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# ACADEMIA vs. GENEALOGY PROSPECTS FOR RECONCILIATION AND PROGRESS

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Scarcely more than a decade ago, a young Southern historian began his teaching career on the university level and simultaneously showed an interest in family history. Superiors promptly cautioned him not to get involved in genealogy or his career would be ruined. The warning was ignored, and in the years that have followed, the young historian's published works have successfully demonstrated that genealogical techniques are vital to the reconstruction of academic history—that the deeper insights provided by such an approach can justify a revision of older, impressionistic interpretations of America's past.<sup>1</sup>

Across the nation, the twentieth-century cold war between "real historians" and "ancestor worshipers" is ebbing noticeably. Why? In fact, why should a rift between them have existed in the first place? Most importantly, what does this overlapping of interest portend for genealogy? What changes are being wrought? What can and must be done by both the genealogist and the professional historian in order that both disciplines can benefit from their mutual interests?

The past schism between academia and family genealogists has been grounded almost solely upon the issue of scholarship. For several centuries, genealogy and history were inseparable, dabbled in by men of all callings who had sufficient money, leisure, and education to study antiquities. This situation has changed drastically since the turn of the last century, as highly-educated students of the social sciences have succeeded in elevating history from the armchair to a university chair. From an academic standpoint, the amateurs—those avid students of local history or family history who have not had the advantage of academic training in historiography—have become mere history buffs or genealogy nuts. Their work has been scoffed at, ignored, or indulgently tolerated by the professional historian.

The resulting distinction between professional and amateur has been justified. Academic historians are theoretically bound to a code of scholastic standards that has not existed in genealogy until recently, and the professional status of a historian has become an important criterion for determining the degree of reliability which can be placed on his published work. However, the professional historian has also suffered academically from his self-imposed barriers against family historians, and his tardy recognition of this fact has at last begun to create an academic interest in genealogy as a legitimate field of study.

It is agreed that the family has been the nucleus around which society is built. Any attempt to study the history of a people without studying the family

structure of that people is to confront a robot and pretend one feels a pulse. Historians of this century have come close to academically exhausting those broad topics of national interest (which, not coincidentally, win more recognition for their work) and they are shifting their focus at last to the pulse of society: the home, the family, and the community.

All of this has occurred at a time when the genealogist has become more plebian in character and more realistic in attitude. It is no longer the blue-bloods or the *nouveau riche* who have the basic education, leisure, and funds to search for their roots, and the historical hobbyist now places far less importance upon illustrious ancestors and impressive charts and far more importance upon the history of his family, upon the life-stories behind all those faceless names.

This gradual shift in focus by both the amateur and the historian has created three distinctive branches of what once was indiscriminately called family history:

1. **BASIC GENEALOGY**—In its most restricted sense, this is the traditional begats, the discovery of a chain of relationships that spans generations and centuries.

2. **FAMILY HISTORY**—Like genealogy, this field of interest also focuses upon the individual family. Yet the true family historian goes well beyond the begats and reconstructs the historical role of his particular family and the personalities, lifestyles, contributions, and the shortcomings of the myriad family members.

3. **HISTORY OF THE FAMILY**—A highly disciplined academic field in which the professional historian attempts to define the composite characteristics of family life in a specific society. This is often accomplished through the reconstitution of all families in a given community and the statistical analysis of the mass of data that is gleaned from the reconstitution process.

These three fields of so-called family history offer room to accommodate individuals of varying interests, at all academic levels. Yet, the future of all three are inseparable, and there is no longer room for participants in any of the fields to disdain or ignore those who pursue the other.

Both academic historians and genealogists (professional and amateur) have taken some steps toward cooperation, be it intentional or not. From these initial efforts, a small but significant degree of progress has been made. But there have also emerged problems that to some may seem irreconcilable, and the development of these disciplines to a degree that each derives optimum benefit from the skills of the other will depend upon three crucial factors:

1. Sufficient interest on both sides of the traditional academic battleline.
2. Modification of ingrained attitudes and traditional approaches.
3. Open, frank, and extended verbal interaction between the professional historian and the genealogist as both, through trial and error, seek to work out a course of optimum cooperation.

NGS members, who rank among the most progressive and discriminating genealogists in both the amateur and professional ranks, should be a moving

force in the successful integration of genealogy and history. They represent the prime brains to pick in springboard discussions, and they would be the most logical field-representatives through which the new spirit of cooperation can spread and develop at the grassroots level.

## ROLE MODIFICATIONS

On each side of the demilitarized zone between historians and genealogists there exist knowledge and technical skills needed by the other. Before these can be transmitted, however, certain attitudes and approaches must be recognized and modified to a far greater degree than that which has occurred to date.

*The genealogist, especially the hobbyist and the marginal professional, must upgrade his standards before professional historians will take genealogy seriously.*

Among hobbyists there still prevails the attitude: "Why should I bother? I'm not a professional historian." To an overwhelming extent, the hobbyist shuns scholarly books that are bottom-heavy with those footnotes he once ignored in the classroom. To a dismaying degree, he treats all printed sources as a reputable record, making little or no effort to weigh judiciously the intrinsic merits of each. All too often he is so intent upon building copious files of notes that he has little time to spend studying methodology or the basic rules for the proper citation of sources.<sup>2</sup> Few hobbyists yet relate to conferences or monographs with sophisticated studies of the development of the preindustrial economy and its impact upon population movements or similar subjects.

Yet, the less sophisticated approach which most hobbyists still insist upon robs them of many resources they need to solve their more difficult problems. The understanding of population movements and their economic causes can be a critical factor in determining where an elusive ancestor originated. Hobbyists who eagerly seize upon lists of people, while side-stepping those heavily documented discussions of history, fail to realize that those boring footnotes offer extremely valuable lists of records which they will probably never discover otherwise.

The hobbyist who still thinks that documentation is an unnecessary chore, who resents the academic holier-than-thou stance of the professional historian and sees no need for cooperation between genealogists and historians, dooms himself to failure or mediocrity in his own work. As long as there exist significant numbers of genealogists who feel that their family research is a purely personal thing, of no interest to anyone else, who feel no need to comply with standards set by others, than genealogists cannot expect to have their hobby taken seriously by those from whom they expect help. *The closed-stacks of better research libraries will remain closed to them. The professional archivists who render extensive help to serious historians will continue to treat genealogists as nuisances.*

The upgrading of standards by genealogists also offers an opportunity for an important long-term investment. The new trend toward historical demography, toward statistical studies of family life, demands vast quantities of solidly-reconstructed family data from which historical interpretations can be drawn.

The good genealogist, hobbyist or professional, is currently far better prepared to perform this basic family reconstitution. He has already developed the highly technical skills which are needed for this work, skills that the traditionally-trained professional historian would need years to acquire. Meanwhile, the academician, with his broader historical perspective, his greater access to computer technology, and possibly his training in cliometric methodology, is best suited to draw social interpretations from genealogical data. The professional historian's ultimate portrayal of family life within specific communities, based upon sound genealogical data, would then provide the genealogist with a historical stage upon which individual families can be placed.

Indeed, the investment which even the hobbyist makes in quality research holds another potential return of greater significance and reward. Both genealogy and history are the fields on which past meets posterity, and most genealogists readily admit that they are prompted not only by curiosity but also by a desire to pass on a greater understanding of life to the generations that follow them. Yet few conceive of the impact that their private work on their own obscure families may now have upon future generations of society at large. The trend in historical demography toward the use of private genealogies as the base for broad interpretations of society catapults the unsuspecting family genealogist or hobbyist into an unprecedented role in the shaping of history. Under these circumstances, the quality of his work may well determine the shape of the history that is taught in public schools and colleges for generations to come.

The academician also faces several challenges in this transitory stage of social history, principally a re-evaluation of innate attitudes and the acquisition of new skills which he may well have underrated in the past.

The success of such demographic studies as those made by Philip Greven on colonial Andover or John Demos on Plymouth<sup>3</sup> has encouraged the legitimation of the use of family histories by academics, but this concession to the genealogical field is far from universal. In countless history departments and archives across America, the "taint" of genealogy is assiduously avoided. A major southwestern university currently faces a dilemma inconceivable even a decade ago; it has been left a generous bequest to fund a chair in Genealogy, and the reluctance of its old-school historians to accept such an addition in their erudite midst is quite indicative of still-prevailing attitudes. Elsewhere in the South, a major city library employed outside consultants of considerable professional stature to evaluate its services and formulate a plan of improvement. The recommendation?—separate history and genealogy so that serious researchers will not be distracted by genealogists.

*History and genealogy can no longer be separated.* Both disciplines have advanced to the point at which their respective leaders recognize their interdependence. Over the past decade such established historians as Stanley L. Engerman and Robert W. Fogel have done significant exploratory work in the use of genealogies as a basis for historical demography;<sup>4</sup> and the future advancement of both disciplines now depends greatly to the degree upon which their example is followed, judiciously, by more tradition-bound scholars who constitute the bulk of the academic community.

Not only does there exist a serious need for historians to accept and use the work of discriminating genealogists, but the application of genealogical techniques to research within all fields of history would significantly advance the ultimate quality of the publications that are produced. Historical biographies serve as a prime example; among the best of them are found deficiencies that could have been avoided if the biographer had been more schooled in the fundamentals of genealogy. Countless general histories of regional or national focus suffer correspondingly from a lack of basic research in those grassroots sources that genealogists traditionally scour and academicians traditionally scorn.

At the same time, the progressive historians who support the integration of genealogy into their discipline face a significant handicap that some do not like to concede. Genealogy, properly done, requires a great degree of specialized research skills—skills to which the trained historian is scarcely exposed. The traditional academic program that produces today's Ph.D. does in no way adequately prepare the historian to conduct effective genealogical work. As a consequence, his approach to genealogy may be lamentably naive. Demographic histories are being produced, based upon "rich genealogical sources," which the genealogical community has long since proven to be unreliable. Boundless credibility is assigned to oral history when discriminating genealogists have demonstrated that tradition cannot be accepted as Gospel. Historians who have grown accustomed to the copious vital statistics of colonial New England are at a loss to do any comparable genealogical groundwork on the South or on the western frontiers where such records were not created.

#### AGENTS OF LIAISON

A successful bridging of the chasm between genealogy and academic history also depends upon the involvement of intermediary organizations and institutions, principally the institutions of higher learning and the historical associations dominated by professionals. In this current era of declining student enrollment, shrinking job opportunities for academic historians, and deficient budgets in professional organizations, the coordination of personal family history into serious history may also be the buoy that keeps the profession afloat.

By and large, neither of these two media are showing a significant interest in such a challenge. However, encouraging exceptions do exist. Samford University of Birmingham, Alabama, a highly-accredited, privately-funded school, has for two decades sponsored an annual summer Institute in Genealogy and Historical Research that is recognized as the dean of all such programs. It is one of the few universities which offer academic credit for successful course work, and over the two decades, the quality of its faculty, as well as that of the instruction they offer, have set new standards for the field of genealogy. The University of Alabama's Center for the Study of Southern History and Culture, which has already begun to incorporate genealogical methodology

and resources into its highly innovative exploration of the Southern heritage, is offering a pilot seminar in family history in 1983.

Harvard and Brandeis, Oklahoma State University and the University of New Orleans, the universities of South Alabama and Southeastern Louisiana, and Nicholls State University in Thibodaux, Louisiana, have all within the past five years sponsored genealogical seminars varying in length from two weeks to one day. In all cases, however, this group of seminars has been sponsored through the university's continuing education division, the same division which teaches cake decorating and aerobic dancing; none has been incorporated into the regular academic program. While a number of American universities offer graduate degrees in Family History,<sup>5</sup> all fall into the category of the highly-disciplined academic field, History of the Family, which has already been discussed. To this writer's knowledge, no American university aside from Brigham Young offers genealogy as an academic equal to other fields of humanity.

The incorporation of genealogy into the conference programs of professional historical associations is presently even more rare. Few organizations have been as *avant garde* as the Louisiana Historical Association which has offered a genealogy session almost every year since 1978 and in 1982 offered a concurrent session on genealogy for every session on history. Acceptance of the movement was evident in at least one session of the last year, when the number of professional historians attending the genealogy papers outranked the number attending the more traditional session pitted against it.

The gradual graying of the line between genealogy and history has also introduced larger numbers of professional historians onto the podium of the genealogical seminars, but the result is often not as successful as it should be. Today's typical genealogical conference brings together individuals of widely varying educational levels, and they demand a different style of presentation from that which a historian would use in addressing his own colleagues. Both professional historical conferences and genealogical conferences serve an equally important, but complementary, function. Conferences for both groups may well be defined as continuing education, and to be effective each conference must be presented at the research level of those in attendance. The distinction has been difficult for many historians and genealogists to accept.

The genealogical hobbyist derives little from conferences of the academic genre which cater to the professional historian—conferences where highly technical papers are presented at Donald Duck speed in order that the reader can cover as much material as possible in his few allotted minutes. The hobbyist is, in fact, turned off by the very idea of reading a paper. This time-honored custom among academicians, who dare not risk using a wrong word extemporaneously lest critics seize upon it, is admittedly a boring format for presenting any subject. Worse yet, the hobbyist is bewildered by the ultimate critiquing of papers at historical conferences; he attends his conference in search of answers and feels he has gained little if the alleged answers the reader presented are then dissected by the session's commentator.

Yet scholars who modify their presentations to appeal to a more casual and diverse audience often stand accused of slumming. Some adopt this stance themselves, viewing the occasion as any easy way to get departmental credit for reading a paper, and in such cases their presentation may be substandard by the most lax genealogical criteria. On the other hand, academicians are prone to berate the prevailing tendency of genealogical speakers to recycle their lectures, using the same fundamental presentations over and over again before different audiences. The serious academician, schooled in the idea that a conference appearance demands a fresh paper based upon new and original research, does experience difficulty appreciating the value of an effective genealogical lecture presented at the nonprofessional level.

Yet the distinction between the two modes of presentation is a basic one that academicians should have no difficulty grasping. An effective professor introduces history to undergraduates in a far different manner than that which he uses to intellectually stimulate post-doctoral students. The one challenge is as great as the other, but each demands a different approach.

A more prevalent problem in using academic historians at family history seminars seems to be a general lack of understanding on their part as to what the genealogist needs or expects. Brilliant interpretations of obscure historical subjects are of minimum value or appeal to genealogists who attend a conference in search of knowledge of methodology or resources that will help them in their own personal work. Two feasible solutions to this problem are obvious: academicians chosen to address genealogical institutes should, ideally, be genealogical hobbyists themselves; or, at second best, the Samford example could be followed. Here, academicians are urged to attend at least one year's Institute, as a student, before they are placed on the faculty.

American colleges and universities today offer the greatest potential, of these two liaisons, for merging the disciplines of history and genealogy. Institutions which pride themselves on the versatility of their liberal arts program—most certainly those institutions offering advanced degrees in the humanities—cannot much longer justify an exclusion of genealogy from their regular course offerings. Basic genealogical techniques are clearly becoming indispensable tools for research-oriented historians; and the student of history who is accorded a Ph.D.—the traditional research degree—without having been trained in genealogical methodology has not been adequately prepared for today's social or demographic history research.

The academic advancement of genealogy also needs the wholehearted but judicious participation of those colleges and universities that offer continuing education to the adult community. Such schools are excellent media for upgrading skills among the masses of hobbyists, but they should be strongly encouraged to commit themselves to a specific market as they develop their programs. There is a distinct need for academic instruction in genealogy at a number of levels: not only basic, intermediate, and advanced, but also special institutes designed for those with advanced degrees in history who wish to learn basic genealogical methodology.

Unfortunately, none of the academically-sponsored conferences available today, with the exception of the Samford Institute which offers five concurrent

levels of instruction, appear to make any effort to target attendees. Those Continuing Education divisions bold enough to venture into genealogy are compelled to offer a little something for everyone in each program, in order to attract enough people to justify the program to the administration. Clearly, this buckshot approach does not adequately satisfy the academic needs of the genealogical community.

It is also recognized that the academic advancement of genealogy suffers from an intrinsic handicap: an insufficient number of scholars in the genealogical community (or genealogists in the academic community) who are qualified to supply the formal training that the exploding field of genealogy needs. The Fellows of the American Society of Genealogists (a body recognized for its contributions to genealogical scholarship) number less than fifty. The membership of the Association for Genealogical Education is not significantly greater. The bulk of those with extensive academic training in genealogy are centered in the Salt Lake City area, and the number of professional historians with sufficient genealogical expertise to train others has never been estimated but is generally conceded to be miniscule, while the number of amateur and marginally-professional genealogists in the United States soars to the millions.

The full development of genealogy as a legitimate field of scholarly inquiry, equal to that of any other humanistic field, will obviously not be accomplished in the near future. But with sincere and extensive cooperation and commitment between the genealogical and academic communities, a mutually beneficial union of history and genealogy can ultimately be achieved.

## NOTES AND REFERENCES

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1. For example, see Gary B. Mills, "Miscegenation and the Free Negro in Antebellum 'Anglo' Alabama: A Reexamination of Southern Race Relations," *Journal of American History* 68 (June 1981): 16-34.

2. Two excellent guides for the genealogical community to use in documenting its research are Richard S. Lackey, *Cite Your Sources: A Manual for Documenting Family Histories and Genealogical Records* (New Orleans: Polyanthos, 1980), and Gary B. Mills and Elizabeth Shown Mills, "How to Properly Document Your Research Notes," *The Genealogical Helper* 33 (Sept.-Oct. 1979): 7-11. A companion work of equal importance is Noel C. Stevenson, *Genealogical Evidence: A Guide to the Standard of Proof Relating to Pedigrees, Ancestry, Heirship, and Family History* (Laguna Hills, California: Aegean Park Press, 1979).

3. Greven, *Four Generations: Population, Land, and Family in Colonial Andover, Massachusetts* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1970); Demos, *A Little Commonwealth: Family Life in Plymouth Colony* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970).

4. A preliminary application of their findings can be found in Robert W. Fogel, *et al.*, "The Economics of Mortality in North America, 1650-1910: A Description of a Research Project," *Historical Methods* 2 (1978): 75-108.

5. For a comprehensive list of universities offering degrees in the History of the Family see *Association of Professional Genealogists Newsletter* 4 (Sept. 1982): 9-10.