This summer, I spent four weeks in Syracuse, New York, working in the Syracuse University Archives. The goal for my time researching in the archives was to read and interpret primary documents for my senior history thesis. I worked in conjunction with Professor Register to design and implement this project. Through my time researching, I learned many research skills necessary for a historian and I gained a sense of confidence and self-sustainability. The importance of this project cannot be understated: primary documents are the crux of a historian’s work, thus collecting primary documents in a professional setting as an undergraduate is a highly-advanced endeavor.

Professor Register and I began this project in the spring semester. With his experience with historical archives and familiarity with my historical interests, he was able to suggest which collections at the Syracuse University Archives that I would be interested in. Once I chose my collection of interest, I spoke with both Professor Register and Professor Berebitsky about how to approach and consider the materials during my research. We agreed upon questions I would ask and themes I would look for in the letters. Again, their experience with advanced research allowed them to help me create a focused and purposeful plan for my time with the letters in my collection. The importance of this preparation stage became clear to me while I was in Syracuse conducting my research. When I was actually looking at the letters, I went back to my initial proposal and notes to keep myself on track and make sure I was completing my outlined goals. I am confident that without the secondary reading and organization that I
completed in the spring, my time in the archives would have been less efficient and less beneficial.

As planned, I worked with Professor Register’s material, the Thomas Mott Osborne collection, during my first week in the archives. Starting with Professor Register’s project allowed me see what the research process each day would be like. Importantly, I learned skills that one needs to possess in order to properly perform research in an archive, such as how to request a box, how to handle the papers, and other technical aspects of archival conduct. Our discussions of the Thomas Mott Osborne papers provided me with an example of how I should approach and question my papers. I ultimately adopted what I saw as Professor Register’s method of reading and taking pictures of each letter, then questioning the letters and trying to link them together in a narrative sense. Once I started looking at my own collection, the Gerrit Smith papers, I had an understanding of what my conduct and methods should be in the archives and felt excited and confident to begin looking at my own project.

Although my time assisting Professor Register with his project put me at an advantage, when I began my own work I quickly realized that independent historical research is unstructured work and can often feel isolating. When facing over one hundred boxes of letters, it is easy to get lost and feel as though you do not have a clear plan. Research of this kind demands great self-discipline and self-motivation. This was a challenge to me, as it would be any student. In order to accomplish my goals, I had to implement methods of organization. I wrote “to-do lists” and worked to establish a strategy each day, asking myself which letters I wanted to look at, what questions I would ask of the letters, and I made sure I wrote notes on details or themes of importance I saw in the letters. This self-designed systemization made it possible for me to make the most of my time with the materials. Discussions with Professor Register about what I read and thought about each day helped curb my feelings of isolation. In
addition, our discussions enhanced my research because his questions and observations on my work gave me new ideas about my material. Halfway through the project, I wrote a summary of my notes and observations and sent it to Professor Berebitsky and Professor Register. At this point in the project, I was feeling muddled and a bit overwhelmed with all the information I had gathered. Their responses to my work supplied me with encouragement, more questions to ask, new observations, and advice for further reading. This “check in,” so to speak, was enormously helpful in giving me direction for the rest of the project. Overall, I was able to make my individual research time valuable because I was organized and I discussed the material with Professor Register and Professor Berebitsky.

Other aspects that made this project successful were the archivists at Syracuse, funding, and secondary reading. The archivists were friendly and willing to help me, consistently making my experience a positive one. I was granted a generous amount of funding for this project as both Professor Register and I applied for grants for this project. This project has not been a hardship on my family because I was provided with adequate funding which covered my meals, housing, and transportation. Professor Register and Professor Berebitsky both suggested books for me to read while I was here. Reading books about the reformers of the era helped put the letters I saw into context and widen my understanding of the 19th century reform movement, particularly the difficulties women faced inside those movements. I discovered that secondary reading is an essential component to historical research.

Besides acquiring historical technical skills, researching forced me to develop professional and responsible skills that I will be able to use in any career. I had to design my own plan of research each day; I was responsible for documenting the letters and keeping up with my notes. In a job, self-sufficiency and a sense of responsibility are skills that one must possesses. I was also living alone in Syracuse and my ability to
explore the area and enjoy the city on my own was quite fulfilling. Beyond personal
growth, this time has provided me with academic advancement. With my primary
documents, I will now be able to contribute a significant viewpoint to the field of history.

Reading through my initial proposal, I feel as though this project has been what
Professor Register and I hoped it would. I have been able to get an advance start,
certainly ahead of my classmates, on preparing my senior thesis, and beyond that I have
been able to work with primary sources in an advanced setting. As the capstone for the
history major is now solely a thesis paper, I think that work such as this project must be
pursued. Preparation in the spring, assisting a professor in his or her own research in
order to learn the craft, and discussing the material throughout the individual research
process were crucial components that made this research model a success.
Realistically, this project might not be a possibility for all students and professors, but it
is a type of historical research model that should be emulated for many.