as either producers or consumers on the planet. So it does kind of have its tentacles in all these different areas. The task just then becomes how we make them engage with all that stuff.

**KL:** So as you’re working in your own research and you’re working with students one of the things that seems to be coming out of some of the things your saying is like a social justice theme. Particular kind of thinking about contemporary connections what you’re doing in the past. Can you talk a little bit more about that where do you see kind of that relationship with social justice with the work you’re doing.

**NF:** Sure, well part of what I do anyways in history in general even when I’m not teaching food history is to try get the student or the audience to think of things from a difference perspective. Normally we read in textbooks growing up or whatever this sort of top-down institutional history. As I mentioned earlier on what I’m interested in is kind of the bottom-up view and how everyone maybe people who don’t get a ton of attention or engaged in things and that extends into the present as well. So if you think about what you eat and what is available to you and why you eat those things the factors that determine the answer to each one of those questions are socially derived and are a product of your experience. So say you’re a middle class person like me and you grew up eating you know whatever Cheetos and junk food but you also had your parents making you eat vegetables every meal too. That’s pretty Midwestern typical experience but at the same time you trained to think of food a certain way. Like I don’t like these things but I’m never actually really hungry so I can afford to not like them. Whereas once you get into topics that deal with things like food and equality. Especially in the present context and people hopefully coming to the University are going to find people different themselves who didn’t grow up in the exact same way and have different perspectives on these things. Then they will start to realize that not everyone does have that food security or not everyone’s decisions are formed by the same imparities. So for instances where do you eat healthy if you live in certain urban environments if they don’t have a real grocery store or don’t have fresh produce available and how do you go about counteracting some of those problems once identified them in society. So I think that it get to back to this notation of engagement but also helping people understand themselves as not just understanding food as part of this larger system but understanding themselves as that system as well. Not as what you do and don’t buy but how you interact with other people and how you judge other people’s food choices or how you connect other social problems to what they do and don’t eat.

**KL:** Well your Nick your research raises huge and impactful questions. I fascinated to hear about your work. Thank you so much for taking the time to come on the show.

**NF:** Sure, thanks for having me.

**KL:** And thanks also to our listeners for joining us for this week’s episode of Research in Action. I’m Katie Linder and we’ll be back next week with a new episode.

# Bonus Clip #1

**KL:** In this bonus for episode 26 of the Research in Action Podcast Nick Foreman discusses organizing archival data. Take a listen.

**NF:** So sometimes my file name will be super long but at least I know like where is this going, why did I took this out and what should I be look for in here. Maybe it’s an 18 page letter and two pages of it have this section that I am focused on, so stuff like that but once you got them all home increasingly now since I scan so much stuff with this app called CamScanner which is free, it works great.

**KL:** We will link to that in the show notes for people.

**NF:** You can upload all that stuff via google drive while you’re there. So you don’t have to plug it into your computer, you don’t have to worry about getting your thumb drive home or anything you just automatically upload it. So when you get home it’s waiting for you which is great but also extends the task of sifting through things. Cause when you get home it’s like where did I get this from and where is this going? So what I chose to do for my dissertation, I broke everything up to different chapters. I have chapters and so I have a chapter on meat and fish, I have a chapter on wheat, I have a chapter on Native Americans, I have a chapter on African Vic Jewelers who are like market women. And so what I do is I go through all the documents that I got and I put them first into a folder based on which library or collection I got them out of and then I make duplicates of them all and move them to each chapter folder. So I know where I got them if something goes wrong and I am like where did this thing come from. Also I know where it’s being used because it’s in the folder for that chapter. So for right now I am finishing my chapter for wheat supply. I go into the wheat folder and there are a bunch of different documents there all of which that pertain to something I am going to talk about in that chapter and ideally there broken up into some sort of flow. So it like these are the earlier stages of what’s going on, and this is when I get talking about morality, and this when I start talking about regulation etcetera.

**KL:** I am always interested to hear about people’s data storage practices. I think that you know says something about me as a researcher and the kinds of things that I am interested in. Thank you for sharing that I think that is really fascinating and it’s always very interesting to hear kind of how people are organizing the different kinds of data that they are collecting.

**NF:** Yeah when I got into doing this it was all very kind of organic and I just did what interested me. So I thought this is cool and I want know more about this. I’ll be reading a book and see something and it would catch my attention, so I would go do research on that. But when I had to start picking larger projects, I realized it was going to have to be a lot more like you said concerted management of data that was going to have to go on there and it really just like with planning your trip from the beginning doing a good job tracing your steps as you go along really saves you time and money and a headache down the end. Because there is nothing worse than getting to a point where you finally after months of research your finally ready to write this section and your like you have a document and accidently didn’t get the page number in your scan or something and your like oh my god.

**KL:** And it’s not something you can just look up on Google

**NF:** Yeah and you’re not going back to Chicago anytime soon or at least I’m not right. So yeah you can avoid disasters like that as well by just being through and it doesn’t actually take that much time to write it down and sometimes you get going your looking through a lot of stuff and it’s like I don’t need to do that but you do. You do you need to write it down.

**KL:** You just heard a bonus clip from episode 26 of the Research in Action Podcast with Nick Foreman discussing organizing archival data. Thanks for listening.

# Bonus Clip #2

**KL:** In this bonus for episode 26 of the Research in Action Podcast Nick Foreman shares about how he learned about the logistics of archival research. Take a listen.

**KL:** Nick like many different components of research and data management and methods and design. I suspect that archival research maybe one of those things that you don’t get formally trained in, is something that you learn as you go. But I would love to hear a little bit more about your background and training with these. How did you pick up these skills and are there resources that you would recommend for people who are interested in archival research?

**NF:** Well you are definitely right about the learning as you go because a lot of the earliest experience I got working in libraries general archives in specific were things that I had figured out on my own out of necessity right. You’re writing a research paper, where are you going to find all this stuff. And I had been in some history courses at the University of North Texas where I go my undergraduate Degree where they did take you to the library and show you where you can find things or it’s like its library day where we are all researching our paper so we’ll all go and some people will have the guts to venture into microfilms but most will just stick with reference or whatever. So you have small class fore’s like that which can be really usefully especially if someone is intimated by the setting or doesn’t know where to begin. But what is really comes down to how to behave in the different spaces that you’re going to be too, how to handle documents, and even just things like where can even find it or how to use the microfilm machine for instance. That’s all stuff that typically you either the guy sitting next to you or the woman sitting next to you that already knows how to do it you can ask them for help or the librarian if they have time will come over a show you how to do. Sometimes you gotta to be obviously ignorant in those settings and let people.

**KL:** It seems like formal dining experiences when you look to your left to see what kind of fork do you use because I’m not sure. It can be pretty formal in these settings and you may not know how to engage.

**NF:** Right and even in places like, there are some places that really take themselves seriously which I’ll get to here in a second but even in places that aren’t no necessarily super formal you still need have to know how to request something and how to load the microfilm machine. Which depending on what era of microfilm machine your using its different. So there are, even though I know how to use multiple type of microfilm machines who to say next time I go to a place they won’t have a different one and I won’t know how to use it right, so. You can’t always just expect that you’re going to know exactly what to do and that is the beauty of the librarian is that is their job is to help you with that stuff. So even though you might feel a little silly or out of place asking. I think most of the time those people not only that’s what they are there for but lots of them like it that they can do their job and feel useful and help someone out. So, definitely it’s a process that you learn as you go but at the same time there are always people if you ask, most of the time that’s the thing about being in the archives too very seldom you are come across someone who is not nice or helpful or whatever. I’ve been in places before where I didn’t know exactly what I was doing someone next me sort of leaned over and helped out. For instance I was in a place called The Historic New Orleans Collection which is another private archive and it’s a very nice place. They sort of expect you to know what you’re doing there and this was the first time I had went there as a MA student. I had one of the finding aids out and I was just writing it down and copying all the things that might be useful and then someone came over and they were like you can find that here online. It’s not available outside the archives but while you’re here you can look in their catalog and so just things like that can really save you some time. It might make you feel a little dumb but you will eventually figure it out and so that’s another thing too. The whole process of going through all the stages of writing a paper, not just to developing you questions, but then finding your sources, and going to retrieving those sources. They all have points at which you’re going to have to ask someone for help or where you’re not really going to be clear about which direction you’re heading in next and that’s part of the fun of it sometimes. Not always fun but you have to sort of take that in aspect of the project.

**KL:** Its part of the adventure.

**NF:** Yeah definitely.

**KL:** Absolutely, as you are teaching students now. Are you including some of these skills in terms of working in archives in the courses that you teach?

**NF:** Yeah definitely so when I get to teaching, I’m going to teach a class called Food and Culture in the Americas alongside another history professor Karey Mays in the fall. And we are going to take our class to into the archives of the extension office and have them look at the ways food processes, and food consumption, and food production can actually be pointed to as evidence, where is this documented right. So we’ll take them into these archives where they can look at photos and records and ledgers or whatever but we will also try to a bit of venturing out into the real world itself too because you know a resource bank isn’t a stuff archive. In many ways you learn about the questions you want to answer in your work by viewing contemporary issues and getting into the way things are now. If you really understand the way food work in the past then you have to be able to apply those ideas to the present. So it’s not just the archive of the private collection or the University but the archive that we all kind of live in and is updated every single moment that is just as valuable.

**KL:** That’s fascinating. Thank you so much for sharing some about your training and also about how you are helping to train student for in the future.

**KL:** You just heard a bonus clip from episode 26 of the Research in Action Podcast with Nick Foreman sharing about how he learned about the logistics of archival research. Thanks for listening.

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