

Bridging the Historic Divide: Family History and “Academic” History

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“History or genealogy? Why Not Both?” The topic assigned to this panel¹ asks a provocative question—one that will not be answered until both historians and the public understand what is meant, today, by the word *genealogy*.

I am a historian by training and a genealogist by profession. I describe myself that way because my academic field was history, but I have spent my life in genealogy. On the other hand, I could reverse the labels and say I am a *genealogist by training*, because much of what I have learned about researching the past was learned not in a history classroom but in the field laboratory of genealogy. I could also say I am a *historian by profession*, because the American Historical Association defines *historian* as one “with some formal training in history who practice[s] history through either teaching or research or both.”² That definition fits the work I do, day in and day out.

As a genealogist, I am—by the very nature of my work—a cross-disciplinarian. I have published in academic presses of several fields, including history. I have reconstituted a whole community on a colonial frontier, identifying over two thousand settlers and transients, tracking each from birth to death, as I followed them through the archival records of five nations. That particular study was one in which I defined patterns of economics, migration, politics, religion, and social behaviors, as well as family composition. As a genealogist performing this kind of study, I am not an isolated case.

Indeed, one of the fundamental tenets of genealogy today is that we cannot trace our ancestors in isolation of their community.

The crux of the issue is a misunderstanding as to what the “new genealogy” (as historian Samuel Hays described it in 1975³) is all about. The ideology and methodology of studying one’s family are the issues that caused the schism, more than a century ago, between genealogy and the new profession of history. Those nineteenth-century differences were the reason why John Franklin Jameson, who earned America’s first doctorate in history in 1882, argued that genealogy has no value and that “no historical society has a right to use its research and publications in furthering it.”⁴

Jameson’s view of genealogy still thrives in the public mind. As the *Boston Globe* reporter Alex Beam recently put it, genealogy is a “flimsy pastime for people who would like to fancy themselves better than they are.”⁵ Still, some historians are more enlightened. As Dr. Karin Wulf of American University observed in the *William & Mary Quarterly* in 2002, “Genealogy today is *not* your grandmother’s genealogy.”⁶

There are, today, distinctly different activities pursued in the name of genealogy. Just as there are “armchair” historians and trained historians, there are “family tree climbers” (aka “name gatherers”) apart from *real* genealogists. Those who meet modern genealogical standards are serious researchers—experts in a vast array of records, who conduct their investigations with rigor, who well know the precepts of scholarship and apply sophisticated research methodology. Unfortunately, those who know little about the field still lump everything that whiffs of “personal research” into the ranks of “junk history.” Hence, this panel’s theme: a divide between two important fields that sorely need to be bridged.

As a genealogist, I struggle to help colleagues in history understand that genealogy *is* history. It is micro-history and historical biography. Genealogists pluck individual people out of the typically nameless, faceless masses whom historians write about in broad

terms. One by one, we breathe life back into people from the past. We piece together again the scattered fragments of their lives. We put them into their historical, social, and economic settings. Then we use our research and analytical skills to stitch these individuals together into the distinctive patchwork quilt that tells each family's story.

"All well and good," friends in history have said to me privately. "But what does all that matter in the grand scheme of things? How does that contribute to a better understanding of society?" That issue of *micro* versus *macro*—inconsequential masses versus key actors on the stage of history—is debated in other historical forums as well. Meanwhile, the value of genealogy to "traditional" history is ignored at a price paid by academe itself.

Historians *need* genealogists. To produce reliable historical interpretations, historians need reliable identification of individuals. To determine political affiliations and migration patterns, they need to know the relationships between the actors on their historical stages, because kinship so often fueled economics, politics, and migration. To explore issues of race and gender, they need reliable ethnic identifications as well as biography and kinship networks. Every family study produced by a skilled genealogist provides data for economic, ethnic, political, and social history—genetic threads and social patterns historians need to reweave the fabric of society.

Obtaining value from genealogical materials, however, means that historians have to understand genealogical standards. Beyond the view of institutional history, genealogy has developed into a rigorous discipline. As historian Gloria Main observed in the *William & Mary Quarterly* in 1997: "Professional genealogists hew to stricter rules of evidence than even professional historians."⁷ Yet the rigor of modern genealogy is rarely noticed on the academic side of the wall that separates family history from professional history. As a result, historians unwittingly sabotage themselves. Schooled in the belief that genealogy is mere name-gathering, whenever they turn to genealogy, they may rely on

whatever comes to hand, without critically appraising the quality of that book, database, or website.⁸

Historians face another major challenge with which genealogists can empathize and help: *time*. The exquisitely detailed research that sound genealogy requires takes far more time than most academics can invest amid a publish-or-perish environment. The toilsome task of slogging through great quantities of unorganized, uncataloged grassroots-level records (and a general unfamiliarity with these records) means that few such materials are used in studies that sorely need them. Genealogists who have learned scholarly editorial practices within their own discipline can provide reliable record abstracts and transcriptions. Yet here again, cautious historians (like cautious genealogists) need to critically evaluate these published materials and reject those that do not meet quality standards or—at the least—use them only as pointers to the original records.

A decade ago, the American Historical Association, the Organization of American Historians, and the Society of American Archivists created a consortium to study the future of historical research. Their final report concluded:

Graduate history students need to master certain research competencies in order to function effectively as professionals. . . . Many of these research competencies involve work with archival materials. In current practice most graduate students acquire archival research skills—to the extent they do acquire these skills—not as a part of graduate training but through time consuming and expensive exercises in trial and error.⁹

Since then, there has not been an appreciable improvement in curricula to better equip tomorrow's historians. At most institutions, graduate students are still learning those archival research skills by "expensive exercises in trial and error." In more-candid

moments, academic historians confess one reason why their departments are not yet teaching graduate students to work with grassroots-level records: they don't yet have a faculty adept in using them. Yet, outside the traditional academic system, the discipline of genealogy has developed excellent programs of study—some at universities, some elsewhere. The National Archives-based National Institute for Genealogical Research, for example, offers in-depth instruction in NARA resources of value to all historians. The Samford University Institute of Genealogy and Historical Research has, for forty-one years, taught a summer program that now offers ten-to-twelve separate tracks of study, with some tracks rotating their topics from year to year. My advanced classes at IGHR routinely attract professionals with terminal degrees in many fields—but rarely historians.

In contrast, academic programs in history generally teach *history*, as interpreted by past and present scholarship, rather than *records* and *archival-research skills*. All are equally important. Historical scholarship provides the context for evaluating new discoveries. Yet, to interpret raw records accurately, one must understand them. One must know the circumstances under which they were created and techniques for milking obscure clues from them. Above all, it seems to me, no one can truly interpret history accurately without using *all* known, relevant records. Those primary sources at the grassroots level, which have long been the domain of the genealogist, beg for use in academic history; but the “expensive trial and error” method have created flawed conclusions within historical scholarship.

Some forward-thinkers have seen potential for cooperation between historians and genealogists. In the online journal *Common-Place*, in 2002, a librarian looked for common grounds. As a base line for her conclusions, she first explored the print media,

discussing major scholarly journals of history. To represent genealogy in the printed form, she cited only Alex Haley's novel—not the *National Genealogical Society Quarterly* or any other scholarly publications. Speaking of professionals, she applied that term only to historians, not genealogists. Genealogy's greatest value, she argued, exists on the Internet where historians can find wonderful databases and “family trees” to shortcut their work. The growing wealth of digitized *records*—the mainstay of the serious genealogist—goes unmentioned.¹⁰

Yes, genealogy can help historians in their research if one does not lose sight of the modern adage *garbage in, garbage out*. Those abstracts and databases the librarian recommended are the work of companies and amateur webs—typically, creators with little or no training in research methodology, handwriting interpretation, or document analysis. The “family trees” are rarely documented and largely invalid. Nonetheless, historians (the only scholars in her equation) are urged to exploit this “exciting new source material,” use their expertise to “interpret” it (unvetted though the material may be), and thereby feed the public's hunger for a better understanding of our world. Serious genealogists have difficulty seeing that same vision.

Recent presidents of the Organization of American Historians have addressed several major issues faced by academic history today, particularly the disconnect between historians and the public, and they call for more partnerships with the public sector. Among the channels they mention, genealogy does not appear. The current OAH president, James Horton, writes eloquently of the sources historians use, their research methods, and their standards for judging historical evidence, and he concludes:

It is clear that most citizens have an appalling ignorance . . . of the substance of American history. . . . [Perhaps] they would be . . . more engaged if they understood how we do our work. This is a critical moment for us to help them understand, for there is a kind of commercial mass production of history underway that sorely needs our attention.¹¹

Horton is correct. Yet I see the issue through a different prism. The bridge that needs building between historians and the public needs *two-way* traffic. Historians have much to gain from interaction with genealogical scholars. Yes, much of the public sector has an “appalling ignorance” of history. Still, outside academe, many historical researchers expertly use a wider range of primary sources than historians typically consult. Many have developed sophisticated techniques for mining and linking historical evidence, techniques not yet common in academia.

Historians and genealogists could have a wonderfully synergistic relationship. We have the same basic goal—a better understanding of our world and ourselves. Historians provide genealogists with many valuable perspectives that help to put families into clearer historical focus. In return, genealogists offer an auxiliary field of study, an auxiliary field of employment, and an auxiliary field of support—both financial and moral.

All points considered, I see three paths by which we might achieve a mutually beneficial relationship.

First, serious genealogists have an endless task ahead of them, educating the hordes lured daily into seeking their “roots” on the Internet. By helping the naive in the public sector understand the rigors that real genealogy requires, they can ensure that their field produces copious studies of benefit to university-based scholars.

Second, university-based historians have a learning curve also—educating themselves about genealogy’s resources, standards, and methods. Whether or not they have the time to explore original records at the grassroots level, a familiarity with genealogical criteria and offerings will increase their productivity and help them achieve keener insight into the issues they study.

Third, archivists who serve as gatekeepers to significant collections need a greater awareness that genealogical scholarship does exist. Allowing qualified genealogists access to original records enhances the quality of the work they provide to historians. Conversely, barring their access forces conclusions based on incomplete information. When a premature conclusion errs and historians use that flawed work in their own studies, the result is that “keeping out the genies” undermines the quality of work done within academia itself.

For three decades, historians have moved toward that ideal Will Durant envisioned in the 1960s: “Civilization is a stream with banks. The stream is sometimes filled with blood from people killing, stealing, shouting and doing things historians usually record, while on the banks, unnoticed, people build homes, make love, raise children, sing songs, write poetry, and even whittle statues. The story of civilization,” Durant believed, “is the story of what happened on the banks.”¹² In today’s world, where Peter and Paula Public see little relevance in academic history, genealogists are playing a major role in revitalizing history by preserving that story of what happened on those banks.

NOTES:

*Mills for sixteen years edited the *National Genealogical Society Quarterly*, the premier peer-reviewed journal of her field, while serving as president of both the Board for Certification of Genealogists and the American Society of Genealogists. Her Centennial Address to NGS, published in the *Quarterly* the year after her departure, addresses the current topic in considerably more detail. See “Genealogy in the ‘Information Age’: History’s New Frontier?” *NGSQ* 91 (December 2003): 260–77.

1. The present paper was developed in August 2004 for the panel discussion, “History or Genealogy? Why Not Both?” presented at the Indianapolis-based Midwestern Roots Conference, sponsored jointly by the Indiana Historical Society and the Indiana Genealogy Society. Co-panelists were Curt Witcher, past president of the National Genealogical Society and the Federation of Genealogical Societies and director of the largest U.S. public genealogical library, the Allen County (Indiana) Public Library, Fort Wayne; Dr. Marianne Woceck, a migration historian on the faculty of Indiana University Department of History; and Dr. James H. Madison, a specialist in 20th-century history and Indiana history, also from IU.

2. “Affiliation with the American Historical Association,” *American Historical Association: The Professional Association for All Historians* (<http://www.theaha.org/affiliates/application.htm>).

3. Samuel P. Hays, “History and Genealogy: Patterns of Change and Prospects for Cooperation,” *Prologue: The Journal of the National Archives* 7 (Spring 1975): 39–43, (Summer 1975): 81–84, (Fall 1975): 187–91; especially p. 40.

4. John Franklin Jameson, "The Functions of State and Local Historical Societies with Respect to Research and Publication," *American Historical Association, Annual Report, 1897* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1898), 57.
5. Alex Beam, "An Adams Heir? It's All Relative," *Boston Globe*, 12 July 2005; online edition (http://www.boston.com/news/globe/living/articles/2005/07/12/an_adams_heir_its_all_relative/).
6. Karin Wulf, "Not Your Grandmother's Genealogy," *William and Mary Quarterly* 59 (October 2002); online edition (http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/wm/59.4/br_6.html).
7. Gloria J. Main, review of *The Great Migration Begins: Immigrants to New England, 1620–1653*, Robert Charles Anderson et al., comp., in *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 54 (October 1997), 858.
8. For cases at point, see Elizabeth Shown Mills, "Academic Forays into Thematic Family History: Two Families, Two Worlds, Two Outcomes," *NGSQ* 92 (September 2004): 209–17.
9. Joint Committee on Historians and Archivists of the American Historical Association, Organization of American Historians, [and] Society of American Archivists, *Historians and Archivists: Educating the Next Generation* (1993; online edition, <http://www.oah.org/>).

10. Sheila O'Hare, "Genealogy and History," *Common-Place: The Interactive Journal of Early American Life*, vol. 2, April 2002 (<http://www.common-place.org>).

11. James O. Horton, "The Year Ahead: Challenges and Responsibilities," *OAH Newsletter*, May 2004; online edition (<http://www.oah.org/pubs/nl/2004may/horton.html>).

12. Quoted in Jim Hicks, "More History from the Will Durants: Spry Old Team Does It Again," *Life*, October 18, 1963, 92.

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