

# What the Genealogist Expects of an Archival Agency or Historical Society<sup>1</sup>

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WE are all aware of the fact that an unfortunate antipathy exists between members of the archival and historical professions and the genealogists. The former generally view the ancestry searchers with contempt, regarding them as people who contribute little or nothing to our knowledge of this country's past and are chiefly occupied in forging weak links between themselves and such celebrities as Charlemagne and William the Conqueror. The genealogists, on the other hand, often think that archivists and historical society personnel deliberately close their eyes to the real value of genealogical investigation and consequently are uncoöperative when requested to make available records in their custody.

There is some justification for both points of view. Unhappily, there are some genealogists whose time could be better spent than in trying to find a royal or noble forefather or to lay claim to a fabulous fortune that does not exist. As classic examples, we have the claims of the Coultharts to be descendants of a mythical Roman soldier, Coulthartus; of both the noble Feildings of England and the Mennonite Rittenhouses of Pennsylvania — of all people — to be male representatives of the House of Habsburg; and of the Springers of Delaware to be male representatives of the Carolingians and the true owners of the present city of Wilmington. These claims, incidentally, are as nothing compared with the proud boast of the princely Hungarian House of Esterházy that its pedigree begins with the grandfather of Adam, the first man! One can readily understand why a keeper of records nearly loses his "archival patience" when he is confronted by such people as the lady who once asked at the National Archives for the 1790 census of

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Iowa and refused to believe the archivist-in-charge when he explained that he could produce no such document because Iowa was not one of the Thirteen Original States covered by that census.

Looking at the matter from the standpoint of the serious student of genealogy, however, I think you will agree that he too has a right to feel irritated when an archivist looks at him with disdain, giving every indication of an unwillingness to produce records for genealogical research, probably because he feels that to produce them would take time from his records administration functions. When such a situation occurs, the genealogist believes that he must remind the archivist that one of his chief functions is to serve the public; that the records in his custody are public property; and, therefore, that genealogists, as well as other students, have the right of equal access to them. In this connection, permit me to state that my own relations with representatives of the archival profession, both in the National Archives and in the several state agencies where I have worked, have been most cordial and coöperative. Nevertheless, I think a frank discussion of the subject will do much to clarify the situation and pave the way for a better relationship between genealogists, archivists, and historical society personnel.

During the past three quarters of a century genealogical research has made tremendous strides. Under the leadership of the great English authority on feudal history, the late Dr. J. Horace Round and of the foremost American genealogist of the present day, Donald Lines Jacobus, Editor-in-Chief of *The American Genealogist*, a school of scientific genealogical investigators has arisen that not only hammers incessantly at false ancestral pride and faked pedigrees, but also demonstrates (1) the close interrelationship between genealogy and history; and (2) the methods whereby workers in the one field may aid researchers in the other. A high code of ethics has been developed in the genealogical profession, a rigid code that is maintained by the state genealogical societies and, in an overall capacity, by the National Genealogical Society and the American Society of Genealogists, a semi-professional group.

To be a good genealogist one must have as specialized a knowledge of his profession as the archivist and the historian have of their professions. A genealogist must know his source materials and possess a working knowledge of genealogical bibliography for the country as a whole. He must have critical ability and the courage to debunk the false and the fraudulent pedigrees that have done so much to discredit genealogy as an auxiliary science of history. By reason of his detailed researches, he is in a position to contrib-

ute new data on obscure phases of history. For example, you will be interested to learn that it was a genealogist, who is also an archivist, whose researches on the family of a certain Elizabethan writer provided the details of that writer's life, whereas the cataloguer in the Library of Congress was merely able to show that the writer "flourished" in the year 1579. Modern genealogy, if properly pursued, throws much light on manners and customs, eugenics, economics, sociology, philology, topography, and other related studies. In an address before the National Genealogical Society many years ago Dr. Amandus Johnson, the noted authority on the early Swedes in the Delaware Valley, neatly summed up this concept when he observed: "History is based upon biography, and biography is based upon genealogy."

Genealogists represent the majority of the "customers" at archival agencies. This fact is being recognized more and more by archivists. It is fitting, therefore, that in a desire to improve the service rendered by archival and historical agencies, a place has been provided on this program for a discussion of the genealogist's needs and point of view.

The principal aid to efficient genealogical research is an adequate indexing system. Much time is consumed when the genealogist is forced to ask questions about the types of documents in an archival agency's possession, or when the archivist finds it necessary to make a search of the records in his custody in order to ascertain if they contain desired data. I am not implying that every name in every document should be indexed on a 3 x 5 card although, I must confess, that such an index would be the answer to a working genealogist's prayers! But a system whereby the various groups and types of documents in custody could be readily indexed on cards would be of considerable help to the researcher whose time is limited. If it is not feasible to index the collections, a series of finding aids should be prepared. The genealogist has the feeling that an archival agency has thousands of documents that would be of inestimable value in his researches if he but knew what collections the agency possesses and what he may expect to find in them. It is difficult, sometimes, to elicit the proper information in conversation with the archivist-in-charge. The researcher may not know quite what he is looking for, and the archivist may be equally uncertain of the object of the genealogist's search. Finding aids would provide both with the working tools that they need.

Archival agencies and historical societies can also aid genealogists by appointing certain staff members as genealogical consultants

who would become familiar with the needs of genealogists and acquaint themselves with the methods of genealogical research. Such an arrangement would increase the efficiency of the agency or society and, at the same time, make the genealogist free to talk over his problems with a member of the staff who has both a knowledge of and sympathy for the work of genealogists.

Many types of documents engage the attention of family historians. In the National Archives, for instance, are found the Federal census records, as well as military, naval, pension, land, and other records relating to personal history. But the National Archives can serve the genealogist only insofar as the activities of a family or an individual are reflected in the records of the United States Government. State archival agencies, local historical societies, and county court houses are, therefore, the principal repositories of genealogical source materials. Since the history of a state, as well as of a nation, is based upon the activities of its people, many genealogists believe that each state archivist has an obligation to assemble in one place the records of the people of his state, either the original records or copies of them. Some archivists are assuming that obligation by endeavoring to centralize the records of their states up to a certain period, say about 1850. There is much to be said for centralization. The researcher is not forced to run around to different counties in order to consult his source-materials, but can find nearly everything he seeks in a central repository. On the other hand, the great disadvantage of centralization is the danger of a catastrophe overtaking the archival agency and the consequent destruction of all the old records of the state. The problem of centralization or decentralization is one that only the state governments can solve.

For many generations New England has been the seat of genealogical development. Extreme care has been exercised to preserve the vital records of the towns, and funds have been generously provided for their publication down to 1850. The highest degree of efficiency in centralization of records has been attained by the Connecticut State Library, which has set up departments bearing the descriptive names of Local History and Genealogy, Archives, Vital Records, Church Records, Probate, and Cemetery Inscriptions or Veterans Grave Survey. The Library has prepared an alphabetical General Index of Connecticut Vital Records, containing over one million entries, from all of the extant town records to 1850. Its collection of church records contains original registers of

over 600 Connecticut churches. In cases where churches desire to retain their original records, the Library has copies made of them for its files. These church registers now are being indexed. The Library's collections also include about 25,000 family Bible records, tombstone inscriptions from over 2,000 Connecticut cemeteries, newspaper notices of marriages and deaths (now comprising about a million entries), and about 200,000 files of estate papers. Land records are still retained by the town clerks, but the Library now is engaged in microfilming those records for each town.<sup>2</sup>

Other states are following the example of Connecticut in assembling documents of genealogical value. Space will not permit me to describe in detail the efforts of certain states such as Delaware, Maryland, and Virginia, to centralize in their archival agencies documents bearing not only on the history but also on the genealogy of those areas. For various reasons it is impossible to transfer all of the county records to the state capitals, but efforts are being made to assemble as many official documents as possible, as well as collections of family papers, church registers, copies of tombstone inscriptions, and Bible records.<sup>3</sup> In North Carolina the State Department of Archives and History is making a similar effort to assemble personal and unofficial collections, maps, newspapers, and noncurrent county records, all of which are invaluable to the historian of North Carolina families.<sup>4</sup>

To a certain extent, the functions of the historical society overlap those of the state archival agency. Whether this is a desirable circumstance I am not prepared to say at this time, although it is certainly helpful to the researcher. Both institutions may assemble collections of family papers, Bible records, and tombstone inscriptions and, in some instances, official records even find their way to the historical society, as in the case of the excellent collection of early tax lists for Chester County, Pennsylvania, in the possession of the Chester County Historical Society. In some of the court houses where I have worked, especially in one large city, the custodians have been so preoccupied with politics as to neglect their duties toward the public records. In the case just cited, I have found

<sup>2</sup> Marjorie E. Case, "Connecticut Resources for Genealogical Research," *National Genealogical Society Quarterly*, March 1948, pp. 1-4.

<sup>3</sup> Leon de Valinger, Jr., "Delaware Records for Genealogical Research," *National Genealogical Society Quarterly*, March 1947, pp. 1-3; Roger Thomas, "Genealogical Records at the Hall of Records," *Ibid.*, June 1945, pp. 49-50; Nellie P. Waldenmaier, "Source Records in the Virginia State Library," *Ibid.*, March 1945, pp. 31-32.

<sup>4</sup> Christopher Crittenden, "The North Carolina State Department of Archives and History and Its Manuscript Collections," *Ibid.*, March 1946, pp. 1-3.

deed books falling apart at the mere touch of the hand and the index volumes virtually scattered in sections around the room! When such a deplorable situation occurs, it is well that progressive historical societies are making every effort to secure for their own collections the official records of the communities which they serve. An editorial in *The American Archivist* for July, 1946 calls attention to the necessity for safeguarding these treasures of the past. I might add, parenthetically, that some of the smaller court houses, such as those for Chester, Bucks, and Beaver Counties, Pennsylvania, and the Office of the Recorder of Deeds for Allegheny County at Pittsburgh, are models of orderliness and care in the preservation of records.

In some states funds may not be appropriated for the acquisition of documents that, strictly speaking, are not official records. Under such circumstances, assistance may be secured by means of Federal grants-in-aid or, in times of depression, by the activities of such agencies as the former Work Projects Administration. The publications of that organization have been criticized by some historians and genealogists for being not too reliable at times, but the fact remains that they have been very useful tools for research. The National Society of the Daughters of the American Revolution is constantly adding thousands of transcripts to its fine Washington library as a result of the labors of its chapters throughout the country. It may be that arrangements could be worked out to have the D.A.R. chapters in the various states prepare for presentation to the state archives copies of the records they are forwarding to D.A.R. headquarters in Washington. These are but a few suggestions as to how records may be secured by the archival agencies if official funds and facilities are not available.

I trust that in the course of this paper I have demonstrated that modern genealogy is not a senseless fad, indulged in by elderly gentlemen who have nothing more constructive to occupy their minds, or by "sweet old things" who love to gossip about their descent from kings, knights, and generals. Genealogy is a very serious business, not only for those professional genealogists who earn their livelihood by its means, but also for those avocational genealogists who seek to show the influence families have exerted on the course of local, national, or even international history. If the historians, archivists, and genealogists can learn to understand each other's problems, they can form an unbeatable team in the reconstruction of the historic events that have made this country great.