

The Location of Inventive Activity in U.S. History

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This project aims to explore three alternative views of the location of inventive activity using data for the U.S. in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. One hypothesis is that inventors come up with new technological ideas when they confront actual problems in production or face competitive pressure to reduce production costs, and so the location of inventive activity is largely determined by the location of production. Another is that inventors tend to co-locate in places like cities, where the environment is conducive to the exchange of technological information and where they are more likely to associate with people knowledgeable about developments on the technological frontier. The third is that inventors tend to concentrate in places where they are better able to secure financing for their creative work and better able to find buyers for their intellectual property.

The RA will be involved in the collection of a dataset on the careers of nineteenth century inventors that we will use, in combination with other datasets, to explore these issues. We have already collected the complete patenting histories of inventors in our sample. We are now supplementing those histories by collecting additional biographical detail (from census records, city directories, vital records, and a variety of other sources) so we can explore the inventors' migration patterns and how their locations affected their ability to patent and the ways in which they could exploit their intellectual property.

The RA will participate in this data collection. We are looking for someone with the imagination and persistence needed to ferret out biographical information about inventors whose contributions have for the most part been lost to history. At a minimum, the RA should have a facility with Excel. Once the data are collected and cleaned, if the RA also knows Stata, s/he will be able to participate more fully in the analysis.