

Squirrel huntin', or, doing research for fiction writing



Croft & Allen Chocolate Works, 33rd and Market, Philadelphia. Undated, from collection published 1900

One recent morning, I spent a couple of hours doing research for my novel-in-process. The story is set in the 1910s and I am intent on getting the historical details right, though the work is not the kind of historical fiction that includes great historical figures or events. I just want the historical setting, the look, the feel, the details, the places, and so on to be as historically-accurate as possible.

To do that, I often have narrow and specific questions to answer. That recent morning, I was working to get right the immediate environs of the West Philadelphia Station of the Pennsylvania Rail Road in September of 1916. I had assembled maps and descriptions of the rail system, and had charted the route my character could have taken leaving the station and walking to the University of Pennsylvania a few blocks away.

But I wanted to know a little more, and was intent on understanding what kind of neighborhood he passed through, what it was like, what he saw, heard, and smelled as he walked through there. So my need for accuracy included details that would inform me, the writer, but that would barely be in the book at all. In particular, what did the neighborhood smell like? It was at least semi-industrial at the time.

This "squirrel hunt" involved research triggering other research and yet more research. And I was able to find out what small and large industries dotted the route he took. A notable one was the Croft and Allen Chocolate Works—he would have smelled chocolate, probably as soon as he got off his train.

Ultimately, what several hours' research yielded that is actually in my manuscript will pass in a rush for the reader, but it will be accurate. My reader will know that the smells of chocolate and manure, and paint, and coal gas mingled before Johnny's nose as he walked south on 34th Street. No more than a few words will be the yield of three hours' research. That is the reality as it has emerged for me in this work. I am entirely satisfied that that is what several hours of research led to. It's as it should be.