

ARCHIVISTS AND GENEALOGISTS: THE TREND TOWARD PEACEFUL COEXISTENCE

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ABSTRACT: Throughout history, genealogy has often been maligned, misused, and misunderstood. However, over the past twenty years, practitioners of both genealogy and history have shifted their focus and have adopted similar methods of study. These changes have altered the traditionally negative view of archivists toward genealogists, with many in the profession not only accommodating genealogists but actually welcoming them to their institutions.

Introduction

The tracing of genealogies has an ancient and often controversial history. During the early years of Christianity, the apostle Paul denounced the prevalent use of "endless genealogies" to support the doctrines of false religions. Detailed genealogies protected the wealth of the early landowning classes in Europe and later created an aura of nobility around the emerging merchant class. Americans in the late 19th century used genealogies to distinguish themselves from the new wave of immigrants, many of whom were from eastern and southern Europe. In the 20th century, the Nazis required the creation of genealogies for the most insidious use of power through pedigree. These negative cultural memories and the narrow connotation of the term "genealogist" cause some of those involved in tracing their ancestry to wince at the label. It often invokes the image of a pretentious provincial absorbed in an entertaining, but historically valueless, pursuit. Fortunately, this stereotype appears to be eroding. Changes in focus and methodology within the studies of genealogy and history, as well as within the archival profession, have helped to blur the demarcation lines between these disciplines. Although the relationship between archivists and genealogists could still be described as tenuous, the past two decades have witnessed a significant trend toward understanding and cooperation.

The "Roots" of "Family History"

While the origin of "genealogy" is ancient, the use of the phrase "family history" is relatively recent, and many will debate to what degree the terms are linked. However, Alex Haley's *Roots*, the extraordinary history of an African-American family, is widely recognized in both popular and professional litera-

ture as the spark that ignited the passions of millions of Americans to discover their ancestral heritage. In the words of Meredith B. Colket, Fellow of the American Society of Genealogists and former Executive Director of the Western Reserve Historical Society, "*Roots*, more than any other single work, stimulated the man in the street to inquire about the genetic, cultural, and other forces that contributed to making him the person he is."¹

That curiosity was fueled by the interest in community history generated by the Bicentennial, which coincided with the publication of *Roots*. A hundred years before, the Centennial had sparked similar interests, but the focus of genealogical research in 1876 was very different. Descendants of 17th and 18th century settlers, facing the continuing influx of new immigrants, sought to secure their place in the structure of American society by constructing pedigrees that would link them to colonial patriarchs or Revolutionary patriots. As a result, many hereditary societies were created within the decade following the Centennial celebration. This focus on 17th and 18th century immigrants and their impact on colonial and early American history would dominate genealogical research and publication until the 1970s.

The complexion of American society had changed significantly by 1976, when Haley's search for "the African" captured the imagination of ordinary citizens, many of whom were descendants of the immigrants from whom genealogists in 1876 had sought to distance themselves. Patrick Quinn has noted four characteristics of postwar American life that may have contributed to the appeal of reclaiming ethnic heritage: the mobility of the American family, which had led to a separation from cultural and ancestral roots; the generational distance from immigrant attitudes against retaining "old country" traditions; the disintegration of the nuclear family, which had destroyed the traditional transmission of cultural heritage; and the dissatisfaction with "the cultural vacuity of American life—a consumerist, homogenized culture."² However, the growing fascination with reclaiming one's heritage was not a uniquely American phenomenon. Both Canada and Australia, nations also built by immigrants, experienced a similar trend.³ Even Great Britain, while lacking a comparable immigrant history, experienced a surge in interest in the history of the working class.⁴ The Federation of Family History Societies was established there in 1974 to coordinate and assist the efforts of local organizations conducting family and community research.

The social and cultural movements of the 1960s and early 1970s also helped to cultivate an environment in which individual identity and pride in ethnicity could be recognized. Edward Weldon made the following observation in a paper delivered to the Conference on Priorities for Historical Records in 1977:

Trends in scholarship usually reflect prevailing contemporary issues and intellectual trends, and in this instance, the liberation movements—national, social, sexual—have their counterparts in ethnic history, women's and gay studies, and a wide variety of local community research.⁵

In other words, the same cultural milieu that allowed *Roots* to have such an important impact on the general population also helped to revolutionize the way professional historians would study history. Weldon noted that although historians were the backbone of early archives programs, a schism had formed between archivists and historians with the rise in governmental records and pub-

lic archives management in the 1940s. This split had an impact on research methodology, with historians through much of the 1960s making minimal use of original sources.⁶

The new "social history" of the 1970s began to document "history from the bottom up" by studying social institutions through their impact on the lives of ordinary people.⁷ Much of the traditional focus on political and military history was redirected to the study of ethnic, gender, and family history. In order to document the lives of ordinary people from the perspective of the immigrant experience or to illustrate changes in communities and families, professional historians began to seek records they had previously neglected, and which archivists had therefore considered of minimal value.⁸ Social history would be built on the personal papers of "anonymous Americans," and on census records, city directories, tax and probate records, and similar primary sources providing information about individuals and families.⁹

This new interest in ethnic heritage and the family found its way into the history classrooms of colleges and universities. Education in the methodology of "family history," defined as "the professional study of trends in families,"¹⁰ was reinforced by assigning students the task of preparing family history projects, unique "family biographies."¹¹ These projects, generally confined to the 20th century, encouraged students to use primary sources, including personal family information, to document some aspect of their families. Historians supervising the preparation of these projects were quick to distinguish their methods from those of genealogists, and emphasized that "while genealogy is concerned with lineage, names and year of birth and death, family history attempts to understand the life of an entire family over several generations."¹²

While historians acknowledged that indexes, record transcriptions, and genealogies compiled by traditional genealogists had proved useful in "technical family history," they also asserted that "amateur family biography and community history," preferably conducted under the tutelage of a professional historian, would be a much better historical resource.¹³

This new focus in historical research required a new focus for archival appraisal. Collection development began to include acquiring not only the papers of society's elite, but also the documents that would illuminate the daily lives of ordinary individuals, particularly those who were part of the great immigrant waves of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.¹⁴ Nicholas Montalto noted in 1978 that archivists were beginning actively to seek the documents of American immigration and ethnicity in response to the "reawakening of ethnic consciousness and the growing interest of historians in the experience of those heretofore considered inarticulate."¹⁵ Historians encouraged archivists not only to collect the primary source material necessary for family history research but also to encourage students and avocationists to create family biographies and donate them to archives for use by professional scholars.¹⁶

This concept of professional "family history" versus amateur "genealogy," or even "family biography," as it was introduced within the community of professional historians, is a curious one from the perspective of many of those who began tracing their ancestry in the 1970s. Unaware of trends in academia, they have been conducting "family history" by definition, "reconstituting" families and tracing their movements through generations of social change. They have had to deal with the unique problems of locating and researching foreign

records, including international history and politics, language barriers, and patronymics. The rebellion against the analogy of the "melting pot" and a yearning for an ethnic identity sent a new breed of "genealogist" in search of the same primary sources that professional "family historians" were "discovering." In fact, some archivists recognized that even genealogists of the past had not always been as narrowly focused on published materials as most historians believed. Stressing the importance of census records in conducting professional "family history," Janice Reiff observed that "Dedicated genealogists have, for decades, known the value of these censuses in tracing individual families back through the generations.... Through the censuses, those people interested in particular families or individuals have been able to reconstruct the lives of their subjects."¹⁷

A Double Standard for "Genealogists" and "Scholars"

Despite the similarities in the interests, and often the methodologies, of professional and amateur family historians in the 1970s, their research was rarely considered equivalent by archivists and librarians. Since many early genealogists had relied heavily on published sources and had often focused on discovering connections to America's elite or even European royalty, much of the foundation for the stereotype of genealogists was laid in public libraries. Antagonism against genealogists was rampant, ranging from "frayed nerves" to contempt and outright discrimination.¹⁸ Yet even the harshest critics often recognized that the new interest in ancestry differed from its previous incarnation. In an otherwise scathing attack on amateur family and local history as little more than "hausfrau therapy" and "nostalgia," an English librarian acknowledged that it "is a genuine phenomenon, and has nothing of the snob-appeal inherent in traditional genealogy."¹⁹

Archivists often exhibited the professional historian's bias against genealogy as they came into contact with amateur family historians seeking primary sources in local and state historical societies and archives. Genealogists were criticized by both librarians and archivists "for their ineptness in historical research and...their uncritical interpretation of records."²⁰ The belief "that any untrained person can do genealogical research" was frequently at the root of discriminatory practices against genealogists.²¹ This narrow impression of the nature and scope of genealogical research has been subtly reinforced even by those attempting to improve the relationship between genealogists and archivists or librarians. An Ohio librarian, advocating understanding as well as "patience and diligence" in dealing with genealogists, unwittingly disparaged their research by commenting, "The preparation, research, and hours that go into filling in all the blanks on a 'begot' sheet is amazing."²² The perception of genealogy as a time-consuming ancestral crossword puzzle has been an integral part of the stereotype. This image is difficult to eradicate because the old terminology persists even where the old methodology does not. Unfortunately, "family history" in the avocational sense is not as widely used in the United States as it is in Britain; despite its narrow connotation, "genealogy" is still generally applied to amateur family history research regardless of its scope.

The negative attitudes toward genealogists noted in the professional literature have been exposed together with revised views based on acquired experience

with these researchers. The nature of the informal debates about genealogists in the early years of their visits to libraries and archives can only be imagined. An increase in thefts at these institutions during the late 1970s, some of which were blamed on overzealous, though probably ingenuous, genealogists, doubtless exacerbated their already tense relationship with librarians and archivists.²³ Phebe Jacobsen, in an article on the improving relationship between archivists and genealogists, acknowledged that "virtual battle lines have been drawn between genealogists and archivists, as each group has seen the other as the major obstacle to accomplishing mutually exclusive goals." She candidly admitted that "Denigrating genealogists has been a cherished avocation of archivists ever since we began scratching our way up the ladder toward professional status."²⁴

From Confrontation to Accommodation

The large numbers of genealogists who have descended on state archives and historical societies since the 1970s, both in person and by post, have forced many of these institutions to reevaluate not only their traditional view of avocational historians, but also their traditional view of reference service. Many archivists affirm that scholars have been, and often continue to be, the preferred users of archives; however, those who have dared to look closely at whom they serve in reference have discovered that reality does not conform to desire.²⁵ In a paper delivered in 1981 to the National Conference on Regional Archives Networks, Timothy Ericson acknowledged that planners of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin's Regional Archival Network anticipated scholars to be its primary users. Although use by genealogists and local historians was considered, the eventual reality of an "explosion in their numbers was entirely unforeseen."²⁶

The onslaught of genealogists has often seemed overwhelming; Jacobsen referred to it as "a siege by a determined and persistent legion."²⁷ However, she has described how the Maryland State Archives turned the substantial genealogical tide to its advantage by modernizing and improving all aspects of reference service in order to keep up with demand: research rooms were redesigned to accommodate more patrons; the process of answering postal inquiries was streamlined and standardized; and orientation and instruction, along with more efficient guides and indexes, helped make genealogists more independent in the research process. Jacobsen also advocated that genealogists, as an archives' "staunchest supporters," be afforded equitable treatment by archivists, and questioned whether it is "justifiable or prudent to expect genealogists, taxpayers and citizens all, who comprise 1/2 to more than 3/4 of our clientele, to stand patiently in line while we first serve fellow public servants and superfluous historians?"²⁸

In the late 1970s, the Illinois State Archives, determined "to change the composition of its user group and attract scholars as well as genealogists," set about creating a detailed guide to its holdings specifically for that purpose. The preparation and publication of the guide had many positive results. Since it was based on detailed series descriptions and provided subject indexes to link series, it improved the level of control over holdings and allowed archivists to deal more efficiently with reference requests. The publicity generated by the project

helped define the archives' purpose and provided momentum for other public service projects, such as indexing and outreach. One thing it did not do, however, was attract the clientele of professional historians for whom it was designed. In fact, Roy Turnbaugh, head of information services at the Illinois State Archives at the time, discovered that, particularly in tax-supported institutions, the idea that a minority of professional scholars should be especially revered archival patrons is "nonsense." Rather than cling to the myth of the "scholar" as its primary patron, the Illinois State Archives began to orient many of its programs toward its main users, genealogists. In response, genealogists became vocal advocates of the archives and their large numbers spurred the implementation of public services such as automated access and improved finding aids.²⁹

The focus on scholars as the main patrons of archives has made many archivists indifferent to the importance of keeping track of who comes to their institutions, what they are looking for, and how they use the records they find. Reference has often been limited to the "omniscience" of the archivist and his/her interpretation of traditional finding aids.³⁰ Outreach has been a low priority for those archivists who assume that the public does not—or need not—frequent the archives. However, a growing number of archivists have been exploring ways of providing more equitable, efficient reference service and more effective public outreach. As early as 1977, Elsie Freeman noted that most archives users were "genealogists, avocational historians, and general users," and advocated that more emphasis be placed on public outreach to expand the base of support for archives. She warned that "If a public institution does not build constituencies larger than those of the academic researcher, the institution is doomed."³¹ The idea of broadening the base of archives users has forced archivists to confront their espoused ethic of equal access to historical records. In 1978, Freeman credited "genealogy, no longer the property of social climbers but the tool of teachers and the delight of students and avocationists," with helping to stimulate in many Americans "a fascination with the past...undeniable in this nation of transients; and it is their right."³²

Some archivists have called for not only *equal* access, but also *improved* access; they have emphasized the need for conducting user studies to determine what type of guides and finding aids would be most beneficial to those who actually use archives, not those whom archivists would prefer to serve. In 1984, Freeman warned that neglecting to keep accurate records "gives credence to our prejudices, which, in turn, govern our practice."³³ However, as recently as 1988, Laurence Dowler observed that archivists may still not be ready to give up the belief that professional scholars are their primary patrons. He contended that many archivists resist conducting detailed user studies because the low scholarly use of archives "is discouraging news which they may be happy not to have confirmed in great detail."³⁴

User studies that have been conducted show that not only avocational researchers, but also professional social historians are often not adequately served by traditional finding aids and reference service. The emphasis on organizational history and hierarchy in archival description is often a barrier to user access, focusing more on records creators than records users. The professional literature has increasingly promoted the idea that archives become more "client-centered rather than materials-centered."³⁵ While archivists continue to debate the importance of provenance and original order in describing collections, many

see the value in the creation of more detailed guides and inventories, preferably with subject indexes, and in the implementation of automated retrieval systems.³⁶ In addition, as the Illinois State Archives discovered, the improved intellectual control afforded by better guides helps archivists respond more efficiently to reference questions. Some archivists also recognize the importance of improving communication skills to deal more effectively with a diverse user population. Some in the profession have even advocated studying the approach of librarians in enhancing reference skills.³⁷

Many archivists have also discovered that improved finding aids and more attentive reference service can only be effective in conjunction with programs designed to educate archives users. Jacobsen challenged archivists to "train genealogists in the art and mystery of archives," and "to change our attitude, welcome the genealogists, and face the problems they bring to our profession as our greatest challenge."³⁸ Many archivists have accepted this challenge and have built on the popularity of exploring cultural heritage and community history. Because this interest cuts across ethnic, gender, and age divisions, genealogy and local history have proved to be important educational tools for teaching a wide public the value of studying and preserving history.

In advancing the goal of making the archives a "community-centered institution meeting a new and expanded set of social needs,"³⁹ archivists are exploring innovative ways to educate a variety of user groups, from senior citizens to schoolchildren. Some archivists have discovered that avocationists are often receptive not only to information specifically related to their personal research, but also to education on archival principles and methodology.⁴⁰ Ann Pederson, in an article summarizing SAA's 1976 outreach survey, eloquently articulated the essence of an archival public service ethos, and commented prophetically on the significance of the nontraditional archival researcher: "...regardless of what varied views we archivists have of our new public and what sensibilities the new clientele may lack, there is one overriding quality they do possess: potential."⁴¹

The Genealogist as Archives Advocate and Asset

Genealogists have exhibited their "potential" in ways other than just those related to their large numbers, and they continue to gain acceptance as "scholars" in their own right. As early as 1979, in a paper given before the Texas State Genealogical Society, Meredith Colket recognized the scholarly expertise of many genealogists:

Academic circles years ago looked down upon the work of genealogy as mostly profitless. Today, they know that the genealogist in many cases knows far more about record sources than many historians. Genealogy appears to be an important tool to attract students to American history courses in general.⁴²

Although progressive, innovative archivists have provided educational programs for genealogists, self-education has played a significant role in the quality of research being conducted by many avocational local and family historians. The *Genealogical Periodical Annual Index*, an index to surname, locality, and topical categories found within all English-language genealogical periodicals,

illustrates this positive trend. In 1974 the *Index* included ninety-five periodicals with thirty-five hundred citations; by 1989 over eleven thousand citations from nearly three hundred periodicals were included. The index shows a steady increase in topics related to methodology, including efficient research techniques, proper documentation, computerized organization and linkage of data, document and artifact preservation, and the writing and publishing of family histories. Articles on local, national and international history have helped put genealogy within its historical framework.⁴³ In addition, many organizations publishing these periodicals provide education on these topics through workshops and conferences. They frequently index and transcribe local records to facilitate future research, and are political and financial supporters of archives programs.

The Mormons, for whom genealogical research is a theological imperative, have been at the forefront in educating genealogists and collecting genealogical material since the 19th century.⁴⁴ However, their expertise and influence have increased with the growing interest in genealogy around the globe. Their program of microfilming original records worldwide has allowed family historians economically to access a variety of primary source material through branches of Salt Lake City's LDS Family History Center. This project has also helped preserve original archival material by allowing repositories to provide researchers with microfilm copies rather than original records. The technological expertise of the Family History Department of the Genealogical Society of Utah has been used to create many unique databases that have been accessed by millions of genealogists.⁴⁵

Many avocational family historians have taken advantage of the educational opportunities provided to them and have gained experience researching diverse records. They have attracted the attention of archivists and librarians not because they are part of an inescapable horde, but because their experience and knowledge have made them valuable to archives and libraries. As often happens with stereotypes, increased contact and communication have helped to erode the negative image. Many librarians and archivists now recognize that "the chasm between [historical research and genealogical research] is disappearing rapidly,"⁴⁶ and that "traditional historical researchers and governmental research programs are using genealogical information more today than ever before."⁴⁷ To illustrate the change in attitude toward genealogical research, a "News Notes" article in the Spring 1982 issue of *The American Archivist* reported that the Los Angeles Division of Archives and Records had recently received a five thousand dollar grant to create an educational tape and slide show demonstrating how genealogical researchers use historical methods.⁴⁸

Particularly during tough economic times, archivists have discovered not only that genealogists as a group can be a political and financial asset to the archives, but also that the knowledge and expertise of individual genealogists can be valuable in a variety of archival functions. Volunteer genealogists can help provide lifeblood to an institution faced with massive budget cuts. When the Cuyahoga County (Ohio) Archives staff was slashed to just two people in 1988, genealogists filled the void to help keep the institution functioning. A Volunteer Assistance Program was created to assist the archivist in many aspects of the archives operation. According to Judith Cetina, Cuyahoga County Archivist, the volunteers eliminated any preconceptions that might have existed

about genealogists by proving themselves to be "serious, knowledgeable, and interested." They provided assistance in locating and accessioning stray county records, compiled indexes and other finding aids, offered personal reference assistance to archives patrons, and donated materials the archives could not afford to purchase. The program continues to reap benefits for both the archives and the genealogists.⁴⁹

Informal discussion of this program at the 1992 Fall Meeting of the Midwest Archives Conference illustrated the role that volunteer genealogists are playing in many archives and historical societies. A representative of the State Historical Society of Iowa acknowledged having used volunteer genealogists successfully in several areas of archival function, including arrangement and description. While other archivists were reluctant to advocate full participation by genealogist volunteers in all archival functions, they did recognize the generally positive role they fill in the reference department. Representatives from both the Ohio Historical Society and the Western Reserve Historical Society reported a high degree of success using volunteer genealogists to assist in reference. Similar observations could be made about many archival institutions around the country.

Conclusion

As the interest in genealogy continues to grow, so do the related challenges for archivists. While professional historians may wonder, "What Ever Happened to Family History?"⁵⁰ archivists know that the avocational variety is alive and well in the crowded reading rooms of archival institutions. As long as there are neophyte genealogists, archivists will continue to debate the extent to which they should have access to original records. Archivists will continue to emphasize that genealogists be better prepared and better educated to conduct their research properly, but they will be more willing to help in those endeavors, offering genealogists "simplicity, elegance, and welcome."⁵¹ At the same time, experienced genealogists will continue to be offended that social historians who use the fruits of genealogical research in their academic studies are afforded recognition as "scholars," but the genealogists who conducted the initial research are not.⁵²

Whatever the personal attitudes of individual archivists concerning genealogical research, clearly genealogists have had a significant impact on all aspects of archival function: appraisal and accessioning, arrangement and description, reference and outreach—and perhaps eventually, even archives education. Janice Ruth suggests students of archives reference try an ancient technique to cultivate an appreciation of genealogists—put on the genealogist's shoes by attempting a family history assignment. She contends that "it might instill in would-be archivists a better understanding and greater empathy for the needs, problems, and interests of their largest group of users."⁵³ The serious consideration of such a proposal demonstrates how significantly the attitude of the archival profession has changed regarding genealogical research. If both archivists and genealogists recognize that they can learn from one another, the future may see their relationship moving from uneasy peace to active partnership.

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45. Two current projects of the Genealogical Society of Utah are particularly innovative. The 1881 British Census Index Project, conducted jointly with the Federation of Family History Societies, has allowed hundreds of volunteers within individual Family History Societies in the United Kingdom to be involved in a standardized transcription process, which will eventually create a multiple-access database from the 1881 census. The *Civil War Soldiers Project*, a joint effort of the National Park Service, National Archives, and the Federation of Genealogical Societies will allow visitors to Civil War sites managed by the NPS to access a computer database containing specific information on the war and the individual soldiers who fought in it. Volunteers

- from genealogical organizations across the United States will assist in the data entry for this monumental project.
46. Bidlack, "Genealogy Today," 21.
 47. Amason, 283-284.
 48. "News Notes," *American Archivist* 45 (Spring 1982): 231.
 49. Judith Cetina, "Genealogists as Boosters for Archival Programs," Paper presented at the Fall Meeting of the Midwest Archives Conference, Cleveland, Ohio, 5-7 November 1992.
 50. Jane Turner Censer, "What Ever Happened to Family History?" *Comparative Studies in Sociology and History* 33 (July 1991): 528.
 51. Freeman, "In the Eye of the Beholder," 116.
 52. Elizabeth Shown Mills, "Genealogists and Archivists: Communicating, Cooperating, and Coping!" *National Genealogical Society Newsletter* (June 1990) and Peter W. Bunce, "Towards A More Harmonious Relationship: A Challenge to Archivists and Genealogists," *National Genealogical Society Newsletter* (June 1990); excerpted in "At Issue: Can Original Research Materials Be Entrusted to Genealogists?" *Editorial Research Reports* 46 (December 14, 1990): 45.
 53. Janice E. Ruth, "Educating the Reference Archivist," *American Archivist* 51 (Summer 1988): 275.