Originally, I wanted to do a project based on Indianapolis since I thought sources would be easy to come by. However, I was having trouble finding a specific topic of investigation. A friend of mine also in the class had run across the What Muncie Read Project and recommended it as a possibility. When I visited the site, I was fascinated by the data and the possibilities it held, so a project was born.

The What Muncie Read Project (WMRP) spans from 1891 to 1902, with some gaps in 1893 and 1894. Because of these gaps I decided to focus on a single year, and 1900 seemed to be appropriate as a good reference point at the turn of the century. When I read more about Muncie’s history, I also learned that 1900 was at the height of the city’s industrial development.

Not much work has been done yet using the data from the WMRP, so I had many possibilities open for research. This data is also unique because, based on my knowledge, there are not many full datasets of library circulation records available. Accordingly, I think that this type of statistical research on what people were actually reading has been limited. Inspired by a list on the web site of the most popular books, I decided to continue with this theme, but to limit myself to the year 1900.

Since there was no filter to tell me the most popular books of 1900 directly, I made a plan that is detailed on the Popular Books List page of my final web site. This process has some limitations, which I have tried to be open about. Discovering the minutes of the library online was also helpful to me and allowed me to be able to read the annual report for 1900, which listed genres of books and number of books accessioned.

I also wanted to find out more about the patrons. I decided to sketch out some of the basic demographics of library patrons using the search function on the WMRP web site. However, I think this also has some limitations because not every library user has a complete
profile. This could also make searching for who was reading the most popular books difficult because there would be some readers unaccounted for in categories like age.

The more I worked on this project, the more questions I came up with. I can easily see this project turning into a Master’s thesis, and tried not to get carried away, but as a historian it is difficult to not want to cover every bit of ground. I decided to draw my scope to focus primarily on the most popular books, and hope that that is enough work for the final project. After I found the data, I also looked up secondary literature and more about the books and the context of the library to analyze what I had found. However, I reasoned that I did not need to explain everything because it would venture into thesis territory. Yet there are some topics, like on the reading habits of women, that I wanted to address but could not find enough information about.

In the end, my project is a primarily a presentation of some of the “Big Data” based on my research done with the data on the WMRP web site. As I mention in the conclusion, I see many ways that future researchers can build off of my project and zoom into some more specific individual patron studies or library comparisons.