
Genealogy in the “Information Age”: History’s New Frontier?

By Elizabeth Shown Mills, CG, CGL, FNGS, FASG

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Modern genealogy—appropriately done—is history in microcosm. Our research projects study “up close and personal” small slices of the past. We pluck individuals from the nameless masses that historians paint with a broad brush. We learn their names. We follow them from birth to death. We see the actual effect upon human lives of the grand world events that historians write about—wars, economic depressions, plagues, politics, and persecutions. We see how one humble person and his or her neighbors can reshape a community, a state, or a country. Then we repeat the process, generation by generation.

Genealogical scholarship—more appropriately called generational history¹—is by nature finely analytical. Other branches of history interpret through synthesis and generalization, so that errors in detail rarely affect overall conclusions. Generational history, on the other hand, requires almost scientific precision. Every research step is one link in a descriptive chain that, like twists of DNA, ultimately establishes identity. Invariably, that chain is riddled with broken links—between individuals and within each life. Reconnecting those links requires acute analysis of each research problem and each statement within every relevant record. Reassembling the shards along the documentary trail requires

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1. GENERATIONAL HISTORY: An interdisciplinary study of the development of individual families across generations—analyzing the dynamics of ethnicity, intermarriage, status, and migration in economic, legal, and social contexts; otherwise, the practice of genealogy as a field of history, following the precepts of peer-reviewed scholarship. (As defined by the author.)

committee offered programs for genealogy teachers,⁸⁶ and later NGS incorporated its workshops into the annual conferences.

- In a similar move GENTECH merged with NGS in 2001, and the society continues to sponsor technology conferences under the GENTECH banner.⁸⁷

CONCLUSION

In 1957 NGS archivist Milton Rubincam organized the society's papers, many from the collection of John B. Nichols, M.D., who assembled the fiftieth anniversary history.⁸⁸ Rubincam asked former presidents to deposit additional important papers. "I do not want it to be said in the year 2003—when none of us, certainly, expect to be around!—that we neglected the sources of our history during the second half-century of the society's existence, as we did during the first half-century."⁸⁹ This brief account is submitted to update Nichols's work, and with the hope that it will facilitate the efforts of future NGS archivists.

The society's first hundred years have produced both remarkable achievements and, as with all hundred-year-old organizations, missed opportunities. In the balance, the society has much to celebrate. Poised to enter its second century, the society echoes in its programs some of the motivations to organize in 1903: it is a leader in the fight to preserve public access to records; it produces and disseminates quality genealogical publications; it sustains an expanded and enhanced book loan program and other member services. NGS has also blazed new trails, establishing itself over the years as a leader in genealogical education, with its conferences, seminars, courses, tours, and myriad educational opportunities. Woven through its history, one overarching accomplishment is its evolution from a small society on the banks of the Potomac to a truly national organization. Many challenges lie ahead, to be certain, but over the next hundred years the society will have a firm, national base—in its organization and in its programs—on which to build and flourish.⁹⁰

86. Annual Report, 1983 folder, Business, Board/Council, RG 5, NGS Archives.

87. Curt B. Witcher, "NGS & GENTECH Join Forces," *NGS Newsmagazine* 28 (2002): 261.

88. Nichols, *History of National Genealogical Society, 1903–53*.

89. "Report of the Archivist of the National Genealogical Society," 2 December 1957, 1957 folder, Business, Board/Council, RG 5, NGS Archives.

90. Programs, activities, and people too numerous to name in these few pages helped NGS achieve national prominence over the past century. A longer version of this article will be available as an NGS special publication. Readers are encouraged to see additional material about the society and its programs at the NGS Web site <<http://www.ngsgenealogy.org>>, which recognizes many leaders of the National Genealogical Society's first one hundred years.

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contextual interpretation of the documents and skilled record linkage. Reaching conclusions requires solid grounding in evidentiary principles when no document explicitly states a needed identity. Moreover, the continuum of generational history holds no tolerance for errors, because mistakes in one generation multiply with each new generation.

Despite the level of rigor our discipline requires, a question still persists: *Does all this represent serious study—or "mere personal fulfillment"?* Researchers in related fields answer that question for us daily as they draw upon our work. Each well-executed family study provides reliable data for economic, social, and political historians. Each study provides a roadmap for geneticists and legal evidence for courts of law. For anthropologists, demographers, and other scholars, generational history provides colors, shapes, and textures for painting panoramas of human development.

Obviously, genealogy is "serious" study. *Why, then, does our field still fight an uphill battle for recognition as a legitimate field of social study?*

Like many prejudices, the cause lies rooted in the past and is kept alive by an educational system that has not taught Joe Citizen standards of reliable research. The public naïvely assumes that history consists merely of recorded facts assembled with no particular skills. Commercial vendors of information perpetuate this fallacy by advertising "family history" as a simple troll for names among databases and indexes. Moreover, academic historians who narrowly define their peers and their audience have failed to acquaint themselves with research principles and scholarly standards long practiced within the genealogical field.

As the National Genealogical Society celebrates one hundred years of contribution to the study of history, we should evaluate ourselves as well.² Progress requires understanding our mistakes, because, as we know, our past shapes both our present and our future. We now stand at a threshold and face a critical choice. Are we content for other disciplines to dismiss genealogy as an "ego trip"—History Lite? Will we accept a role some others propose for us—that of Data Sweeper, mere drudge labor to boost the productivity of "real" historians? Or will we advance the pursuit of knowledge as History's New Frontier? Whether our field earns its overdue legitimacy depends upon how each of us responds to the challenges and opportunities we face today.

2. For earlier surveys, see Robert M. Taylor Jr. and Ralph J. Crandall, "Historians and Genealogists: An Emerging Community of Interest," in Taylor and Crandall, eds., *Generations and Change: Genealogical Perspectives in Social History* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1986), 3–28; Elizabeth Shown Mills, "Academia vs. Genealogy: Prospects for Reconciliation and Progress," *NGS Quarterly* 71 (June 1983): 99–106; Lloyd DeWitt Bockstruck, "Four Centuries of Genealogy: A Historical Overview," *Reference Quarterly* (Winter 1983): 162–70; Walter Lee Sheppard Jr., "A Bicentennial Look at Genealogy Methods, Performance, Education, and Thinking," *NGS Quarterly* 65 (March 1977): 3–15; Lester J. Cappon, "Genealogy: Handmaid of History," *NGS Quarterly* 45 (March 1957): 1–9; and William Carroll Hill, *A Century of Genealogical Progress, Being a History of the New England Historic Genealogical Society, 1845–1945* (Boston: The Society, 1945).

HISTORY VS. GENEALOGY: ROOTS OF THE SCHISM

American genealogy traditionally dates from 1771, when Luke Stebbins published an account of his New England family.³ America was on the verge of a Revolution that would upend politics and undercut the respect for ancestors that had strengthened every society since Biblical days. Postwar, ancestral matters became not just politically incorrect but suspect. To many, genealogy smacked of elitism. In 1783 former Continental Army officers sparked a national controversy by organizing a society with hereditary rights, the Society of the Cincinnati—prompting fears that it would breed a new ruling dynasty.⁴ Amid social and political paranoia of the Early Republic, even Americans like George Washington understood the wisdom of camouflaging their own curiosity about their ancestral past.⁵

Eventually, the Republic's infrastructure stabilized and a new crop of histories blossomed. Genealogy and history again became close bedfellows and would remain so for nearly a century. Their bed was occupied by "men of letters" with credentials in other fields—typically law, science, and religion. "History" had not yet become a profession. Most writers viewed history's purpose as inspiration for new generations, and they filled chronicles with heroic tales putting their forebears on front and center stage, from Jamestown to Plymouth Rock.

The Rebirth of History as a Profession

America's Centennial celebration helped unite a divided nation after the Civil War and Reconstruction, but it also split history into factions. While the Centennial sparked popular interest in matters historical and fueled Everyman's curiosity over his own ancestors' roles in the nation's founding, populist constructions of the past provoked an academic backlash. A new generation of historians had earned degrees abroad, particularly in Germany. Steeped in the emerging "scientific methods of investigation," they returned to American colleges and universities to attack traditional accounts of American history they considered little more than morality plays penned by egotistical authors.

Historical truth, the new academics argued, could be understood only through scientific methods of study—specifically, thorough research, objective analyses, and careful documentation. Deriding "antiquarianism," they crusaded to *professionalize* their field by divorcing it from genealogy and local history.⁶ John Franklin

3. Luke Stebbins, *The Genealogy of Mr. Samuel Stebbins and Hannah His Wife, from the Year 1701 to 1771* (Hartford, Conn.: Ebenezer Watson, 1771). Bockstruck, 163, also points to a 1763 Bollinger broadside printed in Pennsylvania and an appendix to the 1731 *Memoirs of Roger Clap*, published in Boston, as precursors.

4. An excellent study of this controversy is Minor Myers Jr., *Liberty without Anarchy: A History of The Society of the Cincinnati* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1983).

5. Jack D. Warren Jr., "George Washington and the Genealogist," *NGS Quarterly* 87 (December 1999): 261–71.

6. A detailed account of the separation of "professional" and "popular" history appears in David D. Van Tassel, "From Learned Society to Professional Organization: The American Historical Association, 1884–1900," *American Historical Review* 89 (October 1984): 929–56, particularly 932.

Jameson, who earned the first American doctorate in history in 1882, argued that genealogy had no value and declared "No historical society has a right to use its research and publications in furthering it."⁷ From then on, "history" and "genealogy" took radically different paths. In retrospect, the road genealogy took was not a high one. Although that road has long since been abandoned, consequences have been severe and penalties still exist.

The Exploitation of Genealogy

Post-Civil War America was consumed by the ideology of race in its broadest sense. Hereditary organizations sprang up everywhere for those who could prove descent from *this* group or *that*. Once peace and prosperity returned, the nation attracted unprecedented waves of immigrants (particularly Catholics from Eastern and Southern Europe) and nativism spread like a pox. Many "old American families" of Protestant, Northern European stock reacted with hostility toward peoples who had not created America but who were arriving on its shores expecting to share in its greatness.⁸

Genealogy became a tool of ideologies and prejudices rooted in concepts of *blood*, *heredity*, *race*, and *stock*. Genealogical organizations, including NGS, echoed those ideas. The first issue of the *NGS Quarterly* praised the (Northern European) "Blood that Made the Sturdy Races of New Netherland."⁹ That same year, the society's head, a physician, focused his presidential address on "The Problems That Now Confront Us"—specifically, the "degeneracy and decay of modern society" and the "negative" influence of immigrants. He argued that solutions to these "problems" lay in wise reproductive choices made possible by the new "sciences" of genealogy and eugenics.¹⁰ Similar comments appeared in other genealogical journals.

The *eugenics* to which he referred was a new pseudo-science embraced by most western nations. Founded by Charles Darwin's cousin Sir Francis Galton, eugenics defined itself as the "science" of improving the human race by controlling reproduction. Naturally, the movement fed on genealogy; Galton even offered prizes for the biggest compilations of family data.¹¹ Some within the new aca-

7. 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.

8. For an overview of this period, see Oscar Handlin, *Race and Nationality in American Life* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1957).

9. Minnie F. Mickley, "Our Ancestors: The Kern Family of America," *NGS Quarterly* 1 (April 1912), unpaginated, 4th page.

10. Joseph G. B. Bulloch, "The Problems That Now Confront Us," *NGS Quarterly* 1 (October 1912): 39–41.

11. Ruth Schwartz Cowan, *Sir Francis Galton and the Study of Heredity in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1985), 59. For eugenics in historical perspective, see Mark H. Haller, *Eugenics: Hereditarian Attitudes in American Thought* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1963). Ultimately, some good came of eugenics: a wealth of genealogical records. For an introduction to some of these resources, see Thomas H. Roderick et al., "Files of the Eugenics Record Office: A Resource for Genealogists," in *Your Family's Health History: An Introduction*, a special issue of *NGS Quarterly* 82 (June 1994): 97–113.

demic history held comparable views. However, that profession's insistence upon objectivity constrained their influence, while genealogy remained a foil for pride based upon genetic heritage—a pride valued more than objectivity or truth.

Adolph Hitler's atrocities committed in the name of *race* and *blood* discredited eugenics, but ancestral study continued to be equated with personal edification and amusement rather than *serious* study. The American Antiquarian Society's annual reports show how far historians and research facilities went to distance themselves from genealogy during the mid-twentieth century. Founded in 1812, the society had been the first American library to place priority on family history. For more than a century its mission was unchanged. By 1953, it boasted one of the nation's top three collections of genealogies—but added that the society did not encourage “genealogical investigation” when a researcher was “interested only in his own family ancestry, although it realizes that such research is of much *entertainment*.”¹² The 1960 annual report showed even more disdain: “For many years we took all genealogical serials but we dropped many of them as potboilers of no utility to the historians.”¹³

Potboilers. Pulp fiction. Entertainment of no *intellectual* value.

RECONCILING HISTORY & GENEALOGY: THWARTED PROSPECTS

Despite the continued denigration of genealogy by academics, genealogy and history had been quietly growing together for several decades. Each stayed within its sphere, but their orbits were aligning. In both fields, progressives hoped for reconciliation between the “new genealogists” and “new historians.”

The Rise of Genealogical Scholarship

A school of “scientific” genealogists had emerged in the 1930s, a half-century after its counterpart in history. As professionals and scholars, some trained in history, they believed that historians would never properly interpret the “broad sweep” of civilization unless grassroots-level study was undertaken on the individual lives of common men and women. More important, they insisted that worthwhile family accounts had to meet scholarly standards. As their leader Donald Lines Jacobus later said:

Driven by a zeal to rescue their favorite avocation from its deplorable and desperate state, they started writing and publishing. They wrote accounts of specific families, documented and referenced; they showed by example how problems should be solved, what sources should be used, and how records should be interpreted; they attacked many of the absurdities and atrocities committed in the name of genealogy by the

12. Clarence S. Brigham, “Report of the Council,” *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society*; April 15, 1953–October 21, 1953, 63 (Worcester, Mass.: The Society, 1954), 7. Italics added.

13. Clifford K. Shipton, “Report of the Council,” *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* . . . 1960, 70 (Worcester: The Society, 1961), 362.

armchair dilettantes who conjured lines of descent from their own fervid imaginations [and] the poorest printed sources.¹⁴

From this school of "new genealogists" were born four standard-bearers: (a) in 1940, the American Society of Genealogists, recognized as our field's scholastic honor society; (b) in 1950, the National Institute for Genealogical Research, based at the National Archives; (c) in 1964, Samford University's Institute of Genealogy and Historical Research; and (d) also in 1964, the Board for Certification of Genealogists, an independent agency since its founding.

The Birth of Social History

While the "new genealogists" forged standards for sound family research, historians were undergoing their own sea change. Amid the social upheavals of the 1960s, a wave of "new historians" reevaluated their discipline. Some turned from traditional studies of economics, politics, and wars to focus on the family, the home, and the local community. Turning to New England's vital records, probate files, and deeds, they discovered a trove of solid work done by genealogists. They created statistical databases using those materials, then published historical interpretations rooted, at last, in individual lives.¹⁵ Some developed and applied genealogical techniques over many years to reconstitute families in the colonial Chesapeake. Their research produced insightful, groundbreaking social histories.¹⁶

Other scholars attempted the same in places that lacked New England's unique fund of vital records—and failed. Why? Academic historians had scorned "family" and "local" history for so long that even the best-trained among them knew little or nothing about using grassroots-level records—much less the principles and standards of family reconstruction. Moreover, even as social historians flirted with genealogical sources and methods, most still shunned educational forums in genealogy, as well as serious practitioners of the field.

Why did the divide persist? Judith Shklar, Cowles Professor of Government at Harvard, summed up the view of most academics in 1972: "Genealogies are rarely accurate. Their most usual purpose is, after all, to discover eminent ancestors, and a sense of veracity is not likely to inhibit such an enterprise. Social pretensions are too important to let the truth interfere with them."¹⁷

That concept remained entrenched until America's second centennial re-

14. Quoted by Milton Rubincam, "Adventures in Genealogy," in *Genealogical Research: Methods and Sources*, Rubincam, ed., vol. 1, rev. ed. (Washington: American Society of Genealogists, 1980), 7–8.

15. For example, John Demos, *A Little Commonwealth: Family Life in Plymouth Colony* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970); and Philip Greven Jr., *Four Generations: Population, Land, and Family in Colonial Andover, Massachusetts* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1970).

16. For example, Lorena S. Walsh, "Charles County, Maryland, 1658–1705: A Study in Chesapeake Political and Social Structure" (Ph.D. diss., Michigan State University, 1977); and Darrett B. and Anita H. Rutman, *A Place in Time: Middlesex County, Virginia, 1650–1750* (New York: Norton, 1984).

17. Judith N. Shklar, "Subversive Genealogies," *Daedalus: Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 101 (Winter 1972): 129.

minded us that family pride is as much the birthright of the poor and oppressed as that of the upper crust.

The Bicentennial Backlash

Ironically, the catalyst was a novel.¹⁸ Although its author, Alex Haley, did not find his roots,¹⁹ he convinced the world that every family has an important story to tell and that the story is *there, somewhere*, waiting for every ordinary Gene and Genie to find it. *Roots* sparked a profound revolution. In the public mind the search for ancestors—poor or rich, black sheep or blue bloods—became respectable. To archivists, it initiated a crisis as hordes of “untrained headhunters” invaded the old world of “sedate scholars.” To historians, it represented utter madness. One professor fretted to my husband, his colleague, that giving *genies* access to original records was like “putting loaded guns in the hands of babes.” *Historians*, in his view, were trained to *interpret history properly*; *genies* weren’t.

Rootsmania’s eruption in 1976, amid America’s Bicentennial, shattered possibilities for cooperation between genealogy and history. Professional historical societies denounced genealogists who were invading libraries and archives that historians considered “theirs.” Genealogy continued to be dismissed as “nostalgic compulsion and self-protective amnesia.”²⁰ Practitioners were viewed as unschooled *genies*, incapable of quality research or of “treat[ing] primary source documents with the care, respect, and insight they deserve.”²¹

For most of the twentieth century, this mindset dominated academic institutions. Few policy makers recognized how much they damaged their own cause. Academic, genetic, and legal researchers increasingly consulted genealogies and based their professional conclusions on decisions of genealogists about relationships and patterns of childbirth, marriage, and mortality. When “serious” libraries slammed the doors on “serious” genealogists, denying access to needed materials, they undercut the quality of not just family histories but also scholarly work in other fields that use our materials.

18. Alex Haley, *Roots* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1976).

19. For a professional historian’s assessment of Haley’s alleged Gambian roots, see Donald R. Wright, “Uprooting Kunta Kinte: On the Perils of Relying on Encyclopedic Informants,” *History of Africa* 8 (1981): 205–17. For a journalistic appraisal of Haley’s Gambian search efforts, see Mark Ottaway’s lengthy report, “Tangled Roots,” *The (London) Sunday Times*, 10 April 1977. For an interdisciplinary (historical and genealogical) appraisal of the American segment of *Roots*, see Gary B. Mills and Elizabeth Shown Mills, “*Roots* and the New ‘Faction’: A Legitimate Tool for Clio?” *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 89 (January 1981): 3–26. For a contemporary appraisal of the impact of *Roots* upon genealogical scholarship, see Mills and Mills, “The Genealogist’s Assessment of Alex Haley’s *Roots*,” *NGS Quarterly* 84 (March 1984): 35–49; this last paper originated as the keynote address at the 1983 NGS national conference, Fort Worth, Texas.

20. Historian David Lowenthal, quoted by Sheila O’Hare, “Genealogy and History,” *Common-Place: The Interactive Journal of Early American Life* 2 (April 2002), online <<http://www.common-place.org>>, part 1, “Issues and Prospects”; downloaded 3 May 2002.

21. Christopher D. Barth, “Archivists, Genealogists, Access, and Automation: Past and Present Trends in Archival Access Technologies and Their Implications for the Future of Genealogical Research in Archives,” dated 8 May 1997, online <<http://www.arcticwind.com/cdb/writings/archives1.shtml>>, p. 16; downloaded 27 April 2003.

A Tenuous Toehold

To their credit, in the last several decades some historians have dared to plead genealogy's cause. In 1959, Edward Saveth declared that most family histories were "not much more than padded genealogies and not likely to be useful to the historian." Still, he argued that "the bare genealogical record—births, deaths, lines of descent—can be helpful in the study of family mobility and 'in the technique of family reconstruction,' which is one of the aims of historical demography in studying the early American family."²² In 1975 Samuel Hays vigorously called for "a closer relationship between the new social history and the new genealogy. On one side," he pointed out, "the concerns of historians can add a wider dimension to genealogy, and on the other side, the work of genealogists can provide crucial evidence for social history."²³ Hays was right. That synergistic relationship is exactly what was—and still is—needed.

Charles F. Bryan raised another argument in the journal of the American Association for State and Local History:

Many historians, including myself, have been embarrassed more than once by running into genealogists who know . . . records, land policy, or migration patterns better than the professionals. And although many genealogists still narrowly focus their interest in the past, more and more are truly concerned with the broader historical picture and realize that a more complete understanding of history helps them become better genealogists.

Because of the increasing professionalism in the genealogy field, the time has arrived for historical agencies . . . to overcome the fear of "selling out to the 'genies'." By continuing to ignore them, historical agencies will lose a remarkable opportunity to broaden and increase the size of the public they serve.²⁴

In a similar vein, Richard Cox in 1984 contended that historians should accept genealogists because their work has value *and* because they "are often the most dedicated supporters of historical institutions in their perpetual conflicts with budgets and staffing."²⁵

The past decade, particularly, has generated much debate over the disconnect between history professionals and the public they serve.²⁶ Ann Cooper has eloquently described the result:

22. Edward N. Saveth, "The Problem of American Family History," *American Quarterly* 21 (2), *Supplement* (Summer 1969): 311–29; for the quotes see 312–13.

23. 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; for the quote, see 40.

24. Charles F. Bryan Jr., "What Should We Do about the 'Genies'?" *History News* 41 (January 1986): 32.

25. Richard J. Cox, "Genealogy and Public History: New Genealogical Guides and Their Implications for Public Historians," *Public Historian* 6 (Spring 1984): 89–96, particularly 93.

26. John R. Dichtl, "Building toward Our 100th Anniversary," *OAH [Organization of American Historians] Newsletter* 31 (February 2003): 16; and Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, "Vitalizing a Profession," *OAH Newsletter* 31 (May 2003), online <<http://www.oah.org/pubs/nl/2003feb/dichtl.html>> and <<http://www.oah.org/pubs/nl/2003may/hall.html?emtm0503n12>>; downloaded 2 May 2003.

In failing to transmit the knowledge of who we are and how we got here, of the commonality of our past as well as our important differences, we have lost the cement that has held us together. . . . Until 40–50 years ago . . . history was a focal point of school curricula. Earlier, history was a focal point of community life, as people learned of their heritage by listening as a group to old songs and stories. A sense of shared past united people with a sense of shared present, shared context for their lives, a sense of community. Nowadays, the oral tradition has largely disappeared. . . . The result is a population that doesn't understand the principles on which our government is founded, that does not think analytically, that doesn't vote and doesn't care. . . . The result is increasing polarization and decreasing civility and willingness to work for, or even acknowledge, a common good.²⁷

All these messages still struggle for an audience. Publications of the American Historical Association and the Organization of American Historians lament poor job prospects for history students, repeating worn-out suggestions that they be steered into the equally crowded fields of public history or corporate records management—or encouraged to retool themselves as political scientists or theologians.²⁸ No known writer has proposed teaching the methods, sources, and standards for reconstructing *families* and steering jobless students into the genealogical profession, although a few young historians have discovered this career path on their own.

RECONCILIATION WITH ARCHIVISTS & LIBRARIANS

Two decades ago archivists and librarians stood on the threshold of a professional crisis as serious as the one historians still face. Forward thinkers among them successfully argued that “the new genealogist” could be a respected colleague and ally. Phebe Jacobson, in the *American Archivist* in 1981, frankly acknowledged that “Denigrating genealogists has been a cherished avocation of archivists ever since we began scratching our way up the ladder toward professional status.” Then, calling theirs a field “turned upside down,” she questioned whether it was “justifiable or prudent” to expect genealogists to wait while archivists “first serve fellow public servants and superfluous historians.”²⁹

Some colleagues of Jacobson, like some historians, saw pragmatic reasons for welcoming genealogical researchers. Librarian Craig Amason argued in 1988 that genealogists’ wealth and community influence could help “to further the library’s goals.”³⁰ Time proved him right. In 1992, John Grabowski—a historian turned archivist—noted that genealogists were the fastest-growing group of researchers

27. Ann E. Cooper, “Imagine: Literacy, History, and More Perfect Union,” *Ideas, Notes, and News about History Education* [newsletter of the National Council for History Education] 15 (December 2002): 1, 7.

28. Particularly insightful are *Historians and the Public(s)*, a special issue of *Perspectives: American Historical Association Newsletter* 38 (May 2000), and various letters published by the *OAH Newsletter*, 2000–03.

29. Phebe R. Jacobson, “‘The World Turned Upside Down’: Reference Priorities and the State Archives,” *American Archivist* 44 (Fall 1981): 342.

30. Craig R. Amason, “Instruction for Genealogists in the Public Library,” in Robin Kinder and Bill Katz, eds., *Information Brokers and Reference Services* (New York: Haworth Press, 1988), 293.

and that their lobbying efforts had saved archives, records, and budgets. In appreciation, Grabowski's facility (the Western Reserve Historical Society) labored to assist genealogists, who then reciprocated with valuable volunteer service, creating reference tools and finding aids equally helpful to historians.³¹

Laura Graham of the Library of Congress's digital *American Memory* project details other benefits from interaction with genealogists. Describing her project's online material available to researchers, Graham says the library did not anticipate "the flow of content and information *back* to the Library of Congress from people who have local history, genealogical, or other specialized information to offer for enhancing [our] descriptions of items in the institution's collections."³²

Vestiges of prejudice against genealogists persist nevertheless. For example, the American Library Association's staple, *The Librarian's Genealogy Notebook*, plasters across its cover a cutesy but denigrating eye catcher:

Look out for adults with symptoms of the highly contagious Genealogy Pox. Symptoms include "continual complaint as to need for names, dates, and places. Patient has blank expression, sometimes deaf to spouse and children. Has no taste for work of any kind, except feverishly looking through records at libraries and courthouses. Has compulsion to write letters. Swears at mail carrier when he or she doesn't leave mail. Frequents strange places such as cemeteries . . ."³³

The latest polls of archivists in America and abroad are more encouraging, emphasizing respect for genealogists as patrons and researchers. Christopher Barth of Ohio conducted two simultaneous polls in 1997. The first surveyed genealogists attending the NGS conference and found that 94 percent were experienced users of "primary" archival materials.³⁴ Polling his archival colleagues, he found that genealogists earned "the largest number of positive comments and more comments of a positive nature than negative," and added, "Of the negative comments given to all groups, those attributed to administrative and scholarly users seem more negative than those for genealogists."³⁵

Barth also laments that a "general lack of communication between archival circles and genealogical organizations continues to stymie solid advances within the realm of archival/genealogical relations."³⁶ He cautions that colleagues who shun genealogists "run the risk of losing potentially lucrative methods of generating income—and losing the support and patronage of a very important archival

31. John J. Grabowski, "Keepers, Users, and Funders: Building an Awareness of Archival Value," *American Archivist* 55 (Summer 1992): 407.

32. Laura Graham, "Tales from the Vault: A Journey over the Mountain," *Common-Place* 3 (January 2003), online <<http://common-place.org>>, paras. 10–12; downloaded 27 April 2003. Italics added.

33. Dahrl Elizabeth Moore, *The Librarian's Genealogy Notebook: A Guide to Resources* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1998), back cover.

34. Barth, "Archivists, Genealogists, Access, and Automation," 18–19. See also Public Record Office, "National Survey of Visitors to British Archives, February 2001," *Information for Archivists*, online <http://www.pro.gov.uk/archives/psqg/survey_summary_overall.htm>.

35. Barth, "Archivists, Genealogists, Access, and Automation," 17.

36. *Ibid.*

patron group.” Then he pointedly asks, “In today’s business climate of both budgetary and personnel ‘downsizing,’ can archivists afford” to continue past discriminations?³⁷

Cynics may view this as The Great American Principle at work: *Money talks*. However, attitudinal shifts also reflect growing awareness of genealogical standards. In *The American Archivist* in 2002, Duane P. Swanson of the Indiana Historical Society states that genealogists have “move[d] away from simply completing ancestral and descendancy charts to compiling data about the historical context in which their ancestors lived and worked.”³⁸ The contrast between his observations and those of the previously quoted *Notebook* stem from their different experiences. Librarians are more likely to encounter the inexperienced “family tree climbers,” while Swanson, Barth, and Grabowski deal personally with genealogists who are experienced archival researchers. Bottom line: quality work earns respect.

PROSPECTS FOR IMPROVED RELATIONS

Improved relationships with archivists and librarians leave one major challenge: how to bridge the divides that still remain between generational history and the academic world where it should be taught.

Allies and Misdirected Bridges

Allies of genealogy can help bring it and academic history together. The newly organized International Council on Archives, Committee on Outreach and User Services, is studying how archivists and genealogical researchers have cooperated in the past and how they might in the future.³⁹ Other librarians and archivists argue our cause, but not always adequately.

In a recent article, librarian Sheila O’Hare sees prospects for cooperation in cyberspace, noting that historians and genealogists “have begun to reach some common ground on the Internet.”⁴⁰ O’Hare’s characterization of genealogy, however, demonstrates that we need to better educate those who do speak out for us. Her survey of genealogy and history attempts to identify the “best” of each. Among important printed materials for history she includes the expected scholarly journals; for genealogy she covers only Alex Haley’s novel—recognizing not a single scholarly journal.⁴¹ Nor does she acknowledge genealogy as a *profession*;

37. *Ibid.*, 3.

38. Duane P. Swanson, review of *Guide to Genealogical Research in the National Archives*, 3d ed., by Anne Bruner Eales and Robert M. Kvasnicka, eds., *American Archivist* 65 (Spring/Summer 2002): 121–24; quote on 122.

39. Susan Tucker, “Assessing Archival Responses to Genealogical Research,” grant proposal submitted in Spring 2003 to the National Historical Publications and Records Commission, p. 1. We thank Ms. Tucker of Tulane University for sharing a copy of her proposal and her preliminary research.

40. O’Hare, “Genealogy and History,” part 1, paras. 2–3.

41. For the benefit of readers from outside the field: the four “national” genealogical journals that are best known for their emphasis on scholarly standards are the *National Genealogical Society Quarterly* (founded 1912), the *New England Historical and Genealogical Register* (founded 1847 by the New England Historic Genealogical

she applies the word "professional" solely to academic historians. She lauds many "Do History" type projects of universities and professional history groups; however, she takes no notice whatever of the Web sites or projects of the National Genealogical Society or the Board for Certification of Genealogists.

In O'Hare's view, the heart of genealogy and its value to history are the online databases available at prices far lower than what academic suppliers charge. She spotlights companies and networks whose material is created by individuals with little or no training in research methodology, handwriting interpretation, or document analysis. She plugs unreliable "family trees" and "pedigree charts" on various sites and concludes:

The true potential for history-genealogy (or professional-nonprofessional) collaboration . . . is already emerging on the Web. If the end result is that exciting new source materials can be combined with contextual analysis and shared with a wider audience, all students of history will be grateful to both groups.⁴²

In other words: "nonprofessional" genies—trained or not—can be used to mine the "local" sources historians have long scorned. Historians (the only "professionals" and "scholars" involved) can then retrieve online material (for free or for cheap), interpret the unvetted data, and feed it back to a trusting public—disregarding the canons of genealogical scholarship that ensure accuracy. That brings to mind the adage *garbage in, garbage out*.

Yes, collaboration *can* produce outstanding results. Historians who use genealogical Web sites for data, however, need to learn what constitutes *quality* in genealogy. They should know the standards for reliable compilations—abstracts, extracts, transcripts, translations, databases, indexes, and genealogies.⁴³ They should insist upon sound documentation and the use of original materials and exercise rigor in evaluating and accepting derivatives when originals are not available. Similarly, genealogy's advocates in the archival and library worlds would do well to recognize the difference between *genealogical study* and the indiscriminate gathering of names and dates.

Defining the Differences

To foster genealogy's acceptance by other professionals we must better define ourselves, develop our strengths, and educate our supporters. To do this, we will have to act in a way our field has traditionally rejected as "elitist." *The reality is*

Society), *The American Genealogist* (founded 1922 by Donald Lines Jacobus), and *The Genealogist* (founded 1979 and assumed 1997 by the American Society of Genealogists).

42. O'Hare, "Genealogy and History," part I, para. 2.

43. Today's three "standard works" that define genealogical practices and standards are (1) Board for Certification of Genealogists, *The BCG Genealogical Standards Manual* (Orem, Utah: Ancestry, 2000); *Professional Genealogy: A Manual for Researchers, Writers, Editors, Lecturers, and Librarians*, Elizabeth Shown Mills, ed. (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Co., 2001); and Mills, *Evidence! Citation & Analysis for the Family Historian* (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Co., 1997).

this: Within the generic label “genealogist,” three different species exist—a distinction rarely recognized by other disciplines. Those three might be characterized as follows:

FAMILY TREE CLIMBERS: Many are avid toilers, but they *collect* rather than *conduct investigations*. Typically, they spurn documentation, evidence standards, and the study of instructional manuals, scholarly journals, or archival catalogs because they are “just doing this for fun.” They prefer publications and Web sites with “family trees” and lists of names. They write libraries and history departments asking for “everything you have on . . .” They arrive at repositories they have “heard about,” without knowing their holdings. They describe at length their forebears’ exploits, assuming the staff will produce a cache of records on Grandpa. Then they wince when called “genie.”

TRADITIONAL GENEALOGISTS: As serious compilers of family data, most strive to meet the standards set forth by the Jacobus School in the 1930s: a sound knowledge of fundamental sources, thorough documentation, and careful examination of the evidence to ensure correctly assembled identities and relationships. Their goal is likely to produce “compiled genealogies” that are *reference* works rather than *family histories*, so they try to identify as many family members as possible, with vital statistics but little or no historical context.

GENERATIONAL HISTORIANS: Individuals of this mindset thirst for historical knowledge in all its cultural, economic, legal, religious, and social contexts. With or without history degrees, they approach research with a commitment to standards and excellence learned in their professional careers. They value the difference between gathering names and reconstructing lives. They seek out specialized institutes, conferences, learning tapes, online courses, and distance-learning opportunities to hone research skills. Before visiting a repository they identify its holdings and study its catalogs. Their research is exhaustive; they document carefully, evaluate evidence critically, and rely only on the best sources possible. Their measure of success is not the number of family members found, but the extent to which they correctly portray each human life they study.

Unfortunately, the public and academic image of genealogy is typically that of the “family tree climber.” Serious researchers have learned that, when visiting archives and record offices, any use of the G-WORD (*genealogy*) may limit their access to records. The result is that they conduct their work so quietly and efficiently that staff and other patrons do not recognize them as genealogists.

All points considered, it is fair to ask: *given the public’s limited exposure to “real” genealogists, is it surprising that so much of the academic world still uses the past as a stick to beat us?*

We have made progress. The *NGS Quarterly*—which cracked a corner of the academic barricade seventeen years ago with university-based editors and editorial offices—has earned some acceptance among historians.⁴⁴ In New England,

44. For the past decade, relevant items from the *NGS Quarterly* have been included in “calendars of recent scholarship” published by major history journals such as the *Journal of American History* and the *Journal of Southern History*. The ambiguity of genealogy’s acceptance is ironically demonstrated in the May 2002 issue of the latter journal, wherein the one-paragraph preface to the calendar states, “This classified bibliography

academics frequent the New England Historic Genealogical Society library and respect its genealogical scholars. Skilled genealogists pursuing advanced studies in history are ambassadors bridging the fields. As historian Gloria Jackson Main observed, good genealogists "hew to stricter rules of evidence and more rigorous citation practices than even professional historians."⁴⁵ Yet even historians who concede respect for individual genealogists do not yet accept genealogy itself as a scholarly *discipline*.

MAPPING THE ROAD AHEAD

Where does genealogy's future lie? This paper argues that our field represents history's ultimate New Frontier. We *are* historians of the family, and the *family* is the nucleus around which most societies have been built. Any attempt to study the history of a people without studying its family structure is to confront a robot and pretend one feels a pulse.

Our Potential

Our investments in quality and standards are paying significant dividends among archivists and librarians. *How long will it be before we can say the same for the rest of the academic world—not just for the historians who need our skills, but also for educational institutions where we need degree programs in generational history?* Every field has both qualified and mediocre practitioners. Genealogy, however, has an added image problem. We were responsible for it initially; but we have treated the warts that once disfigured us: the masquerades and false grandeur of past generations, the muck of the eugenics movement, and the lack of formal educational programs. We have created a scholarly field and a profession. Yet we remain tainted by a past imperfect.

The image problem exists for four reasons, each building upon the other:

- We have not clearly defined our identity.
- We have not educated the media and the academic world as to what real genealogy is.
- We lack financial resources to support outreach and public education.
- We have accepted second-class citizenship in the educational world.

Identity

Most serious disciplines have their formal definitions. A "historian," for example, is defined by the American Historical Association as an individual "with some formal training in history who practice[s] history through either teaching or

includes most scholarly articles in the field of southern history published in periodicals in 2001 *except for . . . genealogical writings. . . .*" [Italics added.] Immediately following that paragraph, the first entry of the bibliography is "Jefferson-Hemings: A Special Issue . . . *Nat. Genealogical Soc. Quar.*, v. 89, Sept., 165–237." See "Southern History in Periodicals, 2001: A Selected Bibliography," *Journal of Southern History* 68 (May 2002): 375.

45. Gloria J. Main, review of *The Great Migration Begins: Immigrants to New England, 1620–1653*, by Robert Charles Anderson, comp., in *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 54 (October 1997): 858.

research or both."⁴⁶ So: *Who is a genealogist?* Millions of people trolling for names on the Internet or the library shelf *say* they are genealogists. Are they? Neither NGS nor any other group in our field has actually defined the activity or those who practice it. The issue here is not elitism. The issue is *knowing how to do* and *doing* what one claims to do. It is *abiding by* that activity's rules. If I called myself a golfer and I went out to the tenth hole and whacked away at pomegranates with a pogo stick, would others call me a *golfer*? No, they would call me a *wacko*. Even hobbies have rules.

Instructions for sound genealogical research have long existed. But our field will continue to be dismissed by those who take history and education seriously so long as those who claim to be *genealogists* ignore rules and standards. To achieve legitimacy as a worthwhile field of history, we must either: 1) define *genealogist* in a way that demands accountability, or 2) define *genealogical scholarship* by its own name. I suggest the latter and argue that genealogy which follows modern principles of scholarship is, in fact, *generational history*.⁴⁷

This proposed identity should distinguish our *discipline* from the gathering of names and creation of databases that has come to characterize "genealogy" in both popular and academic minds. Adopting the term, however, would carry responsibility. For *generational history* to hold meaning it must be backed by the same kinds of standards that back all legitimate scholarly fields. Those who use it should

1. meet the historical profession's definition of "historian"—an individual with some formal education in history, who practices history through research or teaching;
2. possess earned credentials in genealogy (certification or accreditation) and, as such programs develop, pursue course work and degrees in generational history;
3. publish their research in *peer-reviewed* journals whose essays meet the standards set for scholarship by the academic world—i.e.,
 - exhaustive research, with skillful analysis and interpretation of findings;
 - thorough documentation, relying upon only the best existing sources, carefully identified;
 - sound theories and conclusions, critically tested through peer review and dialog with professional colleagues in and outside the field.⁴⁸

46. "Affiliation with the American Historical Association," *American Historical Association: The Professional Association for All Historians*, online <<http://www.theaha.org/affiliates/application.htm>>.

47. William Strauss and Neil Howe of the LifeCourse Associates network (and longtime "Capitol Hill observers") have promoted this term to describe their books on specific generations as a social phenomenon—as, for example, *Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation* (New York: Vintage Books, 2000). Neither professional history organizations nor academic history departments, however, have adopted the term or recognized such a field. Internationally, the term *generational history* is commonly and informally applied to particular families in which multigenerational studies are conducted for social, genetic, and other reasons. The use of the term *generational history* as a formal field of history would follow this traditional usage.

48. For one current discussion of these criteria, see Avra Michelson and Jeff Rothenberg, "Scholarly Communication and Information Technology: Exploring the Impact of Changes in the Research Process on Archives," *American Archivist* 55 (Spring 1992): 236–315, particularly 241.

Outreach

A second task is to educate colleagues in related fields—librarians, archivists, attorneys, demographers, funeral home directors, geneticists, geographers, historians, journalists, legislators, private investigators, and other constituencies—about genealogy. As individuals, many of us have the affiliations needed to lecture at conferences in related fields and contribute to their professional literature. As genealogical instructors, institute directors, and program planners, we need to market the expertise of our field to the academic world.

Yet a frank assessment of our track record suggests that we need to market our expertise in scholarly arenas more creatively. The one-sided outreach pattern whereby we invite academics to appear on our programs produces predictable results. They appear, deliver presentations that typically misgauge the depth to which we probe our subjects, and depart without attending sessions that would acquaint them with the level of instruction provided in serious genealogical forums.

The failure of this approach prompts the question: Would outreach of a different type—for example, scholarships for graduate students to attend genealogical institutes and major conferences—not bring a better return? A consortium of historians and archivists pointed out a decade ago:

Graduate history students need to master certain research competencies in order to function effectively as professionals over the course of their careers. 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.⁴⁹

Genealogical institutes and conferences could provide instruction that would serve both academic needs and our own. Scholarships to *today's graduate students* could build vital bridges between our branch of history and *tomorrow's academic historians*.

NGS and our other major organizations should be *visible* and *active* at conferences of disciplines that cross ours—in exhibit halls and at podiums. We are much better positioned than our counterparts in other fields to know how our discipline can enhance theirs, but we have to explain it in *their* venues. NGS should participate in consortiums that bring together the history and archival worlds. We should present ourselves in literature of related fields—and in popular media—instead of leaving others to characterize or *caricature* our image.

Funding

It is also time to compete seriously for grants, fellowships, and private contributions. The National Historic Publications and Records Commission recently

49. 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* (Bloomington, Ind.: Organization of American Historians, 1993); online <<http://www.oah.org/>>.

funded a project to study how archivists and genealogists could cooperate more productively, but the applicant was an archivist, not a genealogist.⁵⁰ Major funders have traditionally rejected proposals from the genealogical community. Yet the current success of Houston's Clayton Library—a nationally known genealogical center—and its “friends” organization demonstrates that our initiatives will be seriously considered.⁵¹ Our challenge is to convey how our experience and understanding of historical records uniquely qualify us for projects that advance research and record preservation.

Academic Legitimacy

Achieving educational equality is our most pressing need. Although NGS has been a leader in genealogical education—indeed that has been our prime mission—we pursue that mission in isolation. We should be forging partnerships with colleges and universities to move genealogy into the academic halls with other *for-credit classes* and *degree programs*. While online instruction is increasingly important, it does not represent the mainstream and likely will not for many years. Meanwhile, acceptance of genealogy—or *generational history*—as a legitimate discipline requires acceptance within academia's ivy-covered walls.

Today's explosive interest in genealogy presents an opportunity we cannot afford to squander. *For-credit* education in *brick-and-mortar* institutions should be our major initiative—now. NGS has a solid foundation on which to build, a flagship journal whose standards match those of any related field. Historians who respect the *NGS Quarterly* as a scholarly forum may be willing to put the past behind them, but *we* must reach out. It is up to us to open new channels of communication, to help all historians and educational administrators learn the standards of modern genealogy, and to show them how this discipline can contribute to scholarship.

IN SUM

Genealogy *is* legitimate, vital history. That is the message we need to convey. When NGS was founded, a popular cultural icon was Martin J. Dooley, a fictional Irish saloonkeeper whose creator, a Chicago newspaperman, used him to poke fun at social pretensions—including what he considered the “irrelevance” of history:

I know histry isn't thru, Hinnessy, because it ain't like what I see ivry day in Halsted Shreet. If any wan comes along with a histry iv [of] Greece or Rome that'll show me th' people fightin', gettin' dhrunk, makin' love, gettin' married, owin' th' grocery man an' bein' without hard-coal, I'll believe they was a Greece or Rome, but not

50. Tucker, “Assessing Archival Responses to Genealogical Research.”

51. Robert de Berardinis to Mills, e-mail, 2 March 2003 and 23 June 2003, describing the several grants received to underwrite costs of microfilming and cataloging original records from foreign archives that relate to American history.

before. . . . Histhry is a post-mortem examination. It tells ye what a counthry died iv. But I'd like to know what it lived iv.⁵²

Historians still struggle to prove that history is relevant. We can help. Well-done family histories *show* what it's like every day in Halsted Street.⁵³ Family by family, we show "th' people fightin', gettin' dhrunk, makin' love, gettin' married, owin' th' grocery man an' bein' without" heat in the winter time. *Generational history* shows not what the country *died of* but what it *lived of*, because genealogists study history at its most basic level—the heart and soul of the common man whose needs and dreams drive the George Washingtons and the George Washington Carvers to action.

In a society that causes historians such as Cooper to fear the result of multiculturalism, genealogy is no longer a mere ego trip. It is a vital form of education that no other branch of history can match, because it teaches a powerful truth: None of us can harbor prejudice against another group of people when we realize that, with the very next document we find, we could be a part of them.⁵⁴

Digitalization and the Internet offer truly infinite opportunities for the dissemination of information. However, *information* is not synonymous with *knowledge*. Our challenge is to ensure that those who harvest that information (whether in the name of genealogy or history) process it in a way that preserves its integrity, that they interpret it knowledgeably, and then reassemble the evidence analytically and innovatively. Skilled genealogists have earned the respect of information specialists—librarians, archivists, and digital technicians. If, with their aid, we can bridge the divide between us and our historical colleagues, then history will be far more likely to achieve its ultimate goal: the understanding of ourselves and our world.

52. "The Project Gutenberg eBook of Observations by Mr. Dooley by Finley Peter Dunne," *The Online Books Page*, John Mark Ockerbloom, ed., online <<http://ibiblio.org/gutenberg/etext03/omdoo10.txt>>; downloaded 8 May 2003.

53. For example, see Peter Haring Judd, *The Hatch and Brood of Time: Five Phelps Families in the Atlantic World, 1720–1880* (Boston: Newberry Street Press, 1999).

54. The rapidly increasing use of genetic testing as a genealogical tool underscores this point. For examples of the uses being made of genetics, see the Web sites of FamilyTreeDNA, online <www.familytreedna.com>, which has coined the term *anthrogenealogy*, and Ancestry by DNA <<http://ancestrybyDNA.com>>, as well as Thomas H. Roderick, "The Y Chromosome in Genealogical Research: 'From Their Ys a Father Knows His Own Son,'" *NGS Quarterly* 88 (June 2000): 122–43.

