Tracking the provenance (origin) of material of this type can be difficult. A currently marketed database may have been purchased from a firm no longer in existence, which may have bought its information from a book compiler, who may have assembled materials randomly published elsewhere. Such a database could be of radically different quality from one issued by, say, a learned society using skilled copyists to extract every document in a record set or an image collection created by a company that contracts with an archive to reproduce an entire record series.

If our attempts to track the origin of the material are unsuccessful, we should say so and explain the efforts we made. This will help us and others avoid unnecessary repetition of the same. When we carefully report our steps, we or a user of our work may be able later to plug some of the gaps in our research process or our findings.

2.12 Citing Indexes & Finding Aids

In the framework of history research, an index is usually a tool, rather than a record. Typically, indexes are used in three ways, each of which involves different considerations for citations and analyses.

INITIAL STEP IN THE RESEARCH PROCESS

When an index points us to a source and we proceed to consult that source, we rarely need to cite the index. An exception would be a case in which an index provides some sort of special insight.

TEMPORARY STEP IN AN ONGOING RESEARCH PROCESS

In the course of our research, we may access a microfilmed index or an electronic database to a record set, while the records themselves are not immediately available. In such cases, we take our notes from that index and we cite that index as the source of those notes. As a rule, this is a policy for our working files only. Our pursuit of reliable evidence dictates that we proceed to use the actual records rather than make judgments on the basis of index details that the compiler has presented out of context. Once we examine the actual record set, we report our findings from that search and cite the actual records.

STATISTICS OR BACKGROUND PERSPECTIVES

On occasion, to add perspective to our conclusions, we may compile statistics from an index or analyze it for patterns. In other cases, clerks who created index entries at the same time they recorded legal and sacramental acts may have amplified the index with details about the parties that do not appear in the main documents. In such cases, the index itself is a source to be cited on its own merits.